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WILKIE COLLINS THE WOMAN IN WHITE



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THE WOMAN IN WHITE

WILKIE COLLINS

Julian Symons made a reputation before the Second World War as editor of *Twentieth Century Verse*, a magazine which published most of the young poets outside the immediate Auden circle. He has since written a number of crime novels and also has a reputation as a biographer and military historian.

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WILKIE COLLINS

*THE WOMAN
IN WHITE*

EDITED WITH
AN INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES BY
JULIAN SYMONS



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INTRODUCTION

I

When Wilkie Collins died on 23 September 1889 he left characteristically clear instructions about the disposal of his remains. A cemetery lot was to be bought in Kensal Green, and a plain stone cross erected over the grave. No scarves, hatbands or feathers were to be worn at the funeral, the cost of which was not to exceed twenty-five pounds. And an 'inscription which my executors shall find included in this envelope' was to be put on the tombstone.

Not many people attended the funeral, because the circumstances of Collins's domestic life offended Victorian proprieties. At the time of his death he was living with his mistress Caroline, and she attended the funeral with her daughter Lizzie. His other mistress Martha Rudd, and their three children (what he called his little morganatic family), brought a wreath of white chrysanthemums to the house in Wimpole Street where he died, but did not go to the cemetery. Women friends like Lady Millais, who felt unable to face these two unofficial families, sent empty coaches as a mark of respect. The inscription on the tombstone gave his full name, William Wilkie Collins, and his birth and death dates, followed by the words: 'Author of *The Woman in White* and other works of fiction'. In spite of the brilliance of *The Moonstone*, and the merits of *Armada* and *No Name*, Collins's own verdict seems the right one. *The Woman in White* was his finest novel, and it remains the most brilliant melodrama in a period when, as T. S. Eliot has said, 'the best novels were thrilling'.

Wilkie Collins's career was shaped more than most by his family background and his physical inadequacies. He was born in 1824, the elder son of a successful painter, a Royal Academician who was by nature parsimonious, by conviction a strongly religious High Tory, and by temperament a toady – or, as it might more kindly be said, one who deeply respected his rich and helpful patrons. William Collins, R.A., went to stay at grand houses,

and sent back letters to his wife and two sons in Bayswater, letters which stressed equally the importance of domestic economy and of constant religious attendance. Wilkie (he dropped the William after his father's death) inherited a certain closeness about money, but in almost every other way rebelled against fatherly example. He was a freethinker if not a positive atheist, refused to settle to life in a tea-broker's office or in the law, and was far from accepting as true the words spoken by his father when entering him at school: 'You will make aristocratic connections that will be of the greatest use to you in life.' He was twenty-two years old when William Collins died, a young man already determined to be a writer, and although his first work was the memoirs of the *Life of William Collins R.A.*, he settled after this act of piety to a life of which his father would strongly have disapproved.

This life was an odd blend of the respectable and the raffish, of prudence and daring. His friends included several of the pre-Raphaelites with whom his painter brother Charley was for a time associated, and he became a close companion and occasional collaborator of Dickens with whom he undertook jaunts abroad in which they probably visited brothels or at least behaved, as Dickens put it, 'like Don Giovanni'. Even in London they enjoyed days 'of amiable dissipation and unbounded licence', and there was reality behind the rhetoric. Collins's love for good food, champagne, and music halls was not in question. Yet he lived at home with his mother until he was thirty-two years old, and was always fussily concerned with his own comfort. When he left home it was to take a step which was at the time outrageous, that of setting up a *ménage* with Caroline Graves, a girl in her early twenties who already had a daughter, and apparently somewhere also a husband. Collins courageously faced the social ostracism caused by the arrangement, but although deeply attached to Caroline, he refused to marry her when she was free. In spite of the fact that he had lived with her for years, he accepted the idea of her marriage to a plumber named Clow, and even attended the wedding. When the marriage broke up, he happily settled down with her again. He left the income from his estate, half to Caroline and her daughter Lizzie, half to Martha Rudd and her three children.

His physical make-up had a lot to do with this blend of romanticism and caution. Presumably because of difficulty at his birth, his left temple was depressed and his right one bulged, and the oddness of his appearance was accentuated by the largeness of his head and the smallness of his body. He was just under five foot six tall, very slight, with tiny hands, and feet so small that it was easy for him to wear women's shoes. He was also short-sighted, so that he tended to stand very close to other people when talking to them. After he was thirty he suffered from mysterious rheumatic or neuralgic pains, which may have been psychosomatic in origin but which certainly caused him genuine agony. The pain was medically defined as rheumatic gout, and it affected his eyes so that they became, in the words of an interviewer, 'bags of blood'. Then it spread to his legs. To obtain relief he took laudanum, in ever-increasing quantities. During the last few years of his life he took enough in a single dose to kill anybody whose system was not used to the drug, and there is a possibly apocryphal story that one of his servants took half of the dose Collins poured for himself, and died of it. In youth he had had romantic dreams of being an Arctic explorer or a merchant seaman, but the fragility of his constitution limited him to jaunts like those with Dickens, and for his last fifteen years he was more or less an invalid. 久病弱力の人

There is something engaging about his personality, yet also something rather chilly. His courage in the face of illness must be admired, but as he admitted himself he was often a tiresome hypochondriac, and any feeling that romantic ardour prompted his alliance with Caroline Graves must be checked by the fact that he did not set up house with her until he was sure that he could afford it. In the preface to his second novel, *Basil*, he stressed the differences between the Ideal and the Actual, observing that 'the more of the Actual I could garner up as a text to speak from, the more certain I might feel of the genuineness of the Ideal which was sure to spring out of it'. A sense of the Actual, of the way people talk and look, of external appearances and the way such appearances may reflect personality, is one of the great strengths in Collins's work. To his patient observation of the Actual in streets and omnibuses we owe the exactness of such portraits as that of Sergeant Cuff in *The Moonstone*:

A fly from the railway drove up as I reached the lodge; and out got a grizzled elderly man so lean that he looked as if he had not got an ounce of flesh on his bones in any part of him. He was dressed all in decent black, with a white cravat round his neck. His face was as sharp as a hatchet, and the skin of it was as yellow and dry and withered as an autumn leaf. His eyes, of a steely light grey, had a very disconcerting trick, when they encountered your eyes, of looking as if they expected something more from you than you were aware of yourself. His walk was soft; his voice was melancholy; his long lanky fingers were hooked like claws. He might have been a parson, or an undertaker – or anything else you like, except what he really was.

Many Collins portraits are built like this, of detail added to detail, with the outward appearance suggesting mentality and character. An awareness of the Actual, in his work as in his life, acted as a check upon the Ideal. The Ideal was high melodrama, of the kind to be found in the unsuccessful plays upon which he lavished many pains, *The Frozen Deep* and *The Lighthouse*; it was acts of splendid heroism and deepest villainy, the stuff of much Victorian melodrama, but in him it was tempered always by the Actual, so that if the plots of his books are sometimes purely sensational, the people are remarkably clear and convincing. It is this combination of the Ideal and the Actual, of an exciting plot carried through by wholly believable people, that makes *The Woman in White* a supremely good novel of its kind.

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He was in his middle thirties when he began work on the book. He had already published four novels, a collection of short stories and a longer one written to fulfil the mid-Victorian passion for 'Christmas stories', as well as the memoir of his father, and an account of a tour in Cornwall, *Rambles Beyond Railways*. He was a writer of no more than middling repute, and the reception of his third novel, *Hide and Seek*, had been so discouraging that he thought for a time of giving up fiction. Its successor, *The Dead Secret*, written as a serial for Dickens's *Household Words*, was much more successful. It was the period of closest friendship and collaboration between the two men. They went on a

walking holiday together (Collins typically sprained his ankle at the beginning of it), and wrote about it for the magazine in a series of articles that became a book, *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices*. When Dickens gave up *Household Words* and decided to start another periodical to be called *All The Year Round*, he suggested that it should begin with a novel of his own, to be followed by one from Collins. The inexhaustible fecundity of Victorian novelists left them with no doubts about the possible problems of writing novels to order in this way, and their confidence was fully justified. Dickens's novel was *A Tale of Two Cities*. Collins's was *The Woman in White*.

The story had several points of origin, the most personal and dramatic of which is told in the biography of Millais. It was a story told by Millais to his son, and rests on that authority. Millais had come to dinner with the Collins family, and at the end of the evening walked back with the two brothers from Haver Terrace to Millais's studio in Gower Street. They had reached a point at or just off the Finchley Road, when they heard a scream come from the garden of a nearby villa :

The iron gate leading to the garden was dashed open, and from it came the figure of a young and very beautiful woman dressed in flowing white robes that shone in the moonlight. She seemed to float rather than to run in their direction, and, on coming up to the three young men, she paused for a moment in an attitude of supplication and terror.

The woman then moved on into the shadows. Collins alone followed her, and did not reappear that evening. 'Her story is not for these pages', Millais told his son. The woman was Caroline Graves, and this was Collins's first meeting with her. What was she doing at the villa? For an explanation of her presence we have another authority, an account given by Dickens's daughter Kate Perugini to Gladys Storey, for a book called *Dickens and Daughter*. According to this, Caroline had been kept a prisoner in the villa for several months, perhaps by her husband, anyway by a captor who employed both threats of violence and mesmeric powers.

These stories are both based on secondhand evidence, and may not be literally true, but there is no doubt that Wilkie Collins did have some encounter of this kind, and, unless we regard Mil-

lais or his son as a deliberate liar, that the woman was Caroline Graves. The incident provided a sparking point for the story's opening, in which she appears as a kind of vision, 'a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London'.

A sparking point only, however. The actual details of the plot came from a collection of French criminal records bought by Collins in Paris, while on a trip with Dickens. Among them were Maurice Méjan's *Recueil des causes célèbres*, in one of which is told the story of the Marquise de Drouhault, who was drugged on a journey and then locked up in prison under a false name. Since she was presumed to be dead, her brother inherited her estate. After nearly two years in prison she managed to send a letter to a friend, was recognized and then released. Collins's most recent biographer, Nuel Pharr Davis, has pointed out also that women in white were often encountered in novels of the period (white, with its implication of virginity, had an obvious symbolic attraction for Victorians), and that Scribe's play, *La Dame blanche*, was certainly known to Collins.

These were the raw materials, but of course they hardly begin to account for the success of the novel. For a long time Collins was praised as a master of intricate plotting. Today the power and flexibility of his characterization seems even more notable, although this is not to say that the clear, beautifully paced unfolding of the plot, and the skill with which interest in the narrative is maintained, are anything less than masterly. Serial publication imposed upon Victorian novelists demands which seem unthinkable now. It was desirable that each instalment should end on a note of suspense, and essential that it should meet the requisite number of pages. We have learned to take for granted the sprawling prolixity this often imposed on Dickens, Trollope and Thackeray, and it is worth noting that in his best books Collins found an ingenious way out of some problems involved in serial publication by making frequent shifts in the narrative viewpoint. *The Woman in White* begins with the narrative of Walter Hartright, developed in a leisurely way that enables us to settle down with the characters and the situation, and Collins to introduce the element of suspense with the entry of Sir

Percival Glyde. We shift to the elderly solicitor Vincent Gilmore for a deepening of doubt, and a hint about the villainy which is being planned. Another shift to Marian Halcombe, that early exemplification of Women's Lib, is succeeded by a few excellent comic pages from the valetudinarian Frederick Fairlie, and so on.

Through these changes Collins largely avoided the characteristic *longeurs* of the novel published in serial form, although this was probably not his conscious intention. He was also able to vary the speed of the narrative, and to introduce humour and ironical social comment. He is very skilful at producing the variations of style and tone for different narrators which add greatly to a reader's enjoyment when they are managed unobtrusively, as they are here. And the method allows him to produce some small masterstrokes of surprise, like that in which we suddenly learn that Count Fosco has been reading Marian's diary. It is also partly through the multi-narrational device that he is able to maintain the suspense of the story so well. Collins and Dickens often argued about whether it was better to hold the reader in suspense by gradually unfolding a mystery, or offering a straightforward narrative which contained a surprise at the end. The first was Collins's usual method, and *The Woman in White* is emphatically a suspense story. Each new narrative takes the plot a step forward. Although by the time we are halfway through the story we know the general outline of Glyde's and Fosco's plan, yet some secrets are kept almost until the end, and there is never any lessening of the tension that has been built up in the early chapters.

Equally skilful is the way in which the chief characters are brought on to the scene. As Maurice Richardson has remarked, the book gives you 'a double ration of everything, two heroines, two villains, two house parties, Limmeridge and Blackwater', and this double ration is the more effective because it is not given to us all at once. Take the treatment of the two villains, Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco. Glyde is introduced first, and Collins gives himself space enough to establish the baronet as a character, forceful and impressive in his own right, almost convincing as a model of courtesy and charm. 'Delightfully hearty and unaffected', old Mr Gilmore finds him, 'and his reception of me, upon my being presented to him, was so easy and pleasant

that we got on together like old friends.' Fosco does not enter the story until almost a third of the way through, and we see at once that he is by a long chalk the more formidable character. If the two had been brought on to the scene at the same time, Glyde would have appeared a mere puppet of Fosco. This he does indeed before the end, but in the meantime he has already been successfully built up as a wild and dangerous man. Collins is also aware that villains can be all the more impressively menacing if they are allowed some attractions. It is an admirable stroke to make Marian like the Count even though she distrusts him, a better one still to give Fosco a respect and admiration for her that only just falls short of passion. He does not even notice, or at least does not comment on, her incipient moustache.

The book is full of memorable characters. Fosco is by general agreement the finest of them. His activities are necessarily melodramatic, and he has the apparent omniscience that fascinated many respectable Victorians, yet a strong whiff of the Actual comes in his attachment to a vicious cockatoo, his canaries, his white mice let out of their little painted pagoda to crawl in and out of his fancy waistcoat. Although Fosco is said to have a remarkable likeness to Napoleon, and is shown dominating his fellow-conspirator in a distinctly Napoleonic manner, the portrait of him is full of humanizing touches. He fulfilled the Ideal or romantic side of his author's nature by his alien habits and style, his feminine light-footedness, the ingenuity of his mind. His fatness was an inspired casting against the current type of villain. To us, excess weight is in itself almost a kind of sin, but the standard villain of the period had a lean and hungry look. When Collins, discussing the novel twenty years afterwards, said that Fosco was made a foreigner because the crime was too ingenious for an English villain, he was expressing in part his own contempt for the roast beef stolidity of Victorian England. A letter he received which complained that 'You have more than once set up the foreigners – the jabbering, unwashed, unshaven foreigners, who live on kickshaws and sour wine – as examples to us,' may have been a joke, but it contained a kernel of truth.

If Fosco is the book's chief triumph, Marian Halcombe is perhaps an even more original creation, one who so fascinated Edward Fitzgerald that he named his yacht after her. Collins had a

liking for strong, mannish women, and Marian, with her firm masculine mouth, large hands and swarthy complexion, is a heroine – even though a secondary one – again cast very much against the current type. In a way she is offered as a counter to Fosco, and her unwomanly boldness and decisiveness are among the qualities he admires in her. Does she also have Lesbian tendencies? It is easy enough to read them into passages like those in which she reflects on Laura's approaching marriage when 'she will be his Laura instead of mine', so that 'writing of her marriage [is] like writing of her death', but it is doubtful whether such thoughts were in Collins's mind.

The excellence of Sir Percival as a foil to Fosco has already been mentioned. The 'short sharp cough' which is for a while his only sign of unease seems just right. Mr Fairlie's hypochondria and monstrous egoism probably parodied traits that Collins recognized in himself, and there is a gallery of strongly conceived minor figures. It has been said that Walter Hartright and Laura Fairlie are a standard hero and heroine, but this is an example of Collins's tact. Against such a positive figure as Marian there had to be placed a character comparatively passive, and if Hartright had pursued his love more forcefully this too would have wrecked the balance of the story. It may well be that in deciding what to put in and leave out, Collins like other Victorian novelists was an artist here by instinct rather than by intention, but in its style and shaping *The Woman in White* is certainly a work of art.

The book began to appear in *All The Year Round* and in the *American Harper's Magazine* on the same date, 29 November 1859. Its success was immediate. *All The Year Round* had had a wonderful start with *A Tale of Two Cities*, but the circulation continued to rise when Wilkie Collins replaced Dickens, and dropped sharply with the end of his book in August 1860. Queues formed outside the offices to buy the next instalment, cloaks, bonnets, perfumes, waltzes and quadrilles were called by the book's title. Gladstone cancelled a theatre engagement to go on reading it, and Prince Albert sent a copy to Baron Stockmar. When it was published between covers, in the three volume form of the day, four editions were published in a month. Throughout Europe, and in the United States, the novel had a comparable

success. Before it Wilkie Collins had been one among a hundred Victorian writers making a reasonable living. After *The Woman in White* he was a famous and sought-after novelist, regarded by some as a rival to Dickens.

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Fame, however, is not identical with critical regard. The gap between highbrow and middlebrow culture that exists today was unknown to the Victorians, but still Wilkie Collins dealt in missing jewels and kidnapped heiresses and concealed illegitimacies. He had already introduced a deaf-and-dumb heroine into one story, a blind hero into another. It was felt that a writer who used such material, for the most part without thought of his readers' moral improvement, could not be regarded seriously. Dickens had the same taste for the grotesque, often used similar criminal themes, and had survived similar criticism, but Collins was not, like Dickens, a genius. The reviews of *The Women in White* were for the most part condescending or sharply critical, and Collins was both surprised and annoyed that his story should be so unappreciated. 'Either the public is right and the press is wrong, or the press is right and the public is wrong. Time will tell,' he said. 'If the public turns out to be right, I shall never trust the press again.' Since he judged purely in terms of public taste, he decided that the press was wrong. The reviews became steadily harsher, of course with occasional exceptions, during the rest of his career. When *The Moonstone* appeared in 1868, the *Pall Mall Gazette* observed that 'a conjuror at a country fair has as much right to prate about his art', although it was true that 'in sliding panels, trap-doors, and artificial beards, Mr Collins is nearly as clever as any one who has ever fried a pancake in a hat'. Others were more friendly, but very often there were complaints of forced and unnatural characters, engaging in activities that often outraged both taste and possibility. Of Lydia Gwilt, the master criminal – a feminine counterpart to Fosco – who is also the heroine of *Armadale*, one reviewer said that she was 'fouler than the refuse of the streets', and another that her self-revelation left every feeling revolted. One should put against the contemptuous verdict of Collins's contemporaries about so much