



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

Different Worlds

—Graham Law—

As I have shown in a brief article in the current issue of the *Wilkie Collins Society Journal*, *Blind Love*, the novel on which Collins was working when he died and which was completed by Walter Besant, appeared initially as a weekly serial not only in the elegant and expensive *Illustrated London News* but also in the Sunday edition of the popular New York newspaper the *World*, then claiming a circulation of over 350,000. When I managed to track down a microfilm copy of the American serial in the British Newspaper Library in North London, I was immediately struck by the crudity of the illustrations there compared to the fine drawings in the London pictorial paper. But I was also particularly interested to discover how the New York journal responded to the news of Wilkie's death. On page sixteen of the issue of September 29, 1889, two days after the writer's funeral at Kensal Green, instead of the expected fourteenth installment of the novel, the *World's* readers were given a racy synopsis of the story thus far. The paper presumably wished to exploit the publicity surrounding the author's demise to attract new readers to his last work, for on the facing page there was not only an article of personal reminiscences signed by Olive Logan, entitled 'Wilkie Collins's Charms,' and covering more than two columns, but also the much shorter unsigned report on his funeral reproduced below.

WILKIE COLLINS'S LAST DAYS

His Children and His Adopted Daughter--

His Life of Daily Pain

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[SPECIAL CABLE DESPATCH TO THE
WORLD.]

LONDON, Sept. 2J [sic. for 27].--Almost with his dying breath Wilkie Collins said: "I want a simple funeral and no feathers, no crape, no forms nor ceremonies." His wishes were executed to the letter. There is little to say about the modest manner in which the master of so many plots was laid to rest: but now that he has gone all sorts of strange stories are current about his life, and the innermost secrets of the novelist who sought above all things to shield himself and his home from the gaze and comment of his fellow-men are the topic of the hour. Edmund Yates set the ball rolling in a signed article in his paper, the *London World*, in which he said: "It was during the progress of the *Moonstone*, I believe, that Wilkie Collins first acquired the baleful habit of taking sedatives, which he continued more or less throughout his life. Excited beyond measure by the constant nerve pressure created by the necessity of having every thread of his story constantly within his grasp; suffering under a sharp attack of rheumatic gout in the eyes; distracted at the same time by the serious illness of his mother, to whom he was devotedly attached, Wilkie Collins did as Coleridge, De Quincey and no end of others eminent in the fraternity had done before him--

--he sought and found relief in anodynes. On this subject I almost fear to write, lest I should be suspected of exaggeration. But from what he himself told me, and from what I have heard from friends of even greater intimacy with him, I believe that about that period and for the greater part of his life Wilkie Collins was in the habit of taking daily, and without apparent noxious effect, more laudanum--not Batley's [sic. for Battley's], nor any other minimizing solution, but absolutely pure laudanum--than would have sufficed to kill an entire ship's crew or a whole company of soldiers. This amount was of course arrived at slowly and by degree."

An actor who knew Wilkie Collins intimately remarked to THE WORLD correspondent to-day at the funeral: "I have seen Collins drink a wineglassful of laudanum at one swallow without affecting him in the least. He suffered some injury when he was a young man which rendered it necessary that he should take opium to kill the pain. Life would have been almost unbearable to him without it."

It will be some days before the will of Wilkie Collins will be offered to probate, but it is well known among his intimate friends that he provides liberally in it for the three children whom he acknowledges as his own. They were at the funeral to-day with their mother, and one of the numerous beautiful wreaths which surrounded the coffin was from them. But they were not among the chief mourners and kept out of view as much as possible. They never went near Wilkie Collins's house and few people here have

heard of them. In his will Wilkie Collins refers to these children as his own and leaves one-half of his estate which, it is said, will not exceed \$100,000, to be divided in their interest. The mother of these children was a housemaid in the employ of Wilkie Collins's mother and was very devoted to her while she

lived. The other half of Wilkie Collins's fortune goes to his housekeeper, Mrs. Graves, while she lives, and to the novelist's adopted daughter, Mrs. Bartley, on her mother's death. This adopted daughter, the child of his housekeeper, had been a great pet of Collins for years, doing all his work as amanuensis.

Stories like those in the first two paragraphs concerning Wilkie's addiction to opium were of course rife in the London press at the time, but, for those familiar with the accounts of Wilkie's domestic arrangements and their concealment in the fine biographies by William Clarke and Catherine Peters, the final paragraph comes as quite a surprise. Two questions immediately arise-- -- Which of Wilkie's 'intimate friends' could have passed on the remarkably accurate information about the contents of his Will to the *World* correspondent? and, --Could the new details concerning Martha Rudd, the mother of Collins's three children, also be reliable?

Edmund Yates, who had known Collins since the mid 1850s when both were young members of Dickens's circle, had long been the most conspicuous of London's gossip columnists, then known as Society journalists. The article cited at length in the first paragraph is 'In memoriam--W.W.C., obit September 23rd 1889,' which appeared on Wednesday 25th in Yates's own London Society weekly, the *World* (no connection). In a further article in the same paper the following week, entitled 'One Who Knew Him', Yates even hinted knowingly at Collins's domestic situation in mocking the naivety of a memoir in a rival journal. This suggested that the shabbiness of the writer's dwelling was due to 'the absence of womankind'--'a startling statement to Mr. Collins's intimates,' according to Yates. The editor of the London *World* was undoubtedly present at Kensal Green on the day of the funeral, since he also took the opportunity to contradict the report in the *Times*, by asserting that Oscar Wilde was 'not within miles of the place.'

There were at least two long-standing actor-friends of Collins present at the funeral, Squire Bancroft and Arthur Pinero, both of whom had first met Wilkie in the mid 1870s while performing in plays written by him. Bancroft was one of the chief mourners and seems a more likely source for the remarks recorded in the second paragraph, as he was closer to Wilkie in age and tells a similar story about Wilkie's addiction in his volume of memoirs of 1925, *Empty Chairs*.

Another chief mourner, Hall Caine, the young Manx novelist who made himself a disciple of Collins after the death of his first master Rossetti in 1882 and who had been a candidate for the task of completing *Blind Love*, also published an article of 'intimate' recollections of Wilkie in the London evening paper *The Globe* of 4 October 1889, which included the anecdote about his drinking laudanum by the wine-glass. (The article was later incorporated into Caine's highly unreliable *My Story* (1908), with the addition of the apochryphal account of the death of Collins's

manservant on consuming the anodyne prescribed for his master.) Caine reportedly received £20 for the *Globe* article, which intensely annoyed Harriet Bartley, 'the novelist's adopted daughter.' 'Mr Hall Caine appears to be inclined to again advertise himself at our beloved Wilkie's expense. . . . Small man and small mind but an immense SELF!' she wrote to AP Watt, Collins's literary agent and literary executor, the same night that the article appeared.

But in the end, neither Yates, nor Bancroft, nor Caine was an especially intimate friend of Wilkie's, and there seems good reason to doubt whether any of them would have had the necessary detailed knowledge of the Will to supply the information in the third paragraph. Moreover, even if they had possessed the information, it seems unlikely that Yates and Caine would have wasted such precious morsels of gossip on a mere American correspondent. In fact, the only people apart from the principle beneficiaries (Caroline Graves, Harriet Bartley, and Martha Rudd) certain to know the contents of the Will before probate were the executors--Frank Beard, Henry Bartley, and Sebastian Schelsinger--all of whom were of course also chief mourners at the funeral. Beard had long been Collins's trusted physician and friend and seems the person least likely to divulge secrets to the press. Bartley, who became Wilkie's solicitor in 1877 and married Harriet the following year, emerges from the Clarke and Peters biographies as a thoroughly untrustworthy character and ought to be a prime suspect. But Bartley wrote to AP Watt on October 11, 1889 pointing out that there were details in the Will that it would be 'unhealthy and undesirable to publish,' and requesting that Watt use his influence with the editor of the *Illustrated London News*, who had an obvious interest in such publicity. The London weekly duly complied and published a satisfactorily expurgated account of Collins's bequests. (We should recall that, just two years later, the same paper was happy to add to its popular appeal by featuring daring pictures of bare-breasted slave-girls to accompany its current serial, Hall Caine's *The Scapegoat*.) A business associate of Wilkie's old friend Fred Lehmann, Schlesinger was from Boston, Massachusetts. Wilkie became intimate with him during his reading tour of the USA in 1873-4 and they remained in correspondence until Schlesinger came to live in London in the late 1880s. As an American citizen, Schlesinger might have been both less inclined than Victorian Englishmen to worry about what was 'unhealthy and undesirable to publish' after the writer's death, and more likely to chat freely to a reporter from a New York newspaper.

What then about the original suggestions in the American report--that Martha Rudd had at one time been a housemaid of Wilkie's mother, and that she and the three now grown-up children attended the funeral after all?

Both Clarke and Peters understandably confess themselves unable to document the relationship between Martha and Wilkie between summer 1864 when it is assumed the two met in rural Norfolk (where Martha was born and where Collins was in search of local colour for *Armada*) and autumn 1868--by which time, following the death of Wilkie's mother in March, Martha had been independently installed in the metropolis, and was pregnant with Collins's first child. It is then at least plausible that Collins should have brought Martha to London well before that and found her a place as a maid in his mother's establishment near Regent's Park, or even that Martha made her own way to London and Wilkie first encountered her in his mother's employment.

Both Clarke and Peters, again quite reasonably, base their accounts of Wilkie's funeral principally on coverage in the London papers, particularly detailed reports in the *Times* and *Daily Telegraph*, and thus agree that Martha and the children were represented only by a floral wreath in the name of 'Mrs Dawson and family'. But again it seems plausible that the representatives of the London press might have been either unaware of the identity of the four Dawsons, or persuaded that it was 'unhealthy and undesirable' to mention their presence.

If nothing else the article in the American newspaper suggests that, though the publishing worlds of New York and London were already closely linked economically and technologically by the last decades of the nineteenth century, they remained at a considerable distance in terms of atmosphere and ethos. Without further evidence it is obviously difficult to reach a firm conclusion concerning the source(s) of the 'private' information reported in the *World* or its reliability in areas of uncertainty, but, for what it's worth, my own best guess is that the information is trustworthy and was provided by Sebastian Schlesinger, who, judging by the late letters to him from Collins now held in the Houghton Library at Harvard, probably knew as much about the novelist's 'morganatic family' as anyone. Perhaps other members of the Wilkie Collins Society might care to offer their views.