

WILLIAM WILKIE COLLINS

THE MOONSTONE

*Introduction by
Dr. Lauriat Lane*

*Complete
and Unabridged*



THE MOONSTONE

WILLIAM WILKIE COLLINS



AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET • NEW YORK 10022

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

WITH reference to the story of the Diamond, as here set forth, I have to acknowledge that it is founded, in some important particulars, on the stories of two of the royal diamonds of Europe. The magnificent stone which adorns the top of the Russian Imperial scepter was once the eye of an Indian idol. The famous Koh-i-noor is also supposed to have been one of the sacred gems of India; and more than this, to have been the subject of a prediction which prophesied certain misfortune to the persons who should divert it from its ancient uses.

The Moonstone



WILLIAM WILKIE COLLINS

Introduction

By the time she wrote *Middlemarch* (1871-2) George Eliot was generally accepted as the most serious and distinguished novelist of the age, and Virginia Woolf has called *Middlemarch* "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people." In chapter fifty of that novel, Celia tells Dorothea, "Mrs. Cadwallader said you might as well marry an Italian with white mice." This offhand allusion to Count Fosco, the villain in *The Woman in White*, the first of Wilkie Collins' two famous mystery novels, shows more than mere statistics ever could how widely Collins' fame had spread through the Victorian reading public. Yet at the same time this allusion may be George Eliot's way of telling her readers that Mrs. Cadwallader, the wife of the Rector of Freshitt and Tipton, was not as serious as she might be, or should be.

For in spite of Wilkie Collins' popularity in his own day, in spite of his close friendship and collaboration with Charles Dickens, in spite of the fact that two of his books, *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, have been called by Kenneth Robinson "lesser Victorian classics" and are still famous today, even Collins' most enthusiastic admirers or biographers hardly claim that he was or is a serious novelist in the sense in which Dickens or George Eliot or Thomas Hardy are serious novelists.

If Wilkie Collins is not a serious novelist, then, what is he

that he should have been alluded to by George Eliot, imitated by Hardy (in *Desperate Remedies*), and collaborated with by Dickens? The answer to this question lies in the special appeal, importance, and influence of *The Woman in White* and especially *The Moonstone*. T. S. Eliot, in an introduction to that book which is still the best short essay on Collins, calls *The Moonstone* "the first and greatest of English detective novels." For Dorothy L. Sayers, "Taking everything into consideration, *The Moonstone* is probably the very finest detective story ever written. . . . Nothing human is perfect, but *The Moonstone* comes about as near perfection as anything of its kind can be."

"Anything of its kind"—what exactly is the "kind" of *The Moonstone*? Mr. Eliot and Mrs. Sayers agree that it is a detective novel, which is not the same thing as a novel with a detective in it, as the case of Dickens' *Bleak House* should make clear. It is a novel whose chief concern and appeal lie in the detection of the solution to some mystery, usually the question of responsibility for some crime. Any other interests the book may have, such as setting, character, or moral, are subordinated to or at least contained within the solution of the mystery. Certain contemporary reviewers and critics praised Collins' novels as "feuilletons," a term derived from those parts of French newspapers reserved for light literature; and a doctoral dissertation has linked Dickens, Reade, and Collins as "sensation novelists." Finally, the contemporary English novelist Graham Greene calls his spy and mystery novels "entertainments," and *The Moonstone*, too, is an "entertainment" in the best sense of the word.

William Wilkie Collins (1824-89) was the son of William Collins, R.A., from whom he may have gained a sense for landscape and atmosphere, as well as a distaste for the commercial life and a grasp of the need for an artist in paint or in words to make money by his art. His grandfather, a picture dealer, was in his spare time the author of a biography, a long poem, and a novel. In 1850, Wilkie Collins published his first novel with such success that although he was admitted to the bar in 1851, his legal knowledge, such as it was, was applied exclusively to the plots, circumstances, and characters of his subsequent novels.

Collins first began planning *The Moonstone* early in 1867 by gathering and taking notes on various materials about the British in India. The character of Sergeant Cuff, of whom more later,

Collins based partly on a real Scotland Yarder, Detective Inspector Whicher, and he derived other details in the novel from one of Whicher's most famous cases. He submitted a plot-outline and the first three installments to Dickens, who wrote that "it is a very curious story, wild and yet domestic—with excellent character in it, great mystery and nothing belonging to disguised women or the like. It is prepared with extraordinary care, and has every chance of being a hit. It is in many respects much better than any thing he has done." When *The Moonstone* appeared in *All the Year Round*, Dickens' magazine, it raised the circulation even higher than *Great Expectations* had and aroused Dickens' envy. Dickens even seems to have drawn on *The Moonstone* for some of the ideas and materials in his final, unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

What qualities make *The Moonstone* the first and perhaps the greatest of all detective novels? What first impresses us is the striking yet complicated way the story is told. Rather than tell the story in the third person or by a single narrator, Collins presents his mystery through the mouths, or pens, of seven separate narrators—eleven, counting the prologue and the epilogue—who tell, in all, thirteen different narratives. After setting up the situation with a short prologue, Collins gives the long narrative of the committing of the crime and the main investigation by Sergeant Cuff through the words of Gabriel Betteredge, one of the earliest of those honest, likable, uncomprehending narrators of detective fiction whose apotheosis is achieved in the person of Dr. Watson, companion and historian of Sherlock Holmes. The second part of the novel, "The Discovery of the Truth," as Collins calls it, is told in eight narratives, the last one again by Betteredge. And even in the epilogue, the author summons up three separate witnesses to round off the story.

What has Collins gained by going to such trouble? For one thing, variety. *The Moonstone* is a long and complicated story, and the change from one narrative to the next refreshes the reader. For another thing, a sense of actuality. We hear each narrative from the man or woman in some way closest to it or best suited to give us its essential quality. Moreover, by shifting from one narrator to another, Collins can avoid deliberately holding knowledge back from the reader, always a problem in a lengthy detective story told by one narrator who has lived

through the story. Finally, if one literary merit of *The Moonstone* is the number of separate and interesting characters Collins has created, many of these characters become even more striking when we hear them tell their own versions of the story.

These many narrators also add to the plot excitement and mystery which contribute to the appeal of *The Moonstone*. Through their various and varied narratives, Collins can introduce into the story enough plots and subplots to fill a dozen stories by a more niggardly creator. The recovery of a sacred treasure by religious devotees, revenge for a family wrong fancied or real, the tragic love of a serving-girl for a gentleman, the unwitting theft of the diamond by the least likely suspect, a suicide and murder as a result of this, all these and many other motifs are woven into the tightly knit fabric of *The Moonstone*.

Running through the novel and giving it added interest as well as realism is an undercurrent of social protest embodied in several persons and situations: from Rosanna Spearman's self-destroying worship of Franklin Blake to Sergeant Cuff's undeviating pursuit into high circles of whatever truth circumstances reveal to him; from Limping Lucy's passionate outcry, "the day is not far off when the poor will rise against the rich," to Gabriel's loyal acceptance of the injustice he is too honest not to see, "I don't complain of this—I only notice it." No doubt the range of Wilkie Collins' experience and the irregularities of his own life, as well as the influence of Dickens, made him strongly aware of this dark side of the Victorian world. Such social protests appear more centrally in Collins' other fiction, but gain a special force in this unusual context.

Other characters provide criticism or commentary of other kinds. Superintendent Seagrave and his helpers are the clumsy local constabulary long a staple of the detective novel. Miss Clack, with her books and pamphlets and her twisted perspective, is a religious hypocrite worthy of Dickens, and Godfrey Ablewhite is a subtler study along similar lines. Franklin Blake has all the charm and indecision that come from his background, education, and position. Mr. Bruff shows that Collins had more faith than Dickens in the law as a refuge for the wronged and a force for truth—here again *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* may show the influence of *The Moonstone*. Ezra Jennings has Wilkie Collins' own concern for the legal, moral, and medical implications

of the use of opium. In fact, hardly a character in *The Moonstone* is not given qualities and significance beyond those called for by his or her role in the mystery of the disappearance of the diamond. By the involvement of all these characters in the central mystery, Collins is able to show clearly what Dickens also revealed by the mysteries at the heart of his major novels: the responsibility, direct or indirect, of all men for the fates of their fellows. In a very real sense the "meaning" of *The Moonstone* is just that, the inevitability of human responsibility.

Of all the responsibilities dramatized in *The Moonstone*, none is more direct and engrossing than the professional responsibility of the detective, Sergeant Cuff, for clearing up the mystery and bringing the criminal to justice. And of all the characters in *The Moonstone*, Sergeant Cuff is the most memorable. In him, Wilkie Collins, with some help from Edgar Allan Poe, has fixed the archetype of the detective, to be followed, modified, but hardly improved upon by later writers.

Like Dickens' Inspector Bucket, Sergeant Cuff has both the organizational resources of an official detective and the solitary skills and eccentricities of a private one. He has something of the humble, collaborative efficiency of Chief Inspector French. He cultivates his roses with the same passion as Nero Wolfe his orchids. As an English detective, he has none of the amorality and violence of Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, or Mike Hammer. He has the powers of deduction, the human warmth, and the flair for oracular statement and self-dramatization of the great Holmes himself. Although Cuff is at first led by circumstances toward a solution which is at least partly wrong, and although he is kept apart from the novel during much of the action, he remains in our minds by way of the impression he has made on the minds of the other characters, as shown by their constant reference to him, and he redeems himself, once the full facts are made clear, by bringing the mystery to a close. Our only regret must be that having created such a character and shown him in action, Wilkie Collins never saw fit to bring him to life again in the pages of another detective novel.

Yet it is Collins' failure to continue Sergeant Cuff into other novels that accounts for the last quality that makes *The Moonstone* a great detective novel: its fullness, its completeness. Familiarity does breed contempt—among fictional detectives,

only Holmes and Chief Inspector later Sir John Appleby fully escape this—and our knowledge that Sergeant Cuff will appear just this once before us gives his character added force. Moreover, *The Moonstone* leaves us with none of the sense of resources husbanded, ideas held back, material skimmed, leads undeveloped, that we sometimes get from writers whose careers hang on their ability to keep returning to one detective-hero again and again. In *The Moonstone*, in its narrative, its plot, its characters, Sergeant Cuff above all, Wilkie Collins has been more than generous of his peculiar genius. That is his and *The Moonstone's* final greatness.

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PROLOGUE

The Storming of Seringapatam (1799)
(Extracted from a Family Paper)

I

I address these lines—written in India—to my relatives in England.

My object is to explain the motive which has induced me to refuse the right hand of friendship to my cousin, John Herculastle. The reserve which I have hitherto maintained in this matter has been misinterpreted by members of my family whose good opinion I cannot consent to forfeit. I request them to suspend their decision until they have read my narrative. And I declare, on my word of honor, that what I am now about to write is, strictly and literally, the truth.

The private difference between my cousin and me took its rise in a great public event in which we were both concerned—the storming of Seringapatam, under General Baird, on the 4th of May, 1799.

In order that the circumstances may be clearly understood, I must revert for a moment to the period before the assault, and to the stories current in our camp of the treasure in jewels and gold stored up in the Palace of Seringapatam.

II

One of the wildest of these stories related to a Yellow Diamond—a famous gem in the native annals of India.

The earliest known traditions describe the stone as having been set in the forehead of the four-handed Indian god who typifies the Moon. Partly from its peculiar color, partly from a superstition which represented it as partaking of the nature of the deity whom it adorned, and growing and lessening in lustre with the waxing and waning of the moon, it first gained the name by which it continues to be known in India to this day—the name of THE MOONSTONE. A similar superstition was once prevalent, as I have heard, in ancient Greece and Rome; not applying, however (as in India), to a diamond devoted to the service of a god, but to a semi-transparent stone of the inferior order of gems, supposed to be affected by the lunar influences—the moon, in this latter case also, giving the name by which the stone is still known to collectors in our own time.

The adventures of the Yellow Diamond begin with the eleventh century of the Christian era. At that date the Mohammedan conqueror, Mahmoud of Ghizni, crossed India; seized on the holy city of Somnauth; and stripped of its treasures the famous temple which had stood for centuries—the shrine of Hindoo pilgrimage, and the wonder of the Eastern world.

Of all the deities worshiped in the temple, the moon-god alone escaped the rapacity of the conquering Mohammedans. Preserved by three Brahmans, the inviolate deity, bearing the Yellow Diamond in its forehead, was removed by night, and was transported to the second of the sacred cities of India—the city of Benares.

Here, in a new shrine—in a hall inlaid with precious stones, under a roof supported by pillars of gold—the moon-god was set up and worshiped. Here, on the night when the shrine was completed, Vishnu the Preserver appeared to the three Brahmans in a dream.

The deity breathed the breath of his divinity on the Diamond in the forehead of the god. And the Brahmans knelt and hid their faces in their robes. The deity commanded that the Moonstone should be watched, from that time forth, by three priests in turn, night and day, to the end of the generations of men. And the Brahmans heard and bowed before his will. The deity predicted certain disaster to the presumptuous mortal who laid hands on the sacred gem, and to all of his house and name who received it after him. And the Brahmans caused the prophecy to be written over the gates of the shrine in letters of gold.

One age followed another—and still, generation after generation, the successors of the three Brahmans watched their priceless Moonstone, night and day. One age followed another, until the first years of the eighteenth Christian century saw the reign of Aurungzebe, Emperor of the Moguls. At his command havoc and rapine were let loose once more among the temples of the worship of Brahmah. The shrine of the four-handed god was polluted by the slaughter of sacred animals; the images of the deities were broken in pieces; and the Moonstone was seized by an officer of rank in the army of Aurungzebe.

Powerless to recover their lost treasure by open force, the three guardian priests followed and watched it in disguise. The generations succeeded each other; the warrior who had committed the sacrilege perished miserably; the Moonstone passed (carrying its curse with it) from one lawless Mohammedan hand to another; and still, through all chances and changes, the successors of the three guardian priests kept their watch, waiting the day when the will of Vishnu the Preserver should restore to them their sacred gem. Time rolled on from the first to the last years of the eighteenth Christian century. The Diamond fell into the possession of Tippoo, Sultan of Seringapatam, who caused it to be placed as an ornament in the handle of a dagger,

and who commanded it to be kept among the choicest treasures of his armory. Even then—in the palace of the Sultan himself—the three guardian priests still watched in secret. There were three officers of Tippoo's household, strangers to the rest, who had won their master's confidence by conforming, or appearing to conform, to the Mussulman faith; and to those three men report pointed as the three priests in disguise.

III.

So, as told in our camp, ran the fanciful story of the Moonstone. It made no serious impression on any of us except my cousin—whose love of the marvelous induced him to believe it. On the night before the assault on Seringapatam he was absurdly angry with me, and with others, for treating the whole thing as a fable. A foolish wrangle followed; and Herncastle's unlucky temper got the better of him. He declared, in his boastful way, that we should see the Diamond on his finger if the English army took Seringapatam. The sally was saluted by a roar of laughter, and there, as we all thought that night, the thing ended.

Let me now take you on to the day of the assault.

My cousin and I were separated at the outset. I never saw him when we forded the river; when we planted the English flag in the first breach; when we crossed the ditch beyond; and, fighting every inch of our way, entered the town. It was only at dusk, when the place was ours, and after General Baird himself had found the dead body of Tippoo under a heap of the slain, that Herncastle and I met.

We were each attached to a party sent out by the General's orders to prevent the plunder and confusion which followed our conquest. The camp-followers committed deplorable excesses; and, worse still, the soldiers found their way, by an unguarded door, into the treasury of the Palace, and loaded themselves with gold and jewels. It was in the court outside the treasury that my cousin and I met to enforce the laws of discipline on our own soldiers. Herncastle's fiery temper had been, as I could plainly see, exasperated to a kind of frenzy by the terrible slaughter through which we had passed. He was very unfit, in my opinion, to perform the duty that had been entrusted to him.

There was riot and confusion enough in the treasury, but no violence that I saw. The men (if I may use such an expression) disgraced themselves good-humoredly. All sorts of rough jests and catch-words were bandied about among them; and the story of the Diamond turned up again unexpectedly, in the form of a mischievous joke. "Who's got the Moonstone?" was the rallying cry which perpetually caused the plundering as soon as it was stopped in one place to break out in another. While I was still vainly trying to establish order I heard a frightful yelling on the other side of the court-yard, and at once ran toward

the cries, in dread of finding some new outbreak of the pillage in that direction.

I got to an open door, and saw the bodies of two Indians (by their dress, as I guessed, officers of the palace) lying across the entrance, dead.

A cry inside hurried me into a room, which appeared to serve as an armory. A third Indian, mortally wounded, was sinking at the feet of a man whose back was toward me. The man turned at the instant when I came in, and I saw John Herncastle, with a torch in one hand and a dagger dripping with blood in the other. A stone, set like a pommel, in the end of the dagger's handle, flashed in the torchlight, as he turned on me, like a gleam of fire. The dying Indian sank to his knees, pointed to the dagger in Herncastle's hand, and said, in his native language: "The Moonstone will have its vengeance yet on you and yours!" He spoke those words, and fell dead on the floor.

Before I could stir in the matter the men who had followed me across the court-yard crowded in. My cousin rushed to meet them, like a madman. "Clear the room!" he shouted to me, "and set a guard on the door!" The men fell back as he threw himself on them with his torch and his dagger. I put two sentinels of my own company, on whom I could rely, to keep the door. Through the remainder of the night I saw no more of my cousin.

Early in the morning, the plunder still going on, General Baird announced publicly by beat of drum that any thief detected in the fact, be he whom he might, should be hung. The provost marshal was in attendance to prove that the general was in earnest; and in the throng that followed the proclamation Herncastle and I met again.

He held out his hand as usual, and said, "Good-morning."

I waited before I gave him my hand in return.

"Tell me first," I said, "how the Indian in the armory met his death, and what those last words meant when he pointed to the dagger in your hand."

"The Indian met his death, as I suppose, by a mortal wound," said Herncastle. "What his last words meant I know no more than you do."

I looked at him narrowly. His frenzy of the previous day had all calmed down. I determined to give him another chance.

"Is that all you have to tell me?" I asked.

He answered, "That is all."

I turned my back on him; and we have not spoken since.

IV

I beg it to be understood that what I write here about my cousin (unless some necessity should arise for making it public) is for the information of the family only. Herncastle has said

nothing that can justify me in speaking to our commanding officer. He has been taunted more than once about the Diamond, by those who recollect his angry outbreak before the assault; but, as may easily be imagined, his own remembrance of the circumstances under which I surprised him in the armory has been enough to keep him silent. It is reported that he means to exchange into another regiment, avowedly for the purpose of separating himself and *me*.

Whether this be true or not, I cannot prevail upon myself to become his accuser—and I think with good reason. If I made the matter public, I have no evidence but moral evidence to bring forward: I have not only no proof that he killed the two men at the door; I cannot even declare that he killed the third man inside—for I cannot say that my own eyes saw the deed committed. It is true that I heard the dying Indian's words; but if those words were pronounced to be the ravings of delirium, how could I contradict the assertion from my own knowledge? Let our relatives, on either side, form their own opinion on what I have written, and decide for themselves whether the aversion I now feel toward this man is well or ill founded.

Although I attach no sort of credit to the fantastic Indian legend of the gem, I must acknowledge, before I conclude, that I am influenced by a certain superstition of my own in this matter. It is my conviction, or my delusion, no matter which, that crime brings its own fatality with it. I am not only persuaded of Herncastle's guilt; I am even fanciful enough to believe that he will live to regret it, if he keeps the Diamond; and that others will live to regret taking it from him, if he gives the Diamond away.

