



*POOR MISS FINCH*  
AND  
**THE EYES OF WILKIE COLLINS**

By  
Andrew Gasson, FCOptom.

*Medical Societies.*

ROYAL MEDICAL & CHIRURGICAL SOCIETY.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 14TH, 1854.

JAMES COPLAND, M.D., F.R.S., PRESIDENT.

A COMMUNICATION was read, entitled,  
A CASE OF SUCCESSFUL OPERATION FOR CONGENITAL CAPSULAR  
CATARACT ON A FEMALE, AGED TWENTY-TWO, WHO HAD  
BEEN BLIND FROM BIRTH.

BY G. CRITCHETT, ESQ.,  
SURGEON TO THE ROYAL OPHTHALMIC HOSPITAL.

## ***POOR MISS FINCH***

In *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), the heroine, Lucilla Finch, is blind with cataracts. Much of the plot is taken up with the efforts of the eccentric but likeable German doctor, Herr Grosse, to restore her sight and his disagreement with the opinion of the overly conservative English oculist, Mr Sebright. The operation, unfortunately, is only briefly successful. Collins account of her early attempts at seeing seem to represent the most careful research as well as an awareness of visual psychology and perception. His descriptions of her disorientation, lack of spatial judgement, dislike of dark colours, and her continuing inability to recognise shape and form except by touch all bear a striking resemblance to a 20<sup>th</sup> century case history of a Mr S.B. recorded by Gregory<sup>1</sup> of ‘Recovery from Blindness’, written in 1963, nearly 100 years later.

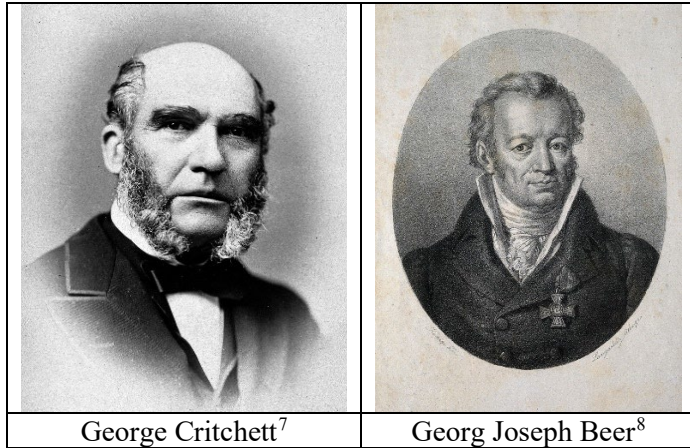
Both fictional and real life cases end badly. S.B. retains his sight but suffered a psychological crisis. “His story is in some ways tragic. He suffered one of the greatest handicaps, and yet he lived with energy and enthusiasm. When his handicap was apparently swept away, as by a miracle, he lost his peace and his self-respect.” Lucilla at one point declares “My eyes are of no use to me!”<sup>2</sup> and after weeks of frustration and mental anguish lapses into blindness once again. The narrator records “The sightless eyes turned on me. Oh, God, after a few brief weeks of sight, blind again!” to which Lucilla replies “Don’t cry about my blindness...The days when I had my sight have been the unhappiest days of my life.”<sup>3</sup>



It is very likely that Collins based Lucilla’s recovery from sight on a real life case reported in the *Lancet* for 25 November 1854 (p. 438) of a Communication of the Royal Medical & Chirurgical Society, entitled ‘A Case of successful operation for congenital capsular cataract on a female aged twenty-two, who had been blind from birth.’<sup>5</sup>

The case was presented by George Critchett, Surgeon to the Royal Ophthalmic Hospital. “Jane S., aged twenty-two, was brought to the Royal Ophthalmic Hospital in the spring of 1849, suffering from cataract in both eyes, with slight internal strabismus, and considerable involuntary rolling and oscillation of the globes from side to side...” Much of the subsequent discourse centred on the use or otherwise of chloroform following a question by Mr Fergusson.

Collins, in fact, knew both Critchett, who practised at 21 Harley Street and treated him during the 1870s, and Fergusson. On one occasion when all three were present, at a dinner party given by the Bancrofts, Fergusson confirmed that “the dose of opium to which Wilkie Collins from long usage had accustomed himself was enough to kill every man seated at the table.”<sup>6</sup>



There is, perhaps, a touch of irony in that Lucilla is probably based on a real life case whereas so convincing was the character of Herr Grosse - described in the book as having “a pair of staring, fierce, black goggle eyes with huge circular spectacles” - that Collins was inundated with letters from readers demanding the name of the real life doctor on whom he was modelled. It is just possible that Collins had learned about a famous Austrian oculist, Georg Joseph Beer (1763-1821), who, like Grosse, was at odds with establishment ophthalmology represented by Mr Sebright in the novel. Beer was known for ‘Beer’s cataract flap operation’ using a specially designed ‘Beer’s knife’ as well as a ground-breaking textbook.

Beer is also quoted by a 20<sup>th</sup> century source to state “Might not the reason for this sudden and striking change of temper, indeed I might say of the whole character, be partly due, perhaps, to the fact that the patients have supposed all objects, which they could only get to know by feeling when blind, to be quite different from what they subsequently see them to be.”<sup>9</sup>

## THE EYES OF WILKIE COLLINS



Contemporary illustrations of Collins invariably show him wearing the typical small, oval-eye frames of the time - very similar to some of those currently in fashion. We cannot be sure at what age he became short-sighted, but certainly from 1850 onwards, when he was 26, all portraits and photographs feature him wearing spectacles.

Myopia, however, was not Collins's only eye problem. For a great many years he suffered from what he called rheumatic gout (a complaint which also afflicted Herr Grosse) and this

frequently affected his eyes with particular severity, causing him the most agonizing pain. Today this would probably be diagnosed as iritis or scleritis, both conditions which could be treated by modern ophthalmology. On some occasions he was compelled to keep his eyes bandaged for days or even weeks at a time so that publishers' deadlines were met only by dictating to an amanuensis from his sick-bed in a darkened room.

This was the case during the magazine serialisation of *The Moonstone* in 1868 when he suffered one of his severest attacks. A report at the time described him as having eyes like “enormous bags of blood”<sup>10</sup>. Once, in conversation, he was heard to say “I see that you can't keep your eyes off my eyes, and I ought to say that I've got gout in them and it's doing its best to blind me.”

Apart from his own real-life eye problems, blind or visually handicapped characters appear in *Poor Miss Finch* and at least two other Collins books. *After Dark* (1856), indeed, begins dramatically enough with “The doctor has just called for the third time to examine my husband's eyes. Thank God, there is no fear at present of my poor William losing his sight, provided he can be prevailed on to attend rigidly to the medical instructions for preserving it.” One of the main characters in *The Dead Secret* (1857) is blind, having rapidly lost his sight in his youth despite “the doctor from London having blistered him behind the ears, and between the shoulders, and drenched the lad with mercury and moped him up in a dark room.”

Some aspects of Collins's own ill health may have been hereditary in origin. He certainly considered that his rheumatic disease was inherited from both his grandfather and from his father. Harriet Collins's Diary for 14 August 1837 reads like a model for *The Dead Secret*, recording for William Collins “Inflammation in his eyes very bad indeed - tried different bathings for them - put on leeches in eveng to temple.” And on 16 August “eyes very bad put blisters behind ears.”

Perhaps Wilkie's forced pre-occupation with his own eye problems explains in part the significant appearance of blind characters in his stories.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Recovery from Early Blindness: A Case Study’, Richard L. Gregory and Jean G. Wallace, reproduced in March 2001 from Experimental Psychology Society Monograph No. 2, 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 39, ‘She learns to see.’

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 49 ‘On the way to the end. Third Stage.’

<sup>4</sup> Illustration by Edward Hughes from the one volume Chatto & Windus Piccadilly edition, facing p. 252.

<sup>5</sup> Read to the Royal Medical & Chirurgical Society on 14 November 1854.

<sup>6</sup> Marie and Squire Bancroft, *The Bancrofts: Recollections of Sixty Years*, John Murray: London, 1909, p. 174.

<sup>7</sup> Photograph by G. Jerrard, 1881: Wellcome Collection. CC BY.

<sup>8</sup> Lithograph by K. Lanzadelly after A. F. Kunike: Wellcome Collection. CC BY.

<sup>9</sup> von Senden, *Space and Sight* (1960) pp. 326—35, referring to his 1932 monograph.

<sup>10</sup> Percy Fitzgerald, *Memories of Charles Dickens*, Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1913, p. 262. Described to Fitzgerald by Charles Kent.