



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

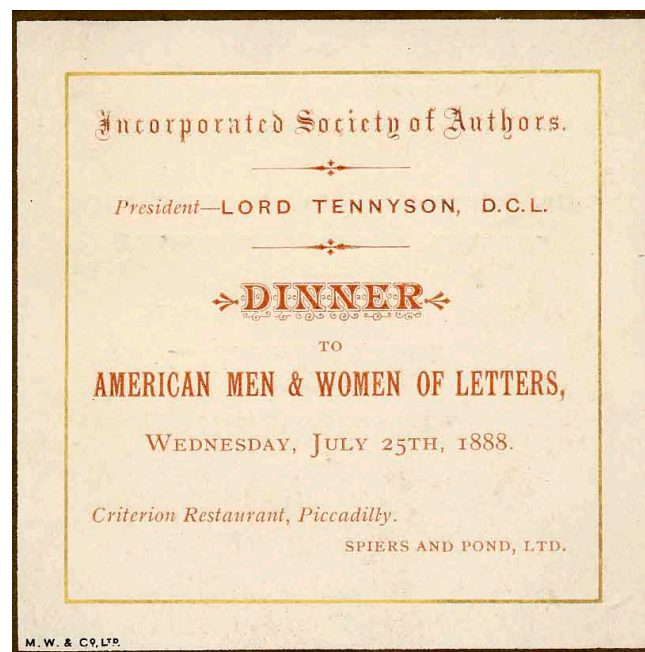
WILKIE COLLINS AND THE DINNER

AT THE SOCIETY OF AUTHORS

25 JULY 1888

By

Andrew Gasson and Paul Lewis



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MARCH 2007

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The Society of Authors was established in 1884 for 'the maintenance, definition and defence of Literary Property', following a meeting held on 28 September 1883. Tennyson, the then poet laureate, was elected President and added prestige and credibility to the newly founded society. Walter Besant became Chairman of the Committee of Management, a position he held for a number of years. Collins was an enthusiastic founder-member and honorary vice-president, along with amongst others R. D. Blackmore, W. S. Gilbert, Charles Reade, G. A. Sala and Charlotte Yonge. The Society was launched at a Lord Mayor's Banquet on 18 October 1884, at which 150 members were present. The Society's first objective was to obtain copyright for English authors in the United States while other aims included the promotion of a Bill for the Registration of Titles.

The Society of Authors was presented by Besant with a large collection of Collins's papers connected with International Copyright. In 1890 it republished in its journal Collins's *Considerations on the Copyright Question, Addressed to an American Friend* under the title 'Thou Shalt Not Steal' (*The Author*, 1, June 1890, pp 31-35).

Collins last appearance at the Society of Authors was as a steward at a 'A Dinner to American Men & Women of Letters' held on 25 July 1888 at the Criterion Restaurant. The event was held in recognition of the efforts by notable US authors to induce their Government to pass an International Copyright Act (V. Bonham-Carter, *Authors by Profession*, London 1978, p. 142).

Many distinguished American guests were present. They included James Russell Lowell, (1819-1891), who had been the US Ambassador to London from 1880-1885 and subsequently spent much of his time in England where he was in demand as a speaker and a campaigner for international copyright laws. He was also a poet and essayist and editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* from 1857 and the *North American Review* from 1864. Seated next to Wilkie was Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924) whose *Little Lord Fauntleroy* Wilkie had recently read and about which he wrote to his publisher "I wonder if Mrs Burnett knows that she has given to her charming little boy the name of the last man hanged for forgery in England?" (To Andrew Chatto 26 April 1888 *Public Face* IV 310). Wilkie had written about the real Fauntleroy thirty years earlier ('A

Paradoxical Experience' *Household Words* 13 November 1858 516-522). Bret Harte, whom Wilkie admired alone among the modern American writers, and Olive Logan, whom he had met on two previous occasions, were also on the top table. Henry James was apparently invited but is not recorded on the table plan

Wilkie Collins, as a distinguished English author, was invited to be one of the stewards and he wrote to Little from his new home in Wimpole Street on 25 June:

Dear Sir,

I accept with pleasure the proposal with which the committee have honoured me – that I should be one of the Stewards on the occasion of the forthcoming public dinner to Mr Russell Lowell.

I am, Dear sir, | Faithfully yours | Wilkie Collins

I have recently changed my place of residence. Will you give directions kindly to have my address changed to | 82. Wimpole Street. | W.

Jas Stanley Little Esqr

(The Public Face of Wilkie Collins, IV, 326)

In a newly discovered letter to Little dated 19 July, Collins paid his dues for the evening and wrote again:

Dear sir,

I beg to enclose a Postal Order for 10/6 for a ticket for the Dinner to American Men and Woman of Letters on the 25th of this month.

Faithfully yours | Wilkie Collins

Jas Stanley Little Esq Secy

On the day of the dinner, Collins wrote to A. P. Watt, his literary agent, "...I wonder whether I shall meet you tonight at the Authors' Society Dinner at the Criterion to the American writers in London? It won't be like your dinner – worse luck!" This was a reference to an evening at Watts's club on 18 June 1888. On the whole Collins did not enjoy either making or listening to speeches writing, for example, in 'Mr Percy and the Prophet' (1877) "At the end of the world, the expiring forces of nature will hear a dreadful voice - the voice of the last Englishman delivering the last speech." In a subsequent letter to Watt on 30 July, Collins confirmed his views, writing:

[For Plan of Tables see within.]

The Incorporated Society of Authors.

President:—LORD TENNYSON.

—*—
DINNER

TO

AMERICAN MEN & WOMEN OF LETTERS,

JULY 25TH, 1888.

—*—
TOASTS.

1. *The Queen and the President of the United States.*

Proposed by THE CHAIRMAN.

Replied to by CONSUL-GENERAL WALLER.

2. *Literature.*

Proposed by THE CHAIRMAN.

Replied to by HON. J. RUSSELL LOWELL.

3. *The Incorporated Society of Authors.*

Proposed by MR. BRANDER MATTHEWS.

Replied to by MR. WALTER BESANT, *Chairman of the Executive Committee*, and MR. UNDERDOWN, Q.C., *Hon. Counsel to the Society*.

4. *American Men and Women of Letters.*

{ *Science.* Proposed by PROF. MICHAEL FOSTER, F.R.S.

{ *Poets.* Proposed by MR. EDMUND GOSSE.

{ *Novelists.* Proposed by MR. EDMUND YATES.

Replied to by MR. BRET HARTE, MRS. LOUISE CHANDLER MOULTON, and

5. *Historians and the Chairman (Prof. James Bryce).*

Proposed by PROF. FREDERICK POLLOCK, LL.D.

PLAN OF THE TABLES.

Rev. Henry Allen, D.D.	Mr. E. M. Tuckertown, Q.C.	Mr. Joseph Fenell.	Mrs. Joseph Fenell.	Mrs. Edward Gosse.	Mr. J. McNeil Wheeler.	Mr. Austin Dobson.	Mr. Paul Hanco.	The Very Rev. the Mayor of the Temple, D.D.	Mr. George Meredith.	Hon. James Russell Lowell.	THE CHAIRMAN (Prof. James Bryce, M.P.)	Mrs. F. Hodgson Barnet.	Mr. Wilkie Collins.	Prof. S. P. Langley, LL.D.	Prof. Michael Foster, F.R.S., LL.D.	Mr. Edmund Yates.	Mrs. Louise Chandler Moulton.	Mr. W. H. Russell, LL.D.	Mr. Consul-General Thomas M. Walker.	Miss Olive Logan (Mrs. Spax).	Lord Brougham.	Mr. G. W. Stanley.
Table I.		Table II.		Table III.		Table IV.		Table V.														
Mr. W. Sharp.	Dr. E. W. Richardson, F.R.S.	Hon. Hamilton Caffé.	Mrs. Isabel Hoey.	Mr. William Black.	Mr. Edwin A. Aubrey.	Mr. W. M. Rossetti.	Sir John Stainer.	Rev. Canon Bell.	Mr. F. H. Cliffe.													
Mrs. W. Sharp.	Mr. H. D. Naldley.	Lord Desart.	Dr. Moulton.	Mr. Osmond.	Sir Francis O. Adams, K.C.B.	<i>The Daily Chronicle.</i>	<i>The Standard.</i>	Miss Clementina Black.	Mr. Charles Edwardes.													
Mr. Bernard Capes.	Mr. Arthur Dillon.	Dr. W. H. Besant, F.R.S.	Rev. Henry White.	Mr. T. W. Rhys Davids, LL.D.	Mrs. Hale.	Mr. George R. Sims.	Miss Lucy (Euseb Stuart).	Miss Amy Levy.	General Burton.													
Rev. H. Rice-Jones.	Mr. H. G. Keene.	<i>The Daily News.</i>	<i>The American Agency.</i>	<i>The Times.</i>	Prof. Horatio Hale.	Mr. Brander Matthews.	Miss Bramston.	Mr. Lee Knight.	The Earl of Pembroke.													
Dr. J. Bowles Daly.	Mr. James Baker.	Mr. Egmont Hake.	Mr. Oscar Wilde.	Mr. Hollingshead.	Dr. Waldstein.	Mrs. Brander Matthews.	Mr. Edward Child.	Mr. J. J. Stevenson.	Mr. James W. Wells.													
Rev. E. A. Deyman.	Mr. Herbert Beaufield.	Mr. David Harray.	Lady Colin Campbell.	Dr. J. E. Ericson, F.R.S.	<i>The Morning Post.</i>	Mr. Campbell Frazer.	Mr. F. W. Robinson.	Mrs. Stevenson.	Mr. H. O. Forbes.													
Mr. A. P. Crouck.	Prof. M. A. Eckington.	Mrs. Stannard (John Strange Winner).	Mr. Edward Hood.	Mr. F. H. Underwood.	Mr. W. M. Colles.	Mrs. Campbell Frazer.	Mr. W. Westall.	Mr. Edward Dicey, C.B.	Prof. D'Orsey.													
Dr. L. J. Alexander.	Mr. T. J. Wise.	Mr. Stannard.	Mr. A. G. Sedgwick.	Mr. Hyde Clark.	Miss Frances Low.	Mr. A. R. Sopes.	Mr. W. Allingham.	Mr. A. C. Armstrong.	Mr. Harcourt.													
Mr. Jenner.	Mr. W. D. Slater.	Mr. Andrew W. Tuer.	Mr. G. A. Roughton, A.R.A.	Mr. Casano Moulhouse.	Mr. Low.	Mr. John Dennis.	Mr. Richard Garnett, LL.D.	Mr. Crosswell.	Mrs. O'Malley.													
Mrs. Jenner.	Mr. S. C. G. Middlemore.	Miss Mary Bramston.	Mr. Bernard Rodd.	Sir Charles Mills, K.C.M.G.	Mr. A. F. Watt.	Mr. Douglas B. W. Staden.	Mr. H. J. Hood.	Mr. S. W. Kenshaw.	Miss Backland.													
Mr. W. Anderson Smith.	Mr. A. W. Dubourg.	Mr. R. Copley Christie.	Mr. Sidney Colvin.	Mr. J. A. Eakie.	Mr. Basil Field.	Prof. George Darwin, F.R.S.	Mrs. Traill.	Mr. William Knighon.	Mr. Robert Ross.													
Mrs. Bateman.	Mr. W. G. Wills.	Miss Pollock.	Mrs. Pollock.	Mr. Putnam.	Mrs. Beant.	Mr. F. D. Millet.	Mr. H. D. Traill, D.C.L.	Mr. John Coleman.	Mrs. Carey Hobson.													
Mr. Robert Bateman.		Prof. Fred Pollock, LL.D.		Mr. Walter Beant.		Mr. Edmund Gosse.		Mr. J. Stanley Little.														

»MENU«

Hors d'œuvres Variés.

Consommé Rossini.

Purée de Tomates à l'Américaine.

Truite Saumonée, Sauce Chambord.

Salade de Concombres. Pommes nouvelles.

Poulet de Grain à la Stanley.

Haricots Verts nouveaux.

Queues de Homard à la Delmonico.

Filet de Bœuf au Madère.

Quartier d'Agneau à l'Anglaise.

Aubergines farcies. Pommes rissolées.

Petits Pois.

Caneton rôti.

Salade de Laitues et Tomates.

Riz à l'Impératrice. Bavarois au Café.

Charlotte Russe.

Gelée aux Fruits. Bombe Glacée Criterion.

Whitebait.

Fraises Crème Glacée. Dessert. Café.

Between the weather, and the speeches (on the 25th) I have been getting on badly with my work. The Authors' Banquet had everything in its favour – a wonderfully good dinner, excellent champagne – permission to smoke – and (so far as my experience went) delightful guests. All spoiled by that damnable product of British stupidity and conceit – after-dinner speeches. The one pleasant exception was Russell Lowell's address – but he would have done better if he had talked a little less about himself, and had sat down a little sooner. As for the others, I will only say this. If I had ventured to take my lovely new stick with me (but I was afraid of losing it in the waiting-room), I should have sent a waiter for that weapon – should have gone behind each of the other speakers and have broken his head when he sat down again – and have appeared before the magistrates the next day with the greatest pleasure as a benefactor to my species.

Ever yours | WC

(See the *Times*, 26 July 1888 p. 6e, for a full version of Russell Lowell's address).

The speeches – fourteen in number - of which Collins understandably complained consisted of seven toasts with their respective replies:

1. **The Queen and the President of the United States.** Proposed by the Chairman and replied to by Consul-General Waller.
2. **Literature.** Proposed by the Chairman and replied to by J. Russell Lowell.
3. **The Incorporated Society of Authors.** Proposed by Brander Mathews and replied to by Walter Besant and Mr Underdown.
4. **American Men and Women of Letters.** Proposed by Professor Michael Foster, Edmund Gosse, and Edmund Yates and replied to by Bret Harte and Louise Chandler Moulton.
5. **Historians and the Chairman.** Proposed by Professor Frederick Pollock.

The Chairman for the evening was Professor James Bryce (1838-1922), under-secretary of state at the Foreign Office. Collins was seated close to him in centre of the top table between Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924) the noted Anglo-American author and Professor Samuel Pierpont Langley (1834-1906) the US astronomer and Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute. The only other two notable English authors on the top table were George Meredith and Edmund Yates. There were five sprigs to the main table, headed by Robert Bateman, Professor Fred Pollock, Walter Besant, Edmund Gosse and J. Stanley Little. According to the table plan, A. P. Watt was seated close to Walter and Mrs Besant.

The menu would have been entirely to Collins's liking, consisting of ten elaborate French courses: Hors d'oeuvres, Consommé, salmon trout, chicken, beef or lamb, roast duckling, dessert, whitebait and coffee. Everything was of the highest standard, including the elegant menu card designed and printed by Marcus Ward & Co. James Little certainly considered the dinner a success, writing to Besant the following day:

We scored a brilliant success last night. The reports and leaders in this morning's papers are, I think, all that could be desired. The various American guests expressed to me their feeling of satisfaction and I believe the evening went without a hitch.

Two of the guests at the top table wrote accounts of Collins at the dinner as part of their *post mortem* appreciations.

Two days after Collins's death Edmund Yates wrote an obituary of his friend for the London weekly *The World* which contains this passage.

At one time we met frequently, but of late years Wilkie went but little into society, and the state of his health prevented his enjoyment of that cheery "give and take" conversation with old friends of which he was once so fond. Months had passed without our meeting, when, on the occasion of the dinner given by the Authors' Society at the Criterion in '88, I saw him descending from a cab at the door. A man of middle height, looking less, for his broad shoulders were rounded and bowed, with a big leonine head, light eyes behind huge spectacles, and a bushy gray beard. He welcomed me with his old affection, and, at his request, I gave him my helping arm up the Criterion staircase. He was dreadfully crippled with rheumatic gout, but in fair spirits, and anxious for me to point out to him such celebrities as had risen since his time. For a man of such wide reputation, Wilkie's personal appearance was very little known; but as soon as it became buzzed about that he was present there was a great rush to see him. He was introduced to, among others, the American ladies, Mrs. F. H. Burnett and Mrs. Moulton, and talked to them with that air of old-fashioned courtesy which became him so well. He remained to the last, and when I saw him off, declared he had enjoyed his evening.

Very bent and gnarled and gnome-like, very much changed, indeed, from the dapper little man I had met thirty years before at Tavistock House.

(Edmund Yates 'Moi-Même. In Memoriam—W.W.C., obit. September 23rd. 1889.' *The World* 25 September 1889, pp. 12-13).

A few days later the American writer Olive Logan (1839-1909) wrote an account for a New York newspaper, also called *The World*, of her three meetings with Collins. The last was at the Society of Authors dinner.

As Mr. Walter Besant was taking me to dinner I saw Wilkie Collins coming upstairs. Never shall I forget the spiritual light which was radiant upon his intellectual face! The simile is well worn of a lamp burning in an alabaster vase; yet I can call to my aid no other which so aptly describes the translucence of the mask of his features, through which the sacred fire of Soul cast its supernal rays. Illness and unswerving devotion to the cult of letters had rendered his physiognomy so much more delicate than when I first saw it that I found difficulty in associating this valetudinarian with the robust gastronomist who had discoursed so earnestly upon the relative merits of terrapin and turtle. His form, too, had undergone a change. He was bent so that his head was scarcely higher than the hand which held the stick by whose assistance he walked. In reply to my inquiry he said that he had been very poorly, very poorly indeed, but was better now, and, as usual, exceedingly busy. At this repast I fancy he made but a pretext of eating, and, if I remember rightly, drank nothing but mineral waters—Apollinaris or the Malvern spring. His face was grave during all the merriment of the banquet. I gazed upon his features with more interest than ever previously; upon each lineament there dwelt a strange, pathetic beauty, with whose peculiarities all are familiar who have seen a face with “Death’s pale flag advanced there.” As he idly toyed with a fork during the change of courses I called to mind the many noble works he had given to enrich English fiction, and I felt a deep sense of gratitude to him for the enjoyment he had furnished us by his powerful contributions to our literature.

(Olive Logan ‘Wilkie Collins’s Charms’ *The World*, New York, Sunday 29 September 1889 p16).

The Society Authors established an annual dinner but this occasion in 1888 was the last that Collins attended. His health was already failing and this was possibly his last public appearance.

Sources

Authors by Profession, Victor Bonham-Carter, Society of Authors, London, 1978.

The Public Face of Wilkie Collins, Edited by William Baker, Andrew Gasson, Graham Law and Paul Lewis, Pickering & Chatto, London 2005.

