

Wilkie Collins: I seem destined, God help me! Never to be well.

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IN 1859, WILKIE COLLINS WAS ON HOLIDAY IN BROADSTAIRS with his mistress Caroline Graves, writing his sensation novel *The Woman in White*. He wrote to his friend, Charles Ward: 'I seem destined, God help me!, never to be well'. Wilkie was suffering torments from a painful boil in his groin, and was waiting for a doctor to attend to him in order to lance the boil.¹ Wilkie's holiday lament was indicative of his lifetime battle with illness. Wilkie Collins and his friend Charles Dickens were both afflicted with poor health throughout their lives. Dickens died from a stroke (apoplexy) in 1870, and Wilkie from the complications of a stroke years later. Wilkie's catalogue of ailments included gonorrhoea, rheumatism, back pain, liver problems, gout, eye problems and angina. To relieve his pain, he depended on laudanum and later morphine. Other treatments included doses of calomel (mercurous oxide) for purging, colchicum to prevent gout attacks,² and electric baths and travel abroad to spas to seek a cure for his ailments. Both Collins and Dickens regularly called on the services of Francis Carr Beard, who became their long-time personal physician and friend.³ As with Dickens, Wilkie's letters reveal significant information on his health, medical treatment and attitude towards ill health.

Wilkie first met Dickens in 1851, and they were close friends for the rest of their lives. The introduction came via their mutual friend, Augustus Egg, a British Victorian artist, who recruited Wilkie to Dickens's amateur theatrical company as an actor. Wilkie joined the rehearsals of a play, *Not So Bad as We Seem* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the hugely successful and prolific novelist, playwright and politician. The play was first performed on 16 May 1851 before Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort in Dickens's home, Devonshire House, London.⁴ Later, Wilkie wrote two plays, *The Lighthouse* and *The Frozen Deep*, which were performed by the company at Dickens's next home Tavistock House, London. Gradually Wilkie and Dickens's association became one in which work and play were inextricably linked. They enjoyed holidays together, at home and abroad, and both became members of the Garrick Club.⁵ They went on trips together, like their walking tour to Cumberland, which would provide material for *Household Words*, the journal edited by Dickens. Wilkie joined the journal's staff earlier in October 1856. Three years later Dickens had dissolved the

Household Words partnership with proprietors Bradbury and Evans in order to launch his own journal *All The Year Round*. Following the success of the novel *The Woman in White*, Wilkie resigned from *All The Year Round* in 1862.

Wilkie was born a scrawny and unprepossessing child on 8 January 1824 with a variety of disfigurements. He had a prominent bulge on the right side of his forehead,⁶ his head and shoulders were disproportionately large for his short body and he had tiny, delicate hands and under-sized feet.⁷ He grew up short-sighted, clumsy, though otherwise healthy as a child, and later wore glasses. His letters reveal a recurring pattern of personal sickness and worry about his well-being. One of the earliest mentions of health problems in Wilkie's letters occur in 1853, when he was 29. Wilkie was now an aspiring novelist having written several books and contributed articles to journals.⁸ At the time he complained that he was 'not strong enough yet to do more than "toddle" out for half an hour at a time with a stick'. Wilkie felt that his illness and long confinement had muddled his brain.⁹

The previous summer in 1852, Wilkie had joined Dickens's theatrical company and performed in Dickens's production of *Not So Bad As We Seem* eleven times in various cities. Having worked so closely with Dickens on the tour he was delighted to be invited to join Dickens's family holiday in Dover that September. Wilkie was pleased with the welcome he received writing to his mother: 'The house fronts the sea and is within a minute's walk of baths and bathing machines. I have had my first dip today, and feel all the better for it'.¹⁰ He went on: 'The sea air acts on me as if it was /all/ distilled from laudanum'.¹¹ The mention of laudanum would suggest that Wilkie had probably already taken the painkiller. At the time Dickens was drafting his novel *Bleak House* and Wilkie was correcting *Basil*, regarded as the first sensation novel. Wilkie noted that following breakfast at 'ten minutes past eight ... Dickens goes into his study, and is not visible again till two, when he is available for every pleasant social purpose that can be imagined, for the rest of the ...day'.¹² This schedule meant that the two writers could enjoy pleasant afternoons together for bathing in the sea, as well as going for walks.

Three years later, in February 1855, Wilkie went on holiday again with Dickens this time to Paris. Wilkie was preparing his satire, *A Rogue's Life*, about the phoniness of English society at the time, when he became unwell. Dickens wrote to his friend, Sir Joseph Olliffe, the British Ambassador's physician to Paris, to seek a medical opinion on Wilkie. Dickens's comment that Wilkie 'has a misgiving that he wants "advice"' sounds mysterious, but it soon became clear that Wilkie had probably developed venereal disease.¹³ Following Sir Joseph's visit, Wilkie was prescribed 'some strong medicine'

and advised 'not to go out in the snow for two or three days, except in a carriage and then well wrapped up'.¹⁴ After eight days, the friends returned to London. Dickens decided to visit Wilkie at his house at 17 Hanover Terrace and wrote: 'I will come up at about 8 o'clock with a cigar in my pocket, and inspect the Hospital. I am afraid this relaxing weather will tell a little faintly on your medicine, but I hope you will soon begin to see land beyond the Hunterian Ocean'.¹⁵ The use of the words 'Hunterian Ocean' was almost certainly a euphemism for gonorrhoea, which results in a urethral discharge. John Hunter was a leading authority on venereal disease, and wrote *A Treatise on the Venereal Disease* in 1791.

In 1856, Wilkie made the first mention of suffering with rheumatism – an ailment which would afflict him for many years.¹⁶ He had returned to Paris, where he was completing the last, longest and most difficult chapter of *A Rogue's Life*. Wilkie wrote to his friend Charles Ward: 'My particular experience of the general malady took the form of rheumatism. I cured myself by sweating – the only way of getting rid of such maladies that I believe [*del*] in'. He continued: 'My arms, legs, back, head, neck, and teeth were all rheumatic by turns. After relieving my mind by swearing and my body by sweating for four consecutive days, I came out victorious in the struggle. But it was rather trying while it lasted'.¹⁷ Other treatments Wilkie tried for rheumatism at various dates included Dr Caplin's Electro-Chemical Baths when he was in London,¹⁸ the spas in Aix La Chapelle,¹⁹ and Wildbad in Germany,²⁰ and the 'sea experiment' following a ten day trip from Cowes and along the Dorsetshire and Devonshire coast and back.²¹ Sea air was a popular remedy for many ailments at this time.

In September 1857, Dickens was feeling depressed because his marriage was failing. He invited Wilkie to join him on a walking tour of Cumberland. A few days after their arrival, the pair decided to climb Carrock Fell in the pouring rain. When they reached the top, the mist prevented them from admiring the view and hindered their descent. On the way down, Wilkie sprained his ankle, and Dickens had difficulty helping him back to their hotel. Wilkie was seen by a doctor and, according to Dickens, his foot was 'wrapped up in a flannel waistcoat (dirty), and [he] has a breakfast-saucer of liniment and a horrible dabbing of lotion incessantly in progress'.²² The swelling prevented Wilkie from wearing his shoe and stocking. The ankle slowly healed, and Wilkie was soon able to hobble around with a walking stick. Later, Wilkie and Dickens wrote up their recent journey as 'The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices' for *Household Words*.²³

Four years later, Wilkie was troubled with a pain in his right side. He remarked 'that my old enemy whose name is Liver has been attacking me

lately'.²⁴ Concealing his symptoms from Frank Beard, he decided to have a change of air. He spent a few weeks in Broadstairs, which was a popular resort with Dickens. Describing the scene in the seaside resort, Wilkie wrote: 'Here are the middle-aged ladies again, with the youthful straw hats, placidly unconscious of their own absurd appearance, and their own [del] disclosure of lean old legs through the fine exhibiting medium of crinoline'. He continued: 'Here are the Gentlemen looking through telescopes, the children digging perpetually in the sand, the fat-faced young English ladies reading cheap novels, the nursemaids giggling, the boatmen idling, the old women knitting, and the shopkeepers cheating'.²⁵ In 1862, Wilkie returned to Broadstairs with his mistress, Caroline Graves, and stayed in the Fort House: a spacious, turreted mansion on the cliffs overlooking the sea, which Dickens had often happily used for holidays. He found that 'a tepid salt-water bath' was soothing and invigorating, especially when suffering with a headache or feeling tired.²⁶

In 1863, Wilkie suffered from severe pains in his right foot, which was most probably gout. This confined him mainly to a chair, and meant he had difficulty getting up and down stairs. His foot was treated with a simple poultice of cabbage leaves covered with oiled silk.²⁷ Cabbage leaf poultices were a popular remedy for gout at this time, as they had anti-inflammatory properties which reduced swelling. Two weeks later, his left foot was affected by gout; this prevented him from getting downstairs to the dining room. He was visited by Dickens's friend, the physician John Elliotson, a former professor of medicine at University College Hospital, London, who practised mesmerism. The procedure involved the application of magnets to ailing parts of a patient's body, and the induction of a trancelike state by gazing into the patient's eyes, making certain 'magnetic passes' over him or her with the hands, and so forth. Wilkie informed him that he was feeling weak and lacked strength. Elliotson prescribed wormwood (absinthe) to reduce the pain and swelling, and another unnamed medicine. Wilkie's mistress, Caroline Graves, was advised to mesmerise Wilkie's feet and to mesmerise him to sleep in order to avoid the use of opium.²⁸

A few months later, Wilkie was still troubled by pains in his feet. He visited the London Medical Electrical Institution in York Place, London where he immersed himself in Dr Caplin's Electro-Chemical Bath – which claimed to draw out impurities such as mercury, lead and other poisonous substances from the body.²⁹ Advocates of the bath claimed it successfully treated palsy, rheumatism, scrofula and other complaints. Wilkie continued to visit these baths for several years. In 1868, in a letter to his solicitor Charles Benham,³⁰ Wilkie wrote: 'At 4, I take my Bath, at 5, I get out –

amidst thunder and lightning. At ½ p 5, I am ordered to dine – with thunder in my stomach & lightning in my head'.³¹ Wilkie described the feeling in his skin: 'I have [*del*] begun the electric baths. Rating the pores of my skin at only 7 million – I have had 7 million currents of electricity running through me for 45 minutes'.³²

During this period, doctors often found it difficult to determine whether a patient had rheumatism or gout.³³ In 1853, Jean Martin Charcot, a distinguished French neurologist, had shown that 'rheumatic gout' was two separate conditions.³⁴ In 1868, Wilkie refers to them as separate conditions, writing: 'The gout has come to keep the rheumatism company...'³⁵ Later, in 1875, however, the two conditions were often linked together as one ailment; 'rheumatic gout' is mentioned several times in Wilkie's letters. In one, he wrote: 'The sight of your handwriting did me good – even when the devil whose name is Rheumatic Gout was in full possession of me'.³⁶ It is worth mentioning that Charles Collins,³⁷ Wilkie's brother, also suffered with gout. He was an artist and author, who married Dickens's daughter Katey in 1860. A letter from Dickens to his sister-in-law, Georgina Hogarth, suggests that Charles's gout was inherited, and supposes that Wilkie's gout was probably inherited too.³⁸ Gout often runs in families and is more common in men, especially as they get older.

Spas became popular in Victorian times, and mineral waters, often sulphurous, were recommended for asthma and gout. By April 1863, Wilkie was well enough to travel the spa resort Aix-la-Chapelle,³⁹ (also known as Aachen), to treat his gout. On his arrival, he was met by a jolly local physician wearing a huge pair of gold spectacles and a face Wilkie described as looking like an apple.⁴⁰ Following his consultation, Wilkie took his first bath. The temperature of the water was 98 degrees Fahrenheit and it smelt strongly of sulphur. The following day, accompanied by a German bath attendant, he was allowed to take a douche bath, where he sat up to his waist. A continuous stream of hot sulphurous water was poured over his weak back, leg and foot. After moving to a warm bath to soak for ten minutes, he was wrapped in a scorching hot linen toga. Wilkie felt that the treatment made his back stronger and his flesh firmer. Apart from the baths, Wilkie wrote: 'I drink in bed, every morning before breakfast, a tumbler of the water from the spring – it is steaming hot, perfectly bright and clear, and in taste like the worst London egg you ever had for breakfast in your life'.⁴¹ After breakfast, presumably not entailing bad eggs, Wilkie smoked a cigar with his physician. During the stay he was also allowed to consume premium vintage wines which included Hock and Moselle. No medicines were proposed. Snacks and luncheons were allowed, but no less than two hours following a bath. Every day while he was

in Aix-la-Chapelle, Wilkie drove out to the surrounding hills in an open carriage to exercise his feet on the high ground, where the road was dry and the air bracing.⁴² After a few weeks, Wilkie's health started to improve; he was able to hobble about with his stick much more freely than he could in London, although he was still unable to wear his boots due to the pain in his feet.⁴³ Although the spa treatment had not cured his gout, it is clear that he had gained some benefit from the treatment.

Progress was slow, however, and a few weeks later Wilkie decided to travel to Wildbad, another spa town, in the Black Forest. Describing the scenery, he wrote: 'A mountain stream rushes by my window – huge, precipitous hill-sides, clothed with impenetrable fir-trees to the very top, shut in the view. More hill-sides rise opposite to /them/ - and the *[del]* narrow *[del]* green valley, and the rushing little stream, wind in out and out, for miles and miles together ...'.⁴⁴ Here, he described the Bath House as being as big as Buckingham Palace. He enjoyed the beauty of Wildbad, the variety of the walks and rivers, and the freshness and purity of the air. The hotel was comfortable and included a snug little library, with four thousand volumes including *The Times*, *All The Year Round* and *The Illustrated London News*. Wilkie wrote: 'Paralysis comes here, and pays the bills which encourage the enterprising landlord to add to the size of his [erased word] palace of an/ hotel. Rheumatism puts its aching hand in its pocket with a groan, and justifies the Town-Council in keeping up the splendour of the Bath-House'.⁴⁵ Although it was the beginning of the season, Wilkie was surprised at the number of people he saw 'halting on crutches, hobbling on sticks, rolling silent in smooth Bath-Chairs!'.⁴⁶ It was also the only place where Wilkie did not find people staring at his felt shoes. He wrote: 'They are used to felt shoes, to pale faces, distorted figures, and *[del]* crippled walkers. A well-dressed stranger, with the free use of his limbs, would be the right man to astonish the natives of Wildbad'.⁴⁷ Compared to the water at Aix la Chapelle, which was turbid and stank of sulphur, the water at Wildbad was clear. The bath was clean, warm and comfortable and patients were also able to lie down on a bed of sand where hot spring bubbles emerged.⁴⁸ There were various theories about the curative powers of the water. Some practitioners believed that the earthy fire that warmed the spring communicated an electrical influence to the water. Others denounced the electricity idea, and proposed theories 'based on the scientific (or chemical) analysis of the springs'.⁴⁹ After his physician declared that all his organs were as healthy as could be wished, Wilkie felt confident that his general health was excellent. Despite his optimism, however, he noted that his 'miserable feet still "kick" at any exertion' and his 'rheumatic muscles still indicate the changes in the

weather with the most deplorable accuracy'.⁵⁰ He added: 'If I advance, and discard my felt shoes – which is my criterion for a cure – I shall probably make a longer stay'.⁵¹ Following a further twenty-eight baths, Wilkie was well enough to be able to travel back to London.⁵²

Wilkie's gout continued to trouble him over the years. In September 1864, he wrote: '... the Gout has attacked my brain. My mind is perfectly clear – but the nervous misery I suffer is indescribable'.⁵³ Frank Beard reassured Wilkie that the attack was not dangerous. The following month Wilkie travelled down to Dover to recuperate, checking into the same hotel where Dickens and Georgina Hogarth, Dickens's sister-in-law, were staying. The hotel was close to the sea, and Wilkie found the sound of the ebb and flow of the waves helped him to get a good night's sleep. He enjoyed the fresh sea air, and took tepid salt-water baths to treat his gout. Wilkie had been drafting his novel *Armadale*, whose plot starts in Wildbad (serialised in the *Cornhill Magazine* from 1864-66). Dickens read the proofs, and was 'greatly struck by them'. Wilkie wrote: 'He prognosticates certain success. Miss Hogarth couldn't sleep till she had finished them'.⁵⁴ Several years later, Wilkie collaborated with Francois Regnier, the producer and director for a theatrical adaption of *Armadale*, in Paris.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, the weather there suddenly turned cold, which brought on another attack of rheumatism, and Wilkie decided to return to London.⁵⁶

By the age of forty, Wilkie was troubled with symptoms of dizziness. Frank Beard suggested that he was seen by Charles Radcliffe, a physician from the Westminster Hospital, London who he described as 'the great authority on brain and nerves'.⁵⁷ Radcliffe agreed with Beard's diagnosis that Wilkie 'was suffering from "gouty irritation" which had upset the nerves for a time only'.⁵⁸ The doctors recommended that Wilkie was put under a new regime. Wilkie notes that he was to:

Dine lightly at two - work from four to 7 or 8 o'clock – go out – come back for supper at ½ p.9 or 10. Bed between 11 & 12. Light breakfast - read and idle between breakfast and two o'clock. Eat light things – game poultry- eggs, farinaceous puddings - no lean meat – claret and hock to drink – and for the present no exciting myself with "Society" and dinner parties.⁵⁹

It is possible that the purine crystal deposits, associated with gout, within the semi-circular canals of his inner ear may have triggered Wilkie's dizziness.⁶⁰

Over the following years, Wilkie's symptoms deteriorated. He complained of 'intervals of severe pain from a rheumatic attack – which has tortured my eyes this time as well as the rest of my body'.⁶¹ Wilkie continued to take large doses of laudanum to relieve his pain. As a result,

he experienced paranoid delusions, the most notable being his conviction that he was constantly accompanied by a doppelganger he dubbed 'Ghost Wilkie'. His novel *The Moonstone* prominently features the effects of opium and opium addiction. While he was writing it, Wilkie's consumption of laudanum was such that he later claimed to have no memory of writing large parts of the novel.⁶² Another example was when Wilkie was going to bed. He used to meet at the turn of the stair a green woman with tusk teeth, and the displeasing habit of biting a piece out of his shoulder.⁶³ In 1869, Wilkie's doctor had tried to break his habit of drinking laudanum by stabbing him every night at ten with a syringe which injected morphia under his skin. This allowed him to get a good night's rest without any of the drawbacks of taking opium internally.⁶⁴ It appears that this experiment did not succeed in curing Wilkie's dependency with laudanum.

Wilkie's eye problems grew so severe they prevented him from writing his novel *The Two Destinies*, published in monthly parts in the journal *Temple Bar*.⁶⁵ The novel was a romance in which the only happy marriages are those where the two destined spirits have succeeded in meeting one another in this sphere of life. He wrote: 'I am again laid up with Rheumatic Gout in the eye. So far the attack is not so serious as on former occasions, but there is enough pain to make dictation to an amanuensis not very easy'.⁶⁶ During the succeeding years, his eye problems worsened further. Referring to himself in a letter to Paul Hamilton Hayne, a Southern American poet, critic and editor, Wilkie wrote :

...when he approached the looking-glass to [*del*] brush his hair and his beard, he perceived a red streak in his left eye. In three days more, his eye was the colour of a (cooked) lobster. The Gout-Fiend had got him. The Gout-Fiend bored holes in his eyes with a red-hot needle. Calomel⁶⁷ and Colchicum⁶⁸ knocked him down, and said (through the medium of his doctor) 'Wilkie, it's all for your good'. Laudanum – divine Laudanum – was his only friend.⁶⁹

Later, Percy Fitzgerald, an Anglo-Irish author, critic, painter and sculptor, gave a more graphic picture of Wilkie's eyes: 'His was a sad fate. He became a martyr to gout - perhaps the result of too much dining out. It settled in his eyes, which often presented a terrible spectacle, so inflamed that someone described them as 'bags of blood'.⁷⁰

In the autumn of 1873, Wilkie had followed the example of fellow literary celebrities Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray by undertaking a six-month reading tour of America. Despite the strains of travelling he felt well during the tour, noting: 'I am thriving in health and in public (as reader). If my health could stand constant reading I should

make a little fortune'.⁷¹ But he felt obliged to be careful and not overdo the schedule. Wilkie pointed out that he could not 'endure the double fatigue of railway travelling and reading on the same day'. He wrote: 'Thus, three or four days a week are lost days (in the matter of money) – but gained days (in the matter of health). And I have suffered enough to make health my first consideration'.⁷² After enjoying good health in America, Wilkie's well-being took a turn for the worse following his return to England in March 1874. He wrote: 'I came back from America with a new stock of health – as I supposed. But my native climate has already made me "bilious" that I can hardly see. My eyes are yellow, and my head aches, and the doctor positively forbids dinner today, and prescribes fasting and physic for the next four and twenty hours'.⁷³ The symptoms would suggest that Wilkie was suffering from jaundice. Soon he developed further health problems, noting 'I have got the gout flying about me – and keeping me nervous and unfit for work'.⁷⁴ In a letter to Jane Bigelow, wife of John Bigelow, an American writer and diplomat who Wilkie met in 1867, and remembering on how healthy he felt during his reading tour Wilkie reflected on the contrast between his health during his American reading tour and his usual wellbeing in Britain. He wrote: 'In your country, I felt five and twenty years old. In my country I (not infrequently) feel five and ninety'.⁷⁵

In 1885, at the age of 61, Wilkie's health problems deteriorated seriously when he developed angina. He revealed the new problem to his American friend, Sebastian Schlesinger, to whom he had dedicated his book *The Haunted Hotel*. Wilkie wanted to keep 'this illness a secret,' he said, 'so as to prevent reports from flying abroad which might make the case out worse than it is'.⁷⁶ Wilkie stated that he was troubled with 'some nervous mischief, in the region of my heart, (the medical name of the region is "cardial plexus" [sic]) which every now and then produces the most terrific pain – beginning in the under parts of both arms, and then extending across the chest'.⁷⁷ After one of these attacks he felt like 'a washed-out rag'.⁷⁸ Wilkie was prescribed 'Five drops of this tremendous elixir, on a morsel of cotton wool, put under my nose' which 'produces a furious throbbing at the temples and a burning heat in the face – but kills the pain, literally, in an instant'.⁷⁹ The elixir referred to was amyl nitrate which was first suggested as a remedy for angina pectoris by Thomas Lauder Brunton, a Scottish physician.⁸⁰

Wilkie's angina continued to worry him. Later that year he wrote: 'I even begin to think that I must have deserved to suffer the merciless neuralgic pains in my chest and my arms which have tormented me in this spring and summer. Slowly, slowly I am getting the better of this new enemy...'.⁸¹ A few weeks later, Wilkie wrote to Frank Beard with a positive update on

his health. 'So far, there has been no return of that familiar fiend who is so good at sharpening his claws on my breast'.⁸² Later, in September, however, the angina returned. Wilkie wrote: 'Neuralgic troubles in my chest and arms have been serious obstacles in the way of my correspondence lately'.⁸³ After a few months, there were further serious concerns amongst Wilkie's friends about his health. He wrote: 'My nerves make sketches with red-hot needles under the skin of my chest – and some kind friends are reporting that my death from Angina Pectoris may be shortly expected! I too have been stethoscoped [*sic*] and reported weak in the heart – but no organic disease'.⁸⁴ This was the first time Wilkie mentioned the stethoscope, which was invented by a Parisian physician Rene Laennec in 1816. Later, in the early 1820s, John Elliotson became one of the first men in Britain to use the stethoscope, which enabled practitioners to listen to sounds in the heart and chest. In November 1885, Wilkie mentioned another drug which was used to treat his angina, reporting that 'we are keeping the Nitro-Glycerine in reserve. When I am blown up, rely on my bursting in your direction'.⁸⁵ Wilkie made this comment because, in the early days, impure nitro-glycerine was sensitive to shock and could explode. Alfred Nobel studied these problems in detail, and was the first to produce nitro-glycerine on an industrial scale and developed an explosive called dynamite. Wilkie lamented that he was 'steeped in Devilish drugs – arsenic among them'.⁸⁶

Wilkie's health started to deteriorate even further. In June 1887, he wrote: 'Here we have had neuralgia in place of earthquake terrors – I have been taking forced holidays with my excellent friends Opium and Quinine until all my literary work has fallen into arrear – and now I am obliged to perform the detestable act of penance called "making up for lost time"'.⁸⁷ Several months later, Wilkie described how he went out for a walk on a damp day and 'in two minutes the detestable raw air caught my heart, or my lungs, or both – I staggered back as nearly suffocated as a man could well be'.⁸⁸ His doctor told him to remain at home and ordered him to go upstairs backwards. The reason was that doctors believed it increased cardiovascular capacity.

Later, in January 1889, Wilkie was returning home to 82 Wimpole Street in his cab after a dinner when he was involved in an accident where he had a narrow escape from some serious consequences. His four-wheel cab collided with another vehicle. Wilkie wrote: 'A frightful smash of broken glass – a turning round of cab and horse – a twist over of the cab just as I jumped out of it. My coat covered in broken glass – but my face and hands untouched'.⁸⁹ At the time he did not feel the accident affected him although later he felt that it had stirred up his gout. He was already

under the doctors care, for he mentioned ‘... again under the doctor’s care – indigestion and gouty disturbances’.⁹⁰

Since it was extremely hot in London that summer, Wilkie travelled to Ramsgate for a change of air. He returned home on 20 June, but ten days later he suffered a stroke which paralysed his left side and temporarily affected his mind.⁹¹ He was looked after by Frank Beard, Samuel Fenwick, a physician from the London Hospital, and a nurse. Despite their attentions, Wilkie’s condition slowly deteriorated; on 21 September, he pencilled a note to Beard. ‘I am dying old friend. They are driving me mad by forbidding the [hypodermic]. Come for God’s sake. I am too wretched to write’.⁹² Beard duly visited Wilkie and administered morphine. Two days later, at 10am on 23 September 1889, Wilkie died at the age of 65. He was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery.

Despite suffering with poor health throughout their lives, Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens were, of course, hugely successful novelists, journalists and gave public readings, producing an impressive output amidst these health issues. They performed in many plays together, and enjoyed holidays with each other, at home and abroad. Eventually, their respective ailments took their toll: Dickens died from a stroke in 1870, and Wilkie passed away followed complications of his stroke nineteen years later. Despite this, and the health issues detailed in this article, they both lived relatively long lives for their times.

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- 1 *The Collected Letters of Wilkie Collins*, ISBN: 978-1-57085-269-5, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA: InteLex Corporation, 2018. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*. p.224, [0313]. To Charles Ward, 30 August 1859, Church Hill Cottage, Broadstairs.
 - 2 An extract of meadow-saffron which was then the standard remedy for gout, and regarded as an effective drug, but one with the unpleasant side effects of nausea and vomiting. Wilkie often tried to avoid it and hence his increasing reliance on laudanum (opium).
 - 3 Francis (often referred to as Frank) became Dickens’s doctor in 1859. His brother Thomas met Dickens in 1834. Thomas was best man at Dickens’s wedding and godfather to his son Charley. He was referred to as ‘Dickens’s earliest friend’.
 - 4 House, Madeline and Storey, Graham (eds). *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, The British Academy Pilgrim Edition, 12 vols, (The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1965-2002). Hereafter referred to as *Pilgrim*. vol.6, p.386, fn.4. After seeing the performance on 16 May, the Queen recorded in her Journal: “The rooms and the little theatre were beautifully arranged, we 4 [*The Queen’s, and Prince Albert’s guests were William, Prince of Prussia and his wife*] sitting in a sort of little box. All acted on the whole well, Dickens (the celebrated author) admirably, and Dr. Jerrold, a funny little man, who writes in ‘Punch’, extremely well. Mr Lemon was also very good and Mr. Egg looked very picturesque, - like Schiller and Milton. The dresses and scenery were beautiful.
 - 5 In July 1857 Dickens and Collins resigned from the Garrick Club in support of Edmund Yates in what became known as ‘The Garrick Club Affair’. Yates, another of Dickens’s proteges, was attacked by Thackeray for publishing gossip he had heard at the Club. Thackeray asked for Yates to be expelled from club membership. The affair caused a rift between Dickens and Thackeray which only healed shortly before Thackeray’s death.

- 6 It was a home delivery in New Cavendish Street, London and appears to have been a difficult delivery. A midwife or accoucheur may have used manipulation with forceps. Lycett, Andrew, *Wilkie Collins: A Life of Sensation*. (London, Hutchinson, 2013), thereafter referred to as *Lycett*. p.21.
- 7 *Lycett*, p.1.
- 8 *Antonina* published by Bentley; *Rambles Beyond Railways* published by Bentley; 'The Twin Sisters' Collins's first contribution to *Bentley's Miscellanies* and the first contribution to the *Leader*; Mr Wray's Cash-Box published by Bentley; 'A Terribly Strange Bed' Collins's first contribution to *Household Words* and *Basil* published by Bentley.
- 9 *Letters*. p.110 [0147] To Edward Pigott, 25 June 1853, 17 Hanover Terrace.
- 10 *Letters*, p.103. [0134] To Mrs Harriet Collins, 9 September 1852, 10 Camden Crescent, Dover.
- 11 *Ibid*, p.103.
- 12 *Ibid*, p.103.
- 13 *Pilgrim*. vol.7, p.535. To Sir Joseph Olliffe, 13 February 1855, Hotel Meurice, Paris.
- 14 *Pilgrim*, vol.7, p.537. To Francois Regnier, 14 February 1855, Hotel Meurice.
- 15 *Pilgrim*, vol.7, p.554. To Wilkie Collins, 4 March 1855, Tavistock House.
- 16 Wilkie's father William was an English landscape and genre painter and suffered from rheumatism. See Collins, W. Wilkie, *Memoirs of The Life of William Collins, Esq, R.A.*, (London, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1848).
- 17 *Letters*, p.178. [0236] To Charles Ward, 19 March 1856, 63. Avenue des Champs Elysees, Paris.
- 18 The baths were situated at the Royal Hygienic Gymnasium, 9, York Place, Portman Square, run by Jean François Isidore Caplin, M.D., author of *The Electro-Chemical Bath, for the Extraction of Mercury, Lead, and Other Poisonous Substances from the Human Body: In Palsy, Scrofula, Rheumatism and Other Complaints, and the Relation of Electricity to the Phenomena of Life, Health and Disease* (London: William Freeman, 1856). A copy of the revised edition of 1868 was found in WC's library at his death (Baker 2002, p. 87).
- 19 *Letters*, p.341 [0534] Mrs Harriet Collins, 21 April 1863, Aix La Chapelle.
- 20 *Letters*, p.344 [0537] Mrs Harriet Collins, 21 May 1864, Hotel de l'Ours, Wildbad, Wurtemberg, Germany
- 21 *Letters*, p.350, [0546] To Mrs Harriet Collins, 4 August 1863, 12 Harley Street. W.
- 22 *Pilgrim*, vol.8, p.442. Miss Georgina Hogarth, 9 September 1857, Allonby, Cumberland.
- 23 *Pilgrim*, vol.8, p.454. To W. H. Wills, 26 September 1857. Office of Household Words.
- 24 *Letters*, p.281, [0426]. To E. M. Ward, 27 June [1861].
- 25 *Letters*, p.282, [0427]. To Mrs Harriet Collins, 11 July 1861, Albion Hotel, Broadstairs, Isle of Thanet.
- 26 *Letters*, p.322, [0492]. To Mrs Harriet Collins, 1 October 1862, The Fort House, Broadstairs.
- 27 *Letters*, p.333, [0518]. To Harriet Collins, 16 January 1863.
- 28 *Letters*, p.334, [0520]. To F. C. Beard, 30 January 1863, 12, Harley Street. W. For further reading on John Elliotson: Wendy Moore. *The Mesmerist: The Society Doctor Who Held Victorian London Spellbound*. (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2017).
- 29 *Letters*, p.339, [0531]. To Charles Reade, 31 March 1863, 12 Harley Street. W.
- 30 Benham and Tindell, Essex Street, Strand, London. Firm with experience in the business of publishing.
- 31 *Letters*, p.512, [0857]. To Charles Benham, 25 September 1868, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square. During these 1868 sessions Caplin gave Wilkie a copy of a revised

- edition of his book which was published by Bentley in October that year. A copy of it was found in his library after his death described as a “presentation copy from the author to Wilkie Collins 1868”. I am grateful to Paul Lewis for this information.
- 32 *Letters*, p.511, [0856]. To Charles Benham, 25 September 1868, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square.
- 33 See Hooper, Robert, revised, corrected and improved by Grant, Klein. *Lexicon Medicum or Medical Dictionary*, eighth edition, (London, Longman et al, 1848), pp.661-66.
- 34 See David R. Kumar et al, Jean-Martin Charcot: The Father of Neurology, *Clinical Medicine and Research*, 2011 Mar; 9(1): 46-49. Joshi Vinay R, Poojary Vinek B, Pioneers of Rheumatology, Jean Martin Charcot (1825-1893), *Journal of the Association of Physicians of India*, January 2014, vol.62, p.77-78.
- 35 *Letters*, p.495, [0825]. To William Holman Hunt, [22 February] 1868, 90 Gloucester Terrace, Portman Square. A few weeks later Wilkie’s mother died and he was too ill to go to her funeral.
- 36 *Letters*, p.872, [1543]. To William A. Seaver, 7 June 1875, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square, London.
- 37 Charles Allston Collins (1828-73) was a British painter, writer, and illustrator associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He died of stomach cancer
- 38 *Pilgrim*, vol.11, p.325. Miss Georgina Hogarth, 4 March 1867, Station Hotel, Newcastle.
- 39 *Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) as a health resort*, Alexander, Louis; Beissel, J. (Editor); Donelan, James (Translator); Brandis, B; Goldstein, L; Mayer, G; Rademakers, Jany; Schumacher, Carl; Thissen, J; Royal College of Physicians of London, (London, Churchill, 1892).
- 40 *Letters*, p.342, [0535]. To Charles Collins, 22 April 1863, Aix La Chapelle.
- 41 *Ibid*, p.342, [0535].
- 42 *Letters*, p.342, [0534]. To Harriet Collins, 21 April 1863, Aix La Chapelle.
- 43 *Letters*, pp.344, [0536]. To Nina Lehmann, 29 April 1863, Nuellens Hotel, Aix La Chapelle.
- 44 *Letters*, p.344, [0537]. To Mrs Harriet Collins, 21 May 1863, Hotel de l’Ours, Wildbad, Wurtemberg.
- 45 *Ibid*, p.344,.
- 46 *Ibid*, p.344.
- 47 *Ibid*, p.344.
- 48 *Ibid*, p.344.
- 49 *Ibid*, p.345.
- 50 *Ibid*, p.345.
- 51 *Ibid*, p.345.
- 52 *Letters*, p.346, [0539]. To Mrs Harriet Collins, 18 June 1863, Hotel de la Ville de Paris, Strasbourg.
- 53 *Letters*, p.385, [0596]. To Edward Pigott, 24 September 1864, 12 Harley Street. W. London.
- 54 *Letters*, pp.385-86, [0597]. To Mrs Harriet Collins, 19 October 1864, The Lord Warden Hotel, Dover.
- 55 *Letters*, p.450, [0730]. To Mrs Harriet Collins, 26 February 1867, Hotel du Helder, Rue du Helder, Paris.
- 56 *Letters*, p.451, [0731]. To Mrs Harriet Collins, 11 March 1867, 9 Melcombe Place, N.W.
- 57 *Letters*, p.390, [0613]. To Mrs Harriet Collins, 18 December 1864, 12 Harley Street, W.
- 58 *Ibid*, p.390.
- 59 *Ibid*, p.390.

- 60 Association Between Serum Uric Acid Levels and Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Observational Studies, Xinglong Yang,¹ Baiyuan Yang,² Mengjun Wu,³ Fang Wang,¹ Xiaodong Huang,¹ Kelu Li,¹ Zhiwei Mao,¹ Zhong Xu,^{1,*} and Hui Ren^{1,*}. *Front Neurol.* 2019; 10: 91.
Published online 2019 Feb 15. doi: 10.3389/fneur.2019.00091.
- 61 *Letters*, p.494, [0824]. To Harper & Brothers, 22 February 1868, 90 Gloucester Road, Portman Square.W.
- 62 Wilkie Collins, *Life*, Paragraph 3. https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Wilkie_Collins
- 63 Drabelle, D, *No Name* by Wilkie Collins, *The Washington Post*, January 3, 1988.
- 64 *Letters*, p.518, [0872]. To Mrs Elizabeth Benzon, 26 February 1869, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square. W.
- 65 Gout can cause subconjunctival transparent vesicles and haemorrhage, and vascular changes. See Jing Lin et al, Characteristics of ocular abnormalities in gout patients, *Int J Ophthalmol.* 2013; 6(3): 307-11.
- 66 *Letters*, p.900, [1601]. To George Bentley, 15 March 1876, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square. W.
- 67 Calomel, or mercurous oxide was marketed as a purgative agent to relieve congestion and constipation. However, physicians at this time had no idea what the medication's mechanism of action was.
- 68 Colchicum and its plant alkaloid colchicine has been used for centuries to treat gout.
- 69 *Letters*, p.1268, [2399]. To Paul Hamilton Hayne, 28 January 1885, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square. W.
- 70 Fitzgerald, Percy, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, vol 1, (London, Chatto and Windus, 1905), p.211. Apart from red/bloodshot/bags of blood eyes, Wilkie complained about the excruciating pain in his eyes. This suggests perhaps more than just conjunctival or episcleral hyperaemia. This could be due to iritis, uveitis or even scleritis, all of which can be recurrent and extremely painful. Another possibility could be acute glaucoma, either primary or secondary to the other condition(s). See Jacob, A, *A Treatise on the Inflammations of the Eyeball*, (Dublin, Dublin Medical Press, 1849), p.142. In 1855 Wilkie had gonorrhoea and some patients can go on to develop Reiter's Syndrome – conjunctivitis, urethritis and arthritis. I am grateful to Andrew P. Gasson for this helpful information.
- 71 *Letters*, p.790, [1393]. To William F.Tindell, 21 November 1873, The Westminster Hotel, New York City, United States America.
- 72 *Letters*, p.798, [1405]. To Frank Archer, 6 January 1874, Buffalo, New York State.
- 73 *Letters*, p.816, [1437]. To Mrs Isabelle Frith, 2 April 1874, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square, W.
- 74 *Letters*, p.822, [1448]. To George Bentley, 16 May 1874, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square. W.
- 75 *Letters*, p.849, [1501]. To Jane Bigelow, 31 December 1874, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square, W.
- 76 *Letters*, p.1275, [2410]. To Sebastian Schlesinger, 9 April 1885, 90 Gloucester Terrace, Portman Square, W
- 77 *Ibid*, p.1275.
- 78 *Ibid*, p.1275.
- 79 *Ibid*, p.1275.
- 80 Fye, W. Bruce, T. Lauder Brunton and amyl nitrate: a Victorian vasodilator, *Circulation*, Vol.74, No.2, August 1986, pp.222-229.

- 81 *Letters*, p.1295, [2456]. To Robert du Pontavice de Heussey, 14 August 1885, 90 Gloucester Terrace, Portman Square. W.
- 82 *Letters*, p.1297, [2461]. To F. C. Beard, 31 August 1885, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square, W.
- 83 *Letters*, p.1301, [2470]. To Robert du Pontavice de Heussey, 19 September 1885, 90 Gloucester Terrace, Portman Square. W.
- 84 *Letters*, pp.1305, [2476]. To William Holman Hunt, 8 October 1885, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square, W. Wilkie advised Hunt of ways to keep healthy and gave three rules which he considered important. 1. As much fresh air as possible. 2. Live well – eat light and nourishing food, eggs, birds, fish, sweet breads – no heavy chops or joints. And find out the wine that agrees with you, and don't be afraid of it. 3. Empty your mind of your work, before going to bed. Wilkie also recommended his personal physician Frank Beard who '... kept Dickens alive, he kept Fechter alive, and he is keeping me alive. The most capable, and the most honest, doctor I have ever known'.
- 85 *Letters*, p.1312, [2489]. To Anne Wynne, 5 November 1885, 14 Nelson Crescent, Ramsgate.
- 86 *Letters*, p.1317, [2501]. To Anne Wynne, 27 November 1885, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square, W.
- 87 *Letters*, pp.1423, [2724]. To Anne Wynne, 1 June 1887, 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square. W.
- 88 *Letters*, p.1456, [2792]. To A.P. Watt, 20 December 1887, 90 Gloucester Terrace, Portman Square, W.
- 89 *Letters*, p.1517, [2920]. To Sebastian Schlesinger, 24 January 1889, 82 Wimpole St, W.
- 90 *Ibid*, p.1517.
- 91 *Lycett*, p.407.
- 92 *Letters*, pp.1538-39, [2972]. To F.C. Beard, 21 September 1889, 82 Wimpole Street, W.