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# The Knights of the River Rafts: Leadership of the Common Citizens and Soldiers in Charles Dickens's and Wilkie Collins's *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*

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The Knights of the River Rafts: Leadership of the Common Citizens and Soldiers in  
Charles Dickens's and Wilkie Collins's *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*

The 1850s are infamous for the political scene within the British Empire and her colonies. The Crimean War against Russia, a rebellion in India treated as a mutiny against the empire, and a shifted focus to international issues over domestic problems highlighted every mistake and misstep of the largely aristocratic government. Rumbles of discontentment arose from the working class within Britain as they watched governmental neglect produce massive repercussions at home and abroad. Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins wrote their 1857 novella *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners* with these perceived political disasters and leadership failures in mind. Leslie Mitchell argues that the collapse of leadership in *The Perils* parallels the social scene of the time: when appointed leaders are unable to function in their duties or propose a solution to a grievous situation, the “leadership devolves upon a common soldier . . .” (Mitchell 236). While it is true that dire circumstances call for unusual solutions, the idea of devolving leadership does not consider the often-overlooked role of common citizens and soldiers as the unofficial social leaders and workhorses that bring about change. *The Perils* can be used to illustrate that the common citizens and soldiers are the compelling social leadership of a country or colony. In the novella, those with rank and position should be the respected and trusted leaders in power, but it is the common people, without rank or title, who are the trusted allies and the driving force that ensures success. This textual presentation of Gill, Marion, and Short as

common citizens and soldiers who effectively fulfill leadership roles when the established government has collapsed can act as a reminder for government and other leaders not to neglect the true source of their power – their citizens.

In the 1850s and in *Perils*, the British empire requires extensive and powerful leadership in the government and military to maintain its colonies and hold its status as a world superpower. As Mitchell notes, during this time of expansion most of those leadership positions tend to be awarded by "birth rather than merit or ability . . ." (229). When British troops entered the Crimean War against Russia from 1854 to 1856, governmental commands and policies made by leaders without personal experience proved detrimental and crippling to those fighting but not to those in power. Dickens, outraged at the lack of accountability for the government's negligence, writes, "it was he [the government] who left the tents behind . . . who chose the worst possible ground for encampments, who provided no means of transport . . . who decimated the British army . . ." (Dickens qtd. in Mitchell 231). The government is blamed again after the Indian Mutiny of 1857, a tragic uprising of Indian sepoys against the British military. Mitchell echoes Dickens's lament that "British troops died under the command of officers who owed their positions to birth and patronage rather than merit" (Dickens qtd. in Mitchell 236), showing that the Indian Mutiny was another dire consequence of government incompetence. Instead of taking responsibility for the aggression and violence of the Indian Mutiny and other such conflicts, government leaders raise the cry of nationalism to overshadow their shortcomings and mistakes, focusing instead on the country as a whole in the context of foreign affairs. Richard Smittenaar, while addressing conservative view against this use of nationalism, states, "the sentiment of nationality cause[s] instability in both the domestic and international realms . . . [functioning] as an excuse for varied forms of aggression in international affairs" (Smittenaar 386). Essentially,

nationalism as a cover-up leads to aggression, which requires another cover-up, and a vicious cycle develops. This cycle gives the government an excuse to expand and focus on the empire's colonies.

With the expansion occurring in the 1850s, the government devotes more of its resources and energy to colonization and the colonized peoples, infuriating Dickens with apparent government indifference to problems such as poverty and disease in its own country all while focusing on colonization and foreign affairs. "The English," Mitchell observes, ". . . were too easily distracted . . . Dickens [writes]; 'the old cannon smoke and blood-mist obscure the wrongs and sufferings of the people at home'" (Dickens qtd. in Mitchell 234). Dickens's worries referencing "cannon smoke and blood-mist" gives the image of ominous overhanging haze to the international affairs Britain allows to divert its attention from the problems among its own citizens, such as the Crimean War, the Indian Mutiny, and colonization efforts. "Government did nothing," Mitchell comments, "on the excuse that its priorities had to be elsewhere" (234). These "other priorities" outside of the country often inflicted even more damage on the already neglected domestic front. After these appalling events, many British citizens, including Collins and Dickens, were searching for a new form of leadership, one based on action, discernment, and resourcefulness, rather than the inaction, apathy, and ineptness that seemed to infiltrate every branch of leadership in Britain.

Governmental problems and grudges held by Collins and Dickens can also be identified within *Perils* by the character of Commissioner Pordage, whose self-given title of "Government" makes this bumbling idiot who lacks a proper understanding of what needs to be done the satirical representation of the government. Dickens shows Pordage demanding the merciless pirates be treated with "great delicacy, consideration, clemency, and forbearance" (Collins and

Dickens 24), and mocking Pordage's worthlessness without official documents, stating, "I cannot possibly recognize [our capture] until the necessary minutes and memorandums and reports have reached me through the proper channels" (Collins and Dickens 49). Neither idealized clemency or the so-called "proper channels" are practical in the given situation, making Pordage's insistence on ignoring the threat, as well as its potential repercussions, and doing nothing until it comes through the proper channels not only unwise but entirely unhelpful to the company. Garrett Ziegler establishes Dickens's view about this kind of leadership by quoting one of the author's letters describing the lack he perceives; "[it is] the system to know nothing of anything; and to believe that England, while doing nothing, was doing everything" (Dickens qtd. in Ziegler 152). This "know-nothing" system of pretending to know and act is characterized by the same incompetence, inaction, and pompous mindset that accompanies Pordage on Silver-Store.

Pordage's inability to act or adapt automatically dismiss him as a capable leader on Silver-Store and the position of official leadership continues down the line of command to the next logical source: the military. However, the military, represented by the ranking military officers Captain Carton and Sergeant Drooce, also falters under the strains of the situation. Dickens describes how Captain Carton and many of the ranking officers are drawn away to the other side of the island, hoping to "give chace [sic], and . . . get at them [the pirates], rid the world of them" (21). This expedition to seek out the pirates can be interpreted as prioritizing a military engagement outside of the fort borders over remaining to lead and protect the colony. Sergeant Drooce, while he remains to protect the colonists, eventually falls into violent madness due to injury caused by military mismanagement not leaving enough forces at the fort. He becomes a liability rather than a leader and leaves the colonists of Silver-Store without any official leadership. Finding themselves in a situation similar to Collins and Dickens, the colonists

of Silver-Store search for leadership that is neither the government nor the military, hoping to find common individuals on Silver-Store who will take the opportunity to lead on their behalf.

This predicament on Silver-Store proves to be an opportunity for Gill, a common soldier exemplifying the need for action, to rise into the role of an unofficial leader. When pirates attack the island of Silver-Store, Dickens describes Gill rushing to the aid of the colonists in the fort. Mr. Macey, the “chief person” at the fort, has the confidence to tell Gill, “I will follow your advice to the letter, Davis” (Collins and Dickens 30). He sees for himself that Gill, an “ignorant private in the Royal Marines” (Collins and Dickens 7-8), is familiar with the situation and committed to the needs of the colony. Gill proves his devotion to the needs of the colonists’s time and again throughout the experiences of the Silver-Store company. Collins describes how Gill leads the company in the march through the jungle and, together with Short, sets the example by “taking two of [the children] up, pick-a-back” (54). Both instances in taking the lead and setting the example are evidence of Gill’s action-oriented mindset as he is quick to act in ways that will best suit the needs of the colonists. Collins even shows Gill’s willingness to place the needs of the colonists above his own when the pirate Captain wakes up during their escape. He writes, “I [Gill] waited - in the interest of us all - to make quite sure, before I left, that he was asleep again” (89). Not only is Gill the last to exit, demonstrating his concern with everyone else’s safety, he also stands ready to defend the escaped prisoners and their “interests” with his life. Gill’s action orientation as an unofficial leader shows dedication the people and their needs, giving Mr. Macey and the other colonists a strong reason to place their trust in Gill over the other established leaders in the colony.

Marion Maryon exhibits a similar trust in Gill after they are captured by the pirates and the pirate Captain drafts a ransom letter for her to sign. This is a matter of extreme importance

because it the message to the British military that will determine the fate of the captured colonists. Marion chooses Gill as her confidant in sharing the contents of the letter. When Gill protests that there are “better men . . . who can read it, and advise you for the best”, Gill seems to believe that a leader of rank should be her first choice in consultation (Collins and Dickens 45). However, her reply, "None better, none, whose advice I would so willingly take" again places the unofficial leader above ranked leaders based on observed actions, interests, and efficiency (Collins and Dickens 45). Marion continues, saying, “I have seen enough, to feel sure of that” (Collins and Dickens 45), which offers a sharp rebuke to leaders whose inheritance of their position made them apathetic. Marion seems to be implying that none of the ranked leaders she interacts with have the same dedication to act and serve as Gill does. Alex Tickell notes that Dickens echoes the words of historian H. T. Buckle when he argues that "legislators should always be the ‘mere servants of the people, to whose wishes they are bound to give a public and legal sanction’” (Dickens qtd. Tickell 464). A leader is supposed to act for the welfare of the society rather than for their own interests or the interests of those solely in their social class. Ziegler emphasizes Dickens’s notion that ranked leaders are often “flaccid, overwrought, indecisive and overeducated in all the wrong ways . . . the type of man who nearly lost Britain the empire” (Dickens qtd. in Ziegler 158). Essentially, Dickens blames the indecisive nature of official leadership and their inactions on the ideology that those in power have a position without merit and experience to do so. In contrast, Gill illustrates that an unofficial leader receives trust and influence through their actions, commitment, and selflessness towards those whom a leader should serve.

While Gill is heralded as an unofficial leader because of his action-oriented mindset, Miss Marion Maryon is an unofficial leader due to her interpersonal discernment, or awareness

of other people, and using that skill to tailor to the needs and situations that arise. During the pirate attack on the fort, Marion and Belltot step forward and prepare weapons while “quietly directing others . . . as unflinching as the best of tried soldiers” (Collins and Dickens 32). Marion adapts to the situation upon seeing a need and shows her skills as an interpersonal leader in coordinating the efforts. Women rarely have the privilege of holding positions of leadership outside of the domestic sphere during this time period, placing them among the common citizens despite having knowledge and experience in certain fields. Notwithstanding what Tickell notes as the barriers of “common oppression . . . [and] limited ‘constitutional freedoms’” (479), Marion stands not only as an unofficial leader but as an unorthodoxly female leader as she uses discernment to meet the needs of the colonists and to coordinate the workings within the group. As she interacts with the members of the company, Collins states that “Miss Maryon [does] wonders in cheering them up” (58), but she is also able to gain valuable insights by intermingling and learning from the others. While Gill and Short are away physically working to provide a way to escape, Marion is in the position “watch and think, all day” (Collins and Dickens 77). This unique position, combined with what Collins calls her “clear head . . . high courage . . . and patient resolution . . .” (77), lets her formulate an idea to escape based on a conversation she overheard Mr. Kitten having with a child about edible berries (Collins and Dickens 79). In a group stranded fearful and unfamiliar circumstances, Marion, acting as someone who discerns and interacts with others in order to reach the best possible outcome for all, proves to be invaluable to the physical and emotional well-being of the colonists.

While the action orientation of Gill and the interpersonal discernment of Marion are outstanding qualities, Short demonstrates the vital quality of resourcefulness. As a common sailor, Short does not seem any whit out of the ordinary at first. Collins describes him in a typical

sailor stereotype jesting that “the stoppage of his grog and the stoppage of his life were two events that would occur uncommonly close together” (52). This ordinary, stereotype fitting description establishes Short as a common citizen and sailor, with no public feats, fanfare, or status that would fit any official powers and leaders. It is Short’s resourcefulness in using whatever resources are available in present circumstances that allow him to step forward an unofficial leader. Short’s resourcefulness works closely with Gill’s action orientation to create plans and accomplish tasks. Collins illustrates Short’s unique gift by showing how Gill at first cannot understand in the way that Short can that the wood meant for furnishing the ruins can be used as rafts for escaping the jungle; “‘What are we cutting down these here trees for?’ says he. ‘Roofs and floors for the Pirate Captain’s castle?’ says [Gill]. *‘Rafts for ourselves!’* says he.” (75). Along with his creativity in designing a plan using what is available to them, Short also displays great analytical power in calculating what needs to be done with the resources to obtain the desired result. Collins depicts Short calculating that “it would take two large rafts . . . and that timber enough to make such two rafts might be cut down by six men in ten days” (75). This resourcefulness and his quick calculations are what set the whole plan in motion, allowing Gill and Marion to formulate a plan of action and to coordinate the execution of the plan among the company. Short’s keen eye and a sharp mind, hidden quietly behind what Collins describes as a “fat face and bushy whiskers” (54), let him see opportunities where others could not, placing him among the other unofficial leaders of Silver-Store.

Despite the drawbacks of the official leaders in *Perils*, unofficial leadership only lasts for so long within the Silver-Store company. In the final chapter of the piece, Dickens reunites the escaped prisoners with Captain Carton’s courageous, determined military band and restores Commissioner Pordage to his senses. It appears that Dickens could be illustrating a reassertion of

official power over unofficial leaders. Mitchell asserts that England's "[refusing] the option of revolution in 1848" (238) can be found in Gill, Marion, and Short reverting from unofficial leaders as they "fell into [their] proper place" (Collins and Dickens 103) back into their previous identities as private, captain's fiancée, and sailor. However, this "return to normalcy" within the text does not consider that the power of official leaders comes from the unofficial leaders operating in supporting roles rather than in the limelight. This idea is illustrated through the final interaction of Captain Carton and Gill with Christian George King. Carton, upon noticing something lurking in a tree, shoots his gun. Dickens describes the aftermath from Gill's perspective; "'It is a Traitor and a Spy,' said Captain Carton, handing me (Gill) the gun to load again. 'And I think the other name of the animal is Christian George King!'" (106). It was Gill who had suspicions of Christian George King from the very beginning and remained distrustful even when the other colonists insisted he was harmless. Just before King's death, Carton charges Gill to prepare his gun and "load her fresh with a couple of slugs, against a chance of showing how good she is" (Collins and Dickens 105). The menial task of loading a gun isn't perceived as a task for a leader to perform, but if Gill had not loaded the gun, Carton would not have had a weapon to fire and the victorious triumph against the "traitor and spy" would not have happened. The movement of the gun from Gill to Carton and back to Gill illustrates that while Carton is a ranking man of power, he relies heavily on unofficial leaders like Gill for their skills, effort, and preparations, without which there would be no success.

While this kind of supporting role is not generally associated with the qualities of leadership, Dennis C. Grube asserts that this kind of supporting, unofficial leadership is actually the prevailing successful leadership strategy in the Victorian Era. Operating without fanfare or acknowledgment, Grube states that these leaders "quietly, tactfully and anonymously . . . wielded

immense policy and administrative power . . .” (708). The unofficial leaders of Silver-Store also acted quietly and anonymously, accepting little praise or recognition for their actions in the jungle. Even when faced with a reward for his deeds, Gill declines any offer of money. He accepts only a simple token from Marion, which prompts her to compare Gill to “the brave gentlemen of old . . . [who] did all their good actions for the givers’ sakes” (Collins and Dickens 108). These “brave gentlemen of old” reference the knights from earlier periods in English history. Much like Gill, these knights are neither high ruling kings and lords nor the lower-class servants. They are men devoted to serving and protecting the people and an extremely valuable workforce, for, without them, the leadership and power of the kings and lords would crumble. The leadership style of “the brave gentlemen of old” operates in stark contrast to the flashy and grandiose leadership of those Grube claims to have “highly developed gifts of self-advertisement” (714), all while providing support as the underlying and underrecognized foundation for success. Without the unheralded actions of Silver-Store’s unofficial leaders, there would have been no formulated plan of escape, no rafts, and no drugged tortillas, meaning prisoners would have never escaped, and the rescue by the official leaders would not have been successful. Gill, Marion, and Short acting as unofficial leaders prove to be critical for the success of the official leaders, whether they notice or not.

By the end of *Perils*, these unofficial leaders are essentially erased, removed from their unofficial positions of leadership, and dissolved back into society. However, without Gill, Marion, and Short acting as unofficial leaders, the colonists of Silver-Store would have met a grim fate. These unofficial leaders carried the company through their journey together. Their characteristics of unofficial leadership offered support, strength, and hope, held the band of prisoners together in times of trial, fulfilled the needs of the colonists, and returned them safely

to the comfortable familiarity of their lives outside of the jungle. At the end of their journey, Marion encourages Gill, saying, “you have to take back to England the good name you have earned here” (Collins and Dickens 96). It appears that *Perils* can act as a similar encouragement from Dickens and Collins to unnoticed, unofficial leaders, reminding them of the impact they can make even in the quiet, background roles. While serving as encouragement, *Perils* also seems to serve as a reminder to the official leaders of the power and influence unofficial leaders have on the world around them.

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