



**A NOVELIST  
ON NOVEL-WRITING.**

**An Interview with Mr. Wilkie Collins.**

**THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY]  
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## INTRODUCTION

'A Novelist on Novel Writing: An Interview with Mr. Wilkie Collins' was first published in *Cassell's Saturday Journal* for Saturday March 5, 1887 (No. 179 Vol. IV, pp. 355-6). Some of the material is familiar, describing the composition of *The Woman in White*, copyright issues and Collins's high opinion of Sir Walter Scott. More unusual is his description of the hallucinatory effects of coffee and tobacco. Notably absent for this period is any mention of his taking opium.

Collins wrote comparatively few reminiscences and undertook only a handful of interviews for publication. He was never keen on memoirs and two years later he declined a proposal from the Dutch-American publisher Edward Bok. "We have had (to my mind) more "Reminiscences" latterly published in England than are really wanted. It will soon become a distinction not to have written one's autobiography." There is no indication of the writer of the interview but the editor during 1886 and part of 1887 was Sir W. Laird Clowes who did much to promote the publication of cheap reprints of popular literature.

*Cassell's Saturday Journal* was published weekly at one penny and monthly at sixpence. It ran from 1883 until discontinued in 1921. The *Journal* was started with the object of providing livelier reading than had previously been considered respectable for a family paper. It described itself as "a magazine of useful and entertaining literature for the homes of the people." The literature consisted of tales of the sea and the wild west, sensational serials, and occasional detective stories by Arthur Conan Doyle.

The interview is particularly interesting since until now it seems to have eluded Collins scholars and has not been included in any of the standard bibliographies or other works of reference. It has not previously been republished and as such complements the 1888 'Reminiscences of a Story-teller', the first ever reprint of the Wilkie Collins Society in October 1991.

Andrew Gasson

## **A NOVELIST ON NOVEL-WRITING.**

### **An Interview with Mr. Wilkie Collins.**

ONE sloppy, cheerless afternoon not long ago, I found Mr. Wilkie Collins awaiting me in his cosy library in Gloucester Place.

There is nothing dark or melodramatic about the author of "The Woman in White" and so many other tragical stories. Mr. Collins is short and spare, with that significant stoop at the shoulders so often seen in men who have spent a life at the desk; but although he complains of his hereditary enemy, gout, he is still alert and active, and works with as much intensity as ever he did. But, indeed, Mr. Collins is not an old man; for, as age goes in these long-lived days, a man of a little over sixty may well look forward to many years of active work.

Mr. Collins works in a roomy library, well filled with hooks and pictures, and delightfully quiet, seeing that it is but a stone's throw from Oxford Street. As befits a novelist, Mr. Collins is a diligent student of fiction, and the numerous bookcases in his library contain, among literature of a more substantial order, a goodly freight of the world's great romances. Sir Walter Scott is still to him the one supreme novelist; and upon shelves of honour, all to themselves, stand three or four rows of those books which for a long time to come will mark the high-water mark of romance. One or two obvious "tools," such as a treatise on the law of divorce, lie upon the tables; while upon a settee are piles of laborious manuscript, of which more hereafter.

Mr. Collins is a delightful talker, especially when he converses on literature; and over a couple of his cigars we had a long hour's chat, which to me, at least, was most enjoyable.

In answer to a question of mine about his methods of work, Mr. Collins gave me some very interesting reminiscences.

I had asked if it was his custom to arrange his plot minutely before commencing a story, or if he left anything to the inspiration of the moment.

"I make some of the beginning and the end, and have the central idea clearly formed in my mind," was the answer. "The beginning is always difficult, and many young novelists spoil their books by commencing their stories in the middle - a mistake which the practised novelist very rarely commits. Dumas, for instance, in that wonderful 'Monte Cristo,' took care to begin at the beginning. But it is sometimes difficult, in starting a story, to know which is the beginning and which the middle. I was at least a fortnight or three weeks before I hit upon the opening of 'The Woman in White.' As it stood originally, the book commenced with the departure of the young drawing-master for Cumberland; but I soon perceived that I should have to try back, and at last I found the natural commencement."

"And the middle of a book you work out upon the inspiration of the moment?"

“Very largely. The details of the story come bit by bit as you write; and it often happens that the best thing in a novel is an after-thought. Count Fosco, for instance, although a very distinct character in my mind when I began, was only made fat by an after-thought. I always intended to make Fosco a villain; and I ultimately determined to make him fat, by way of protest against the popular fancy that a fat man or woman must necessarily be good and virtuous. The idea seems to be that a man would never grow fat unless his conscience was at rest.”

I asked Mr. Collins if he agreed with the great majority of his readers that Count Fosco was his finest creation. “I nearly always agree with the judgment of my readers,” he replied; “and I think Fosco probably is, taken altogether, the best character I have hit upon.”

We had had some conversation about Alexandre Dumas, and I was delighted to find in Mr. Collins an enthusiastic Dumasite.

“And that reminds me,” he exclaimed, “that the picture of Count Fosco sitting all through the night writing the confession of his villainy, dashing down upon each sheet a few lines of bold calligraphy, numbering the slips and casting them carelessly over his head until he was snowed up in sheets of manuscript, was a detail taken from Dumas’ habits of composition. A most wonderful man!”

Mr. Collins told me a very amusing story apropos of Count Fosco. When “The Woman in White” appeared, various sensitive persons took it into their heads that they had sat for the portrait of the villain. Among them was a Frenchman, whom Mr. Collins had never either seen or heard of. The Frenchman wrote the novelist a letter, breathing fire in every line, and telling him that he was aware of his traducer’s frequent visits to Paris, and that he was certain to know when the next one was to be paid. Then,” went on the letter, with awful solemnity, “I will wait for you at the station, M. Wilkie, with two seconds!”

Notwithstanding these fierce threats, the next visit was paid as usual; and, of course neither challenger nor seconds were in waiting.

But, although he thinks Count Fosco is his best creation, Mr. Collins does not consider “The Woman in White” to be his best book. It is to “Armada” that he gives the palm. He admits that it has always been the less popular of the two; and, indeed, he fancies that when it first appeared it was distinctly unpopular. “Armada” ran through the *Cornhill* a little more than twenty years ago, and Mr. George Smith, the founder of the magazine, gave him a very large sum for it before a line was written.

“It went on all right in the serial form” added Mr. Collins, “until Miss Gwilt came on the scene, and then, somehow, people seemed not to like it; and the success of the story did not begin until it was republished in volume form. It is by far the best thing I have ever written, and, in my own opinion, no other book of mine can compare with it.”

It is always interesting to know how far a famous Romance is “founded on fact,” and I

asked Mr. Collins if any of his stories had any basis of truth.

“Only one,” was the answer. “That was a very short tale which I wrote for Dickens in *Household Words*, and it was called ‘A Terribly Strange Bed.’ The whole of it was true. It was the story of an attempt to squeeze to death a successful gambler in a collapsible bed in an hotel in the old Palais Royal. That little tale has had the most extraordinary popularity, and it has been translated, not only into all the European languages, but into some of the languages of Asia. That was the first piece of work which attracted Dickens’s attention to me. Since then I have had great numbers of ‘true stories’ sent to me, with suggestions that I should make use of them; but they have been too horrible or so strangely true as to seem improbable.”

Conversing upon his method of composition, Mr. Collins said that when the spirit moved him he worked very hard. “But,” he added, “I have been so accustomed to write with the press waiting that, although I work better one day than another, I can generally write every day.” Working at night he has long since forsworn, although formerly he never wrote in the daytime. “I began at one in the morning, and went on until six or seven, with a large pipe in my mouth and a quantity of strong coffee at my elbow. The result of these heroic measures was that I have seen more ghosts than any man in existence. I have often gone up to bed pushing my way through crowds of ghosts. There was one young woman with a green complexion who used to wait for me upon a particular stair. She had enormously large teeth, which she fixed in my neck as I went past her. “Obviously, then, when night work, tobacco, and coffee combined to produce such results, it was time to try a more excellent way; and Mr. Collins took to writing in the daytime. He begins his work at the business-like hour of ten in the morning, and goes on as long as he can; but he never smokes over his writing. Mr. Collins does not believe in doing literary work upon toast and water. When he gets excited over a scene or a plot, he takes a little diluted brandy; and when he is finishing a book - when he gets to within two or three days of the end - he drinks champagne, which he has found to be at once a stimulant and a sedative; “and” adds Mr. Collins, if it be good it does not get into your head.”

Assuredly there never was a novelist who took such infinite pains over his work. Mr. Collins showed me some pages of the manuscript of his last book, “The Evil Genius,” written with a quill in a firm and uncompromising, but rather small, hand, upon quarto paper with a wide margin. At the first glance they looked like the productions of a baleful ingenuity which had sworn to drive all compositors mad. Nearly every line was altered, and in two or three places upon a page whole sentences were blotted out, not with a careless scrawl, but with as much completeness and blackness as if the Russian censorship had taken the slips in hand. Every available inch of margin was crowded with additions and substitutions often themselves emended, for which there was no space between the lines. Yet this seemingly unreadable tangle was as clear and legible as bold-hand. Every addition had its place plainly marked, and I can well understand that printers prefer Mr. Collins’s copy to that more treacherous manuscript which, while fair to look upon, is very hard to read.

Mr. Collins naturally had something to say upon the copyright question. Like all popular

novelists, he is able to make certain terms with the American publishers for “advance sheets;” and of late years he has derived some small advantage from the translations of his books which are published in France, Germany, and Italy. But he thinks it very hard upon young authors that they should lose their Continental copyrights if the translations be not published within twelve months of the originals. The term should, he considers, be two or three years. “Our own copyright is likewise too short,” added Mr. Collins. “It ought to last one hundred years; and even that would be a short term.” As to the prices received by the generality of novelists, Mr. Collins said there could be no doubt that they had fallen of late years “Personally I make more money now by my serial right than ever I did; but I do not get so much for the book. The popularity of every writer varies after a number of years; but I have never presumed upon my reputation. I try as hard now as ever to do good work, and that has helped to keep me abreast of the public.”

We had a long chat about Scott, Fennimore Cooper, Dickens, and Dumas; and lovers of Sir Walter will go a long way with Mr. Collins in thinking “Old Mortality” to be very nearly the most perfect novel that has ever been written, and that Dugald Dalgetty is in some respects a more finished and proportioned picture of a soldier of fortune than even Ancient Pistol himself.

Mr. Collins retains the pleasantest recollections of his visit to America some dozen years ago; and not the least amusing of his reminiscences tells of how a ragged admirer on a western-bound express insisted upon teaching him “how always to win at poker” for love of the author of “The Woman in White.”

