



A PLEA FOR SUNDAY REFORM

BY

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INTRODUCTION

'A Plea for Sunday Reform' is the first contribution to *The Leader* definitely identified as by Wilkie Collins. *The Leader* was a radical, left-wing, weekly newspaper founded in 1850 by George Henry Lewes and Thornton Hunt. Within a year it needed financial help and Wilkie's friend Edward Pigott bought a controlling share. The two had been friends since boyhood and sailed together throughout their lives.

Collins's work for *The Leader* was originally identified by Kirk Beetz (1) who concluded that 29 pieces in it were by Collins and a further 50 might well be. Of the 29, only 8 (including this one) are actually signed W.W.C. and a further five are signed W. Evidence for the other 16 – and for many of the signed 13 – comes from information contained in Collins's letters to Pigott. The remaining 50 pieces are identified on style, title, or content. There may well be more.

'A Plea for Sunday Reform' is his most polemical early work – both the style and the substance sound as much like a well reasoned sermon as a piece in a weekly publication. Certainly it lends itself to speaking aloud – as much of his fiction later did. The views expressed in it were radical. The National Gallery had occupied its present site in Trafalgar Square since 1837 (the Royal Academy occupied some rooms in the eastern end, nearest to St Martin's in the Fields). The British Museum was also open to the public and several collections owned by aristocrats and other wealthy patrons could also be seen – but not on Sunday. It was 1896 before the law was changed to allow Sunday opening of museums and art galleries. Many other laws in Britain for keeping all manner of things closed on Sundays lasted until nearly the end of the 20th century – a few still remain.

The poverty and long hours of working class people was not lost on thoughtful middle-class men and women. At this time a male worker in a cotton factory in Leeds earned less than £1 a week for working 56½ hours – 10 hours a day Monday to Friday and 6½ hours on Saturday (2). Drinking heavily – sotting as Wilkie calls it – was a familiar relief. By comparison, Wilkie sets up Dives (3), the wealthy bigot condemned to Hell, who by implication is anyone who disagrees with his argument. He even suggests that "good Churchmen and good Churchwomen" who themselves listen to church music on their own pianos on Sunday but deny music to others may be as bad as Dives.

Of Collins's known work in periodicals, this piece is the eighth in order of publication, preceded by six items in *Bentley's Miscellany* – all in 1851 – and his much earlier first piece in *The Illuminated Magazine* in August 1843. By September 1851, Wilkie had already published three books – the biography of his father *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins Esq. R.A.* in November 1848; his Roman historical novel *Antonina* in February 1850; and the Cornwall travel book *Rambles Beyond Railways* in January 1851. Mr Wray's Cash-Box came out in December.

Wilkie's best known work in *The Leader* followed this piece – six essays early in 1852 setting out his eye-witness accounts of clairvoyance, telepathy, and spiritualism under the title 'Magnetic Evenings at Home'. After that his contributions were mostly book

reviews, including a well-known critique of Trollope's *The Warden* which is still reprinted without attribution to Wilkie.

Wilkie's letters to Pigott about editorial policy on *The Leader* bring out his rejection of atheism, his own strong religious views, and his antagonism towards the established church. He wrote to Pigott in February 1852

“Why not let Mr Holyoake write a series of articles on the advantages of Atheism as a creed? – his convictions have been honestly arrived at, miserable and melancholy as they are to think of....In regard to your mixing up of the name of Jesus Christ with the current politics of the day, I am against you - against you with all my heart and soul, I will expose and condemn as heartily as any of you the corruptions and abuses of Church Politics, as the inventions of man – but if one of the things you understand by "freedom of religious thought" be the freedom of mingling the Saviour's name with the politics of the day – I protest against that "freedom" as something irredeemably bad in itself; and utterly useless for any good purpose whatever.” (4)

After this row he refused to allow his name to appear on his contributions to the periodical although he wrote for it until 1855 or 1856. But his writing was becoming more drawn to fiction and to humour rather than polemic. His first piece for Dickens's *Household Words* 'A Terribly Strange Bed' appeared in April 1852 and he joined the staff in October 1856. *The Leader* was behind him.

The Text

This text is taken directly from a copy of *The Leader* 27 September 1851 vol II, no.79 pp925-926. It retains all the original spelling, punctuation and paragraphing.

NOTES

1 *Victorian Periodicals Review* vol.XV no.1 Spring 1982 pp20-29

2 *Levi Wages and Earnings of the Working Classes* London 1885 p.128

3 Latin for 'rich man', used in the parable of the beggar Lazarus who went to heaven and the anonymous rich man (Dives) who went to hell and begged Lazarus for a drop of water – a request refused by Abraham. See Luke 16: 20-26

4 *The Letters of Wilkie Collins* William Baker and William Clarke, Cambridge 1999 I pp83-86

Paul Lewis

A PLEA FOR SUNDAY REFORM

We want reform. We are calling for reform pretty loudly in various matters – in Church doctrines; in Bishop’s incomes; in taxation; in the franchise; in Government offices; in drainage; in street architecture; in the treatment of the poor; in a whole host of errors and corruptions, religious, political, and social, too many for enumeration. Is it flat blasphemy to raise one more among these conflicting cries, and call honestly and boldly for a reform in our Sundays? Is it rank infidelity and sedition to ask for a little innocent amusement and instruction for the poor – the working poor – on a great festival day of the Christian world?

“Yes,” says DIVES, with a frown and shudder – “It *is* blasphemous and seditious to ask for anything of the kind. We *will* have our Sabbath observance; we are a moral, Protestant country; people have no business to be thinking of amusement on the Sabbath, they ought to go to church in the morning, and then take a walk, and then come back to a cold dinner, and then go to church in the evening again; and, if they have any time on their hands after that, let them read tracts, and examine themselves, and think what miserable sinners they are, and repent of their wickedness in sackcloth and ashes. Amusements, indeed! See if we don’t stop their excursion trains and their hot loins of pork and roasted potatoes on the Sabbath! Amusements! I should like to know what you mean by amusements on the Sabbath Day? What do you want next?”

I want this: – I want less Sunday drunkenness, more Sunday consistency, and a system of Sunday observance which shall be at once religious and rational. I want the poor man’s only holiday to be devoted, in an appreciable manner, to his improvement, his instruction, and his enjoyment. How is this done now? You set the church doors open and tell him to go in. If he turns away, you abandon him to the gin palaces at once; if he won’t go to heaven in your way, he may go to the devil in his own. You don’t take into any account his circumstances, his weaknesses, his natural human longings for one day’s enjoyment, after six days’ toil. You establish a code of religious exercises and restraints which suits *your* condition of life; and no matter what the difference in your stations, that code must be *his* code too. If he reject it, you at once assume that he can have no religion at all, and that it is expediency and time-serving to attempt to teach him any religion on another plan than yours.

Let us see what sort of “expediency” this is. In advocating Sunday reform, or any other reform, I start invariably from that one immutable and Divine principle which teaches us to do our duty to our neighbour, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. I take the case of a hard-working mechanic in the receipt of good wages (let us call him John Styles), and I try to find out what is the best use to which John’s spiritual and temporal pastors and masters can put him on the Sunday.

In the first place, the principle on which I have started teaches me to have some sympathy, and to make some allowances, for the sort of life John has led for the six week days. It has been all hard work, poor fellow! for *him* – work which has dismissed him at night fit for nothing but to eat his supper and sleep off his weariness as well as he can,

against the next day. Out of all the large store of the comforts and amenities of life there has been no portion set aside for him. Well: he wakes on Sunday morning, and the uppermost idea in his mind – naturally, irrepressibly, the uppermost idea – is, now I have got a holiday!

How are we to teach him to spend it? First of all by teaching him something of his religion and by leading him to learn and practise it devoutly with his fellow creatures. Is it necessary to do this that we should shut him up for two hours in church, and read him three separate church services rolled into one, with a sermon at the end, in which abstract points of doctrine are discussed for the theological enlightenment of his betters? Surely not. Where would be the harm of separating the Prayer-book Services? of having the Morning Prayer, the Litany, and the Communion celebrated at different and distinct periods of the morning? – celebrated in certain churches as services for the poor especially. I will suppose our friend, John Styles, to be sent to public worship under such circumstances as these – to join, for instance, only in the Morning Prayer; after that, to hear from the officiating clergyman a few words – literally a few words – of earnest, affectionate exhortation on his religious, and moral, duties towards his fellow men, and then to be dismissed, after little more than half an hour of church attendance. Is this enough to make him try to be a better man for the day, and for the six days after? If it is, your object is accomplished, without over-wearying his attention. If it is not, will reiteration of church attendance, will hours on hours of church service, gain the point?

We will now follow John Styles out of church at half-past eleven, or thereabouts; he takes his walk, and then goes home to dinner. What shall we recommend him to do after that? To go to church again? No. If he cannot recollect his lesson of the morning, without repeating it in the afternoon, he has not been very well taught. Moreover, after his good hot dinner, he is not in a very fit state to learn in church, be he ever so willing – there would be danger of his inadvertently going to sleep. But can we give him no other chance of spending his holiday innocently and usefully, having already influenced him to begin it religiously? Yes. We remember that God has given him tastes which ought to be cultivated; faculties which may be elevated and refined; we think this, his only leisure day, a good opportunity for doing the good work, for performing a religious duty towards him – religious in the largest and highest acceptance of the term; and we open our National Picture-galleries and our National Museums to him, *after* the period of the Morning-services. We give him a chance – mewed up as he is all the week in the crowded workshop and the crowded street – of looking at lovely scenes and lovely figures, which open a new world of beauty to his eyes. He can come from his wretched home-view over a back court, and see what the shores of Italy are, in the landscapes of Claude. He can behold the wonderful works of nature in the animal and mineral kingdoms, and be the better for the sight. No? Well, not the worse, certainly. Take the commonest utilitarian view of the subject, and you must confess that in opening picture-galleries and museums on the Sunday, we have, at any rate, opened opposition shops to the gin-shop. Is this nothing gained toward the observance of a holy day, and a festival day?

I, for my part, believe in the humanizing power of our pictures and our Museums – believe that a man may carry away from them thoughts which are worthy of Sunday and worthy of religion – or, in other words, thoughts which are fit to be seen by his Maker. And in this conviction I should rejoice to see John Styles and his brethren enjoying their only leisure hours in the week usefully and innocently, in such a Sunday afternoon’s occupation as I have described.

And now, when John has got home again, and the evening comes on, and the night is before him, what shall we afford him an opportunity of doing? How does he too often pass his Sunday night now? Walk about the Edgeware-road, or Tottenham-court-road, or any other of the “poor” populous neighbourhoods, and you will see sights to shock, ay, to terrify you. It is useless to say John ought to be in church, or John ought to be at home reading his Prayer-book – that does not touch the present existing evil. There he is, sotting; because on Sunday evening, on his holiday, he has nothing else to do but to sot. We all know the remedy – teach him better; but the question is, how? Prove his duty to him out of the Bible: is he in a fit state to receive such a proof? Preach to him while he is wallowing in the mire: will he come out because you bid him? Lure him out of the mire, then; lure him on to the cleaner and higher ground, without any preaching at all, and you have some chance of keeping him clean for the future.

We have already opposed the gin-shop in the afternoon, with museums and picture-galleries – why not oppose it in the evening, with music – sacred music, if you will, to mark the character of the day? Where would be the harm of establishing Sunday evening oratorios, on a large scale and at a low price, to suit working-men and their families? Give these oratorios, when the evenings are fine, in our public gardens; when they are not, in our public halls and our theatres. Sanctify the Sunday evening to the poor, who have only heard the street ballad and the street organ during the week, by making it their occasion for hearing Handel and Haydn, or the Masses of Mozart set to Scripture words, or any other among the great achievements in church music, which our poorer brethren have ears to listen to – yes, and hearts to feel – if you give them the chance. Is no sacred music ever played by a wife or daughter on Sunday evenings, to family audiences of as estimable and as religious people as England can produce? We all know that there is plenty of such music played and hearkened to by good Churchmen and good Churchwomen. Why refuse the harmless privilege to our poor brothers and sisters, who may like music as much as we do, though they may have no pianos, and don’t know one note from another?

Other Sunday evening amusements, at once harmless and useful, might be added to the oratorios; such as dissolving views, representing important scenes in history, to be briefly and plainly explained during their exhibition; moving panoramas, which might, in the same way, be made productive of information about foreign countries and their inhabitants. There are plenty of other means of innocently occupying an idle Sunday evening which I might mention; but I have said enough for my purpose; enough to show generally what I mean by Sunday Reform, what I think might be advantageously offered on Sunday to Mr. John Styles and the large working class that he represents. My

proposals may be incomplete enough; but how are they irreligious and dangerous, in the highest and truest meaning of the words?

I do not ask *you* this question, DIVES, You are a bigot and would set up your own small prejudices (if need be) against the largest convictions of the whole world beside; but I ask you, among my readers, who are good men and moderate men, what is there to scandalize you in what I have written? You object to shortening the Church service, for anybody. I answer, that I only propose to shorten its length, to increase its influence; to give it time to persuade, and deny it time to weary, the “weaker brother.” You object, that what I propose is against the spirit and feeling of the nation. I answer, that it may be against the spirit and feeling of an exclusive party among the nation; but that you do not know that that party represents the whole nation, and cannot know until you have tried my experiment. You object, that my plans, if followed out, would empty the churches and pander to the non-devotional feelings of the people. I answer, that I have already provided a good chance for filling churches in the morning, with an extra congregation that does not enter them now; and that I only want to empty the gin-palaces by an innocent counter-attraction in the evening. Moreover, as to the “pandering” you speak of, I am only aiming to cultivate, on the only day when I am able to cultivate them, tastes and faculties which God has given to man to exercise; and which are, therefore, fit tastes for God’s day. You object, that if my proposals were carried out, many working-men would still prefer their gin and their public-house parlour, their idling and their drunkenness, to my picture galleries and my cheap oratorios. I answer, in the first place, try them before you are in such a hurry to decide; and, in the second place, I tell you that your objection infers that a vast body of your fellow creatures are so determinately and instinctively fond of what is bad, that nothing good, however alluringly presented, can be welcome to them. This is what you have no right to say, on any religious principle – no reason to say, on any philosophical principle, of any man whatever – white or black – that ever God created. No! No! Object as you please, this fact still remains : – Your present Sunday observances do not answer the purpose with the lower classes – do not repress the drunkenness and vice on Sunday evening which they ought to repress. You cannot prevent the working-man from thinking his Sunday a holiday; and yet you will not try to make it an innocent and a useful holiday to him. You try to follow an utterly impracticable middle course between a Jewish Sabbath and a Christian Sunday; you will not *prohibit* as a Jew would; you will not *persuade* as a Christian might; you let a gin-palace and a brothel open their doors on Sunday, and insist on picture-galleries and music-halls closing *theirs*; you will have no rules but your rules, no religious observances but your religious observances, no Sundays but your Sundays. Does this state of things need no reform? – is it absolutely incapable of improvement! Am I, and are those who think like me, to be called infidels and anarchists, because we suggest the propriety of some change in our present Sunday observances? and because we doubt the infinite and eternal wisdom of certain lords and gentlemen who have made these observances? I think not. I set out by saying that our Sundays need reform; and I repeat it here; conscious of no other wish than to speak in the best interests of religion and morality, and of that other all-important virtue of charity, without which religion and morality are alike of no avail.