THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

WILKIE COLLINS

BY

GEORGE MAKEPEACE TOWLE

IN

Appleton's Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Art

THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

AUGUST 2006

WILKIE COLLINS.

The parentage of Wilkie Collins accounts, in some degree (if we may believe Mr. Galton's theory of hereditary genius), for the wealth of his fancy, and for the success which he has achieved in a calling which requires imaginative power. He is the eldest son of the late William Collins, of the Royal Academy, celebrated as a painter of rustic scenes, and especially of sea-coast scenery and English cottage-life; and his mother was a sister of Mrs. Carpenter, than whom there are few English portrait-painters more successful. Wilkie was born January 8, 1824. His younger brother, Charles Collins, married Charles Dickens's eldest daughter, and is also known as an artist of no mean merit. For the first twelve years of Wilkie Collins's life he was taught at a well-reputed private school, being instructed mainly in the rudiments of Latin and Greek, "which," he writes in a letter, "have not been of the slightest use to me in my after-life." In 1837, his father determined to go to Italy in search of fresh subjects for his brush among the people and the scenery of that country, and Mrs. Collins was to accompany him. The question being agitated whether the boys should go too, the family friends, for the most part, urged that it would be madness to interrupt the education of two boys of thirteen and nine, by taking them to a foreign country, and subjecting them to foreign influences, at a time when they ought to undergo the wholesome discipline and restraint of an English school. Two friends, however, dissented from the general opinion; and these two happened to be remarkable persons, capable of seeing possibilities of education in systems other than that conventionally recognized; they were David Wilkie, the famous Scotch painter, who was Wilkie Collins's godfather, and Mrs. Somerville, authoress of "Physical Geography," and who has lately, at over fourscore years, given to the world an admirable and profound philosophical treatise. David Wilkie was William Collins's dearest friend; and for Mrs. Somerville's opinion he had great respect. They persuaded him that what the boys might lose in the classics, they would gain in knowing the modern languages, and in acquiring habits of observation among new people and new scenes; and so to Italy it was decided the boys should go. They remained abroad for two years; and there, and in that way, the elder picked up, in his own judgment, the only education which has been of some real use to him. Returning from Italy, he went back to a private school and his uncongenial classics. In due time it became a question whether he should be sent to Oxford and the classics, or to Cambridge and the mathematics. His father left him free to choose his own profession; only hinting that, if Wilkie liked it too, he would prefer to see him in the Church! The young man scarcely knew which he most disliked—going to the university or into the Church. So he cut the Gordian knot and escaped both, by declaring for commerce; and at seventeen or eighteen he was placed in a merchant's office. In this pursuit he continued for four years;

but, with his tastes, he would hardly have remained so long, had he not had a pursuit of his own to follow, which really engaged his interest. He was already an author in secret. Few are so disinclined that their children should pursue a literary or artistic career, as literary men and artists themselves; and William Collins had doubtless used his powers of persuasion to divert his son from the hazardous venture of letters. There was, however, hardly any form of audacious literary enterprise proper to his age which he did not surreptitiously venture, while he was supposed to be in a fair way of becoming one of the solid commercial props of the city of London. Toward the end of the four years he had grown wise enough "to descend from epic poems and blank-verse tragedies" to unassuming little articles and stories, some of which found their way modestly into the small periodicals of the time. He was thus self-betrayed as unfit for a mercantile career, abandoned commerce, and tried reading for the bar. This new occupation lasted, perhaps, six weeks; then he began a novel by way of imparting a little variety in his legal studies. Nominally he continued to be a member of Lincoln's Inn, at which he had been entered as a student, and (no examination being necessary at that time) he was, five years afterward, called to the bar. "I am now," he says, "a barrister of some fifteen years' standing, without ever having had a brief, or ever having even so much as donned a wig and gown." The novel which he began, with which to beguile his time in the cosy but not wholly congenial retreat of Lincoln's Inn, where he found no sympathies among his law-talking neighbors, and where he uttered many a weary sigh over the ponderous law-calf tomes, was, when completed, offered for sale among the London publishers. Wilkie Collins had to undergo the same brusk rebuffs, and to experience the same terrible sinking of the heart, which Thackeray, Chatterton, and hosts of others, have suffered before and after him. The publishers would not venture to publish his first ambitious work. One after another declined to make the experiment; and one and all gave excellent reasons for their decision. The best reason in the world is given in the author's own words. "The scene of the story," says he, "was laid in the Island of Tahiti, before the period of its discovery by European navigation! My youthful imagination ran riot among the noble savages, in scenes which caused the respectable British publisher to declare that it was impossible to put his name on the title-page of such a novel. For the moment I was a little discouraged. But I got over it, and began another novel." This time the scene was Rome; the period, the fifth century; and the central historical event, the siege of the Eternal City by the Goths. All day he read his authorities at the British Museum; in the evening, he wrote on his story in the quiet and seclusion of his father's painting-room. The first volume had been completed, and be was well on with the second, when his absorption in it was broken rudely by his father's death. He put the novel aside, and addressed himself to the writing of another story, which lay far nearer his heart—the story of his father's life. In the "Memoirs of William Collins, R. A.," he saw his name on the title-page of a printed and

published book for the first time. This biography and work of love appeared in 1848, when he was twenty-four, and is considered one of the best of his books; it is full of the enthusiasm of early youth and zealous authorship, and its interest is heightened no less by filial pride than by filial tenderness. It was valued, too, by an extensive circle of earnest admirers of the father's genius.

The biography finished, Collins returned to and completed his romance, the third volume of which was written at Paris. Colburn, the publisher, refused the book; but Bentley published it in 1850. The title of this, his first novel, was "Antonina, or the Fall of Rome." Its success was such as to give him at once a certain place as a novelist. The critics received it with a praise which was nearly unanimous; while the favorable verdict of the reviews was indorsed in time by the readers, "many of my literary elders and betters kindly adding their special tribute of encouragement and approval." "Antonina" opened him a career as a novelist which be has continued to follow, with a success and fame steadily increasing, to the present time. His second romance, "Basil," appeared in 1852, and in the same year he published a narrative of a walking-tour in Cornwall, called "Rambles beyond Railways." In 1854 appeared "Hide and Seek," and, in 1856, a collection of short stories, entitled, "After Dark." His pen, thenceforth, has known little rest. His first novel to attract universal interest, and which exhibited his rare powers of invention, and his genius for constructing a sensational plot, was "The Dead Secret," issued in 1857; and in the following year appeared another volume of short stories, collected under the head of "Queen of Hearts." It was in 1860 that his greatest triumph was achieved, and that he gave to the world his greatest work of fiction—"The Woman in White." This was followed, in 1862, by "No Name;" a volume of collected sketches and essays appeared in 1863, called "My Miscellanies;" "Armadale" was published in 1866, "The Moonstone" in 1868, and, finally, "Man and Wife," in 1870. Besides these novels, Wilkie Collins has been a successful writer of dramas, and has a facile hand in rendering dramatic versions of brother authors. His first drama was "The Light-house," which was acted in private at the house of Charles Dickens. It was first performed at Camden House, Kensington, the residence of Colonel Waugh, for the benefit of a charity connected with the army in the Crimea; and the audience was most brilliant. Not less so the performers. Charles Dickens assumed the part of Aaron Gurnoch, head light-keeper; Wilkie Collins that of Martin Gurnoch; Jacob Dale was acted by Mark Lemon; a "Shipwrecked Lady," Miss Hogarth (Dickens's sister-in-law); Phœba, the eldest Miss Dickens. The acting of Dickens, on this occasion, was the marked feature of the evening, which, according to Tom Taylor, "was a great individual creation of a kind that has not been exhibited before." It has been said that the association of Miss Hogarth with Dickens in this play was the occasion of the separation from his wife. "The Light-house" was also brought out in public at the Olympic Theatre with marked success. "The Frozen Deep," Collins's second drama, has a similar history, having been produced at

Dickens's house by amateurs, and also at the Olympic. The next, "The Red Vial," was brought out by the Olympic, but had only a limited popularity. Wilkie Collins, in collaboration with Dickens and Fechter, dramatized Dickens's beautiful Christmas story, "No Thoroughfare," which Fechter brought out with great *éclat* at the Adelphi Theatre, Strand, of which he was then the manager. "Black and White" was also adapted by Collins and Fechter, and produced at the Adelphi. At the time of writing this, Collins is busily dramatizing "Man and Wife" for the London stage, and has arranged to have it also brought out in the United States.

Wilkie Collins was for many years one of Dickens's closest and most cherished friends. They might often be seen walking together in the London streets, especially in the neighborhood of Covent Garden and the Strand; Collins, short and rather thick-set, with bold forehead, long black beard, large bright-blue eyes, and gold spectacles, forming a decided contrast with the airiness and "sailor-like aspect" of his great friend. Most frequently might these two be found quietly dining together at Verrey's restaurant at the upper end of Regent Street, near Oxford Street, where they had a little table to themselves in a corner reserved especially for Dickens by the restaurant-keeper. Frequently, also, Collins visited the famous old house on Gad's Hill, and Dickens the plain house occupied by his friend, in Gloucester Place, Portman Square. Collins has long been a frequent contributor to *All the Year Round*, several of his best novels having appeared in that periodical; and doubtless his connection with it will not cease, now that its founder has been laid in the great Abbey. In society, few men are more genial, sparkling, and entertaining, than Wilkie Collins. Few enjoy life and good fortune with more zest, or with more honest and hearty pleasure. He is fond of talking, and converses with an ease and fluency, and a frequent humor (though this quality appears little in his writings), which make him a welcome comer among the literary circles of London, and a favorite guest at the tables of elegant entertainers. Like Dickens, Wilkie Collins is far from having a kinship with literary Bohemians, the eccentric and shiftless *literati*, whose oddities are noted by gossips, and whose pounds sterling melt away without their consciousness. He is a prompt, methodical, quick-witted, keen business-man. He pays careful attention to the business details of his profession. He understands fully the advantage of reputation and his position, in the face of the publisher. He seldom or never appears in public, and, although a ready speaker on occasion, he is, it is needless to say, wanting in that peculiarly happy brilliancy and apt oratorical force, which, on festive, as well as serious occasions, distinguished Charles Dickens above all Englishmen. He is an excellent representative and type of a modern class of English literary men, who mingle freely and happily with the world and are of it; who take a keen interest in the events of the world and keep well apace with their times; who have a kind of robustness, physical as well as moral and mental, and a generous vigor, which identify them with Young England in its best phase. Charles Reade is

another example of the same sort. Like Dickens and Reade, Collins is no courtier of lordly patronage, no dupe of aristocratic splendor and blandishment. He thinks positively on all subjects, and in politics he stands fairly on the liberal and progressive side. Thackeray, with all his bluff independence and "Snob-Papers" satire, was not a little patrician in his tastes and habits; and was seduced by the smiles of a nobility which, in grace and polish and delicate condescension, is the most seductive on earth. It is the peculiarity of this newer race of which I speak, that they are rarely found in the company of lords, and that their writings make little account of the "higher orders." They feel quite independent of them, and so think and act for themselves. Toward America, Collins, as Dickens and Reade, feels cordially and cousinly, and in our affairs he takes a very lively interest. Doubtless a sense of gratitude has something to do with his cordial friendship for us; for, popular as he is in England, his works are far more widely circulated and read in this country, and his fame is probably more widespread with us than with his British fellow-subjects.

It is, perhaps, hardly a proper moment in which to enter upon any minute criticism of his works. To sum up an author's labors, and to seek to settle his proper rank among other authors, is, in his lifetime, an invidious task. Wilkie Collins is still in the sturdy vigor of his prime; and although it is true that no recent work of his equals in artistic and dramatic power, or in strong delineation of character, "The Woman in White," we may yet look for his masterpiece. It is difficult to avoid expressing the thought, that his later works show signs, not of any deterioration of creative power, or of working mental capacity, but of a haste and carelessness which betray many defects, and leave many things to be desired. It almost seems as if the author were too heedful of the business aspect of his profession, and too little heedful to maintain his fame. Many writers have fallen before the temptation to turn out a certain annual quantity of matter, and to derive from it a certain annual income. What has often been mistaken for a decay of powers, has resulted from yielding to such an impulse.

There is one observation which few, who read both the earlier and later books of Wilkie Collins, will not make. Like Bulwer, it may be said of him that, at a certain period of his literary career, his style seems to have changed, and to have become widely different from what it was before. As the author of "Pelham" would scarcely be recognized in "My Novel," so the author of "Antonina" and "Basil" was effectually disguised in "The Woman in White" and "Armadale." The change was an improvement. If there be a conspicuous merit in the last two, it is the art with which the reader is entangled in the plot, and in the unflagging interest of every succeeding page; and hardly less remarkable is the singular appropriateness of the author's style to the peculiar sort of fiction to which he has for the most part latterly confined himself. His forte is to invent with subtlety, and then to develop his invention through the medium of a style the peculiarity of which is at once to give a *vraisemblance* to

the story by detailed and minute matter-of-fact statement, to enchain the attention, and to deepen and dramatize the mysteries of the complication. In the invention of a plot, and in that alone, Collins is superior to Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot; and may be said to have only in Reade a rival. He is fond of introducing the supernatural into his stories; but does so with less boldness than Bulwer, seeking rather to leave it doubtful whether the startling appearances which he presents are remarkable coincidences, or due to other than human agency. His works rather give evidences of a possibility of greatness in him, than declare him already great. He lacks the fitful and flashing brilliancy of Reade, as he does the surpassing tenderness and unapproachable humor of Dickens; he has no touch of Thackeray's satire, no splendor of description, such as that which abounds in Bulwer; neither can he be compared with George Eliot in those perfect pictures of certain phases of society, and of every-day characters and events, for which that authoress is famous. But, in his especial field of fiction, he has no superior, perhaps no equal, among living English romancers.

By George Makepeace Towle (1841-1893), *Appleton's Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Art* 3 September 1870 pp278-281.