

CHAPTER NINE

“The Woman in White”

DESPITE THE EMOTIONAL turmoil of his private life, the latter half of 1859 must have been for Wilkie Collins a time of intense creative activity. The new novel had to be ready to commence serial publication in November and there was much preparation to be done. The basic idea of *The Woman in White*, was as Clyde K. Hyder pointed out,† almost certainly suggested by a sensational lawsuit in the French Courts some fifty years earlier, the story of which was given in some detail by Méjan in *Recueil des Causes Célèbres*, the book Wilkie had picked up at a Paris bookstall in 1856.

The facts of the case are briefly these. Adélaïde-Marie-Rogres-Lusignan de Champignelles, Marquise de Douhault became a widow in 1787 at the age of 46. Her father had died some three years earlier, and her brother, M. de Champignelles, had wrongfully seized the greater part of the estate including property which should have come to his mother and sister. Mme. de Douhault decided to visit Paris in order to try and recover this property for her mother, who was very poor, and for herself. She announced her intentions to her sister and to a Mme. de Polignac, expressing at the same time some misgivings about the proposed journey. Leaving her home at the end of December, 1787, accompanied by two or three servants she intended staying for a few days at Orleans with her nephew, M. Dulude. This

† *Wilkie Collins and The Woman in White*. Clyde K. Hyder (P.M.L.A. 1939.)

gentleman was unable to offer her accommodation and persuaded her to stay instead with another relative, M. de la Roncière who lived some ten miles away. She remained here several days and, on the eve of her departure for Paris—January 15th, 1788, was taken for a drive along the banks of the Loire by her hostess. After taking a pinch of snuff from Mme. de la Roncière, the Marquise was seized with a violent headache which obliged her to return to the house where she fell into a deep sleep.

This much Mme. de Douhault remembered clearly, but of the events which followed she had only a hazy recollection. She believed that she remained asleep for several days. Upon waking, she found herself in the Salpêtrière in Paris under the name of Blainville. She tried to communicate with her friends, but discovered that all her correspondence was intercepted. After a suitable interval, Mme. de Douhault's death was presumed and her estate passed to her heirs, who included her brother and M. Dulude. In June, she contrived to send a letter describing her plight to Mme. de Polignac, who succeeded in procuring her friend's release. It is mentioned that the white dress she was wearing on her arrival at the Salpêtrière was restored to her. She had no difficulty in establishing her identity among her friends and servants but the villainous brother used every means to prevent her from proving her identity in the eyes of the law. The case dragged on for years and Mme. de Douhault never succeeded in regaining either her property or, legally, her identity. She died in 1817 a poor woman.

When describing to a friend how he had found some of his best plots in Méjan's book, Wilkie expressly cited *The Woman in White* as being one of them. Although he offered other explanations, towards the end of his life, of how he first hit upon the central idea, the points of similarity between novel and *cause célèbre* are too marked to be dismissed as mere coincidence. The drugging, the incarceration in an asylum, the obliteration of identity, even the detail of the white dress, all point to this once-famous French case

as having provided the basic threads from which Wilkie wove the gloriously intricate plot of *The Woman in White*.

It may be of some interest to examine the skeleton of this remarkable piece of construction. Fortunately we have two sources of first-hand information on the subject. In the late 'seventies he gave an interview to Edmund Yates which was published in the *World*, and in 1887 he contributed an article, in the form of an open letter, to the *Globe* entitled 'How I write my Books.' Both deal specifically with the writing of *The Woman in White*.

The central idea, 'the pivot on which my story rests,' has crystallised as the substitution of persons effected with the help of a private asylum. The first part of the story will deal with the destruction of the victim's identity, the second with its recovery. One or two characters begin to suggest themselves. There must be a villain, and upon reflection he decides that the crime is too ingenious for an English villain. Thus, Count Fosco is born. Wilkie always insisted that, despite the many letters he received from abroad accusing him of 'gross personal caricature or rather too accurate portraiture,' Fosco was not modelled upon any particular person. 'I knew a man who loved canaries, and I had known boys who loved white mice,' he said, 'and I thought the mice running about Fosco while he meditated on his schemes would have a fine effect.' Fosco's obesity was almost an afterthought. 'I had begun my story when it struck me that my villain would be commonplace, and I made him fat in opposition to the recognised type of villain. His theories concerning the vulgar clap-trap that 'murder will out,' are my own.' As a contrast to Fosco, and as his tool, he believes that a minor villain is required, 'a weak, shabby villain'—Sir Percival Glyde in fact. The nature of the crime is then considered in greater detail; convention dictates that the victim of the substitution shall be a young lady of gentle birth, and for contrast her 'double' must be of poor parentage. Laura Fairlie, the former, materialises almost uninvited but the double presents difficulties.

I try what a walk will do for me—and fail. I devote the evening to a new effort—and fail. Experience now tells me to take no more trouble about it, and leave that other woman to come of her own accord. The next morning, before I have been awake in my bed for more than ten minutes, my perverse brains set to work without consulting me. Poor Anne Catherick comes in to the room and says, 'Try me.'

He has his idea. He now has four characters. Now comes the task of building up the story which involves 'three efforts.'

First effort: to begin at the beginning. Second effort: to keep the story always advancing without paying the smallest attention to the serial division in parts, or to the book publication in volumes. Third effort: to decide on the end. All this is done as my father used to paint his skies in his famous sea-pieces, at one heat. As yet I do not enter into details; I merely set up my landmarks. In doing this the main situations of the story present themselves; and at the same time I see my characters in all sorts of new aspects. These discoveries lead me nearer and nearer to finding the right end. The end being decided on, I go back again to the beginning, and look at it with a new eye, and fail to be satisfied with it. I have yielded to the worst temptation that besets a novelist—the temptation to begin with a striking incident, without counting the cost in the shape of explanations that must and will follow. I get back (as I vainly believe) to the true starting-point of the story. I am now at liberty to set the new novel going; having, let me repeat, no more than an outline of story and characters before me, and leaving the details in each case to the spur of the moment. For a week, as well as I can remember, I work for the best part of every day, but not as happily as usual. An unpleasant sense of something wrong worries me. At the beginning of the second week a disheartening discovery reveals itself. I have not found the right beginning of *The Woman in White* yet.

One of the discarded ideas was to open the novel in Cumberland, with the Limmeridge household awaiting the arrival of the new drawing-master. There follows a frantic but unprofitable search for a better notion. 'I and my manuscript have quarrelled, and don't speak to each other.' Then a brief paragraph in the newspaper catches his eye, and the solution presents itself in a flash. 'From that moment I am

done with my miseries. *The Woman in White* begins again; and nobody will ever be half as much interested in it now, as I am.' Much remains to be done in the way of construction. The story must be broken up into a series of personal narratives and carefully rearranged to create the maximum suspense and mystification. We learn nothing more of the ingenious juggling with time and place nor of the manipulation of incident which must have contributed towards what has been described as 'the finest plot-novel in the English language.' He simply tells us: 'For the next six months the pen goes on; it is work, hard work.'

By August 15th, 1859, he had finished the first instalment, and wrote to Wills from Church Hill Cottage, Broadstairs, which he had taken for six weeks.

I send enclosed (and registered—for I should go distracted if it was lost) my first number. Please let me have duplicate proofs as soon as possible, for I want to see something in connection with the story which is not a mass of confusion. It is an awfully long number—between 8 and 9 pages; but I *must* stagger the public into attention, if possible, at the outset. They shan't drop a number when I begin, if I can help it.

It was at Broadstairs that a solution was found to the problem of a title. He had thought of many possibilities, many more had been suggested by helpful friends such as Dickens and Forster; all were discarded. If the final choice seems to us obvious and inevitable, the author did not find it so. He has described how, one moonlight night, he wandered over the cliffs towards the North Foreland, smoking cigar after cigar, racking his brain for the right title. In the vicinity of what is said to be the original Bleak House, he threw himself on the grass. Looking across at the white shape of the North Foreland lighthouse, he thought: 'You are ugly and stiff and awkward; you know you are as stiff and as weird as my white woman . . . White Woman . . . Woman in White . . . the title, by Jove!' A roundabout way to the obvious, perhaps, but at least the story carries, in its very inconsequence, the ring of truth.

Dickens liked the title immediately and wrote by return, 'I have not the slightest doubt that the *Woman in White* is the name of names and the very title of titles.' All his other friends were unenthusiastic. Forster, who regarded himself as an expert in the matter of titles, complained that it was too long and too irrelevant.

The issue of *All the Year Round* for November 26th, 1859, contained the final instalment of *A Tale of Two Cities*, followed by this handsome introduction of the opening chapter of *The Woman in White* :

We purpose always reserving the first place in these pages for a continuous original work of fiction, occupying about the same amount of time in its serial publication as that which is just completed. The second story of our series we now beg to introduce to our readers. It will pass, next week, into the station hitherto occupied by *A Tale of Two Cities*. And it is our hope and aim, while we work hard at every other department of our journal, to produce, in this one, some sustained works of imagination that may become a part of English Literature.

The success of the new serial was immediate. Wilkie Collins had in truth 'staggered the public at the outset.' Nor did they drop a number after he had begun; the circulation, which had already reached a remarkable figure thanks to *A Tale of Two Cities*, continued to rise steadily. In a single month no less than 35,000 'back numbers' were sold. The progress of *The Woman in White* became a dinner-table topic and bets were struck on the outcome of this or that situation. What, for instance, was the nature of the crime which had placed Sir Percival Glyde in Mrs. Catherick's power?

All this makes more surprising the story† of how George Smith (of Smith, Elder) missed his opportunity of publishing what he described as 'the most popular novel of the century.' Learning that Wilkie Collins was at work on a new novel, Smith Elder had written to say that they would like to make an offer for it. In January, 1860, when perhaps half-

† Recounted in *The House of Smith Elder*, by Leonard Huxley (privately printed, 1923).

a-dozen instalments had appeared, Wilkie received an offer from Sampson, Low for the book, and promptly wrote to Smith Elder to give them the promised opportunity. George Smith had not been following the story in *All the Year Round* and turned to his clerks for their opinions. By an odd chance not one of them had read it either. Smith was, as often, in a tearing hurry, being engaged to dine out, and Wilkie had asked for an early reply. A hasty note was dictated offering the sum of £500. At dinner the lady sitting next to George Smith startled him by asking if he was reading 'that wonderful book, *The Woman in White*,' and was astonished at his reply. 'Everyone is raving about it,' she said. 'We talk "Woman in White" from morning till night!' Smith reached his office much earlier than usual the following morning, only to learn that the letter had been delivered to Wilkie Collins the night before. He wrote in his *Memoirs* that he would have multiplied his offer five-fold, had he heard that piece of gossip a couple of hours earlier, and concluded sadly, 'If my offer had been multiplied tenfold, I should have made a large sum by the transaction; but my hasty original offer cost me the pleasure and profit of publishing *The Woman in White*.'

Edward Marston, discussing the transaction in his reminiscences, *After Work*, does not recollect the exact figure his firm paid for the English rights of *The Woman in White*, but it was far more than Wilkie had ever received before. For the advance proofs, since there was no such thing as American rights, Harper Brothers of New York paid him about £500. His success was due to the sensation which the serial version created from the start. In a letter dated January 7th, 1860 to E. M. Ward, he wrote :

I do hope and believe that the story *will* be the best I have written yet. It is on a much larger and much more elaborate scale than anything I have done hitherto—and, as far as it has gone, it has certainly made itself felt pretty strongly not only in England but in America as well. The effort of keeping it going week after week is (in the reporter's famous phrase)

'more easily imagined than described.' When I approach the glass in the morning to brush my hair, I am quite agreeably surprised to find that it has not turned grey yet.

And to Charles Ward he wrote about the same time, 'My weekly race with the press is beginning to weigh heavily on me.'

Dickens put his finger on the one serious weakness of the book, a weakness which was perhaps inseparable from the narrative method employed, but which would be unlikely to escape Dickens' eye for character.

I have read this book with great care and attention. There cannot be a doubt that it is a very great advance on all your former writing, and most especially in respect of tenderness. In character it is excellent . . . The story is very interesting and the writing of it admirable.

I seem to have noticed, here and there, that the great pains you have taken express themselves a trifle too much, and you know that I always contest your disposition to give an audience credit for nothing, which necessarily involves the forcing of points on their attention, and which I have always observed them to resent when they find out—as they always will and do. But on turning to the book again, I find it difficult to take out an instance of this. It rather belongs to your habit of thought and manner of going about the work. Perhaps I express my meaning best when I say that the three people who write the narratives in these proofs have a DISSECTIVE property in common, which is essentially not theirs but yours; and that my own effort would be to strike more of what is got *that way* out of them by collision with one another, and by the working of the story.

You know what an interest I have felt in your powers from the beginning of our friendship, and how very high I rate them? I know that this is an admirable book, and that it grips the difficulties of the weekly portion and throws them in a masterly style. No one else could do it half so well. I have stopped in every chapter to notice some instance of ingenuity, or some happy turn of writing; and I am absolutely certain that you never did half so well yourself. So go on and prosper. And let me see some more, when you have enough (for your own satisfaction) to show me.

In July he was able, weary but elated, to lay down his pen.

In a letter to his mother dated 'Thursday, July 26th, 1860, five o'clock p.m.' he wrote: 'I have this instant written at the bottom of the four hundred and ninetieth page of my manuscript the two noblest words in the English language—The End— . . . I must go out and walk off the work and the excitement of winning the battle against the infernal periodical system, at last.' A few days later Dickens wrote: 'Let me send you my heartiest congratulations on your having come to the end of your (as yet) last labour, and having triumphantly finished your best book. I presume the undersigned obedient disciple may read it *now*?'

Despite the intense interest displayed by the public in the serial version, many people prophesied that *The Woman in White* would not succeed in book form. Whilst agreeing that the author had contrived to maintain the tension admirably from one instalment to the next, they professed to see weaknesses in the story which would be fatal to the published novel. Publication was fixed for August 15th, and on the 3rd Wilkie invited some of his closest friends to Harley Street to celebrate. The guests included Holman Hunt, Egg, E. M. Ward, Frederick Lehmann and Henry Bullar, the last-named being a barrister on the Western circuit and an old friend of the family. In his letter to Ward, Wilkie wrote :

I have done! (except my *varnishing days* in respect of proof sheets which publishers and translators are still bothering about). We dine here at half past six on Thursday to drink success to the book in England, America, Germany and Canada, in all which places it will be published this month. Will you come? No evening dress—everything in the rough . . . cast respectability to the winds and write me a line to say you will come.

It is remarkable that both the English and American editions were published on or about August 15th, less than three weeks after Wilkie had completed his manuscript. There was certainly every need for haste on the part of Harpers who, in order to recoup the money they had paid

for advance proofs, had to out-distance the American pirate publishers by the largest possible margin. These firms had cut down to a very few weeks the lapse of time between the publication in London of a novel by an established English author, and its appearance under their imprints in the New York bookshops. It is significant that in Harpers' first edition the copious illustrations which decorate most of the text stop short two or three chapters from the end, indicating that no time could be spared for the illustrator once the final instalment of proofs had crossed the Atlantic. Such was the system by which the English novelist received no payment whatever in respect of the greater part of his American sales, a system which the American public relished since it meant cheap books. As Dickens had written from the States in 1842, 'the raven hasn't more joy in eating a piece of stolen meat, than the American has in reading the English books which he gets for nothing.' Years later a New York publisher told a friend of Wilkie's that he had sold 126,000 copies of *The Woman in White*. 'He never sent me sixpence,' was Wilkie's sour comment.

Unwilling perhaps to endure the strain of publication day in London he rushed up to Yorkshire to stay with friends. Passing through London on August 22nd on his way to another house-party in Kent, he learned to his satisfaction that the entire first impression of 1,000 copies had been sold on the day of publication, and that the second impression was selling fast. He was back at 12, Harley Street in early September but stayed only long enough to fix up another yachting cruise with Pigott. After sailing around the Bristol Channel for a week or two in 'a capital safe boat'—the weather frustrated once again their intention to cross to Ireland—he returned home towards the end of the month. It was only then that he began to deal with the letters and newspapers piled high upon his desk. He read first the reviews, which were for the most part sharply critical, and then turned to the letters which 'brimmed over with eulogy. The experience taught him a long-remembered lesson, he

told Hall Caine many years later. ' These letters,' he reflected, ' are nearly all from total strangers, and may be said to represent in some measure the opinion of the general public. These reviews are by professional writers, some of them my intimate friends. Either the public is right and the press is wrong, or the press is right and the public is wrong. Time will tell. If the public turns out to be right, I shall never trust the press again.' There is a very obvious confusion of thought here, which led him in later years to regard popularity and merit as more or less synonymous. No doubt the press was wrong in failing to recognise *The Woman in White* as a masterpiece of its kind. What he failed to appreciate was that the appearance of seven impressions of *The Woman in White* in six months did not in itself constitute proof that the book possessed literary merit. Subsequently he mistrusted reviews, favourable or otherwise, even to the extent of overlooking their effect on public opinion, which he regarded as nearly infallible. The professional critic he came to look upon as a barrier rather than a bridge between himself and the reading public. It was partly in an attempt to eliminate this barrier, real or imagined, that he persisted in addressing the reader directly in prefaces to his novels, contrary to all advice.

On this occasion, there was no lack of tributes from delighted readers. Reporting the book's success, clinical as well as financial, to his mother, Wilkie wrote :

It is soothing the dying moment of a *young* lady—it is helping (by homœopathic doses of a chapter at a time) to keep an *old* lady out of the grave—and it is the first literary performance which has succeeded in fixing the attention of a deranged gentleman in his lucid intervals! The other day I reckoned up what I have got for it thus far. One thousand four hundred pounds—with the copyright in my possession, and the disposal of all editions under the extravagant guinea and a half price in my hands. Cock-a-doodle doo! The critics may go to the devil—they are at the book still as I hear, but I see no reviews.'

That Wilkie Collins was no different from many another writer who pretended to ignore the critics is shown by the

postscript. Here he announced the enclosure of *The Spectator*, instructing his mother to turn to 'a review of *The Woman in White* answering the *Saturday Review*.'

The Times did not review *The Woman in White* until October 30th when it was already in its third edition. Apart from observing that too little attention had been devoted to character, the reviewer was on the whole favourably disposed towards the book, which he described as 'a novel of the rare old sort which must be finished at a sitting.' The author's request in his Preface that critics should avoid disclosing the secrets of the plot provoked this one to write :

We are commanded to be silent lest we should let the cat out of the bag. The cat out of the bag! There are in this novel about a hundred cats contained in a hundred bags, all screaming and mewling to be let out. Every new chapter contains a new cat. When we come to the end of it out goes the animal, and there is a new bag put into our hands which it is the object of the subsequent chapter to open. We are very willing to stroke some of these numerous cats, but it is not possible to do it without letting them out.

Then, stealthily, the reviewer produced the ace from his sleeve. 'If we dared trespass upon details . . . we could easily show that Lady Glyde could not have left Blackwater Park before the 9th or 10th of August.' Whereas the entire plot turns in the final volume upon the date of Lady Glyde's departure, which was stated to be July 26th.

Wilkie lost no time in writing to his publisher, Edward Marston.

If any fresh impression of *The Woman in White* is likely to be wanted immediately, stop the press till I come back. The critic in *The Times* is (between ourselves) right about the mistake in time. Shakespeare has made worse mistakes—that is one comfort, and readers are not critics who test an emotional book by the base rules of arithmetic, which is a second consolation. Nevertheless we will set it right at the first opportunity. They are going to dramatise the story at the Surrey Theatre, and I am asked to go to law about *that*. I will certainly go and *hiss* unless the manager makes a 'previous arrangement' with me.

Fame had indeed come to Wilkie Collins. While the novel was still selling in its thousands, manufacturers were producing *Woman in White* perfume, *Woman in White* cloaks and bonnets, and the music-shops displayed *Woman in White* waltzes and quadrilles. Even Dickens had hardly known such incidental publicity. In America the book's success was phenomenal; both Harper Brothers and the pirates made large sums of money out of it. Among Wilkie's colleagues, Dickens was not alone in his enthusiasm. Thackeray sat up all night reading it. Edward Fitzgerald read it three times, and named a herring-lugger he owned *Marian Halcombe* 'after the brave girl in the story.' The Prince Consort admired it greatly and sent a copy to Baron Stockmar. On the other side of the account Bulwer-Lytton described it as 'great trash.'

With *The Woman in White* Wilkie Collins' art reached maturity at a single leap. There is an assurance, an authenticity about it which sets it quite apart from his earlier novels, and indeed from much that he wrote afterwards. As an example of sustained story-telling it is unsurpassed. From Walter Hartright's meeting with the mysterious woman in white in the Finchley Road, a scene which Dickens bracketed with the march of the women to Versailles in Carlyle's *French Revolution* as the two most dramatic moments in English literature, to the final gruesome glimpse of Fosco lying in the Paris morgue, the suspense is maintained in masterly fashion. Andrew Lang wrote in the *Contemporary Review* within a few months of Wilkie's death :

The Woman in White is a masterpiece of excitement and ingenuity. There is hardly a page but lives with its own mysterious life, and beckons you to follow till the end. It is a rare thing among novels of incident, of secret and of adventure, to find one that you can read several times . . . Though it is a work which we can never forget, we can often return to it; and it made Mr. Collins for long the most popular favourite in English fiction.

This typical Collins plot has been likened to a game of

chess. Walter de la Mare has called him 'a literary Capablanca.' It would perhaps be more apposite to describe *The Woman in White* as a chess tournament, so many are the games simultaneously in progress. Count Fosco, on his own account, conducts two or three with such brilliance and bravado that we are almost sorry when in the end he faces checkmate at the hands of his plodding opponents. The master game between author and reader is conducted with scrupulous fairness on Wilkie's part. He is able to do this largely through the method he adopts in telling his story, the use of a series of personal narratives written by various characters of the plot. Each narrator is allowed to tell the whole truth as he knows it at the time of writing, but it is by an ingenious arrangement of the narrative that the author is enabled to guard his secrets, quite legitimately, until the proper time for disclosure. The plot is one of the most tortuous and perfectly dovetailed in all fiction, and yet it is unfolded with complete lucidity.

The admirable carpentry of the book has sometimes tended to obscure other merits less commonly associated with the name of Wilkie Collins. He was always able to produce a telling character-sketch, the likeness done in a few vivid strokes. In the more difficult art of creating characters out of their speech and actions, and of developing them in their mutual relationships, he had been less successful. *The Woman in White*, however, marks a great advance in this respect, and is rich in what may be termed three-dimensional characters.

Most remarkable perhaps is Marian Halcombe, who has more in common with Ibsen's Nora than with the typical heroine of Victorian fiction. Courage and a lively and intelligent mind compensate for the beauty which her creator was bold enough to deny her.

Never was the fair promise of a lovely figure more strangely and startlingly belied by the face and head that crowned it. The lady's complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large,

firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair growing unusually low down on her forehead. Her expression—bright, frank, and intelligent—appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete.

We watch with admiration the prolonged battle of wits with Count Fosco, in which she displays a tenacity and a resourcefulness worthy of her cunning opponent. In the long gallery of Collins' characters, Marian Halcombe represents his most deeply felt tribute to the qualities he admired in woman. We believe in her absolutely, and it is small wonder that Wilkie was inundated with letters from bachelors begging him to divulge her real name and address in order that they might seek her hand in marriage.

Into the subtly humorous portrait of Frederick Fairlie, hypochondriac and 'dilettante, Wilkie, who could always smile at his own weaknesses, projected something of himself. Fairlie lives his life of claustrophobic seclusion in a world of half-light and whispers, and describes himself as 'nothing but a bundle of nerves dressed up to look like a man.' Then there is Mrs. Catherick, as proud of her newly-acquired respectability as she is obsessed by her disreputable past.

Memorable as these characters are, Count Fosco is quite unforgettable. From the moment of his appearance, one-third of the way through the novel, he dominates the scene. He is admittedly a grotesque, larger than life, a creature of carefully conceived eccentricities and fustian humour; and yet, by some curious alchemy, Wilkie Collins contrives to fuse these qualities together to produce, not the stock villain of melodrama, but a figure of flesh and blood. However diabolical his schemes may be, however inordinate his suavity, however arrogantly he may strut across the stage, Fosco seldom steps beyond the bounds of credibility. Like Marian, recording her first impressions, we feel a 'strange, half-willing, half-unwilling liking for the Count.' The author gives us no direct portrait of Fosco, preferring that his im-

pact upon the various narrators of the story should be communicated to us in their own words. It is an effect which oddly foreshadows Proust's masterly presentation of that other fascinating monster, M. de Charlus.

A contemporary journalist once described Wilkie as a master of 'the creepy effect, as of pounded ice dropped down the back.' No better example of this could be found than the moment when Marian's diary, in which she has set down all her suspicions of the conspiracy being woven by Fosco around the helpless Laura, is continued during her illness in a different handwriting—the characteristic flourish of Fosco himself.

It is not surprising that Sir Percival Glyde, the 'mean and shabby villain' cast in more conventional mould, is acted off the stage by his mentor and fellow-conspirator, Fosco. The roles least adequately filled are those of hero and heroine, if one may thus describe Walter Hartwright and Laura in a book where the interest is more or less equally divided among so many characters. Like many another novelist, Wilkie is at his weakest when depicting the good and the innocent, and neither character excites more than our superficial interest; if we notice at all Walter's disappearance from the scene during a large part of the story, his absence hardly disturbs us. Ann Catherick, the Woman in White, suffers from an infirmity of mind, which, while appealing to our sympathies, nevertheless limits our interest in her and her fate, and she misses the tragic stature intended for her by the author. Mention must also be made of Pesca, whose tedious chatter in the opening pages must have deterred many readers, but whom we forgive when he reappears at the close as the surprising instrument of Fosco's destruction. It has been said that his character was suggested by Gabriele Rossetti, father of the painter, who was himself a well-known teacher of Italian and had been, in his youth in Italy, a member of the secret society of patriots known as the Carbonari.

The novel of sensation must depend to a large extent upon

the creation of a convincing atmosphere, in which the melodramatic incidents of the plot are made to appear almost inevitable. In *The Woman in White* he succeeds for the first time in harnessing his talent for scenic description to the dramatic requirements of the story, and induces in the reader that mood of suspended disbelief essential to the full enjoyment of melodrama. Who would not expect sinister events in a setting so forlorn as this?

The ground, shelving away below me, was all sand, with a few little healthy hillocks to break the monotony of it in certain places. The lake itself had evidently once flowed to the spot on which I stood, and had been gradually wasted and dried up to less than a third of its former size. I saw its still, stagnant waters, a quarter of a mile away from me in the hollow, separated into pools and ponds by twining reeds and rushes, and little knolls of earth. On the farther bank from me, the trees rose thickly again, and shut out the view, and cast their black shadows on the sluggish, shallow water. As I walked down to the lake, I saw that the ground on its farther side was damp and marshy, overgrown with rank grass and dismal willows. The water, which was clear enough on the open sandy side, where the sun shone, looked black and poisonous opposite to me, where it lay deeper under the shade of the spongy banks, and the rank overhanging thickets and tangled trees. The frogs were croaking, and the rats were slipping in and out of the shadowy water, like live shadows themselves, as I got nearer to the marshy side of the lake. I saw here, lying half in and half out of the water, the rotten wreck of an old overturned boat, with a sickly spot of sunlight glimmering through a gap in the trees on its dry surface, and a snake basking in the midst of the spot, fantastically coiled, and treacherously still. Far and near, the view suggested the same dreary impressions of solitude and decay; and the glorious brightness of the summer sky overhead, seemed only to deepen and harden the gloom and barrenness of the wilderness on which it shone.

Incidentally, this description of the lake at Blackwater Park brought him a most indignant letter from a property-owner who recognised in every detail the picture of his own estate, which lack of money prevented him from adequately

maintaining. He charged the novelist with trespassing on his property and with advertising its owner's impecuniousness. It so happened that Wilkie was able to assure the gentleman that his estate was situated in one of the few English counties in which he had never set foot.

Among other letters he received was one from a lady, in the main laudatory, but complaining that Count Fosco was 'a very poor villain.' She offered to provide the author with first-hand material for the presentation of a villain who would eclipse all others in the whole range of fiction. 'The man is alive,' she wrote, 'and is constantly under my gaze. In fact he is my husband.' The lady was the wife of Bulwer-Lytton.

The Woman in White represents one of the twin summits of Wilkie Collins' achievement. *The Moonstone* is possibly the more flawless in construction, and affected more profoundly the stream of English fiction, but for sheer storytelling the earlier novel stands supreme. Authors are notoriously poor judges of their own work, but we might exclude from this generalisation the man whose tombstone is inscribed, in accordance with his own explicit instructions, 'author of *The Woman in White* and other works of fiction.'