



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

A Visit to Wilkie Collins

Personal recollections by one who knew him.

from
Pall Mall Budget and Pall Mall Gazette

Introduction © Paul Lewis 2017

The Wilkie Collins Society
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INTRODUCTION

These newly identified recollections are the original source of one often quoted detail about his life and give new information about why Fosco in *The Woman in White* is fat and has mice.

Green ghosts

Wilkie's biographers have frequently referred to green ghosts which haunted him. But the original source of this idea has never been identified.

The first mention is in the biography by Robert Ashley in 1952 who clearly drew on the main piece published here

He once confided to an interviewer that regularly in the early hours of the morning as he was writing in his library "the ghosts would begin to appear, and I used to make a rush upstairs to my bedroom. There was always one particular ghost which would greet me when the situation [in the particular novel he was writing] had been horrible. It was a fearful, shapeless monster, with eyes of fire and big green fangs."

Ashley also drew on the piece for the description of where Wilkie worked "his quarters were dingy, dusty and disorderly, and the furniture plain old-fashioned, and worn." Ashley gives no citations in his book.¹

Five years later, Nuel Pharr Davis embellished the story

When he worked late, phantoms would follow him upstairs to bed. At the turn a green woman with tusk teeth would wait for him and say goodnight by biting a piece out of his shoulder.²

Davis, who footnotes copiously, gives no reference for this assertion. Nearly forty years later Catherine Peters (p.336) also draws on Ashley in her major biography

One of his recurrent terrors appeared in slightly different forms, as a green woman with fangs, or a 'shapeless monster, with eyes of fire and big green fangs'.³

¹ Robert Ashley *Wilkie Collins*, London 1952, pp. 110-111.

² Nuel Pharr Davis, *The Life of Wilkie Collins*, Illinois, 1956, p. 299.

³ Catherine Peters *The King of Inventors*, London 1991, p. 336.

She also quotes the American actress Mary Anderson, who met Wilkie in 1884 and knew him well. In her autobiography she claimed Wilkie had visions under the influence of laudanum

When going up to his room at night, the staircase seemed to him crowded with ghosts trying to push him down.⁴

Anderson records that Wilkie visited her *en famille* at her home in Cromwell Road telling her anecdotes and “in recounting his reminiscences, he added to them his own personal magnetism”. The most recent mention is in Andrew Lycett’s comprehensive biography, who also draws on Ashley and Anderson.

When he went upstairs, he was confronted by ghosts who, he imagined, wanted to push him down. When he tried to sleep, he often saw a ‘shapeless monster, with eyes of fire and big green fangs.’⁵

Lycett also gives no reference.

Fat Fosco

The piece also gives the origin of why Wilkie made Fosco fat.

In 1887 Wilkie told a journalist

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.⁶

But in this new piece we learn that it was a challenge after being told no villain could be fat. It also tells us the origins of Fosco’s white mice.

How reliable?

There are things in the account which are wrong. It quotes Wilkie as saying

⁴ Mary Anderson *A Few Memories*, London 1896, p. 143.

⁵ Andrew Lycett, *Wilkie Collins A Life of Sensation*, London 2013, p. 390.

⁶ *Cassell’s Saturday Journal*, 5 March 1887, vol. IV, No. 179, pp. 355-356.

I am not one of those who have the patience to write a *scenario*. I get the main subject well into my head and leave the details and complex elaborations to come afterwards.

This is simply not true. Indeed it is contradicted by a later account in the same periodical by Wilkie's publisher Andrew Chatto who writes

It was his habit to write a synopsis or *scenario* of his novels.⁷

Wilkie himself said on several occasions that he knew the end of his story before he embarked on the beginning. He wrote in 1865

The minor details of incident, and the minuter touches of character, I leave to suggest themselves to me at the time of writing for publication. But the great stages of the story, and the main features of the characters, invariably lie before me on my desk before I begin my book.⁸

He explained in that letter that he knew in detail the end of *Armadale* although he was in the middle of writing it.

When Wilkie was taken seriously ill in 1889 and could not continue with his novel *Blind Love* he asked Walter Besant to finish the story for him using his notes. Wilkie died before Besant had done it. Besant found that the notes were a detailed scenario and that he was "careful to adhere faithfully and exactly to the plot, scene by scene, down to the smallest detail as it was laid down by the author."⁹

The piece also claims that Wilkie said his favourite writers were Scott, Byron, and Dickens and that the passages that always affected him most were the death of little Nell and of Paul Dombey.

⁷ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 24 September 1889, pp. 1-2.

⁸ [0651] to Dr Deems, 5 October 1865 (Baker & Clarke, vol. I, pp. 258-60.

⁹ See Andrew Gasson, *Wilkie Collins, An Illustrated Guide*, Oxford 1998, p. 18.

Certainly Scott was one of his three “Kings of Fiction” who Wilkie listed as “Walter Scott, Fenimore Cooper, and Balzac.”¹⁰ He also wrote “I believe Byron to be beyond comparison the greatest poet that has sung since Milton”¹¹

Whether Dickens would have been in his pantheon is more doubtful. Marginal notes he made on a copy of Forster’s *The Life of Charles Dickens* are highly critical. He writes of *Dombey and Son* “the latter half of Dombey no intelligent person can have read without astonishment at the badness of it”. On *Edwin Drood* it was “cruel to compare Dickens in the radiant prime of his genius with Dickens's last laboured effort, the melancholy work of a worn out brain.” And on *Oliver Twist* “The one defect in that wonderful book is the helplessly bad construction of the story. The character of Nancy is the finest he ever did...That the same man who could create Nancy created the second Mrs Dombey is the most incomprehensible anomaly that I know of in literature.”¹²

Other appearances

The piece was pirated by several newspapers. Examples are:-

- *Gloucestershire Chronicle* Saturday 28 September 1889 p.3. Only a couple of paragraphs.
- *Cork Constitution*, Monday 07 October 1889, p.3.
Begins: A correspondent of London contemporary gives the following account of visit to the late Wilkie Collins:—
- *The Chicago Tribune* 13 October 1889, p. 28 (with some variations).
Begins: Pleasant Recollections by One Who Was an Intimate with the Novelist.
- *Tiverton Gazette (Mid-Devon Gazette)*, 15 October 1889, p.3. An abbreviated version.
- *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 November 1889, p. 4. The anecdote about Fosco.

But its importance seems to have been overlooked by biographers and academics.

¹⁰ See [2182] to Miss R, 12 July 1883 and [2304] to Paul Hamilton Hayne, 3 May 1884

¹¹ [2337] to Paul Hamilton Hayne, 16 July 1884.

¹² *Pall Mall Gazette* 20 January 1890,

The author

The visit was almost certainly in 1887 and the account is clearly written by the same person who wrote this piece published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* early in 1888.

IN THE HIGHWAYS AND BYWAYS.

Every one will be sorry to hear that Mr. Wilkie Collins is again suffering from his old enemy the gout, which has pursued him with fiendish malignity for years. The famous novelist once related to me with his own lips the history of “The Moonstone,” and said that some of the most entertaining scenes of that exciting novel were dictated when in the grasp of the gout-devil. If gout is the enemy of his old age, ghosts persecuted him when he was young, so that the life of the popular novelist has not been all beer and skittles. “When I was writing ‘The Woman in White,’ said Mr. Collins, “I often used to take up my work a little before midnight and work into the small hours of the morning. Then the most horrible monsters, with green eyes, frightful fangs, and lolling tongues, would meet me on the staircase and follow me to bed, not once, but night after night. Of course they were the result of overwork, and a rest banished them from my overwrought brain.”

I remember asking Mr. Collins how he came by Count Fosco, the only fat villain in fiction. “He was an agglomeration,” replied the novelist, “and I made him fat because a lady once made the remark to me at a dinner party that no novelist could make a really lifelike fat villain.”¹³

‘In the Highways and Byways’ was an occasional topical diary in the London evening newspaper the *Pall Mall Gazette*. It began on 2 January 1888 signed at the foot ‘A.B.C.’ and then from 16 January was signed ‘Jack Finucane’ (19 Jan, 23 Jan, 26 Jan, 30 Jan, 16 Feb, 24 Feb, 5 Mar, 13 March, 10 April, 16 April, 19 April). The column reappeared from 12 June under the pseudonymous ‘A Saunterer’ and Finucane does not appear again.

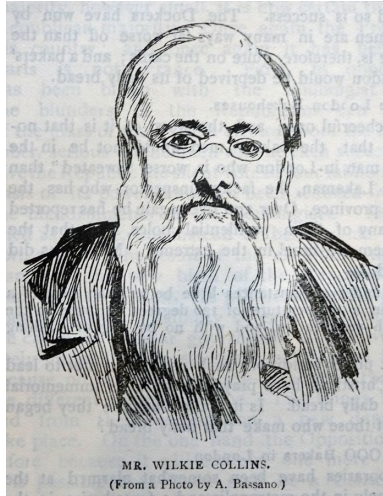
Jack Finucane has not been traced and may have been a pseudonym.

This earlier piece was also widely pirated in the USA.

¹³ *Pall Mall Gazette*, Monday 30 January 1888, p. 6.

THE DEATH OF WILKIE COLLINS.

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS. BY ONE WHO KNEW HIM.



MR. WILKIE COLLINS.
(From a Photo by A. Passano)

Universal regret will be felt at the death of Wilkie Collins, which, as we deeply regret to announce, took place at his residence in Wimpole-street on Monday. This is not the time to consider his position among the writers of the present generation nor to discuss the literary merits of the long series of novels which he has produced during the last 30 years. "The Woman in White" and "The Moonstone" are probably the two of his novels which have achieved the greatest popularity, as they are certainly the most fascinating by reason of their remarkable plots and the extraordinary ingenuity with which their interest is sustained from the first page to the last. The schemes of the fat Fosco and the adventures of the glittering Moonstone have been followed with breathless interest by countless readers. "The Woman in White" sells in thousands in all parts of the world every year, and the figures of "The Moonstone" cannot reach a much smaller quantity. From the first he is said to have received £3000, and Mr. George Murray Smith, the head of the firm Smith and Elder, paid him the very large sum of £5000 for "Armada," which first appeared in the pages of *Cornhill*. Collins was a past master of the art of plot-

weaving, and he spared himself no trouble to be certain of the technicalities of his law and his medicine, upon both of which professions he drew largely for his effects. His first novel was "Antonina, or the Fall of Rome," which was fairly successful. This was published in 1850, and since then he has written ceaselessly, most of his books having been first published in serial form, for which they were peculiarly fitted owing to their sustained interest and the curiosity which they fired in the reader to know "how it was going to end."

Collins's father was a celebrated painter of rustic scenes, and his mother was one of a very distinguished family of artists. He was born in January, 1824, received his education in a private school of London, where the family resided and on completing his studies went on a trip to Italy with his parents. Upon their return, and after considerable debate in the family circle, he was articled for four years to a tea merchant, and immediately set to work in his office. He soon tired of commercial life. It was not dull but its liveliness was of a decidedly uninteresting and prosaic kind. He thought upon the whole he had rather be a lawyer, and entered Lincoln's Inn as a student. In the cosy retreat of that old Court Inn he began to try his pen in short tales, which were frequently published in some of the small periodicals of the city. In about six weeks he gave up the study of the law, but remained nominally a student at Lincoln's Inn, writing a serial. The story was soon completed, but the young author, like other young authors, failed to find any one who was willing to publish his first ambitious effort. He set about rewriting the story, changed the scene to Rome, and in 1850 it was published as "Antonina, or the Fall of Rome." Some three years afterwards (the interval being filled with several stories, including "Basil") he began to write for Dickens's "Household Words."

A VISIT TO WILKIE COLLINS.

One afternoon, a year or two ago, I happened to call upon Mr. Collins, who was then living in the house in Gloucester-place, Upper Baker-street, which he had occupied for many years. The house bore signs of a certain dinginess which I attributed to the absence of womankind. The furniture was plain and old-fashioned, and one noticed none of the æsthetic prettinesses with which most literary and artistic people surround themselves. Mr. Collins's workroom was on the first floor, to which I ascended, following his man-servant, who ushered me into the novelist's presence. I found myself in a large back room, in which the novelist spent most of his time, and which communicated with the front drawing-room by folding doors, which had the appearance of being always kept open. I discovered Mr. Collins after a few seconds, and was greatly surprised by his diminutive size, and pained by the

look of constant physical suffering which his decrepit and bent frame denoted only too plainly. He bade me sit by him at the little writing-table at which he worked, and on which he afterwards told me, he had written "The Moonstone." Those of us who feel grateful to Mr. Collins for his works and have followed his career will remember that a considerable portion of that novel was written or dictated in bed during a terribly severe fit of gout. It was in the corner of this room just by the window that the bed was placed. From here he could see the simple little household treasures with which he felt most at home. Many of them were drawings by his father, and little curios which he had collected on the Continent during his many yachting excursions. The room could be scarcely called cheerful. One was struck by the accumulation of dust on the well-worn couches and chairs, by the faded paper, and the threadbare carpet, and the old fashioned bookcases. But these uncomfortable impressions wore off in a few minutes. Mr. Collins produced a decanter of some very fine brandy and a box of cigars, both of which we discussed during the chat which followed. I think I had called to ask his opinion about some question of the moment which had arisen out of the dramatisation of a play.

MR. COLLINS AND HIS READERS.

"I remember," continued Mr. Collins, "that I used to receive scores of letters from all parts of the world complaining of the abstruse nature of my plots. And why, do you think? because, forsooth, they were too difficult to follow. 'You make us read every line, we can't skip,' cried the plaintiff, 'we even have to go back to follow the clues.' I need scarcely say that I took these letters as so many compliments." "Then you were accustomed to receive criticisms after the publication of a novel?" "Certainly, and especially when I deal with what it is the fashion to call risky subjects, as I did when I wrote 'Fallen Leaves' for Mr. Yates's *World* and 'The New Magdalen.' The women objected to the first, the parsons to the second."

HIS FAVOURITE AUTHORS.

He told me his favourite authors were Scott, Byron, and Dickens. In fiction the passages that always affected him most were the death of little Nell and of Paul Dombey. Like many of us he had shed many tears over them. With latter day novelists he had but slight acquaintance. "Perhaps I am old-fashioned," he said, with a modest smile of self-depreciation. Mr. Collins, being possessed of brains had no logs to roll. I gathered that though he liked to have pleasant things said about him he held that a review, however favourable, was never of any real service. If the people did not like a book they would decline to read it in spite of all the reviews in the world, and he held the same opinion about notices of plays. Whenever I have produced a play, he said, I have made a point of going to the pit-door when the

people come out. I listened to their opinion, and that was my gauge of popular opinion.”

FOSCO AND FAT VILLAINS.

In the course of a desultory conversation I happened to ask the novelist how he came to evolve the famous Fosco, and whether he had any particular person in his mind. “He was a combination,” laughed Mr. Collins. “When I was writing the story I was at a dinner party one night, and the table-talk ran on the villains of fiction. One lady said that no fat man could be a villain. I argued the point and determined to make Fosco fleshy. I took the idea of the white mice from a school-fellow, who used to carry the little things in his pocket. I thought they would serve as a foil. I made him Italian because I had spent many months with my father in Italy, and thought it would be interesting to work up some of the local colour.”

“NOW THEN, WILKIE.”

The white mice reminded Mr. Collins of some of his early attempts at fiction, which he described with evident pleasure. Indeed, I was much struck by the keen delight which he took in discussing his stories, and by the extreme modesty with which he alluded to his successes. I have found the author of a penny dreadful or a twopenny melodrama far more exacting gentlemen. These early attempts were in the school dormitory of a night when the lights were turned down. “Now then, Wilkie, old chap, give us a story,” the boys would say; and Wilkie sat up in his night shirt and poured out horrors till they saw a ghost in every shadow.

TROUBLED BY GHOSTS AND GOUT.

For years Mr. Collins had been subject to violent attacks of gout. In the preface to “The Moonstone” he mentions that the amusing chapters in which Miss Clack tells her portion of the story were written between fits of agony. When his brain was highly wrought in the throes of composition he suffered fearfully from nerves, which meant ghosts. I am not likely to forget the vivid description which Mr. Collins gave me of the midnight terrors which beset him on these occasions. “I would begin,” he said, “say at midnight, and work on till 3 or 4 o’clock in the silence of the night, as the fit took me, smoking cigars and drinking black coffee, my mind absorbed in my situations. Then the ghosts would begin to appear, and I used to make a rush upstairs to my bedroom. There was always one particular ghost which would greet me when the situation had been particularly horrible. It was a fearful shapeless monster, with eyes of fire and big green fangs. He came to be quite a familiar in those days.”

“PLEASE TELL ME HOW TO WRITE A NOVEL.”

“It makes me really indignant,” continued Mr. Collins, discussing the plague of letters which were showered on to his devoted head, “when I get one asking me for a recipe to write a novel. It generally runs ‘I have lots of spare time, and I am fond of scribbling; Could you advise me how to write a novel?’ The depth of human folly.”

MR. COLLINS’S REPLY.

“Well, would you tell me how you work, Mr. Collins?” I asked. The veteran lighted a fresh cigar, and toying with an orange which he took from the table, replied: “Well, I am not one of those who have the patience to write a *scenario*. I get the main subject well into my head and leave the details and complex elaborations to come afterwards. Some novelists find it possible to begin at the beginning. I tried that method in The ‘Woman in White,’ and failed egregiously.” “Did you ever avail yourself of suggestions sent by correspondents?” “Never, I think. I used to receive hundreds of letters containing hints for my guidance, and I used to sift them and kept scrap books of cuttings, but I never found them useful.”

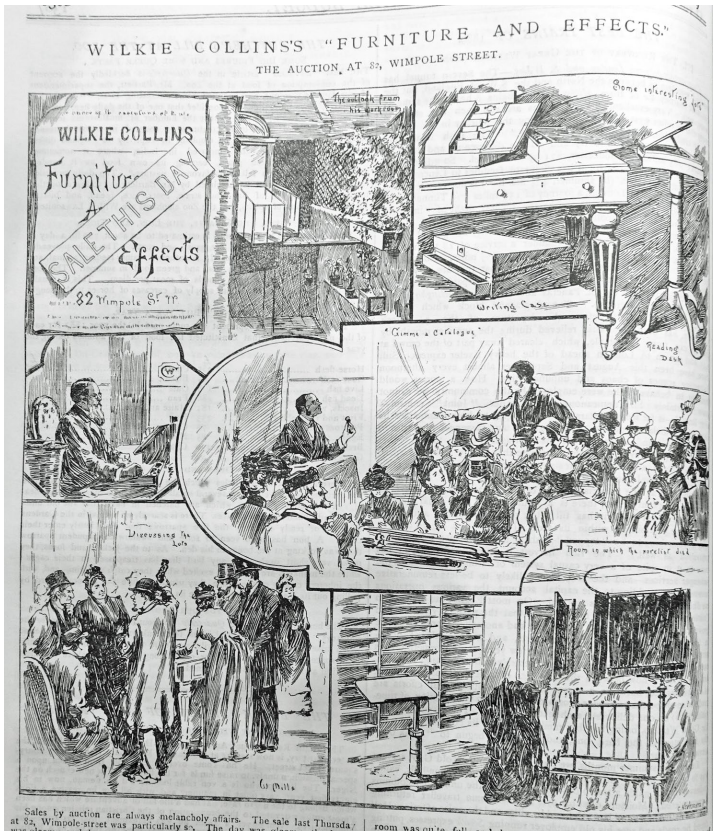
THE TEST OF POPULARITY.

Of all his works, I judged that Mr. Collins liked “The Woman in White” best. I remember his saying that translation is the best gauge of popularity, and if any one takes the trouble to consult the catalogue at the British Museum he will find that Mr Collins’s novels have been translated into many languages.”

Pall Mall Budget, No.1096, 26 September 1889, pp. 1224-1226

WILKIE'S LAST HOME

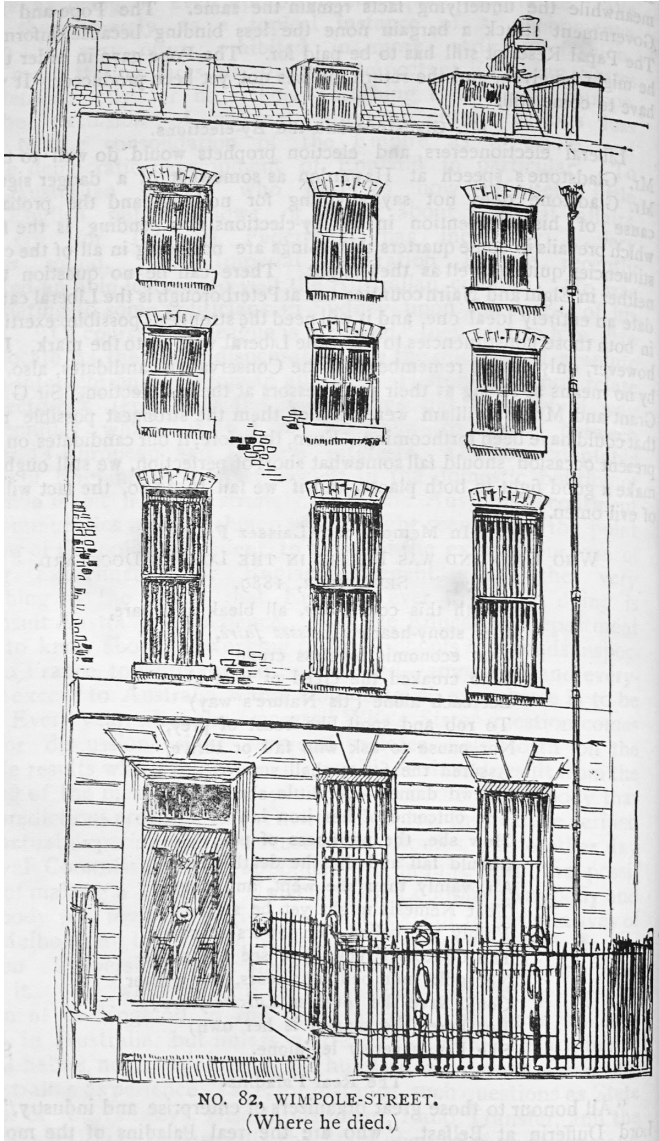
A month after Wilkie's death at 82 Wimpole Street the furniture and household effects were sold at an auction in the house. This sale was originally reported in *Pall Mall Gazette*.¹⁴ In 2010 the Wilkie Collins Society published a reprint of that article from an Australian newspaper.¹⁵ *Pall Mall Budget* also carried the piece but with illustrations "Our artist gives some sketches which we feel sure will interest our readers".¹⁶



¹⁴ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 October 1889, p.7.

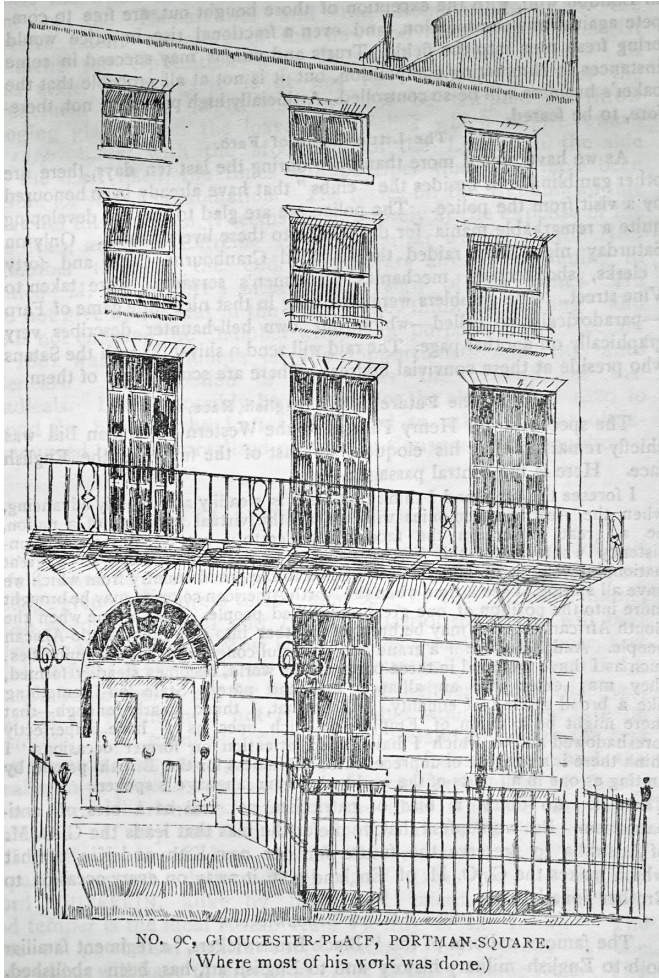
¹⁵ Wilkie Collins Society Newsletter, Winter 2010, pp. 3-4. See <http://wilkecollinssociety.org/newsletter-winter-2010>

¹⁶ *Pall Mall Budget*, 31 October 1889, pp. 1388-1389.



NO. 82, WIMPOLE-STREET.
(Where he died.)

This drawing of the house where Wilkie died is one of only two images of the house before it was largely rebuilt in the first half of the 20th century.



This drawing is the only contemporary image of the house where Wilkie lived from 1867 to 1888 (now numbered 65 Gloucester Place). It still stands and this drawing confirms it has always been one storey shorter than its neighbours.

Both accompanied the piece in *Pall Mall Budget* 26 September 1889, p. 1224

This edition of
A Visit to Wilkie Collins
is limited to 200 copies.

