

## CHAPTER ONE

### William Collins R.A.

ON 18TH SEPTEMBER, 1788, William Collins, the father of Wilkie Collins, was born in Great Titchfield Street, London. His mother was a Scot, and his father, who bore the same name of William Collins, an Irishman from Wicklow. The elder William Collins earned a precarious living as an art-dealer, and specialised in the cleaning of old pictures. He was also a man of literary ambitions.

The boy grew up in this respectable middle-class environment surrounded by works of art, and delighted his father by starting to paint at an early age. The elder Collins did all he could to foster his son's obvious talent, instructing him in draughtsmanship and the use of paint, taking him on sketching expeditions to some nearby village such as Highgate or Willesden, and occasionally sending him to spend the day with his great friend, George Morland. Though deeply shocked by his dissipated habits, the boy was able to learn something of Morland's masterly technique. As soon as he was eligible he became a student at the Royal Academy where, at the age of eighteen, he was also an exhibitor.

The elder William Collins was no man of business, and his family lived constantly on the edge of penury. The cleaning of pictures was an ill-paid occupation even if his services were in wide demand; as an art-dealer he was far too honest to be financially successful; and his literary work brought him, we are told, 'more popularity than profit.' He contributed to numerous periodicals, and published a hand-

ful of works including a *Poem on the Slave Trade*, a biography of Morland, and a sensational novel in three volumes entitled *Memoirs of a Picture*. This last book deserves a mention if only for the sake of a plot so complex as to invite comparison with the work of its author's grandson more than half a century later. *Memoirs of a Picture* tells the story of an Old Master which changes hands with the frequency of a coin of the realm, and is forever being stolen and copied by villainous collectors with such resounding names as Chevalier Vanderwigie and Des-chong-fong. Perhaps the oddest feature of this curious literary hybrid is that the story occupies the first and third volumes, the second being devoted to a *Memoir of George Morland*. This section, in the words of Wilkie Collins, is 'filled with characteristic anecdotes, told with genuine Irish raciness of style.'

When the elder Collins died in 1812 he was heavily in debt. His son, now aged 23, was fortunate in being able to borrow from a patron enough money to meet the day-to-day household expenses. All the family's possessions had to be sold for the benefit of creditors, the furniture, the stock of pictures—including several by the younger William Collins which realised £57—even the dead man's spectacles and snuff-box. A friend who called at their house in Great Portland Street on the evening of the sale found the family eating their scanty meal off an old box, the nearest thing to a table they possessed.

For a time William Collins was too heartbroken to paint. His father had been to him master, critic, and friend; his encouragement had helped the young artist in all the difficulties and disappointments of his earliest attempts. The mood of despair only passed when he realised that the family now looked to the elder son for guidance and support. He went to work at his painting as he had never worked before. Of his two pictures exhibited during that year, one was sold for 150 guineas, his best price so far.

Henceforward, until his death, William Collins exhibited regularly at the Academy and was able to sell most of his

work. He was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1814, at the age of 26. A day or two later, the following resolve appeared in his diary :

*November 12*—To aim greatly at reformation in the leading features of my private character—the little weaknesses that almost escape detection, and which, notwithstanding their pettiness, seem to be the obstructing cause to all dignity of character in an artist, or a man.

And on the 17th of the same month :

From the great success I have met with, the eagerness I feel to deserve it and my struggles against sluggishness, I never was more confused in my intellects than now—dreadful want of confidence—my mind must be weeded—good habits may be gained by watchfulness—bad habits grow of themselves.†

Collins was ambitious, but seldom was ambition so tempered by humility and self-questioning.

The following year he moved from the small house in Great Portland Street to a 'larger and more eligible abode' at 11, New Cavendish Street, taking with him his mother and younger brother Francis. Within a few months the increased expenses had overtaken his income, and the diary sums up as follows :

One sixpence in my pocket, seven hundred pounds in debt, shabby clothes, a fine house, a large stock of my own handy-works, a certainty of about a couple of hundreds, and a determination unshaken of becoming a great painter.

He worked harder and still harder, only to see the gap between income and the necessary expenses of his household as wide as ever. At last, faced with the prospect of the immediate seizure of his goods for taxes, he sat down and wrote to Sir Thomas Heathcote, a generous patron, for an advance of money against a picture Heathcote had commissioned him to paint. The money was produced, accompanied by a note expressing surprise at 'the pecuniary distress of

†These and the following extracts from Collins' Journal are taken from *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.*, by W. Wilkie Collins (*Longmans*, 1848).

a person of such apparently prudent habits,' and the crisis averted. Economies were made which included the letting of half the New Cavendish Street house.

As Collins' fame increased so his circle of acquaintances widened. Among his intimates by this time were Sir David Wilkie, R.A., and Washington Allston, the American painter of historical subjects with whom Collins paid his first visit to Paris in 1817. Shortly afterwards he made the acquaintance of Constable. Despite his possessing, according to Collins, 'a capacity for dry, sarcastic humour and a character of marked eccentricity,' they became close friends until Constable's death in 1837. In a letter to Constable's biographer he mentions his friend's 'heartfelt love of his pursuit, independent of any worldly advantages to be obtained from it.'

If commissions were becoming more numerous, so were his financial troubles. The diary of January 20th, 1818, opens despairingly :

Pecuniary difficulties, debilitating idleness, waging war upon me; dreading what, to my poor and finite capacity, appear insurmountable embarrassments. Notwithstanding my conviction that my troubles are real, and their number great, yet I feel that my desultory habits are adding to the list . . . Fearing consequences, which God in His infinite mercy avert, I once more implore His assistance.

In addition, Collins sought assistance from Sir Thomas Heathcote who once more obliged with a loan of a hundred pounds. This loan, like the previous one, was scrupulously repaid and appears to have been the last he was forced to seek.

The Academy of the same year (1818) set the seal on Collins' fame. His main exhibit, *Scene on the Coast of Norfolk*, had just been sold to the Earl of Liverpool, when he was informed that the Prince Regent had been delighted with the seascape at the private view and wished to possess it. Lord Liverpool graciously resigned his purchase and commissioned Collins to paint another sea-piece for the next

year's exhibition. The Norfolk coast scene joined the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle.

During the few remaining years of Lord Liverpool's life, Collins was frequently his guest at Fife House and Walmer Castle. Here he met a number of celebrities including Sir Robert Peel, who became one of his most valued patrons. In the summer of 1818 he visited the Lake District where he was introduced to Wordsworth and Southey. At this point the Journal becomes tantalising in its brevity.

*September 2nd*—Showery all day. Lord Lowther and Mr. Wordsworth at dinner. In the evening at Mr. Southey's—lightning in the evening.

*October 3rd*—Walked to Ambleside with Wordsworth and his wife—sketched the mill there.

*October 5th*—Rainy morning; Wordsworth read to me: walked out before dinner—took my farewell of the Lakes.

Whilst in the Lake District Collins had done a portrait of Sara Coleridge. Writing from Highgate to Collins shortly after the latter's return, Coleridge refers to 'your exquisite picture of Sara Coleridge, which had quite haunted my eye ever since.' He encloses two tickets for his first course of Lectures, and expresses the hope that there will be a tolerable number of auditors. Collins thanks him sincerely and asks for some prospectuses to distribute among his friends, for which kindness Coleridge's gratitude is almost pathetic: 'God knows I have so few friends that it would be unpardonable in me not to feel proportionately grateful towards those few who think the time not wasted in which they interest themselves in my behalf.' Many were the subsequent occasions on which Collins made the journey to Highgate to delight in Coleridge's 'extraordinary conversational powers.' A sincere friendship grew up between the two men which only ended with Coleridge's death some fifteen years later.

The Journal of this year shows how little Collins was affected by his mounting success, both professional and social.

*March 20th*—I believe that I must answer for every idle, vain, and unprofitable word that I utter; how absolutely necessary it is then, that I should use those means already in my power to attain the blessing of mental watchfulness. I know no cause so adequate to the entire frustration of the acquisition of this faculty, as indolence, which I believe to be of the will first, and then of the body; where, when it has once taken hold, it is cancerous. God, of His infinite mercy grant that I may escape its fatal grasp!

With all his humility Collins would not submit to dictation in matters affecting his professional pride or artistic conscience. One of his more exacting patrons, Sir John Leicester, had commissioned a landscape with figures to hang in his private gallery opposite a Richard Wilson, and having seen the work in progress thought fit to write to Collins suggesting that the subject chosen 'would not enable you to display your genius against so formidable a pendent as the Wilson.' After some indication how the picture should be treated in order to form a noteworthy companion to the Wilson and to 'partake of its magnificent character without servility or imitation,' Sir John blandly suggests that the half-completed picture should, when finished, be sent instead to the Academy Exhibition, Collins being compensated for work done on it to date, and that he should begin another picture 'with fewer parts and more simplicity.'

Collins' reply is politely firm :

Sir,—I know no event of my professional life attended with so unpleasant a result as the one upon which you have written to me this day.

With the utmost gentlemanlike regard for my feelings as a man, and a solicitude for my reputation as an artist, you have thrown me into a situation from which I must confess my utter inability to extricate myself—each of your proposals being so entirely impracticable. That a picture unfit to hang with a Wilson should yet have nothing to fear upon a comparison with the works of living artists at Somerset House (notwithstanding the very high estimation I feel of Wilson's powers), is a reflection upon the painters of this day to which I can never subscribe.

Respecting the other proposal—when I take the liberty to assure you that my present picture engrossed my thoughts during the

whole of my tour in the north; . . . that I have already been actually engaged upon it for nearly two months; and that I have also put aside many considerable and lucrative commissions, which it would be highly imprudent longer to neglect, solely for the purpose of availing myself of an opportunity of painting upon a larger scale, I trust you will see the futility of my attempting to complete another picture, either by February, or for some time to come.

I remain, Sir,

Your most obedient servant,

William Collins.

After a further exchange of letters Collins won his point, and the picture was hung in its intended position in Sir John Leicester's Gallery.

Having failed the previous year by one vote, Collins was elected a Royal Academician in 1820, at the age of 31. Some six years earlier, he had met a young girl named Harriet Geddes to whom he was immediately attracted. She was the daughter of an Associate of the Royal Academy and younger sister of a Mrs. Carpenter who was already known as a portrait-painter. Although he believed that his affection was returned, Collins then considered his prospects too uncertain to justify his asking Harriet to share them. During the next seven years they met at intervals on social occasions and it happened that both remained single. By 1821 he decided that his reputation was sufficiently secure, and with it his financial position, and asked Harriet to be his wife.

Though the couple became officially engaged there was an obstacle in the way of marriage. Mrs. Collins, whilst approving the match, urged delay until her son's position was still more firmly established, and not all his pleading could induce her to alter her view. Normally this would have been no obstruction to a determined couple of marriageable age, but there were, it seems, complications arising from a new Marriage Act recently passed into English law. Such was the vexatious position when Collins left London in August, 1822, for Edinburgh accompanied by Sir David Wilkie.

Their purpose was to provide a permanent record of the State Visit to Edinburgh of George IV, in a series of occasional paintings. The city put on its gayest dress to greet the Royal visitor. Its grey walls were decked with flags, cannon fired salutes of welcome, bonfires blazed in the streets. Every kind of entertainment was arranged. Collins and Wilkie were invited to Sir Walter Scott's house in Castle Street, where the food and wine were of equal excellence. The scene after dinner, according to Collins, would have defied 'the pen of a Rabelais or the pencil of a Hogarth.' The host, 'in the exuberance of his loyalty and hospitality,' gave a spirited rendering of his own song, 'Carle now the King's come,' loudly exhorting his guests to join in the chorus and then to dance round the table with him, despite his lameness, to its measure.

Within a fortnight the King had departed and the festivities were over. On August 16th Collins wrote to Harriet :

As I have received no letter from New Cavendish Street, where I hope to write today, I have it *not in my power decisively to say when or where the desired event may take place*. Would to heaven it were tomorrow, my affections and all my thoughts upon the subject of it are unchangeable. Our mutual love and confidence in each other have every night soothed my mind and every morning cheered my prospects. My dear love, how much of my happiness depends upon you . . . I have a space (being the whole of it) in my heart which, as 'tis yours, nought else can fill.

A few days later Sir David Wilkie returned to London but his companion, who had lighted upon a simple solution to his matrimonial problem, remained in Scotland. He wrote to Harriet asking her to join him in Edinburgh, where, after a brief residence, they could be married without regard to a law which was only effective south of the Border. The letter closed with the hope that they would 'return to London cemented by that tie which, please God, may brighten our future prospects.' To his mother he wrote of his intention to marry 'despite our unhappy difference upon the most vital of all subjects, connected as it is with happiness here, and



the hope of it in a better world.' It was on the whole a mollifying letter and recognised that her opposition 'has arisen from an affection for me, which has never ceased to show itself upon all occasions; and this affection has been met, on too many occasions, by an apparently heartless neglect of your kindness.' It would be surprising if such a letter had not produced the forgiveness it sought.

Harriet duly arrived in Edinburgh and they were married in the English Episcopal Church in September, 1822. The ceremony was performed by the Rev. Dr. Alison, 'author of the celebrated work on *Taste*,' who declined to accept a fee, saying, 'You bear the name of a great poet, and you are yourself increasing the honours of that name by your progress in one of the intellectual Arts—I could receive no fees from *any* William Collins; and still less could I take them from you.'

Collins had not even confided his intentions to his friend Wilkie who wrote shortly afterwards :

Calling on Collins the other day, to my surprise he introduced me to his wife whom he brought from Edinburgh with him, and to be married to whom had been the reason of his delay in that place. When in Edinburgh he told me all about his engagement, but the marrying before returning home was an afterthought. They had been sighing for years, till they could sigh no longer; and he appointed her to come down in the James Watt steamer to Edinburgh. She seems a nice woman, not particularly handsome, but accomplished and intelligent, and I dare say much attached to him.

The elder Mrs. Collins had only to meet her new daughter-in-law to forget her opposition to the marriage and the married couple settled down happily at the house in New Cavendish Street. Harriet had an attractive personality and soon succeeded in winning her mother-in-law's affection. During the following summer Collins rented a small cottage at North End, Hampstead, at that time a village in rural surroundings, where he and his wife lived 'in perfect tranquillity and retirement.' The neighbourhood provided subjects for many of Collins' pleasantest works. He was happy

to be removed from the interruptions of London life and derived all the more enjoyment from the occasional entertaining of his fellow-artists.

Towards the end of the year they returned to 11, New Cavendish Street, where, on January 8th, 1824, their first child was born, a son.† The boy was christened William Wilkie Collins, the second name being a tribute to his father's friendship with Sir David Wilkie, who was asked to be one of the sponsors. Wilkie was a bachelor and must have had little experience of infants, for it is recorded that when his godson was first presented for his inspection he exclaimed with astonishment, 'He sees!'

William Collins' fortunes continued to prosper. Commissions were coming in from such useful patrons as Sir Robert Peel, Lord Liverpool and the Duke of Bedford. His greatest honour so far was a commission from George IV who chose as a subject a Hastings Coast Scene; and to Hastings Collins duly removed his family for the summer of 1824. The picture was completed the following year and the artist was privileged to hear the King express his satisfaction with it in a personal interview at Windsor. We are told that 'the notorious ease and affability of the King's manners . . . was as apparent in his frank and kind reception of Mr. Collins as in all other instances.' Even when the artist ventured to correct His Majesty regarding the precise point on the Sussex coast which formed the subject of the picture, 'the propriety of the correction was acknowledged with the most perfect good-humour.'

The next summer was spent in the little village of Hendon, and the family did not return to London until December. A few months later, in the spring of 1826, Collins quitted the house in New Cavendish Street for good and went to live in Pond Street, Hampstead, where he remained apart from occasional visits abroad, for the next four years. Few events interrupted the happy monotony of their life in

†*The Dictionary of National Biography* incorrectly gives the birthplace as Tavistock Square.

the country. From time to time William would leave for a brief sketching tour but always his desire was to return home to his family: 'I cannot tell you,' he writes to Harriet, 'when I am alone how I long for home. Why should we be thus parted I say continually, and my only consolation is that it is not for pleasure alone, but for the "crumbs" I must take to my "nest."' There are the normal fond messages to his small son: 'Tell Willy I have this day picked up two nice little scuttle-fish bones for him.'

During this period Sir David Wilkie was absent on an extensive tour of the Continent and he too, at the end of a long letter describing the Italian masterpieces he has seen, remembers his godson: 'He is now old enough to learn that there is such a person as his godfather—he will be able to speak to me when I return.' A life-long bachelor, Wilkie never found it easy to talk to children, though he developed a great affection for his young godson. Wilkie Collins recalls sitting on his knee as a child and persuading him to draw cats, dogs, horses and anything else he cared to name.

In January, 1828, Harriet Collins gave birth to their second son whom, following the precedent, they named Charles Allston in honour of his father's friend, Washington Allston. Allston became a sponsor by proxy. Collins wrote to Wilkie: 'Your godson grows a strapping fellow, and has a little blue-eyed, red-haired, bonny bairn as a brother.' In the summer of the following year Collins took his wife and children for a holiday to Boulogne. They rented a house in the market-place and stayed about six weeks. For young Willy, now in his sixth year, the first sight of a foreign country was an exciting event. Twenty years later, he remembered 'the picturesque dresses, curious gestures and bustling employment' of the peasants.

On returning home Collins moved into a larger house in Hampstead Square in order to accommodate his mother, now in poor health and in need of constant attention. They remained only a year before moving back into London where, in the summer of 1830, he rented a house in Bayswater.

This possessed the double advantage of 'a more commodious painting-room' and proximity to Sir David Wilkie's Kensington residence. Despite these compensations the Collins family left Hampstead with some regret. On young Wilkie in particular the neighbourhood had left a lasting impression. The quiet surroundings, the wild and solitary Heath, the view of London from the heights, invested Hampstead with an air of romance which not even the later development of the district quite dispelled. Time and again we find it used in his novels as the setting for some sensational event.

Wilkie Collins' childhood is scantily documented, and we know little of his progress between the ages of seven and twelve, while the family was living in Bayswater. There are letters describing a holiday at Ramsgate in September 1833 with his mother and Charley, and his uncle Francis, of whom he was particularly fond. Harriet writes: 'the boys are quite wild. Willy behaves nobly in the sea, he has had two 6 pennyworths'; and Collins asks if Willy has his book on ships. 'He might learn a good deal while at the sea about vessels.' There are the usual difficulties about lodgings, described in a cheerful, philosophical way by Harriet. Francis Collins fell seriously ill on his return to London and died in October. The elder Mrs. Collins' health gave way completely after the loss of her younger son and she too died three months later. William Collins was so stricken down by this double bereavement that he was forced to take a prolonged rest which he spent with his wife and children in Wales.

As his Journal shows, Collins' deeply religious nature coloured his entire life. One of the manifestations of his zeal was an inflexible Sabbatarianism. A story is told—not in the *Memoirs*—that he had a violent quarrel with his friend John Linnell because he found him nailing up his plums on a Sunday.

The children naturally came in for their full share of religious instruction. Fortunately in the matter of their

upbringing strictness was tempered by affectionate understanding. To Willy and Charley, aged 11 and 7, he writes :

Your mother's account, in her last letter, of you both, pleased me much. Go on praying to God, through Jesus Christ, to enable you, by His Holy Spirit, to be blessings to your parents; and then you must be happy. Both your letters were well written, and I was delighted to hear you were pleased with the holiday you had on Michaelmas-Day. I have made only a few sketches—one of them, however, will, I think, please you both. It is a drawing of a large gray horse, which was brought to me from the plough. The drawing occupied my time, I dare say, four hours. The horse is evidently of the Flanders breed, and I know Charley always likes to see horses of that class. I think I shall have it framed, and make a present of it to my own Charley. I have a sketch of a watermill, which I rode many miles yesterday to make and which, if Willy should take a fancy for, I shall have framed and give to him . . . A pretty *long* letter, methinks, for two such *short* fellows! However, I never regret any trouble I may have in doing anything for good boys.

That the boys were not invariably good is suggested by a letter to Harriet some days earlier :

Tell the dear children that the only way they can serve their parents, is to obey them in all things: let Charley find out the passages in the Scriptures where this duty is most strongly insisted on, and write them down for me.

The few letters from Harriet which have survived reveal a rather warmer, more humorous personality, and there is no doubt that she too adored her two boys. As so often happens, they received more indulgence at their mother's hands. It was, on the whole, a happy childhood for Willy and Charley, and the best was yet to come.