

Wilkie Collins

The Woman in White

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by Wilkie Collins

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INTRODUCTION BY
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WILLIAM WILKIE COLLINS

Born in 1824, the son of a Royal Academician. Called to the Bar in 1851, but devoted himself to literature. Visited America, 1873-4. Died in 1889.

INTRODUCTION

'I HAVE not the slightest doubt,' wrote Dickens, in whose magazine, *All The Year Round*, it first appeared as a serial in November 1859, 'that *The Woman in White* is the name of names and the very title of very titles.'

Its success on publication was overwhelming. All throughout 1860 *The Woman in White* was the rage. Cloaks and bonnets, waltzes and quadrilles, were named after her; there was a *Woman in White* scent and even a hairbrush. Though the reviews were not altogether favourable, eminent men of letters were as delighted by the book as the reading public. Thackeray sat up all night and Mr Gladstone put off a theatre party to finish it. The Prince Consort revelled in it and recommended it to the austere Baron Stockmar. Edward Fitzgerald was so captivated by the character of Marian Halcombe that he named his new lugger after her; Swinburne, who had always a taste for masterful women, pronounced her 'a glorious female.' Count Fosco, the Napoleonic master criminal, was another popular favourite; while, of the minor characters, Mr Fairlie, the neurotic invalid whose fantastic selfishness puts his niece, Laura, at the mercy of her wicked husband, Sir Percival Glyde, and the sinister Mrs Catherick, repository of the baronet's dark secret, were highly praised.

What makes it still the finest mystery-thriller in the language—just as Wilkie Collins's other masterpiece, *The Moonstone*,¹ remains the finest detective story? The answer, briefly, is that in these two books Collins achieved an almost perfect integration between his great talent as a novelist and his capacity for sensationalism. *The Woman in White* was his sixth novel. In writing it he made a determined effort to bring off a coup; into it he put everything he had learned during his apprenticeship.

One or two technical points are worth noting. First, of

¹ Everyman's Library, 979.

course, there is Collins's brilliant use of the multi-narrational method, whereby several characters tell the story, each one writing in the first person singular. This imparts depth and a three-dimensional quality; it enables the tension to be raised and lowered with an effect of naturalness, and transcends the limitations imposed upon one sole first person narrator.

There is the thick, almost palpable, atmosphere of doom-laden suspense that hangs like a brooding cloud over the story from Walter's first encounter with the Woman in White at what seems now to be the intersection of Finchley Road and West End Lane. This atmosphere is nicely accentuated by Collins's powerful scenic descriptions (his father, the painter, had been famous for his Collins skies), especially at Blackwater Park, Sir Percival Glyde's balefully sinister Hampshire seat.

And then there are the psychological undercurrents. Many critics have complained that as a heroine Laura Fairlie, the dreamy blonde heiress of Limmeridge, is insipid. She is, of course, but it is essential that she should be so, for if she were to elope with her drawing master, Walter Hartwright, there would be no story. As it is, the sexual frustration caused by her weakly consenting to marry the odious baronet, old enough to be her father, gives the reader an additional *frisson*. It is not surprising that Freudians have detected the pattern of their favourite Oedipus situation in the Laura-Walter-Percival Glyde triangle.

To compensate for the blonde Laura's insipidity Wilkie Collins gives you her half-sister, the forceful brunette, Marian, forthright, amusing, graceful, but ugly. She is the second heroine and plays opposite to Fosco, the second and heavier leading man.

This generosity is one of the features of the story; it gives you a double ration of everything: two heroines, two villains, two house parties, Limmeridge and Blackwater. There are even two climaxes, the first of which, the death of Sir Percival, occurs nearly a hundred pages before the end of the novel. Modern thriller-writers would not dare to risk the accompanying anticlimax. But Collins had a unique flair for blending melodrama with realism, the thriller with the comedy of manners. Note also how sparing he is in his use of actual physical violence; again and again he throws the punch away in order to heighten the tension.

There is a good deal of social criticism implicit in *The Woman in White*, more than in *The Moonstone*. Much of this stems

from Collins's own predilections; he was a radical feminist. The framework of the story happens to be founded on fact. The elaborate method whereby Lady Glyde is parted from her inheritance was taken from the Douhault case, a famous French conspiracy that Collins read about in Méjan's *Recueil des Causes Célèbres*, which he picked up at a bookstall during one of his jaunts to Paris with Dickens and in which he found several of his best plots. The Douhault case provided him with not only the machinery, including some devices which reviewers labelled outrageous, but also with all the principal rôles in the story.

The first encounter with the Woman herself was based on a personal experience of Wilkie Collins, and an intensely dramatic one. The story has often been told but no introduction would be complete without it. The source for it is J. G. Millais's biography of his father.

Millais was walking back one moonlit summer night from dinner at Mrs Collins's, Wilkie's mother's, house in Hanover Terrace. Wilkie and his brother Charles were seeing him part of the way home. Suddenly they heard a scream coming from the garden of a nearby villa. The garden gate was dashed open and 'from it came the figure of a young and very beautiful woman dressed in flowing white robes that shone in the moonlight. She seemed to float rather than to run in their direction. . . . "What a lovely woman!" was all Millais could say. "I must see who she is and what's the matter," said Wilkie Collins as, without another word, he dashed off after her. His two companions waited in vain for his return, and next day when they met again, he seemed indisposed to talk of his adventure. They gathered from him, however, that he had come up with the lovely fugitive and had heard from her own lips the history of her life and the cause of her sudden flight. She was a young lady of good birth and position, who had accidentally fallen into the hands of a man living in a villa in Regent's Park. There for many months he kept her prisoner under threats and mesmeric influence of so alarming a character that she dared not attempt to escape, until, in sheer desperation, she fled from the brute, who, with a poker in his hand, threatened to dash her brains out.'

It is probable, if not certain, that this mysterious young lady was Caroline Graves, one of the two women in Collins's oddly unmarried life (the other being Martha Rudd, by whom he had three children). He lived with Caroline for many years, and

she was buried beside him in the same grave. But such was Victorian reticence where any domestic irregularity was concerned that Collins's private life is still something of a mystery.

The two years after the publication of *The Woman in White* were probably the happiest of the gay, gentle, sociable, mildly Bohemian Collins's life. From 1862 onwards he suffered increasingly from a rather baffling form of rheumatic gout, which was so hideously painful that, by the time he was writing *The Moonstone*, in 1867-8, he was taking enough opium to put a dinner party of twelve under the table. He went on writing for another twenty years. His later work was by no means so catastrophically bad as some critics have maintained, but he never recovered his touch as a story-teller. His radicalism inclined him more and more towards social reform and the didactic novel. But Swinburne's doggerel:

What brought good Wilkie's genius nigh perdition?
Some demon whispered 'Wilkie! have a mission.'

tells only part of the story. It leaves out chronic illness, pain, and the effects of opium in such quantities that when he went upstairs to bed he had to brush his way past a jostling crowd of phantoms.

The unevenness of his work makes it rather difficult to place Collins as a novelist. Obviously, he lacked his friend Dickens's huge creative energy; but his two acknowledged masterpieces of sensational fiction stand up to comparison with anything Dickens attempted in the same line. Both his clear flowing style, at which he worked hard, and his characterization, were underestimated in his own day. Some of his modern admirers, among them Mr T. S. Eliot and Miss Dorothy Sayers are almost inclined to rank *Armadale* (1866) and *No Name* (1862) on a par with *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. Anyone who wishes to round off his acquaintance with Collins's work should certainly read both these. He might also try *Poor Miss Finch* (1872); this has a wildly freakish plot, but contains some remarkable passages which anticipate Freud's theory of the unconscious and the importance of traumatic experiences in causing neuroses.

An agreeable debate can always be held as to which of the two masterpieces wins the Crime Fiction Stakes. I have no hesitation myself in going nap on *The Woman in White*. With her superior suspense and excitement, plus Fosco, the most convincing master-criminal in fiction, I give her a length in

hand over *The Moonstone*. Reading her again for the fourth time I found her fascination as compelling as ever. To new readers I can guarantee that she offers five hundred pages or so of cosy fireside ecstasy.

MAURICE RICHARDSON.

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