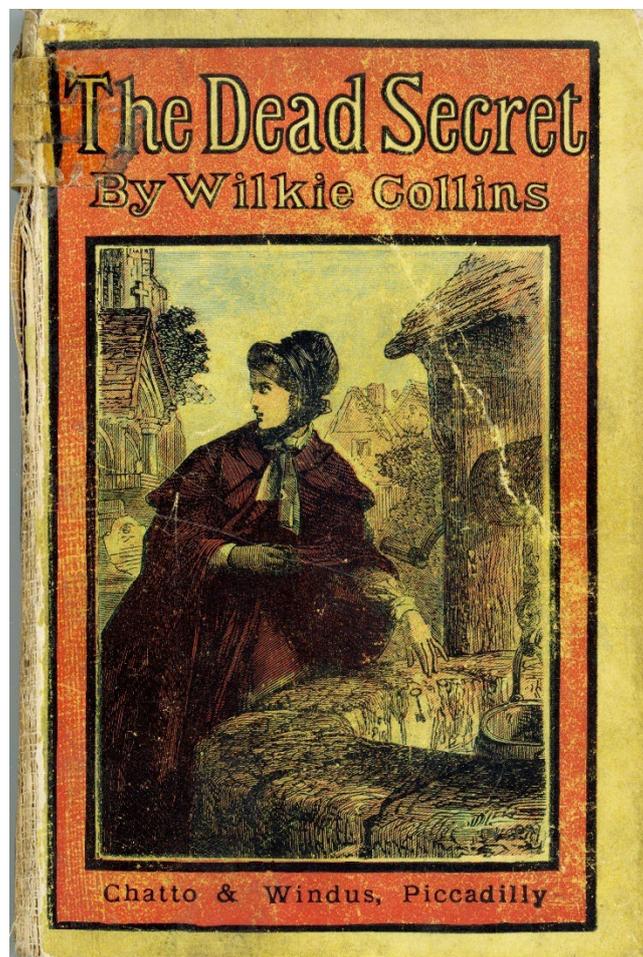




THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

SECRETS OF *THE DEAD SECRET*
The Missing Part

by
Paul Lewis



The Dead Secret, Chatto & Windus, 1889

Wilkie Collins Society
April 2025

FOUR MEN DROWNED IN A BARGE.

On Sunday afternoon, the neighbourhood of Southwick, a small village on the banks of Shoreham Harbour, was thrown into considerable consternation by the discovery of four poor fellows who had been accidentally drowned in a barge, near the basin of the harbour, under the most singular circumstances. It is very evident, although the facts are not precisely known, that the cause of their death was a sudden squall of wind, accompanied with thick sleet and snow, which induced them to take shelter in what is called the "cuddy" of the barge, a small hold, and that whilst they were there, the stern of the vessel dipped, and the barge being heavily laden with oysters, they could not see the water rushing in, and the vessel filled immediately, and went down. Two of the unfortunate

Brighton Gazette, 12 March 1857 p.5e

| BURIALS in the Parish of <i>Southwick</i> in the County of <i>Sussex</i> in the Year 18 <i>66</i> / <i>57</i> | | | | |
|--|-------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------|--|
| Name. | Abode. | When buried. | Age. | By whom the Ceremony was performed. |
| <i>Thomas Ophir</i> No. 481. | <i>Southwick</i> | <i>Sept 18th 1857</i> | <i>61 yrs.</i> | <i>Edwin Harrison Off^r Minister</i> |
| <i>Henry Rigden</i> No. 482. | <i>Southwick</i> | <i>October 17th 1857</i> | <i>71 yrs.</i> | <i>Edwin Harrison Off^r Minister</i> |
| <i>Sarah Rigden</i> No. 483. | <i>Southwick</i> | <i>December 10th 1857</i> | <i>76 yrs.</i> | <i>C. Townsend Rector of Kingston.</i> |
| <i>James John Coleman</i> No. 484. | <i>Southwick</i> | <i>1857 March 12th</i> | <i>40 yrs.</i> | <i>Edwin Harrison Off^r Minister</i> |
| <i>Daniel Furman</i> No. 485. | <i>Colchester</i> | <i>1857 March 12th</i> | <i>45 yrs.</i> | <i>Edwin Harrison Off^r Minister</i> |
| <i>William Marsh</i> No. 486. | <i>Colchester</i> | <i>1857 March 12th</i> | <i>28 yrs.</i> | <i>Edwin Harrison Off^r Minister</i> |
| <i>Thomas Cadman</i> No. 487. | <i>Colchester</i> | <i>1857 March 12th</i> | <i>25 yrs.</i> | <i>Edwin Harrison Off^r Minister</i> |

Burials of oystermen James Coleman, Daniel Furman, and William Marsh from Colchester, and local man Thomas Cadman, St. Michael and All Angels, Southwick, 12 March 1857

SECRETS OF *THE DEAD SECRET*

The missing part

The long friendship of Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens was not just a personal one. It was also a business one. A year after they first met in March 1851, Collins wrote his first piece for Dickens's weekly publication *Household Words*. 'A Terribly Strange Bed' filled nearly 15 columns and he was paid the standard rate of half a guinea a column – a total of £7-10s.¹ In the following four years he wrote 16 more pieces for £241-12s-6d, say about £24,000 in today's money.²

Dickens took almost everything the freelance Collins offered and came to value him so much that in September 1856 he decided to take him onto the staff at 5 guineas a week.³ Collins accepted. But he got Dickens to agree that he should write a novel to be published in *Household Words* as a serial. So far only Dickens had done that with *Hard Times*. Dickens reluctantly agreed but said it "should not go beyond six months."⁴

Collins began the serial at once and *The Dead Secret* was published in 23 episodes from 3 January to 13 June 1857. But there has always been a puzzle about that timetable. Those dates cover 24 issues. Why did *The Dead Secret* run in *Household Words* every week except one – the issue of 4 April?

It was Collins's first serial novel. Earlier works including *Basil* (1852) and *Hide and Seek* (1854) had been published in volume format. From the start of the serialisation, he struggled to keep up with the weekly demands of the press. In January, when he was probably writing part 8, he told a bookseller why he could not accept some tickets he offered him to see to a musical play

...I am shut up from the world... driving my pen as hard as I can make it go, day and night. I have a fortnight's work to do in a week, and the printer's devil is perpetually at my heels, lashing me on.⁵

Earlier that month, when he was writing parts 4 to 6 he was also involved in rehearsals and performances of his play *The Frozen Deep* which Dickens staged at his home, Tavistock House.⁶

¹ *Household Words*, V, 24 April 1852, pp. 129-137; Lohrli, *Household Words – A Weekly Journal*, Toronto: 1973.

² Paul Lewis calculations from information in Lohrli.

³ Dickens to W H Wills, 16 September 1856, *Pilgrim Letters* VIII p. 188.

⁴ Dickens to W H Wills, 18 September 1856, *Pilgrim Letters* VIII p. 189.

⁵ [Q249] Collins to W. R. Sams, 31 January 1857 – *The Collected Letters of Wilkie Collins*, <https://wilkiecollinssociety.org/collected-letters>.

⁶ Dress rehearsal on 5 January and performances on 6, 8, 12, and 14 January, *Pilgrim Letters* VIII xxiii and 248.

But recent research has established a much more plausible theory for why the issue of 4 April had no episode of *The Dead Secret*. And Dickens was to blame.

South Downs

From their initial meeting on 12 March 1851 at the house of John Forster, Collins and Dickens became lifelong friends.⁷ Wilkie visited Dickens and his family when they stayed in Dover in 1852 and in Boulogne in 1853. Later that year, accompanied by the artist Augustus Egg, they spent two months travelling in Italy and Switzerland. In March 1855 Collins stayed with Dickens in Paris and again in October. And in February 1857 Dickens proposed another trip – this one to Brighton for a walk on the South Downs.⁸

In early March he wrote to Joseph Ellis, the landlord of the Bedford Hotel in Brighton

As I have not been in Brighton for sometime and want a walk on the Downs, I purpose coming to you next Friday, with a literary friend (Mr. Wilkie Collins) for about three days. Will you be so good as let me know whether you have room enough to give us a sitting-room and two bedrooms? If you reply yes, perhaps you will let your people know that we shall come down early in the afternoon, and that we will dine at Six.⁹

Wilkie's letter confirming he would go was doubtless burned by Dickens in his great bonfire of letters at Gad's Hill in 1860. But we know he wrote that letter on 3 March because Dickens replied the next day

I cannot tell you what pleasure I had in the receipt of your letter yesterday Evening...and my face has been shining ever since.

Ellis responds to my letter that rooms shall be ready. There is a train at 12 which appears to me to be the train for the distinguished Visitors. If you will call for me in a Cab at about 20 minutes past 11, my hand will be on the latch of the door.¹⁰

⁷ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, II, p. 372.

⁸ Dickens to Wilkie Collins 14 February 1857, *Pilgrim Letters*, VIII p. 282.

⁹ Dickens to Joseph Ellis, 2 March 1857, *Pilgrim Letters* VIII, p. 293.

¹⁰ Dickens to Wilkie Collins 4 March 1857, *Pilgrim Letters* VIII, p. 294.

They arrived as promised on Friday 6th, and went straight out to sample the pleasures of Brighton, only returning to the hotel in the evening around nine o'clock'.¹¹

On Sunday 11th they went for their walk on the South Downs. But the weather was dreadful. On his return from their walk Dickens wrote to his friend Lavinia Watson

I have had such a burst on the Downs — have been so rained upon, hailed upon, snowed upon, and blown — that I have been obliged to tumble into a warm bath, and have not got a hat to come out in, until my own is dried. I brought it back, if you can believe it, a solid cake of ice, half an inch thick.¹²

That unseasonable downpour is confirmed in the weekly *Brighton Gazette* the next Thursday which reported the death of four boatmen on that same Sunday due to

a sudden squall of wind, accompanied with thick sleet and snow...the stern of the vessel dipped and the barge being heavily laden with oysters, they couldn't see the water rushing in. The vessel filled immediately and went down.¹³

All Dickens got was a ruined hat. Collins, though, suffered more. The next day, Monday, Dickens left without him, explaining on Tuesday in another letter to Lavinia Watson

I left the Bedford, early yesterday morning, leaving the Invalid behind to follow with the baggage. (My face is like a cullender from the hail and ice on Sunday).¹⁴

There is no corroboration from Wilkie's own letters of these events or of when he left "with the baggage". None are known until 30 March 1857.

But Dickens's letters are enough to show us why that episode of *The Dead Secret* was missing from the *Household Words* issue of 4 April.

¹¹ Dickens to Joseph Ellis, 6 March 1857, *Pilgrim Letters* VIII, p. 297.

¹² Dickens to Mrs Richard Watson, 8 March 1857, *Pilgrim Letters* VII, p. 298.

¹³ *Brighton Gazette*, 12 March 1857, p. 5e. See inside front cover for more details.

¹⁴ CD to Mrs Richard Watson, 10 March 1857, *Pilgrim Letters* VIII, p. 299

Deadlines

Household Words was published weekly dated Saturday, though actually on sale the previous Wednesday.

Before that the manuscript copy had to be set up in type, galley proofs produced, sent to the authors, checked by Dickens, and returned with corrections to be printed on the presses of the publisher Badbury & Evans.

On Saturday 9 May Collins wrote to the proprietor Frederick Evans

The number for Saturday May 30th (which I finished and corrected last night) I will send as soon as I get it from Wills and have looked it over again.¹⁵

When he finally finished the story he wrote again to Evans on Thursday 21 May

I have done!! Those two blessed words, “The End” were written at 1/2 past 3, today. The last chapter I have just given to Mr Gardener to set up and he will send it to me in proof tomorrow morning, to be corrected while the boy waits.

That letter also makes clear that it was not just the London printers who had to be supplied. The New York publisher Harper & Brothers had offered to pay Wilkie £25 for the right to publish the story in its new periodical, *Harper’s Weekly*.¹⁶ Copy was sent to New York by transatlantic mail at the same time it was sent to the London printers. The mail steamer sailed every Friday¹⁷ so the final proofs had to be completed in time to be on board, as Wilkie explained

This arrangement will, I hope, allow plenty of time for sending the slips of this final number to America, by tomorrow’s mail. I understood from Wills that you would kindly undertake to do this. My corrections will all be done in the morning – so the number will be complete, I suppose, before noon.¹⁸

That final part was published on 9 June, confirming Wilkie’s absolute deadline for his copy – before corrections – was the Thursday three weeks before publication. Any illness early in the week would prevent it being met.

¹⁵ [0253] WC to F M Evans, 9 May 1857.

¹⁶ It appeared there anonymously in vol. I, starting 24 January 1857, pp. 61-62.

¹⁷ Kelly’s *Post Office Directory*, London 1856 p. 2270.

¹⁸ [0254] Collins to F M Evans, 21 May 1857.

Given these pressures it is surprising that Dickens should suggest a trip to Brighton in the first week of March when Wilkie was little more than halfway through writing his story.

A table of the publication dates and the deadlines three weeks earlier – see inside back cover – shows that he would have finished part 13 on Thursday 5 March before travelling down to Brighton on the Friday. If he had returned on Monday then part 14 could have been written, corrected, and sent to the printers and the transatlantic mail ship by Friday 13 March. But as the table shows, the missing episode of 4 April had to be at the printer by Thursday 12 March at the latest, just four days after the lashings of unseasonal rain, hail, snow, and wind on Sunday the 8th which left Wilkie, in Dickens's words, an invalid.

So we can now conclude it also meant that Wilkie, for the only time in his life, was unable to meet a deadline. A similar gap was found in the weekly serialisation in *Harper's Weekly* – the episode of 2 May 1857 was missing, though the American publisher did some catching up and published the last two parts as a double number on 27 June, just two weeks after it finished in London.

A brilliant success

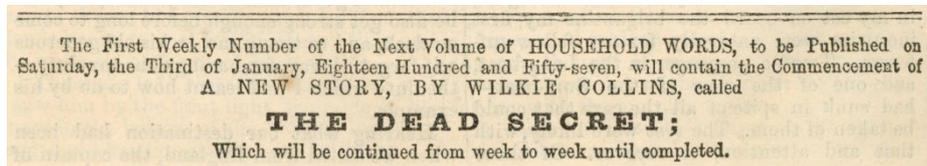
Presumably Wilkie's editor Dickens, who had taken him for a pleasant spring walk on the South Downs but left him there an invalid, was sympathetic. He certainly fulfilled the second condition Wilkie insisted on when he agreed to go on the staff of *Household Words*. Not only was he to write a novel in serial form, he also wanted his name on it.

No name other than Dickens's own had ever appeared in *Household Words* and every opening of two pages had 'Conducted by...Charles Dickens' in a strapline across the top. Many people thought Dickens wrote it all. Dickens claimed that any confusion existed only "in half a dozen minds out of half a dozen hundred" and refused to let Wilkie's authorship appear directly with the story. But he did offer two concessions, as he told his subeditor W H Wills

...as far as a long story is concerned, I see not the least objection to our advertising, at once, before it begins, that it is by him. I do see an objection to departing from our custom of not putting names to the papers in H. W. itself; but to our advertising the authorship of a long story, as a Rider to all our advertisements, I see none whatever.¹⁹

¹⁹ To W. H. Wills, 18 September 1856, *Pilgrim Letters* VIII, p. 189.

Good to his word, in the Christmas number for 1856 *The Wreck of the Golden Mary*, published on 6 December, this advertisement was placed at the foot of the last page.²⁰

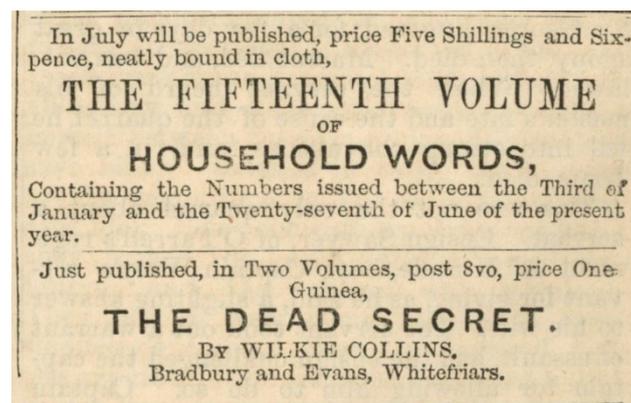


In addition, two issues before Wilkie's serial began – on 20 and 27 December 1856 – an advertisement in tiny type at the bottom of the last column read

The first weekly number of the new volume will contain a story by Wilkie Collins, called *The Dead Secret*, which will be continued from week to week until completed.²¹

It was the first time Wilkie's name – or anyone's apart from Dickens's – had appeared in *Household Words*.

In the issue after *The Dead Secret* serialisation finished there was a box at the foot of the last page advertising "The Fifteenth Volume of Household Words" followed by the details of *The Dead Secret* published in two volumes with Wilkie's name again clearly stated.²²



That joint advert appeared for another seven weeks and then by itself on 22 August 1857 and four further dates, the last on 7 November.²³

²⁰ *The Wreck of the Golden Mary*, 6 December 1856, p. 36.

²¹ *Household Words*, XIV, 20 December 1856 p. 552 and 27 December 1856 p. 572b.

²² *Household Words*, XV, 20 June 1857, p. 600b.

²³ *Household Words*, XVI, 22 August 1857, 3, 10, 31 October, 7 November.

This series of 13 adverts for the book naming Wilkie as the author may have recognised Dickens's appreciation of the story. Edmund Yates wrote in 1879 of its "brilliant success" in *Household Words*.²⁴ And that success would boost circulation and bring in money for the co-owner Dickens. It also seems to have been a major factor in Dickens's decision that every issue of his new periodical *All the Year Round*, launched in 1859, would contain a serial story. It opened with *A Tale of Two Cities*, then *The Woman in White* soon followed by Wilkie's *No Name*, and *The Moonstone* which all boosted the circulation dramatically when they appeared.²⁵

Biographies

None of Wilkie's major recent biographers recognised the significance of the Brighton trip, though two referred to the difficulties and distractions he had meeting the printer's deadlines.

Catherine Peters started with the performances of *The Frozen Deep*

As soon as the last performance, followed by the usual substantial supper and dance on the stage was over, Wilkie disappeared to Richmond...He needed to catch up on *The Dead Secret* being serialised in *Household Words*. It was the first time he had produced a full-length work for serialisation. Wilkie had, as always, thoroughly worked out the plot of the novel in advance...But now Wilkie was having to work day and night, keeping only a fortnight ahead of the printers. The novel was also being serialised in the United States and instalments had to be written to coincide with the sailings of transatlantic steamers. All this pressure had been intensified by the Tavistock House production of *The Frozen Deep*.²⁶

That was echoed more recently by Andrew Lycett who did bring in the Brighton trip

The play proved so distracting that Wilkie had to lock himself away in a house overlooking Richmond Park for the next month or so, so he could keep up with his punishing weekly schedule for serialisation of *The Dead Secret*. This was the first time he had published a full-length novel in this

²⁴ Edmund Yates, *Celebrities at Home*, 1879 pp. 154-156. It is possible that the article was written by Yates's reporter Bernhard H Becker – see 'Wilkie Collins and Edmund Yates: a postscript' by Peter Edwards, *Wilkie Collins Society Journal* NS vol. 1, 1998, pp. 47 note 1.

²⁵ Robert L Patten, *Dickens and his Publishers*, Oxford: 1978, pp. 462-464.

²⁶ Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors*, London: 1991 pp. 170-171.

manner, and it was a struggle. Dickens was also equally under pressure to complete not only *Little Dorrit* but also construction work at his new house at Gad's Hill. The two men typically sought some distraction in early March and went to stay at the Bedford Hotel in Brighton, from where the only information that emerged was that they got soaked walking on the Downs.²⁷

Neither mentioned the missing part. If they were aware of it, they presumably put it down to the difficulties of keeping up with the demands of the press. One who did mention it was Nuel Pharr Davis in his much earlier biography *The Life of Wilkie Collins*. But he got the sequence of events wrong and cause and effect backwards when he wrote

Struggling with unaccustomed serial deadlines, Wilkie broke down and missed a week when he was half through. Dickens took him to Brighton for a few days' rest.²⁸

Conclusion

Although not well received by the critics when first published and with disappointing initial sales,²⁹ *The Dead Secret* was republished many times for the rest of Wilkie's life and beyond, bringing him a stream of income from his first serial novel.³⁰ It was also published in Europe and America, and translated into French, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, Russian, German, and Dutch. A stage adaptation written with Collins's permission by E. W. Bramwell opened on 29 August 1877 at the Lyceum in London and ran for 69 nights bringing Wilkie £72.³¹

Wilkie Collins expert Andrew Gasson believes the character of Uncle Joseph "... I smoke three pipes, and think three thoughts" was a possible inspiration for Arthur Conan Doyle's 'three-pipe problem' in *The Sign of Four*.³²

Not bad for a story which, for a week in March 1857, Wilkie was too battered by snow, hail, sleet, and wind to write.

²⁷ Andrew Lycett, *Wilkie Collins – a Life of Sensation*, London: 2013, pp. 172-173.

²⁸ Nuel Pharr Davis, *The Life of Wilkie Collins*, Urbana: 1956 p. 195.

²⁹ Peters, *op.cit.* pp. 171-172; [0270] WC to F. M. Evans, 24 October 1857.

³⁰ See for example [1080] WC to George Smith, 30 March 1871 and [1453] to him, 29 May 1874.

³¹ See notes to [3295] WC to Sidney Frances Bateman, 24 August 1877.

³² Andrew Gasson 'Wilkie Collins and Detective Fiction' in *Wilkie in Whitby*, London: Wilkie Collins Society 2024 p. 38.

The Dead Secret - serialisation in *Household Words*

| Last copy deadline | | Issue dated | | Week | Part |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------|------|
| Thursday | 11 Dec 1856 | Saturday | 3 Jan 1857 | 1 | 1 |
| Thursday | 18 Dec 1856 | Saturday | 10 Jan 1857 | 2 | 2 |
| Thursday | 25 Dec 1856 | Saturday | 17 Jan 1857 | 3 | 3 |
| Thursday | 1 Jan 1857 | Saturday | 24 Jan 1857 | 4 | 4 |
| Thursday | 8 Jan 1857 | Saturday | 31 Jan 1857 | 5 | 5 |
| Thursday | 15 Jan 1857 | Saturday | 7 Feb 1857 | 6 | 6 |
| Thursday | 22 Jan 1857 | Saturday | 14 Feb 1857 | 7 | 7 |
| Thursday | 29 Jan 1857 | Saturday | 21 Feb 1857 | 8 | 8 |
| Thursday | 5 Feb 1857 | Saturday | 28 Feb 1857 | 9 | 9 |
| Thursday | 12 Feb 1857 | Saturday | 7 Mar 1857 | 10 | 10 |
| Thursday | 19 Feb 1857 | Saturday | 14 Mar 1857 | 11 | 11 |
| Thursday | 26 Feb 1857 | Saturday | 21 Mar 1857 | 12 | 12 |
| Thursday | 5 Mar 1857 | Saturday | 28 Mar 1857 | 13 | 13 |
| Thursday | 12 Mar 1857 | Saturday | 4 Apr 1857 | 14 | GAP |
| Thursday | 19 Mar 1857 | Saturday | 11 Apr 1857 | 15 | 14 |
| Thursday | 26 Mar 1857 | Saturday | 18 Apr 1857 | 16 | 15 |
| Thursday | 2 Apr 1857 | Saturday | 25 Apr 1857 | 17 | 16 |
| Thursday | 9 Apr 1857 | Saturday | 2 May 1857 | 18 | 17 |
| Thursday | 16 Apr 1857 | Saturday | 9 May 1857 | 19 | 18 |
| Thursday | 23 Apr 1857 | Saturday | 16 May 1857 | 20 | 19 |
| Thursday | 30 Apr 1857 | Saturday | 23 May 1857 | 21 | 20 |
| Thursday | 7 May 1857 | Saturday | 30 May 1857 | 22 | 21 |
| Thursday | 14 May 1857 | Saturday | 6 Jun 1857 | 23 | 22 |
| Thursday | 21 May 1857 | Saturday | 13 Jun 1857 | 24 | 23 |

Dates from *Household Words* and analysis by Paul Lewis

The Dead Secret ran as a serial in *Harper's Weekly* anonymously without illustrations in 22 parts from 24 January 1857 to 27 June 1857. It followed the chapter divisions in *Household Words* normally three weeks later. However, the issue of 25 April – which should have corresponded to the 4 April gap in *Household Words* – contained chapter 16 just 14 days after it appeared in London. The following week, 2 May, was a gap in New York, 28 days after the gap in London. Harper then resumed the chapters with a three week delay until the final issue of 27 June. That contained chapters 26 three weeks after its London publication on 6 June but also the concluding chapters 27 and 28 published in London a fortnight earlier on 13 June.

The Dead Secret 'From *Household Words*' was also serialised in *Littell's Living Age*, Boston in 14 parts, spread across 21 issues from 28 February to 18 July 1857.



The Dead Secret, Sampson Low, 1862

“What do you mean by that?” asked Mr. Treverton, pointing...
at Shrowl....“You ugly brute, you’ve got a clean shirt on!”

This edition of
THE MISSING PART
Is limited to 200 copies

