Past Perfect Tense

The Past-Before-Past Tense

Like the past-to-present, the past-before-past (past perfect) tense also has three forms:

1. had = -ed (past participle)-- had arrived, had fallen
2. had + been + -ed (past participle) - had been removed
3. had + been + -ing - had been singing

The past-before-past tense is used to indicate that something happened before something else happened when both things happened in the past.

By the time you arrived, I had left. (Which happened first?)

The thief simply walked in because someone had forgotten to lock the door. (Which happened first?)

Her eyes were red because she had been crying. (Which happened first?)

Until yesterday, I had never heard about it. (This is tricky. Something is missing--but understood. What happened yesterday? What happened before yesterday?)

When before or after is used to make the time relationship clear, the use of the past-before-past is optional; the simple past may be used as well:

I had left before you arrived.
I left before you arrived.

I left after you had arrived.
I left after you arrived.

When writing about an incident that happened in the past, be careful to use the past-before-past only when necessary:

As I walked down the lonely street at midnight, I thought I heard footsteps behind me. The footsteps grew louder and louder. I suddenly stopped and whirled around to face whoever was following me. But no one was there. My imagination had been playing tricks on me.

Only the verb in the final sentence is in the past-before-past tense because only in this sentence does the writer refer to something (his imagination playing tricks on him) that happened at an earlier point in the narrative (before he turned around and discovered no one was there).
Which verb in the following sentence should be changed to the past-before-past tense?

The following day when I told my friend what happened he just shook his head and smiled.

Exercises
Use the past-before-past or the simple past as needed. Read each sentence carefully before you change the verbs. Are there some places where either tense is possible?

1. Dinosaurs (become) ________ extinct by the time the first humans (appear) ________ on the earth.
2. Yesterday I (see) ________ Susan Chan, an old friend of whom I (see, not) ________ in years. At first I (recognize, not) ________ her because she (gain) ________ fifty pounds.
3. Joe suddenly (realize) ________ that the teacher (ask) ________ him a question.
4. She (be) ________ a teacher before she (became) ________ a lawyer.
5. It (be) ________ midnight. I (study) ________ for five straight hours.
6. I (feel) ________ a little better after I (take) ________ the medicine.
7. The movie (begin, already) ________ by the time I (arrive) ________ at the theatre.
8. Then I (go) ________ to see my math teacher about why I (receive) ________ a failing grade on the last test, he (examine) ________ my paper, then (announce) ________ that he (make) ________ a mistake and (change) ________ my grade to an "A".
9. When I (try) ________ to explain to my friend why I (call, not) ________ him in several weeks, he (tell) ________ me not to worry because he (be) ________ out of town for a month.
Each of us can think of annoying or embarrassing experiences that we have had. Two in particular come to mind when I am traveling in memory. The first occurred on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving in 1980; I just finished doing the dishes and was ready to take the garbage out. Wrapping it securely and walking downstairs, I suddenly felt something underfoot and heard a snapping noise. A second later my feet slipped and I found myself sitting on the stairs. It got dark early so I couldn't see very well, but I finally spotted what I stepped on: it was a very small, hard pine cone. I was so angry that I threw it thirty feet into the neighbors' yard. Then I picked up the garbage and put it in the trash can, limped upstairs, and examined my foot. It already got red and slightly swollen. When I went to the doctor the next day, he took an X-ray, examined it, and announced I broke my foot. When I told him what happened, he laughed out loud, then sent me to have a cast put on. I never wore a cast or used crutches before that, but I learned how to get around quite efficiently. I just recovered from the broken bone when I went out to dinner one night with friends. Sitting on the table, I began to feel lightheaded and dizzy, so I decided to excuse myself for a few minutes to go to the ladies' room. On my way, I heard a voice yell, "Where do you think you're going?" and then I felt myself falling. By the time I opened my eyes, several waiters bent down next to me, the people at the surrounding tables stopped eating, and I somehow managed to get creamed spinach all over my sweater and buttered carrots on my skirt. I fainted. My arm hit a wall when I fell, and my watch crystal broke. The manager already called paramedics; they were giving me oxygen. I never was so embarrassed in a public place before. I suppose I should be glad that I didn't do any serious damage.