

Post Mortem

THE FUNERAL TOOK place on September 27th at Kensal Green Cemetery. During the service the sky was overcast, threatening rain, but just as the procession came down the steps of the church, the sun burst through the clouds. From these north-western heights one can see far over London, and the city, bathed in the autumn sunshine, was looking its best for the final journey of one who was, in the truest sense, a Londoner. Nearly all his more intimate friends attended the ceremony: Caroline Graves and her daughter, Frank Beard, Holman Hunt, Pigott, Ada Cavendish, Hall Caine, Chatto, Edmund Yates, Bancroft and Pinero, E. M. Ward's widow, and Charles Dickens junior. Among those who came to pay tribute to a literary colleague were Edmund Gosse, representing the Society of Authors, and Oscar Wilde. Mamie Dickens and her sister Kate Perugini sent wreaths, as did Martha Rudd, Miss Braddon, the Comte de Paris and many of Wilkie's theatrical friends.

In addition there was a large crowd of spectators, and a contemporary report describes a scene which might almost have figured in one of Wilkie's novels. 'There must have been at least a hundred of those unwholesome creatures, who call themselves women, who seem to live in graveyards. When the coffin had been lowered into the bricked grave there was a general rush of these people who craned over into space, and clawed the wreaths of flowers, and pulled about the cards which were attached to the wreaths, and laughed and cried and chattered until they were moved on

by the graveyard police.' A memorial service was held two days later at St. George's Chapel, Albemarle Street.

His Will was drawn up with the precision and attention to detail that one would have expected. It is dated March 22nd, 1882 and a codicil, added a couple of months before his death, appointed two further executors. First there are instructions with regard to his funeral, the expenses of which, apart from the purchase of the grave and the erection of 'a plain stone cross,' shall not exceed £25; 'no scarves hatbands or feathers shall be worn or used.' There are detailed instructions as to the sale of his books and pictures; small annuities are to be given to two aunts and there are the usual bequests to servants. Holman Hunt's chalk drawing of Charles Collins was to be returned to the artist. To Caroline he left his gold studs and links and the furniture of two rooms. The rest of his property was to be disposed of and the proceeds invested in trust, half the interest going to Caroline for her lifetime and then to her daughter for her lifetime, the other half to Martha Rudd (Mrs. Dawson). Remainder in each case was left to his three illegitimate children, whose parentage he frankly acknowledged in the Will.

The sale of his effects produced less than was expected, especially the pictures and books. His manuscripts realised over £1,300, however, £320 being paid for that of *The Woman in White*. From a newspaper report we learn that the collecting of antique furniture had been a pastime of his, and that several items in the sale were bought on behalf of an American museum. The estate was finally sworn at £11,414, not a large figure having regard to his earning capacity over thirty years.

Within a few days of Wilkie's death Harry Quilter had formed a committee for the purpose of providing him with a suitable memorial, and an appeal over Quilter's signature was published in various newspapers. Meredith and Thomas Hardy were on the committee, in addition to personal friends such as Frank Beard, Pigott, Besant and Hall Caine. Quilter

somewhat overstated his case in claiming that 'it would be a little short of a national disgrace were such an author, whose books have long been famous throughout the world, to pass away without some permanent mark of honour from the English public whose pleasure he has so long enhanced, and from the brotherhood of literature of which he was so distinguished a member.' No sooner was it put around that their idea was to erect a memorial in either Westminster Abbey or St. Paul's, than the *Daily Telegraph* came out in loud condemnation, in its leader of October 5th :

There is no duty so invidious and so distasteful as that of subjecting the work of any highly gifted and deservedly popular writer, recently deceased, to severely critical scrutiny and strict appraisal on its merits. In the case of the late Mr. Wilkie Collins the task is a particularly unwelcome one . . . When the pleasure which he has given to thousands has been so lavishly and liberally bestowed it seems almost ungracious to enquire curiously into the status of the literary powers which enabled him to confer it . . . The mere fact that it is found necessary to 'agitate' for the memorial to a deceased English worthy to be erected in Westminster Abbey or St. Paul's Cathedral affords the strongest possible presumption that the proper place for such a memorial is elsewhere. To form committees, to distribute circulars, to 'tout' for subscriptions, and to take steps for bringing 'influential' pressure to bear upon Deans are steps which ought not to have, and would not have, to be resorted to in the case of any man of distinction in art or letters, war or politics, whose title to admission was of that clear and indisputable kind which ought alone to be recognised. The national Valhalla will not require to be filled by the same sort of methods as is employed to obtain the election of a candidate to a charitable institution. The great dead who alone deserve to occupy it do not need the canvassings of a clique to procure their admittance. They are summoned to that glorious resting-place by the spontaneous voice of the nation.

Without accepting the infallibility, so apparent to the *Telegraph*, of contemporary judgment in these matters, we may agree that Wilkie Collins was hardly a suitable subject for such a memorial. There is something pathetic about this public wrangle over the claims of a man who in his lifetime

avoided personal publicity, to an honour which he almost certainly never desired. The *Telegraph* leader virtually killed the Fund at its inception, and, if this were not enough the Dean and Chapter of St. Paul's reported adversely on the proposal, having taken, according to an American paper, 'other considerations than Mr. Collins' literary excellence into account.' Although the general public failed to subscribe, Quilter contrived to scrape together over several months some £300, mainly from Wilkie's friends and literary colleagues. The money was devoted towards establishing at the People's Palace, in the East End of London, the 'Wilkie Collins Memorial Library' of fiction.

Six years later, in June, 1895, Caroline Graves died at 24, Newman Street, at the age of 61. She was buried in Wilkie's grave at Kensal Green, possibly in accordance with instructions contained in an envelope which we know to have been enclosed with his Will. Her name does not appear on the tombstone. For some years after Caroline's death, the grave was tended by Martha Rudd until she too vanishes from the story. The 'morganatic family' soon lost themselves among London's nameless millions.

It is not easy to assess Wilkie Collins as a writer and his place in English fiction will probably remain a matter of some controversy. The issue is to some extent confused by the quantity of inferior work which he produced during the last twenty-five years of his life, work which, taken by itself, might entitle him to a place among such conscientious purveyors of popular fiction as Miss Braddon, William Black or Charles Lever. But who would place in such a mediocre gallery the author of *The Moonstone* or *The Woman in White*? And it is upon his best work—not the worst, nor even the average—that a writer may claim to be judged. Wilkie Collins' reputation must stand or fall by these two books, together with *Armada*, *No Name* and perhaps, *Man and Wife*. On the strength of these he can surely claim at least to be measured against the great literary figures

of his time, to stand alongside Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Trollope and Reade. His work fell short in many ways, of course, where they excelled. He could not approach Dickens' sheer overflowing genius; he had not Thackeray's style or versatility, nor George Eliot's intellect; he could not, as Trollope could, move about a little world of his own creation; his writing was less vigorous than Reade's. In one respect, however, Wilkie outdistanced them all. His ability to tell an absorbing story in such a way as to extract from it the last ounce of mystery and suspense and excitement, remains in these few books unsurpassed. In them he did something better than it had been done before. As Trollope wrote in his *Autobiography*: 'Of Wilkie Collins it is impossible for a true critic not to speak with admiration, because he has excelled all his contemporaries in a certain most difficult branch of his art.' Trollope could not, it is true, 'lose the taste of the construction,' but he readily admitted that the construction was superb.

To Wilkie Collins belongs the slightly paradoxical achievement of elevating the Sensation Novel to the level of serious fiction, and at the same time of reaching a wider circle of readers than any of his contemporaries save Dickens. In stripping the old-fashioned Sensation Novel of its Gothic trappings and relating it to the everyday Victorian world, the world his readers knew, he transformed it into something at once more credible and more fearful. For the supernatural forces of the earlier romances he substituted the criminal plottings of real people, actuated by simple, plausible motives of greed or revenge. He was wise enough to see that by this means, and by setting his tales among familiar surroundings, the effect he achieved would be more, and not less, sensational. With his characters, for the most part, it is the same. They are essentially ordinary people. Though they move in a world charged with mystery and suspense, among fleeting shadows and strange sounds, often caught in a web of diabolical intrigue, they still behave as ordinary people, with simple, sometimes almost primitive emotions. However

unusual the situation in which they find themselves they behave sensibly and rationally. If this is sometimes less true of his villains even the most bizarre of these is firmly rooted in reality.

The charge that Wilkie Collins was incapable of creating character has been so often repeated as to become almost a truism. Always nettled by it, he himself was apt to reply: 'What about Fosco?' inviting the retort that one swallow hardly makes a summer. But if we apply the test of whether or not a character lives on after the final page has been turned, there are surely other swallows. He might equally have cited Rosanna Spearman, or Marian Halcombe, or Captain Wragge, or Magdalen Vanstone, or half-a-dozen others. These are no mere puppets, jerked hither and thither by an elaborately contrived mechanism, but living creatures who linger in the memory long after their part in the drama is over. This is not to say that he could breathe life into a character at will. His touch was unsure, and even the most convincing of them lack a certain subtlety of drawing. There are, too, occasions when it seems that Wilkie is playing all the parts himself, dashing frequently into the wings like a Protean actor, to return in a different costume and with a voice imperfectly disguised.

He was no stylist. He wrote simply, and with perfect clarity and directness. If his style lacks distinction, it is at least an instrument well-suited to its purpose, which, after all, is to tell a story. 'Everyone writes novels nowadays,' he told a friend, 'but nobody tells stories.' This absorption in the purely narrative side of his art continued to the end. Not only did it colour all his literary opinions, but it rendered him incapable of appreciating the way in which the whole scope of the novel was being expanded. If the younger writers were experimenting with new forms, it was only because in his view they were no longer able to tell a good story in the old way. As we have seen, he regarded Scott as the model for all fiction-writers, and never missed a chance of extolling 'the Prince, the King, the Emperor, the God

Almighty of novelists.' To one aspirant he wrote: 'Study Walter Scott. He is beyond all comparison the greatest novelist who has ever written. Get *The Antiquary*, and read that masterpiece over and over and over again.' Some way after Scott in his regard came Balzac, Victor Hugo, Dumas père, and Fenimore Cooper—all masters of narrative in their way.

The apparent fluency of Wilkie's writing is deceptive. The act of writing was for him always a labour, and often an agony. His manuscripts are black with deletions and alterations. The early *Basil* manuscript in the British Museum, is in parts almost undecipherable, and must have presented a formidable problem to even the most experienced copy-reader. It was the same, we are told, with his proofs. 'The mere writing of a story is nothing,' he said on one occasion, 'it is in the revise—the amendments, the reconstruction, that the hard work really begins.' He took his job with utter seriousness and held in the greatest contempt those whom he termed 'the holiday authors,' who 'sit down to write a book as they would sit down to a game of cards, leisurely-living people who coolly select as an amusement to kill time, an occupation which can only be pursued, even creditably, by the patient, uncompromising, reverent devotion of every intelligent faculty which a human being has to give.'

The extraordinary disparity between the best and the worst of Wilkie Collins has given rise to a good deal of speculation. What was the reason for that steady decline in the quality of his later books? Why was such an apparently rich vein of ore so soon worked out? Why, in his last twenty years, did the mechanism become progressively more obtrusive, the characters more commonplace, the situations more repetitive, the coincidences more frequent and far-fetched? Three main explanations have been advanced; over-production, ill-health and opium. The first we can dismiss, since during the relevant period his output declined, if anything. In the twenty years up to 1870 he produced nine long novels, and in the following twenty years thirteen, of little more than half the length; he wrote roughly the same

number of shorter stories in each period. Ill-health may have contributed to the decline, though one recalls that much of *The Moonstone*, for example, was written at a time of acute physical and mental distress. The chief cause must almost certainly have been opium. The type of book at which Wilkie excelled, and which he was always trying to repeat, required above all a continuously clear intellect. One cannot expect a complex, elaborately constructed plot to emerge from a brain alternately clouded and stimulated by narcotics; and without the inspiration of such a plot Wilkie Collins seldom rose above the second-rate. Latterly his capacity for self-criticism dwindled. He seemed genuinely unaware of the extent to which his talent had decayed. Of one thing, however, we may be certain; there was no falling-off of effort. Large and uncritical though his public remained, he never offered them less than the best he could do.

It is hardly surprising that so uneven a writer should evoke such widely differing views. At the time of his death his reputation with the critics, if not with readers in general, had sunk very low. He had lingered too long upon the literary stage. The appreciations of his work which appeared in various periodicals harked back to the earlier romances and, for the most part, passed over his more recent writing in kindly silence. Among the sincerest tributes was that of Edmund Yates, who wrote in *Temple Bar*: 'The world is the poorer for want of one of the most fearless and honest fictionists who ever fed the public's sensation hunger, while seeking to influence the public's serious sentiments.' Swinburne, in a balanced critical study of Wilkie Collins' work,† summed him up as 'a genuine artist' despite occasional lapses. It was, he considered, to the credit of France that Collins should be more highly regarded there than in his own country, and he looked to a later generation to accord him the full recognition he deserved. Twenty years later Thomas Hardy wrote: 'He probably stands first in England

† *Studies in Prose & Poetry*. A. C. Swinburne. (Chatto & Windus, 1894).

as a constructor of novels of complicated action,' and remarked that those who ridiculed him in his lifetime were soon praising second-rate imitations of his methods. By this time *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White* had found their way into the category of lesser Victorian classics, but about their author or his other books the reading public was incurious. The centenary of his birth passed unnoticed, and not until some twenty years ago was interest re-awakened in Wilkie Collins. His re-discovery by three contemporary writers, T. S. Eliot, Walter de la Mare and Dorothy L. Sayers, coincided to some extent with the resurgence of interest in and re-valuation of the Victorians in general. Following her researches into the history of the detective-novel and the thriller, Dorothy L. Sayers paid an authoritative tribute to Collins' pioneer work in both fields, and to his competence as a writer. T. S. Eliot saw him as the master of melodrama. 'There is no contemporary novelist,' he wrote in *The Times Literary Supplement*,† 'who could not learn something from Collins in the art of interesting and exciting the reader. So long as novels are written, the possibilities of melodrama must from time to time be re-explored. The contemporary "thriller" is in danger of becoming stereotyped . . . The resources of Wilkie Collins are, in comparison, inexhaustible.' A year or two later Walter de la Mare delivered a paper to the Royal Society of Literature on 'The Early Novels of Wilkie Collins'‡ in which he discovered the rich quality and brilliant craftsmanship of Collins' best work, and redefined its limitations. In one vivid paragraph he illustrates that strange chiaroscuro effect which is the very essence of Wilkie Collins; his work resembles 'a cheerful sunlit morning—the flutter of birds, the sound of distant voices—when, slowly and furtively, there seeps in upon every object within it the gloom and the hush, the

† Reprinted in *Selected Essays 1917–1932*. T. S. Eliot. (Faber).

‡ Reprinted in *The Eighteen Sixties*. (Royal Society of Literature, 1932).

sullen ominousness, the leaden lull of an advancing eclipse; it is the actuality of a summer evening lit suddenly by the wide refulgent flicker of distant lightning. Quiet and blue his sea may lie, but lo!—high in the heavens—a remote, serene drift of warning clouds.'

These three diverse writers treated his work with a serious critical attention it had not received since his death. Together they are largely responsible for establishing his position as a novelist of some importance and as a pioneer in one of the most productive fields of English fiction.

The simple art of telling a story is one which it is from time to time fashionable to disparage. Yet it is as old as the power of speech, and as new as today's film or tomorrow's radio play. To this art Wilkie Collins dedicated himself from first to last. No man has pursued it with a more whole-hearted devotion, and few have told stories better than he.

As with most writers, it is in his books no less than in his letters and in the recollections of those who knew him that we must seek the real Wilkie Collins. From his friends we have learned that he was modest, kind, courteous and, above all, sincere; that he possessed a fairly strong, though not a dominating personality. They found him a delightful and stimulating companion, an excellent host, an amusing, if not a witty, talker. Some refer to his erratic temperament, alternating between lively good humour and deepest gloom or irascibility, without mentioning that this may have been no more than the normal temperament of the drug-addict. All testify to his genius for friendship. Their collective opinion can be summed up in the words of his friend William Winter. 'I have not known any person, distinguished or otherwise, whose society—because of mental breadth, generous feeling, quick appreciation, intrinsic goodness and sweet courtesy—was so entirely satisfying.'

None of this goes very deep. Wilkie Collins was a more complex character than most of his friends would have us believe. As to his less superficial qualities they are more

reticent, but we can learn a good deal from his life and his writings. Gentle by nature, he was tolerant of most things, save cruelty, humbug and intolerance. If he was impatient of fools, it was because he had seldom met a fool who was not also cruel. Towards the narrow-minded, the prudes, the hypocrites, he was implacably hostile. Indifferent to convention he lived the life he chose and wrote what he wished to write. If the world was shocked—as often happened—he might be sad, or angry, but he did not compromise. His will was strong, often to the point of stubbornness. Courage and will-power enabled him to resist, with the help of opiates, twenty-five years of intermittent sickness and physical pain which would have broken most men. Nothing less than utter prostration could keep him away from his work. In the labour of writing he could escape, in the words of Walter de la Mare, 'lapped in the condition of the worm in the cocoon spun out of its own entrails; ink his nectar, solitude his paradise, the most exhausting earthly work at once his joy, his despair, his anodyne and his incentive.'

Though he took little interest in politics as such, he was a true Radical, with all the Radical's determination to fight oppression and to set right injustice. His pen was ever at the service of the weak, the sick and the disinherited. He had a deep sense of pity; but this alone cannot explain his intense, compelling interest in disease, deformity and death. Here was the morbid expression of some deep psychological maladjustment, the causes and precise nature of which are obscure.

There remains a sense of incompleteness about this picture of one who was in many respects an extraordinary man. If here and there the outline is blurred, perhaps the fault is largely his own. From all but his closest friends he seems to have kept something in reserve, to have withheld something of himself. Of those who might have told us more of the real Wilkie Collins—Caroline Graves, his mother and brother, Dickens, Martha Rudd—none but Dickens has left so much as a line about him; and even Dickens tells us little. Wilkie's

letters, though far from being impersonal, reveal few of his inner thoughts. Like his books they are for the most part narrative. He kept no diaries. All correspondence with Caroline, which might have made clear much that is now obscure, has vanished. He himself destroyed a quantity of letters which contained matter he wished to conceal. Sixty years have obliterated many clues.

Wilkie Collins was a master of the story which hangs upon the well-kept secret. The steps he took suggest that he wished the story of his own life to remain something of a mystery to all but his closest friends. Perhaps more has emerged than he intended, but if some dark places remain it was he himself who withheld the light.