THE MOONSTONE

BY

WILKIE COLLINS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

T. S. ELIOT

Geoffrey Cumberlege
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INTRODUCTION

THE *Moonstone* is the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels. But it is something more important than that; it is the best of all the novels written by that man who among the novelists of the nineteenth century was in every way the most closely associated with Charles Dickens. You cannot appreciate Collins without taking Dickens into account; and the work of Dickens after 1850 would not be what it is but for the reciprocal influence of Collins.

William Wilkie Collins was born in 1824, twelve years later than Dickens. He had begun writing before he and Dickens met, but his two best-known novels, the only ones which are at all widely read to-day, *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, were written after the friendship was well assured. Dickens played an important part in their production; he published both of them serially in his magazine *All the Year Round*. Both novels were in this form popular successes and contributed materially to the prosperity of the magazine.

None of the novels which Collins wrote thereafter either deserved or obtained the success of *The Woman in White* or *The Moonstone*. Collins's claim to remembrance after that time is to be found chiefly in the work of Dickens. There is no adequate biography of Collins beyond a brief note in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and Forster's allusions to the relations of the two men are few and meagre, but some things we are entitled to guess. At about the middle of Dickens's career Forster tells us that Dickens experienced an impoverishment of the creative imagination which had hitherto appeared inexhaustible. There is no doubt that Dickens, who always needed money,

and who had in his early years made unfavourable contracts with publishers, had worked for a long time under too great a strain. He was a man of prodigious energy, and of that physical health upon which energetic men are apt to place too much reliance; and he may have been intoxicated by sudden and universal fame. At any rate, he begins to complain of a diminution of energy. It is at this point that his novels change so as to form definitely a second group. What is greatly to his credit is that this second group, although different, is not at all inferior to the first. Instead of that free narrative, in writing which Dickens hardly knew from week to week what was going to turn up, we find a more elaborate and finished construction. In other words, the early novels are narrative, even picaresque, but the later novels are dramatic; and this change is the great change from the earlier to the later form of the English novel. In this change in the work of Dickens I believe that the influence of Wilkie Collins dominated.

Dickens had always been interested in the drama and the stage. Before ever he began to write he made one timid attempt, related by Forster, to obtain a trial from a celebrated theatrical manager. Then and throughout his life one of his chief pleasures was amateur theatricals; even in his busiest working years he was taking part in theatrical performances on such a scale that they were almost professional. But Dickens had more than merely a taste for the stage; there was something essentially dramatic about his view of life. Forster, early in his life of Dickens, observes:

'On the coincidences, resemblances, and surprises of life Dickens liked especially to dwell, and few things moved his fancy so pleasantly. The world, he would say, was so much smaller than we thought it; we were all so connected

by fate without knowing it; people supposed to be far apart were so constantly elbowing each other; and to-morrow bore so close a resemblance to nothing half so much as to yesterday.'

Such a feeling is dramatic, as any reader of *Oedipus the King* must realize; and the words might have been spoken still more appropriately by Wilkie Collins.

The earlier novels of Dickens are dramatic only in detail. In *David Copperfield*, even in *Nicholas Nickleby*, there are separate scenes of great dramatic reality. The whole of the latter part of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, comprehending the tragedy of Jonas Chuzzlewit and Montague, is drama. But in general form Dickens was following the tradition of Fielding and Smollett. One characteristic of this earlier type of fiction is the absence of the sense of fatality. But over the later novels of Dickens, as over the novels of Collins, there is the same atmosphere of fatality that we feel with the very first line of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*.

It is not to be supposed that the change in the English novel from narrative to dramatic form is due solely to Wilkie Collins or to Collins and Dickens together. In the way of a light comedy of manners Jane Austen had already introduced a dramatic element into her tales. A much more important writer whose greatest book is undoubtedly dramatic and who was probably uninfluenced by any of these people was Emily Brontë. Hawthorne in America and Balzac in France invented dramatic form separately, and passed it on to Henry James. But it was from Dickens that Dostoevski got his dramatic impulse.

The change in the work of Dickens is rung in the opening paragraph of the first and greatest of his novels of the second period—*Bleak House*.

'London. Michaelmas term lately over, and the

Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foothold at street corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.'

This paragraph ought to be very bad writing, but it is not; the last phrase ought to be a cheap anticlimax diminishing the effect, but it is not. But this would not have been good writing in one of Dickens's earlier books; it is only good writing because it sets the dramatic tone which is held throughout the book, introducing the mud and the fog and the Lord Chancellor like grim phantoms ruling the fate of the characters who are to appear. And these characters as they are presented make dramatic appearances; we feel at once that the author knows what is to become of them. The whole construction of the book, as Mr. Chesterton has pointed out, is extremely complex. There is no other novel with so many characters all of whom appear essential to the main plot.

The sense of fatality which we feel so strongly in *Bleak House*, in *Little Dorrit*, in *The Tale of Two Cities*, and in what might have been one of the finest—*Edwin Drood*—is everywhere present in the work of Wilkie Collins. One

of Collins's shorter and slighter tales is *The Frozen Deep*, which was first written as a play (and in which as a play Dickens several times took the leading role with great applause). This story is given a happy ending, which somewhat diminishes the effect, but the plot depends upon a very long-armed coincidence which we are asked to accept as a kind of fatality. The heroine has rejected a suitor who considered that he had every reason for expecting to be accepted, and who appears as a man of passionate and revengeful temper, in spite of other virtues. She has accepted another suitor equally estimable with the addition of a sweet and amiable temper, who as a naval lieutenant is about to embark on a dangerous polar expedition. In the very nick of time the rejected suitor, wild with despair, arranges to be accepted for the same expedition, not knowing the identity of his successful rival. In the course of the disasters which befall the expedition the two suitors are brought nearer and nearer together, and by a set of remarkable accidents the identity of the one is disclosed to the other. In the solitude of the frozen deep, the fortunate lover, exhausted and ill, is finally left at the mercy of his revengeful rival; but the latter, against all our expectations, conquers his feelings and gives up his life in restoring the youth to the lady whom they both love. This simple tale shows Collins in his crudest and most melodramatic aspect. But it is typical of his plots. In *Armadale*, which after *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White* is the best of his romances, the element of foreknowledge is always present in the mind of one of the principal characters. The role of Cassandra should have been a favourite with Collins. In another short tale, *The Haunted Hotel*, the lady who is actually to be the villain of the piece is presented as horrified and terrified by the premonition of a disaster against which she struggles

but in which she finds herself helpless to avoid taking the leading part. Again and again, in the work of Wilkie Collins, we find this theme repeated. *The New Magdalen* is a play. After we have read the first few chapters we know perfectly well what is going to happen; and the interest of the story resides in the delays, the constant checks and arrests of the inevitable disclosure. And in every one of Collins's books, in some of the best of them such as *Armadale* or *Poor Miss Finch* or *No Name*, our attention is steadily maintained by this sense of apprehension.

The distinction between drama and melodrama is a fine one. In relation to the work of Wilkie Collins it is probably this—that in drama the coincidences, the fatalities, appear to be the visible manifestations of some obscure power beyond human knowledge. The dramatist seems to be sensitive, more than we, to these Dark Forces. When we intellectualize his work, we say that he has a 'philosophy'. The melodramatist, on the other hand, is the author who appears to be interested in the effects as effects, without knowing or caring what lies behind. Wilkie Collins is the pure melodramatist. Dickens, without belonging to that group of dramatists of fate which includes Sophocles and Shakespeare, is yet separated from Collins by the difference between pure unaccountable genius and pure consummate talent. Dickens had two gifts of genius which were denied to Collins: the gift of Shakespeare and Dante, of creating character, even in a single phrase, and the gift of evoking atmosphere. The latter is also a gift which Shakespeare had in the highest degree. Collins had merely a great talent for constructing character, and for constructing atmosphere. The only two of his characters whom we never forget are Count Fosco and Marion in *The Woman in White*. Individual as they are, we do not find that these any more than other

of Collins's characters have that superabundant life in excess of the requirements of the plot, which is the life of the characters of Dickens.

The Moonstone contains no characters as memorable as Count Fosco and Marion, but it exhibits all of Collins's qualities in more perfect proportion than any other of his novels. The feeling of fatality is always present, but it is never overworked. It is given by the Prologue, which is accordingly essential to the story. The diamond has always been acquired by lawless means, is brought to England by a disreputable man in a disreputable way and brings misfortune to whoever possesses himself of it. Yet this fatality of the diamond puts no strain on our credulity; we are not expected to accept any occult powers or incredible coincidences. The position of the diamond in *The Moonstone* should be compared with the law case of Jarndyce *versus* Jarndyce in *Bleak House*. Like the Jarndyce suit it blights the lives of whoever come near it.

The tone thus established is intensified by the atmosphere which in this book Collins manages to create about his characters. The dinner party at the country house on the evening before the diamond disappears, with all its apparent irrelevances, arouses a feeling of ominous expectation. The terrible scene on the Shivering Sands is almost worthy of Dickens; it reminds one of the shipwreck of Steerforth in *David Copperfield*. And indeed in such scenes as this Collins must have learned much from Dickens. He learned a great deal also, all that a man of talent could learn from a man of genius, about the making of character. Most of the characters in *The Moonstone* belong to the comedy of humours: Franklin Blake with his polyglot education Godfrey Ablewhite and his friends with their philantnropic activities Betteredge with his beehive chair and his divination by

Robinson Crusoe, and Sergeant Cuff with his interminable disputes about the dog-rose.

In *The Moonstone* the characterization assists and is assisted by the method of narration. Collins was always addicted to the method of composing his story out of separate accounts in the first person by various witnesses each relating his part. In some of his books this method becomes tedious and even highly improbable. In *Armadale*, for instance, we are indebted for much of our information to a private journal which is kept quite unnecessarily and most imprudently by the chief villain of the piece; and we are not told how this journal comes to be preserved and revealed. In his efforts to obtain verisimilitude Collins sometimes over-reached himself; but in *The Moonstone* this method is kept well within bounds.

I have said that *The Moonstone* is the first, the longest, and the best of the modern English detective novels. We may even say that everything that is good and effective in the modern detective story can be found in *The Moonstone*. Modern detective writers have added the use of fingerprints and such other trifles, but they have not materially improved upon either the personality or the methods of Sergeant Cuff. Sergeant Cuff is the perfect detective. Our modern detectives are most often either efficient but featureless machines, forgotten the moment we lay the book down, or else they have too many features, like Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes is so heavily weighted with abilities, accomplishments, and peculiarities that he becomes an almost static figure; he is described to us rather than revealed in his actions. Sergeant Cuff is a real and attractive personality, and he is brilliant without being infallible.

T. S. ELIOT.

THE MOONSTONE

IN MEMORIAM MATRIS

PREFACE

In some of my former novels, the object proposed has been to trace the influence of circumstances upon character. In the present story I have reversed the process. The attempt made here is to trace the influence of character on circumstances. The conduct pursued, under a sudden emergency, by a young girl, supplies the foundation on which I have built this book.

The same object has been kept in view in the handling of the other characters which appear in these pages. Their course of thought and action under the circumstances which surround them is shown to be (what it would most probably have been in real life) sometimes right and sometimes wrong. Right or wrong, their conduct, in either event, equally directs the course of those portions of the story in which they are concerned.

In the case of the physiological experiment which occupies a prominent place in the closing scenes of *The Moonstone*, the same principle has guided me once more. Having first ascertained, not only from books, but from living authorities as well, what the result of that experiment would really have been, I have declined to avail myself of the novelist's privilege of supposing something which might have happened, and have so shaped the story as to make it grow out of what actually would have happened—which, I beg to inform my readers, is also what actually does happen, in these pages.

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 Sceptre 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.

GLOUCESTER PLACE, PORTMAN SQUARE,

June 30*th*. 1868.

PREFACE TO A NEW EDITION

THE circumstances under which *The Moonstone* was originally written have invested the book—in the author's mind—with an interest peculiarly its own.

While this work was still in course of periodical publication in England and in the United States, and when not more than one-third of it was completed, the bitterest affliction of my life and the severest illness from which I have ever suffered fell on me together. At the time when my mother lay dying in her little cottage in the country, I was struck prostrate, in London—crippled in every limb by the torture of rheumatic gout. Under the weight of this double calamity, I had my duty to the public still to bear in mind. My good readers in England and in America, whom I had never yet disappointed, were expecting their regular weekly instalments of the new story. I held to the story—for my own sake as well as for theirs. In the intervals of grief, in the occasional remissions of pain, I dictated from my bed that portion of *The Moonstone* which has since proved most successful in amusing the public—the 'Narrative of Miss Clack.' Of the physical sacrifice which the effort cost me I shall say nothing. I only look back now at the blessed relief which my occupation (forced as it was) brought to my mind. The Art which had been always the pride and the pleasure of my life became now more than ever 'its own exceeding great reward.' I doubt if I should have lived to write another book, if the responsibility of the weekly publication of this story had not forced me to rally my sinking energies of body and mind—to dry my useless tears, and to conquer my merciless pains.

The novel completed, I awaited its reception by the public with an eagerness of anxiety which I have never felt before or since for the fate of any other writings of mine. If *The Moonstone* had failed, my mortification would have been bitter indeed. As it was, the welcome accorded to the story in England, in America, and on the Continent of Europe was instantly and universally favourable. Never have I had better reason than this work has given me to feel gratefully to novel-readers of all nations. Everywhere my characters made friends, and my story roused interest. Everywhere the public favour looked over my faults—and repaid me a hundredfold for the hard toil which these pages cost me in the dark time of sickness and grief.

I have only to add that the present edition has had the benefit of my careful revision. All that I can do towards making the book worthy of the reader's continued approval has now been done.

W. C.

May, 1871.

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