

Wilson vs Bierman

- A Victorian Rashomon

by Cazard

There was tension in the house. The households, one stuck upon the other, were ruled, for all we know or rather don't, by the female hand. On the ground floor, a single living, though reportedly married woman, about 20 years of age, above her a possibly younger woman living with her mother.¹ Whatever civil pleasantries had been exchanged between ground and first floor when first they had met had gained a substantial amount of ice since. The first floor was patiently awaiting the ground floor to be vacated, and it wouldn't be long now. Two ordinary households that didn't get along too well, nothing that wouldn't drown in the sea of time along with millions of other quarrelling neighbours. It needs murder, or the attempt of, to be remembered 128 years later.

That not all was peachy at 19 Maidman Street, even before a man attacked Ada Wilson, the occupier of the ground floor flat, becomes blatantly clear with some in between the lines-reading of the account of what had occurred that late March-day as told by the upstairs neighbour, Miss Rose Bierman. The two tales, given by Mrs. Wilson and Miss Bierman respectively, are not only wildly differing in respect to some very basic and decisive details, they also allow us a very brief, somewhat titillating peek into a rather undesirable relationship. Neighbourly problems are rarely one-sided.

I'm mentioning this, in the shape of the short opening, because what information we gained by a mere few words would have been different had the two been, say, best friends.

We recall: according to Wilson, she'd heard a knocking at her door late at night, March 28th 1888. She'd answered it to find a man – about 30, 5' 6", with a sunburnt face and a fair moustache, dressed in a dark coat and light trousers, and all that under a wideawake hat. He terrifyingly and dramatically demanded money or else she'd only have moments left to live, drawing a clasp-knife, which he then used, as Mrs. Wilson refused, on her throat. She screamed for help, which was heard, the man escaping, those answering Wilson's voice coming to her help as she stumbled out onto the passage.

Rose Bierman remembered a different scenario. Here it is best to cite what she told the reporter with The Eastern Post and City Chronicle 3 days later:

*'Ada Wilson, the injured woman, is the occupier of the house, but at the time of the outrage she was under notice to quit. I knew Mrs. Wilson as a married woman, although I had never seen her husband. Last evening she came into the house accompanied by a male companion, but whether he was her husband or not I could not say. She has often had visitors to see her, but I have rarely seen them myself, as Mrs. Wilson lives in the front room, her bedroom being just at the back, adjoining the parlour. My mother and I occupy two rooms upstairs. Well, I don't know who the young man was, but about midnight I heard the most terrible screams one can imagine. Running downstairs I saw Mrs. Wilson, partially dressed, wringing her hands and crying, 'Stop that man for cutting my throat! He has stabbed me!' She then fell fainting in the passage. I saw all that as I was coming downstairs, but as soon as I commenced to descend I noticed a young fair man rush to the front door and let himself out. He did not seem somehow to unfasten the catch as if he had been accustomed to do so before. He had a light coat on, I believe. I don't know what kind of wound Mrs. Wilson has received, but it must have been deep, I should say, from the quantity of blood in the passage. I do not know what I shall do myself. I am now 'keeping the feast,' and how can I do so with what has occurred here? I am now going to remove to other lodgings.'*²

So according to Miss Bierman, Mrs. Wilson had not answered a knocking, she'd brought her assailant home with her. That's quite an alternate detail right there. Different from Wilson, she also noted that the door had been closed. And she described all this, as it had been seen by her, descending down the stairs, seeing the attacker fleeing; the memories of the two women also differed in the description of the man, dark coat and light trousers, sunburnt with Wilson, while the coat was a light one with Bierman, and she described the man as 'fair.'³ Note also that Miss Bierman's presence is altogether absent in Mrs. Wilson's version.⁴

Before we decide whom we'd rather believe, let's have a look at what Miss Bierman is really saying. Besides acting as witness to the attack she clearly likes to talk about the victim herself. And, as good gossip will have it, sex is featuring big time.

Mrs. Wilson had brought the fellow home. Which, by the way, she was in the habit of doing, bringing fellows home. Who they were Rose couldn't say, for Mrs. Wilson's *bedroom* looked out the back. And she was only partially dressed. Oh, yes, and she was about to get evicted. Yes, she probably needed money.

So much information within so few words that are supposed to be about the attack.

One thing that strikes me is her mentioning why she couldn't tell who the men were Mrs. Wilson brought home with her. She couldn't because she had no view into Mrs. Wilson's bedroom, you know, the place where one would find out, as opposed to looking out the window when they'd come or leave. It might make you suspect that she really wanted the bedroom in the story.

Let's keep in mind that she didn't tell all this to a friend (although she might have as well). Nor did she stand outside chatting with the street neighbours about The Wilson (which she might have done as well). No, she told all this to a reporter, her version of events soon to be released for all of London to read, potentially the entire world, and still now in 2016 we have this insight into Mrs. Wilson's private life.

Skipping ahead, one aspect of this might already induce us to believe Miss Bierman. Bringing men home habitually, the bedroom, the man possibly having been there before – she was clearly insinuating. Not only wasn't all that exactly flattering, the fact that Mrs. Wilson brought these men home while being married and that she was about to get thrown out of the house neither, that it was all tossed out there for the public to pick up, pretty much exposing Mrs. Wilson, I'd think some people might want to answer such a thing by means of a libel suit. I don't have any information about such having emerged from what increasingly looks like, at least a silent, feud, but it can hardly be assumed that Mrs. Wilson was amused.

So in the end the decision as to whom to believe is really about whether Miss Bierman was a mean-spirited liar, or whether her account of events, spicy emotions or not, told the truth.

We have learned that ‘seamstress’, which Mrs. Wilson gave as her occupation, was regularly used as code by women who’d been forced to resort to soliciting men. We have to tread carefully here. I can only imagine how those real seamstresses who had known about the code must have hesitated when asked to name their trade. It does tally in neatly with the information provided by eager, nifty Rose, though. And with the hypothetical threat of a legal response to slander in mind that could have been initiated by a woman who quite clearly would have welcomed the money – at least the detail of her coming eviction would have been verifiable – I tend to put more of my trust into Rose Bierman’s version.

As always we also have to consider the perpetrator’s point of view. When we do and look back at the two versions Miss Bierman’s appears a good deal less ludicrous than Mrs. Wilson’s. Otherwise we’d have a man, who’s either extremely desperate or quite plainly daft, or possibly both. In Mrs. Wilson’s own words the man was a stranger. I’d conclude from this that he could have had no certain knowledge about who would answer that door, not even had he followed and observed Wilson. It could have been a strong, towering husband. It could have been two even stronger brothers with quick legs. He could have ended having the living excrements beaten out of him. And let’s not forget that it wasn’t Miller’s Court, at least not in this sense. It was a house, with at least one floor above it. And indeed, there had been other occupants, one of them later stating that she had seen him.

If we then fall a verdict in favour of Bierman we’d have the man having been inside, not knocking, and we wouldn’t be able to tell for sure whether money had indeed played any part in this, while we do have a potential motive for Wilson making up her version: she wouldn’t have wanted to be seen as a woman suspected of being a prostitute, who had brought her attacker home with her.

Which is what then makes the whole case interesting to us, as a woman meeting a man and leading him to a private spot, to then being attacked by him, bears some semblance when thinking of the later murders, mostly strongly with the one where this private spot would indeed be the home of the victim.

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Notes and references:

¹*For the sake of simplicity I was treating the house as if only these two, mattering floors existed. I have no knowledge about how many floors 19 Maidman Street featured.*

²<http://www.casebook.org/witnesses/rose-bierman.html>

³*To be fair, while ‘fair’ alone could be read as referring to the skin tone, it might as well have been a mistake on behalf of the recording reporter, since the word was also used by Wilson to describe the man’s moustache.*

⁴*One should keep in mind here that we don’t have a full word-for-word account of Wilson’s version, details might be missing from what she’d said originally, such as, for example, an inclusion of Bierman’s presence on the stairs.*

