

ANNIE PERRY



THE FACE OF A STRANGER

THE FIRST WILLIAM MONK NOVEL

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**The Face
of a
Stranger**

Anne Perry

Book 1
William Monk series

To Christine M. J. Lynch, in gratitude for old friendship renewed.

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He opened his eyes and saw nothing but a pale grayness above him, uniform, like a winter sky, threatening and heavy. He blinked and looked again. He was lying flat on his back; the grayness was a ceiling, dirty with the grime and trapped fumes of years.

He moved slightly. The bed he was lying on was hard and short. He made an effort to sit up and found it acutely painful. Inside his chest a fierce pain stabbed him, and his left arm was heavily bandaged and aching. As soon as he was half up his head thumped as if his pulse were a hammer behind his eyes.

There was another wooden cot just like his own a few feet away, and a pasty-faced man lay on it, moving restlessly, gray blanket mangled and sweat staining his shirt. Beyond him was another, blood-soaked bandages swathing the legs; and beyond that another, and so on down the great room to the black-bellied stove at the far end and the smoke-scored ceiling above it.

Panic exploded inside him, hot prickling through his skin. He was in a workhouse! God in heaven, how had he come to this?

But it was broad daylight! Awkwardly, shifting his position, he stared around the room. There were people in all the cots; they lined the walls, and every last one was occupied. No workhouse in the country allowed that! They should be up and laboring, for the good of their souls, if not for the workhouse purse. Not even children were granted the sin of idleness.

Of course; it was a hospital. It must be! Very carefully he lay down again, relief overwhelming him as his head touched the bran pillow. He had no recollection of how he had come to be in such a place, no memory of having hurt himself—and yet he was undoubtedly injured, his arm was stiff and clumsy, he was aware now of a deep ache in the bone. And his chest hurt him sharply every time he breathed in. There was a thunderstorm raging inside his head. What had happened to him? It must have been a major accident: a collapsing wall, a violent throw from a horse, a fall from a height? But no impression came back, not even a memory of fear.

He was still struggling to recall something when a grinning face appeared above him and a voice spoke cheerfully.

"Now then, you awake again, are you?"

He stared upwards, focusing on the moon face. It was broad and blunt with a chapped skin and a smile that stretched wide over broken teeth.

He tried to clear his head.

"Again?" he said confusedly. The past lay behind him in dreamless sleep like a white corridor without a beginning.

"You're a right one, you are." The voice sighed good-humoredly. "You dunno nuffin' from one day ter the next, do yer? It wouldn't surprise me none if yer didn't remember yer own name! 'Ow are yer then? 'Ow's yer arm?"

"My name?" There was nothing there, nothing at all.

"Yeah." The voice was cheerful and patient. "Wot's yer name, then?"

He must know his name. Of course he must! It was ... Blank seconds ticked by.

"Well then?" the voice pressed.

He struggled. Nothing came except a white panic, like a snowstorm in the brain, whirling and dangerous, and without focus.

"Yer've fergot!" The voice was stoic and resigned. "I thought so. Well the Peelers was 'ere, day afore yesterday; an' they said as you was 'Monk'—'William Monk.' Now wot 'a you gorn an' done that the Peelers is after yer?" He pushed helpfully at the pillow with enormous hands and then straightened the blanket. "You like a nice 'ot drink then, or suffink? Proper parky it is, even in 'ere. July—an it feels like ruddy November! I'll get yer a nice 'ot drink o' gruel, 'ow's that then? Raining a flood outside, it is. Ye're best off in 'ere."

"William Monk?" he repeated the name.

"That's right, leastways that's wot the Peelers says. Feller called Runcorn, 'e was; Mr. Runcorn, a hinspec-tor, no less!" He raised scruffy eyebrows. "Wot yer done, then? You one o' them Swell Mob wot goes around pin chin' gennelmen's wallets and gold watches?" There was no criticism in his round, benign eyes. "That's wot yer looked like when they brought yer in 'ere, proper natty dressed yer was, hunderneath the mud and torn-up stuff, like, and all that blood."

Monk said nothing. His head reeled, pounding in an effort to perceive anything in the mists, even one clear, tangible memory. But even the name

had no real significance. "William" had a vague familiarity but it was a common enough name. Everyone must know dozens of Williams.

"So yer don't remember," the man went on, his face friendly and faintly amused. He had seen all manner of human frailty and there was nothing so fearful or so eccentric it disturbed his composure. He had seen men die of the pox and the plague, or climb the wall in terror of things that were not there. A grown man who could not remember yesterday was a curiosity, but nothing to marvel at. "Or else yer ain't saying," he went on. "Don't blame yer." He shrugged. "Don't do ter give the Peelers nothin' as yer don't 'ave ter. Now d'yer feel like a spot of 'ot gruel? Nice and thick, it is, bin sitting on that there stove a fair while. Put a bit of 'eart inter yer."

Monk was hungry, and even under the blanket he realized he was cold.

"Yes please," he accepted.

"Right-oh then, gruel it is. I suppose I'll be a'tellin' yer yer name tennorrer jus' the same, an' yer'll look at me all gormless again." He shook his head. "Either yer 'it yer 'ead summink 'orrible, or ye're scared o' yer wits o' them Peelers. Wot yer done? You pinched the crown jools?" And he went off chuckling with laughter to himself, up to the black-bellied stove at the far end of the ward.

Police! Was he a thief? The thought was repellent, not only because of the fear attached to it but for itself, what it made of him. And yet he had no idea if it might be true.

Who was he? What manner of man? Had he been hurt doing something brave, rash? Or chased down like an animal for some crime? Or was he merely unfortunate, a victim, in the wrong place at the wrong time?

He racked his mind and found nothing, not a shred of thought or sensation. He must live somewhere, know people with faces, voices, emotions. And there was nothing! For all that his memory held, he could have sprung into existence here in the hard cot in this bleak hospital ward.

But he was known to someone! The police.

The man returned with the gruel and carefully fed it to Monk, a spoonful at a time. It was thin and tasteless, but he was grateful for it. Afterwards he lay back again, and struggle as he might, even fear could not keep him from deep, apparently dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

When he woke the following morning at least two things were perfectly clear this time: his name, and where he was. He could remember the meager happenings of the previous day quite sharply: the nurse, the hot gruel, the man in the next cot turning and groaning, the gray-white ceiling, the feel of the blankets, and the pain in his chest.

He had little idea of time, but he judged it to be somewhere in the mid-afternoon when the policeman came. He was a big man, or he appeared so in the caped coat and top hat of Peel's Metropolitan Police Force. He had a bony face, long nose and wide mouth, a good brow, but deep-set eyes too small to tell the color of easily; a pleasant enough countenance, and intelligent, but showing small signs of temper between the brows and about the lips. He stopped at Monk's cot.

"Well, do you know me this time, then?" he asked cheerfully.

Monk did not shake his head; it hurt too much.

"No," he said simply.

The man mastered his irritation and something that might even have been disappointment. He looked Monk up and down closely, narrowing one eye in a nervous gesture as if he would concentrate his vision.

"You look better today," he pronounced.

Was that the truth; did he look better? Or did Runcorn merely want to encourage him? For that matter, what did he look like? He had no idea. Was he dark or fair, ugly or pleasing? Was he well built, or ungainly? He could not even see his hands, let alone his body beneath the blankets. He would not look now—he must wait till Runcorn was gone.

"Don't remember anything, I suppose?" Runcorn continued. "Don't remember what happened to you?"

"No." Monk was fighting with a cloud totally without shape. Did this man know him, or merely of him? Was he a public figure Monk ought to recognize? Or did he pursue him for some dutiful and anonymous purpose? Might he only be looking for information, or could he tell Monk something about himself more than a bare name, put flesh and memory to the bleak fact of his presence?

Monk was lying on the cot clothed up to his chin, and yet he felt mentally naked, vulnerable as the exposed and ridiculous are. His instinct was to hide, to conceal his weakness. And yet he must know. There must be

dozens, perhaps scores of people in the world who knew him, and he knew nothing. It was a total and paralyzing disadvantage. He did not even know who loved or hated him, whom he had wronged, or helped. His need was like that of a man who starves for food, and yet is terrified that in any mouthful may lurk poison.

He looked back at the policeman. Runcorn, the nurse had said his name was. He must commit himself to something.

"Did I have an accident?" he asked.

"Looked like it," Runcorn replied matter-of-factly. "Hansom was turned over, right mess. You must have hit something at a hell of a lick. Horse frightened out of its wits." He shook his head and pulled the corners of his mouth down. "Cabby killed outright, poor devil. Hit his head on the curb. You were inside, so I suppose you were partly protected. Had a swine of a job to get you out. Dead weight. Never realized you were such a solid feller. Don't remember it, I suppose? Not even the fright?" Again his left eye narrowed a little.

"No." No images came to Monk's mind, no memory of speed, or impact, not even pain.

"Don't remember what you were doing?" Runcorn went on, without any real hope in his voice. "What case you were on?"

Monk seized on a brilliant hope, a thing with shape; he was almost too afraid to ask, in case it crumbled at his touch. He stared at Runcorn. He must know this man, personally, perhaps even daily. And yet nothing in him woke the slightest recall.

"Well, man?" Runcorn demanded. "Do you remember? You weren't anywhere we sent you! What the devil were you doing? You must have discovered something yourself. Can you remember what it was?"

The blank was impenetrable.

Monk moved his head fractionally in negation, but the bright bubble inside him stayed. He was a Peeler himself, that was why they knew him! He was not a thief—not a fugitive.

Runcorn leaned forward a little, watching him keenly, seeing the light in his face.

"You do remember something!" he said triumphantly. "Come on, man—what is it?"

Monk could not explain that it was not memory that changed him, but a dissolving of fear in one of the sharpest forms it had taken. The entire, suffocating blanket was still there, but characterless now, without specific menace.

Runcorn was still waiting, staring at him intently.

"No," Monk said slowly. "Not yet."

Runcorn straightened up. He sighed, trying to control himself. "It'll come."

"How long have I been here?" Monk asked. "I've lost count of time." It sounded reasonable enough; anyone ill might do that.

"Over three weeks—it's the thirty-first of July—1856," he added with a touch of sarcasm.

Dear God! Over three weeks, and all he could remember was yesterday. He shut his eyes; it was infinitely worse than that—a whole lifetime of how many years? And all he could remember was yesterday! How old was he? How many years were lost? Panic boiled up inside him again and for a moment he could have screamed, Help me, somebody, who am I? Give me back my life, my self!

But men did not scream in public, even in private they did not cry out. The sweat stood cold on his skin and he lay rigid, hands clenched by his sides. Runcorn would take it for pain, ordinary physical pain. He must keep up the appearance. He must not let Runcorn think he had forgotten how to do his job. Without a job the workhouse would be a reality—grinding, hopeless, day after day of obedient, servile, pointless labor.

He forced himself back to the present.

"Over three weeks?"

"Yes," Runcorn replied. Then he coughed and cleared his throat. Perhaps he was embarrassed. What does one say to a man who cannot remember you, who cannot even remember himself? Monk felt for him.

"It'll come back," Runcorn repeated. "When you're up again; when you get back on the job. You want a break to get well, that's what you need, a break till you get your strength. Take a week or two. Bound to. Come back to the station when you're fit to work. It'll all come clear then, I dare say."

"Yes," Monk agreed, more for Runcorn's sake than his own. He did not believe it.