

## The Moonstone - by Wilkie Collins

One of the first examples of the detective story, in English, anyway – it was published in 1868.

### Episode 1

#### Introduction to the story - Family history - Taken From an Old Family Letter

I am writing to my family to explain why I am no longer my cousin's friend and to end the misunderstanding my silence has caused.

My disagreement with my cousin, John Herncastle, began in India in 1791, during the capture of the town of Seringapatam under General Baird. Before the battle the camp was alive with talk of gold and jewels in the Palace of Seringapatam, and particularly of a huge yellow diamond. Ancient Indian writings describe the diamond, known as the Moonstone, whose place was originally in the forehead of the Hindu God of the Moon.

In the eleventh century a golden temple was built for the Moon-God in the holy city of Benares. The god Vishnu appeared in a dream to the three priests who guarded the diamond. He ordered that it should continue to be guarded by three priests, night and day until the end of time. Vishnu foresaw disaster for anyone who might take the holy stone, disaster for his family and for all those who received it after him.

For centuries, three priests kept watch over the Moonstone until, in the early eighteenth century, the temple was destroyed by a Muslim army. Their leader, Aurungzebe, broke up the Moon-God and took the jewel.

Powerless to get back their holy treasure by force, the priests followed the Muslim army, watching and waiting.

Many years went by, Aurungzebe died a terrible death, and the Moonstone passed (carrying disaster with it) from one unlucky hand to another, always accompanied by three priests, waiting for their chance. In 1794, the Sultan of Seringapatam fitted the jewel into the handle of one his ceremonial knives. Unknown to him, three Hindus, disguised as servants, were keeping watch in his palace.

The night before the attack I and other officers laughed at my cousin when he became angry with us for not taking the story seriously.

I entered the palace at dusk the next day. The day's fighting had whipped my cousin into an excitement close to madness. I was sent to stop soldiers stealing gold and jewels. While I was trying to control the men I heard terrible screams. Rushing through a door I saw two Indians lying dead and a third, badly wounded, falling beside Herncastle who held a long knife, dripping with blood. A large precious stone in the middle flashed as he turned to me. 'The Moonstone will have its revenge you and your family!' cried the Indian before dying. Herncastle turned me, laughing like a madman, staring at the jewel. Soldiers came in. 'Clear the room!' he shouted. I did so and left immediately, horrified by what I had seen.

And now our story starts.

## **Chapter 1 - A Record of the Facts**

This morning (May 21st 1850), my lady's nephew, Mr Franklin Blake, said to me: 'Betteredge, I've seen Mr Bruff, our lawyer, and we talked about the loss of the diamond two years ago. He thinks a complete record of the facts ought to be put down in writing. And I agree with him. The story should be told and I believe we've found a way to do it. Everyone will tell their part of the story in turn, beginning at the beginning. I have a letter telling how my uncle got hold of the diamond in India. Next we must tell how the stone reached my aunt's house in Yorkshire two years ago; and then, of course, how it was lost twelve hours after it was given to Rachel. Nobody knows more than you, dear Betteredge, about what went on in the house during that time. So your narrative must be the first.'

I have a clear memory for a man of over seventy. However, I did what you probably would have done: I modestly declared that I was incapable of such a task. But young Mr Franklin insisted, and here I am at my desk two hours later, realizing I may have bitten off more than I can chew. Oh, well, here goes...

I worked for Lord Herncastle, and after he died, when Miss Julia, his youngest daughter, married Sir John Verinder, I came with her to Sir John's house here in Yorkshire. I married a local girl, but five years later she died, poor soul, leaving me with my little girl, Penelope. Soon afterwards, Sir John died and my lady was left with her only child, Miss Rachel. My lady made sure that Penelope was educated, and when she was old enough she became Miss Rachel's maid.

My lady promoted me. I became manager of her farms in Yorkshire and carried on this work until, on Christmas Day 1847, my lady invited me to tea. 'Gabriel,' she said, 'It is time to work less. From today you will give up the outdoor work and simply look after the servants here in the house.'

I protested, but looking out over the cold grey hills I knew she was right.

## **Chapter 2 - Three Indian Men**

I shall begin with the morning of 24th May 1848. My lady called me into her sitting-room. 'My nephew, Franklin Blake, has returned from abroad,' she said. 'He is coming to stay until Rachel's birthday next month. He will arrive tomorrow.' I calculated he was twenty-five years old. I hadn't seen him since he was a boy - the nicest little boy I've ever known. The fun he and Rachel had playing together! He'd gone abroad, to schools in Germany, Italy and France, and had then wandered around Europe, no doubt borrowing everywhere he went (I remembered he still owed me a halfpenny). He spent money like water — probably on those continental women he mentioned to me in a letter once. His yearly allowance of seven hundred pounds disappeared in an instant!

Next morning, my Lady and Miss Rachel, expecting Mr Franklin at dinner time,

drove out to lunch with friends. I inspected our guest's bedroom, left a bottle of wine to warm in the soft summer air, and was about to sit down outside in my favourite chair when I heard a sound like a drum. I went round to the front of the house. Three dark-skinned Indian men in white coats, each with a drum, were looking at the house. Behind them stood a small English boy. One of them, a man of most elegant manners, told me in excellent English that they were travelling magicians. He asked permission to perform tricks to my lady. I said she was out and ordered them to leave. The man bowed beautifully and they left. I returned to my chair until Penelope woke me, excited, saying the Indians were planning to do some kind of harm to Mr Franklin. She was in the garden when they left. On the road, thinking they were unseen, one of them had poured ink into the boy's hand and made signs over his head. 'Can you see the Englishman from abroad?' the Indian asked him. 'I see him,' said the boy, staring at the ink. 'Has he got it with him?' asked the man. 'Yes,' answered the boy. 'Will he come here tonight as he said?' asked another. 'I can't see any more,' said the boy, 'My mind is full of fog.' They made more signs over the boy, woke him up, and walked off towards town.

Penelope was sick with worry. 'Father, what does it mean?'

'We'll ask Mr Franklin when he comes,' I replied.

### **Chapter 3 - The Will**

I was nearly asleep again when Nancy, the kitchen maid, rushed out, bumping into my chair. 'I'm sorry sir,' she said, 'But Rosanna's late for dinner again. She fainted again this morning, and asked to go out for some air. She'll be at the Shivering Sand, no doubt.' I had a kind of pity for Rosanna so I decided to fetch her myself.

Four months before, in London, my lady had visited a home for women who had just been released from prison. She met Rosanna Spearman, who had been a thief, an extremely plain-looking girl with a deformed shoulder. The Director recommended her, saying she deserved a second chance. A week later, she began as our second housemaid.

Only my lady, Miss Rachel and I knew about her past, and Rosanna was grateful for our trust in her. She was hard-working and polite, but the servants didn't like her silent, lonely ways. They thought she thought she was superior to them.

Our house is near the sea, with beautiful walks in all directions. But a quarter of a mile away is an ugly, lonely little bay that has the most horrible quicksands. When the tide turns, something happens down under the surface. The whole face of the quicksand begins to tremble. No boat ever comes into that bay — even the birds seem to avoid it. Yet it was Rosanna's favourite place.

When I arrived, I saw her sitting in the grey coat she wore to hide her shoulder, looking out to sea. She was crying. I gave her my handkerchief, sat down beside her, and asked her what was wrong. 'It's my past, sir,' she said, drying her eyes. 'You must forget all that,' I said. She took my hand and squeezed it. 'Why do you like this miserable place?' I asked. 'A strange kind of magic seems to pull me here,' she replied. 'Sometimes I think my grave is waiting for me here.' She put her hand on my

shoulder. ‘Dear Mr Betteredge, I’m trying to deserve your trust, but sometimes I feel there’s no future for me here.’ She pointed at the quicksand. ‘Look!’ she said. The tide was turning. The whole face of the sands was beginning to tremble. ‘Isn’t it wonderful? Isn’t it terrible?’ she cried. ‘Throw a stone in, sir. Watch the sand suck it down!’

I heard a voice shout, ‘Betteredge!’ Rosanna jumped up and looked towards the woods behind us. I was astonished by the sudden change in her. Her cheeks turned a beautiful red, her whole being seemed to brighten with a kind of breathless surprise. I looked round and saw a handsome, beautifully dressed young gentleman coming out of the trees. His smile would have made even the quicksand smile. He sat down beside me, put his arm around me and said, ‘Dear old Betteredge, I owe you a halfpenny.’ He looked up at Rosanna, their eyes met and her cheeks went an even deeper red. Seemingly confused, she turned and left us suddenly. It was very unlike her. ‘She’s an odd one,’ said Mr Franklin. ‘Why on earth did she do that?’ I couldn’t offer any explanation for her behaviour.

‘Welcome back, Mr Franklin,’ I said. He had changed, but he still had the same bright, straightforward look in his eyes. ‘I’ve a reason for coming earlier than expected,’ he said. ‘I’ve been followed by a dark-skinned man in London for the last few days. I took an early train to lose him. Tell me about those Indians who came today.’

‘How on earth do you know about them?’ I asked.

‘I saw Penelope. “My father will tell you all about the magicians,” she said. She’s pretty, Betteredge, and she says your edge is better than ever!’ His gay mood died away when I told him. Looking worried, he took a small packet from his pocket. ‘It means this,’ he said. ‘My wicked uncle’s famous diamond. He left it to Rachel in his will. My father, who is managing his brother’s affairs, gave it to me to bring here. The will states that it must be given to her on her birthday.’

‘Your father is managing his affairs!’ I said. ‘He hated him! So did my lady. She forbade him to ever enter her house again.’

Let me explain. It became public knowledge that Colonel Herncastle had got possession of the Moonstone in dishonest circumstances. When he returned from India, he was avoided by everyone. For years he led a lonely life, never showing the diamond to anyone. It was said that he was afraid it would cost him his life. Almost two years ago, he came to my lady’s house in London, on the night of Miss Rachel’s birthday. I was told a gentleman wanted to see me. I left the party upstairs and met him in the ball. He was old, wasted, but looked as wild and wicked as ever. ‘Tell my sister,’ he said, ‘that I have come to wish my niece a happy birthday.’ I went upstairs with the message. Controlling her anger, my lady said coldly, ‘Tell Colonel Herncastle that Rachel is busy, and that I do not wish to see him.’ When I told the Colonel downstairs his grey eyes settled on me and he laughed softly. ‘Thank you, Betteredge,’ he said. ‘Never mind. I shall remember my niece’s birthday in the future.’ He left without another word, and the next I heard of him was that he had died, six months ago.

Mr Franklin tapped the packet. 'I have made some interesting discoveries at Mr Bruff's office,' he said. 'An old family letter says that it was the object of an ancient holy curse, and also the object of a promise by three Hindu priests. If the Colonel knew this - and he almost certainly did - was he deliberately trying to pass on the curse to the sister he hated, by giving it to her innocent daughter?'

I couldn't understand my own alarm. Who, in this age of progress, could believe that the peace of our English country house could be suddenly rained by an Indian diamond with a Hindu curse on it?

Mr Franklin read my thoughts. 'I noticed the man following me after I took the stone out of the bank.' He looked around him suspiciously. 'You must understand that the idea of chosen servants of an old Hindu superstition waiting for years for the opportunity to get back their holy stone is perfectly normal - in the Oriental way of thinking, that is. Their religion has given them a different idea of patience to ours. The Colonel knew this, and made clever arrangements to hide the stone during his lifetime.' He lay down. 'I don't want to alarm my aunt unnecessarily,' he said, staring up at the sky. 'Yet I feel she must be warned. If you were in my place, Betteredge, what would you do?'

'Sir,' I said, 'Today is May 25th. The Colonel's will states that Miss Rachel must be given the diamond on her birthday, June 21st. We have over three weeks to wait and see what happens. Time will tell us what to do. Until then, put the stone in the bank in Fritzinghall (our nearest town). Do it now, before the ladies return.'

He jumped up and pulled me to my feet. 'Betteredge,' he said, 'you're worth your weight in gold.' We returned to the house and he left for Fritzinghall. I wondered whether I wasn't dreaming, the morning's events had put me in such a spin.