

## CHAPTER TEN

### “No Name”

THE NEXT TWELVE months or so were among the happiest of Wilkie Collins' life. At the age of 36 he was no longer, as many had regarded him, just one of 'Mr. Dickens' young men,' but a celebrity in his own right. He had learned to enjoy success without losing his balance. His domestic life was happy and seemed relatively stable, if unconventional. He had no monetary cares and for a brief period his health was better than for some time past. He lived, as he liked to do, a full social life, and invitations to public functions, musical evenings and private dinner parties showered upon him. In the winter of 1860 we find him staying for the first time with those literary lion-hunters, the Monckton Milnes, at Fryston, in Yorkshire. He also came into touch with George Eliot and G. H. Lewes, and frequently attended their musical 'Saturday afternoons' at their house near Regent's Park.

The musical evening—or afternoon—was an established feature of social life in the London of the Sixties, and Wilkie was known to be a keen music-lover. His understanding of the subject was not particularly profound and we have Dickens' word, for what it is worth, that he was virtually tone-deaf, but at least it is to his credit that his favourite composer was Mozart. If music appears in one of his novels, it is almost sure to be Mozart. Laura Fairlie and Walter Hartwright play Mozart piano-duets; Uncle Joseph's musical box plays—rather too often, one must confess—'Batti, batti,' the air from *Don Giovanni*; the blind Lucilla in *Poor Miss*

*Finch* plays a Mozart sonata on the piano. He liked Italian opera, particularly Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini and Verdi, and shared the fashionable enthusiasm for Meyerbeer. For Wagner, whose music-dramas were soon to make their impact on the London opera-goer, he conceived a violent dislike. Neither did he apparently appreciate Beethoven, to judge from a letter written in 1861 to the Lehmanns :

In *one* respect only, I have been the worse for the delightful party at Hallé's—the 'Great Kreutzer Sonata' has upset me about classical music. I am afraid I don't like classical music after all—I am afraid I am not the Amateur I once thought myself. The whole violin part of 'The Great K.S.' appeared to me to be the musical expression of a varying and violent stomach-ache, with intervals of hiccups.

Wilkie Collins' first reported appearance as an after-dinner speaker dates from the same year. He had always hesitated to make public speeches and envied Dickens' fluency in this field. George Dolby recounts the story of an evening in the fifties, when he, Wills, Wilkie and Dickens were discussing the technique of public speaking. Dickens, to illustrate his point, made a brilliant extempore speech proposing the health of the president of an imaginary rowing-club. Called upon to respond, neither Wills nor Wilkie felt equal to the task, and Dickens was left to reply to his own toast, a feat he performed with the same aplomb. On May 23rd, 1861, Wilkie was Chairman at the Newsvendors' Benevolent Institution Dinner and managed to acquit himself as a speaker rather better than he had expected. Wills was present and gave an account of the proceedings to Dickens who replied :

Many thanks for your report of Wilkie, which amused and interested me very much. His quality of taking pains, united to a natural quickness will always get him on.

To Wilkie he wrote :

I am delighted to receive so good an account of last night, and I have no doubt it was a thorough success. Now it is over, I may honestly say that I am glad you were (by your friendship) forced into the Innings, for there is no doubt that it is of

immense importance to a public man in our way to have his wits at his tongue's end.

The nine months following the completion of *The Woman in White* were a period of comparative inactivity. Apart from collaborating with Dickens on the Christmas Story for 1860, he wrote nothing beyond an occasional article for *All the Year Round*. In October, 1860, he took Caroline to Paris for a short visit. He told his mother of his plan to travel 'first class all the way, with my own sitting-room at the best hotel when I get there—and every other luxury that the Capital of the civilised world can afford.' At last he could travel in the style of Dickens without having to weigh the chances of wheedling a loan out of his mother. He pressed Charles Ward to accompany them, but without success. 'Change your mind,' he wrote, 'and come to Paris. Only £4 there and back 1st class. £4 more for expenses—and there you are. *Sell a child*—terms £10 down! Slawkenbergins would fetch more if disposed of *by weight*, but I think him too amiable to be parted with. Try the baby, and let us devour the proceeds at the *Trois Frères*.' It amused him to tell, in connection with this trip, the story of a Parisian gentleman who had been reading *The Woman in White* in translation and had written to the author to complain that Count Fosco was an absolute likeness of himself. Having described how he flung the book to the other end of the room, the irate Frenchman proceeded to demand satisfaction, leaving to the author the choice of weapons. He had learned that Wilkie intended to visit Paris on a certain day during the following week and concluded with the chilling words, 'J'attendrai Monsieur Vilkie avec deux témoins à la gare.' No Fosco-like Frenchman turned up, however, at the Gare du Nord, and one cannot avoid a suspicion that the letter may have been a practical joke perpetrated by Dickens with the help of one of his many friends resident in Paris.

On his return to England Wilkie set off with Dickens for a short visit to the West Country seeking local colour for the Christmas Story. They spent the first night in a 'beastly

hotel' at Bideford, where they 'had stinking fish for dinner' and could not get a drink of any kind. Dickens wrote to Georgina, 'No adventure whatever. Nothing has happened to Wilkie,' doubtless recalling the disastrous beginning to the Idle Tour. From Bideford they posted to Liskeard visiting Clovelly en route; and Clovelly, lightly disguised as Steepways, provides the setting of the opening chapter of *A Message from the Sea*. Their collaboration in this story is more closely knit than usual, and it is hard to detect the precise division of labour. The opening chapter seems unmistakably Dickens, and Chapter IV 'The Seafaring Man,' can be attributed with reasonable certainty to Wilkie; both writers shared in the remaining chapters. It would be a bold critic who asserted the authorship of any particular paragraph, since they deliberately attempted, from time to time, to imitate each other's style. 'It is amusing,' declared Wilkie on one occasion, 'to see reviewers point out a passage of mine as an example of Dickens' peculiar vein, and in the next sentence comment on a paragraph of Dicken's as a sample of Wilkie Collins' sensational style'. *A Message from the Sea* was one of the most popular Christmas stories, more than a quarter of a million copies being sold.

A pirated dramatic version of *A Message from the Sea* was announced for presentation at the famous Britannia Saloon, Hoxton, within a few weeks of the story's publication.† The two authors visited the theatre on the first night and threatened the manager, Lane, with legal proceedings if the production were not withdrawn. Lane was sufficiently impressed by the force of their argument to comply with the request for that night at least. He sent an emissary to Gad's Hill the following day but failed to induce Dickens to change his mind. Dickens wrote to *The Times* the same

†The dramatisation is wrongly attributed to Wilkie Collins by Professor Allardyce Nicoll in *XIXth Century Drama*. A synopsis of the plot for a dramatic version was published for the authors by *All the Year Round* in 1861, no doubt to protect the dramatic copyright, but the play itself was never written.

day explaining his action and announcing his intention to deal likewise with any similar breach of the rights of authors. The subsequent history of the affair is somewhat confused. The *Britannia* continued to announce nightly performances of *A Message from the Sea* for the next four weeks, and these almost certainly took place. Lane had probably decided, after taking legal opinion, to call the authors' bluff. In a letter to a friend Dickens claimed to have instituted proceedings in Chancery, at the same time expressing doubts as to the strength of his case, but no action appears to have come before the court.

In the same month, January, 1861, Wilkie resigned from *All the Year Round*, having been on the staff of Dickens' periodicals for more than five years. He no longer needed a regular salary and was doubtless relieved to be free from the trammels of weekly journalism. Dickens wrote to him: 'I am very sorry that we part company (though only in a literary sense) but I hope we shall work together again one day.' Not until six years later did they collaborate again, and for the last time, upon *No Thoroughfare*, although Wilkie did contribute one story to the 1861 Christmas Number, 'Tom Tiddler's Ground.'

Publishers were now competing for the right of Wilkie Collins' work, and he was in the happy position of being able to play one off against the other. In so doing he was scrupulously fair, as Edward Marston of Sampson Low testified. Hurst and Blackett were keen to reprint his novels in their Standard Library, and Blackett called upon him offering a substantial sum for the copyrights. Thereupon Sampson Low were given a similiar opportunity and made an identical offer. Since they had already reprinted *The Woman in White* in the cheaper one-volume form, Wilkie, regarding them as having a prior claim, accepted their offer. He had, according to Marston, a perfect knowledge of his own value and stood in no need of a literary agent to make bargains for him.

The first reference to a successor to *The Woman in White* comes in a letter from Dickens dated April 28th, 1861, to

Bulwer-Lytton concerning the latter's *A Strange Story*, shortly to succeed *Great Expectations* in *All the Year Round*. 'Wilkie Collins will be at work to follow you.' A few weeks later, Wilkie was 'slowly—very slowly—building up the scaffolding of the new book.' Dickens had hurried his own novel on to the scene earlier than intended, in order to offset the disastrous fall in circulation occasioned by Charles Lever's *A Day's Ride*. The final instalment of *Great Expectations* appeared in August and an editorial note announced that its successor would be *A Strange Story*, to be followed in its turn by a new novel from Wilkie Collins' pen. Unfortunately the circulation again began to diminish, and with it the high hopes Dickens had entertained of the Bulwer-Lytton novel. This time he had no *Great Expectations* to stop the rot and had to be content with advertising Wilkie's forthcoming novel at the end of each number, during the last three months of *A Strange Story's* weary course.

It is a difficult moment in any writer's career when he is faced with having to follow up his first great success. The easiest, if often fatal method is of course to repeat the successful formula, but Wilkie was seldom attracted to the line of least resistance. 'I think I can hold the public fast with an interest quite as strong as in *The Woman in White*, and with a totally different story,' he wrote in July, 1861, when he had completed the outline of the new novel; and six months later, 'I lay great stress on my originality this time—for the first element of success is not to repeat the other book.' Although widely regarded as a pure sensation-novelist, he became increasingly affected by a seriousness of purpose which did credit to his social conscience as certainly as it impaired his literary virtues. He expressed strong views on the novelist's duty to his public, which in his opinion went far beyond the mere provision of entertainment. He once stated that his principle in writing fiction was threefold, 'Make 'em cry, make 'em laugh, make 'em wait,' but he could also have claimed, on occasion, a laudable desire to

' make 'em think ' as well. Aware that a sermon is the more acceptable, to the public at which he aimed, for being sandwiched between the covers of a sensation-novel, he began to cast about for serious themes around which to spin his incomparable web of narrative. Earlier novels had touched here and there upon a social problem, conditions in fever hospitals in *Basil*, the abuse of religious instruction in *Hide and Seek*, the lack of public control over private asylums in *The Woman in White*. In none of these books, however, was the problem more than incidental to the plot. Possibly inspired by Dickens' example he now came to believe more and more in the social functions of the novel; what he failed to appreciate was that his own talents were unsuited to this purpose and could only suffer by being forced into the uncongenial channel of the propaganda-novel. Later on his zeal for reform, for exposing injustice and castigating cruelty took an even stronger grip upon him until, like ivy on a tree, it all but strangled his natural gifts. In the eighteen-sixties, however, he was at the height of his powers, and by carefully co-ordinating his theme, the social and legal implications of illegitimacy, with the demands of the plot, he produced, in *No Name*, his one satisfactory ' purpose-novel.'

The August heat drove Wilkie and Caroline out of London just as he had begun the new novel. They spent most of the month at the Royal Hotel, Whitby, where he had a pleasant private sitting-room with three bow-windows overlooking the harbour and its fishing-boats. There were inconveniences, however. ' Among the British matrons established in the hotel,' he wrote, ' is a Rabbit with *fourteen* young ones. She doesn't look at all ashamed of herself—nor her husband either.' These and dozens of other children combined with ' a brass band hired by the proprietor to play four hours a day ' to distract him from work. ' Working against noise is the hardest work of all,' he decided and made his way back to London in leisurely stages, ' studying localities ' for the new book on the way. He found it parti-

cularly hard to squeeze into the periodical instalments, but finished the first two by mid-September, six months before they were due to appear. Indeed by the time the story began in *All The Year Round* on March 15th, 1862, the entire first volume was in print. This time he clearly intended to keep well ahead of schedule.

Dickens was again most encouraging. He was 'immensely struck' by the outline of the story, and communicated his enthusiasm to Wills, 'whose eyes rolled in his head with astonishment.' After reading the first volume Dickens wrote to Wilkie: 'I find in the book every quality that made the success of *The Woman in White*, without the least sign of holding on to that success or being taken in tow by it. I have no doubt whatever of the public reception of what I have read. You may be quite certain of it. I could not be more so than I am.' In the same letter Dickens suggested no fewer than twenty-seven possible titles, some of them almost unbelievably banal, as for instance 'Through Thick and Thin,' 'Changed, or Developed?' 'Playing out the Play,' 'Nature's Own Daughter,' and 'Which is Which?' The final choice, *No Name*, was once again Wilkie's own.

His plans for steady and unhurried work on the new novel were upset by a serious decline in his health, which became apparent about this time. As we have seen, from being a normally robust child he had become, not exactly a sick man, but one of uncertain health rather too much at the mercy of wind and weather. By 1862 Wilkie's recurring ailment had taken on some of the aspects of gout, and was ultimately diagnosed as 'rheumatic gout,' a convenient name for a complaint which possessed symptoms of both rheumatism and gout. Many eminent physicians, however, declared that there was no such thing.

Gout was then—and is to some extent still—something of an enigma to the medical profession. A fairly recent text-book describes it as 'that riddle of the ages upon which so many physicians from time immemorial have expended their dialectic skill.' Once the disease had taken a firm hold there



seemed little hope of a permanent cure, and treatment was largely negative in character. The patient was advised to eschew rich food and alcohol, a form of treatment unlikely to appeal to a devout lover of wine and food such as Wilkie Collins. Rudolf Lehmann, who painted his portrait during the 'eighties, remarked upon his peculiar theories that nothing the palate relished could be harmful and nothing the palate disliked could be wholesome, adding wryly that the state of Wilkie's health hardly bore out the validity of his theory. He would follow his doctor's instructions regarding diet as long as an acute attack lasted, but was much too fond of good living to regard abstinence as more than a temporary expedient. Inevitably recurrences became more frequent as the years went by.

Even in its ordinary manifestations gout is an extremely painful complaint and hardly deserves the lightly humorous allusions it so often provokes. It may be confined to the legs and feet but can attack almost any part of the body; in Wilkie's case the eyes became seriously affected and gave rise to the most excruciating pain. Again physicians are divided as to whether there is such a condition as 'gout of the eyes,' which was the description used by Wilkie and his doctor, but they agree that gout is not uncommonly associated with, and may be the cause of acute ocular inflammation such as iritis or conjunctivitis. A friend of Wilkie's, Charles Kent, said after visiting him during one of these attacks, 'his eyes were literally enormous bags of blood!'

It was to alleviate the pain during these attacks of gout that he began about this time to take opium, usually in the form of laudanum. The laudanum proved of course a potent anodyne, but soon the effect would wane, the agony would return and the dose would have to be repeated until the attack subsided. References to laudanum in his books reflect Wilkie's intense feeling of gratitude for its powers. Miss Gwilt, in *Armada*, writes in her diary: 'Who was the man who invented laudanum? I thank him from the bottom of my heart, whoever he was. If all the miserable wretches in

pain of body and mind, whose comforter he has been, could meet together to sing his praises, what a chorus it would be! I have had six delicious hours of oblivion; I have woke up with my mind composed.' Dr. Ezra Jennings, in *The Moonstone*, expresses views on the virtues of opium, 'all-powerful and all-merciful drug,' which are the author's own.

Wilkie became a chronic sufferer from gout. There would be a few weeks, a few months perhaps, of freedom from pain, and then another attack would seize him. The drug would become necessary once more, but each time, as the patient gradually acquired a tolerance for it, the dose had to be imperceptibly increased. As his general health deteriorated, so his reliance upon the drug became more absolute. Then he began to need more opium to counteract the effect of opium itself and soon the faithful servant had become the tyrannical master. So Wilkie Collins came with tragic inevitability to join the company of Coleridge and de Quincey. The process naturally took some time. Perhaps twenty years elapsed between the first medicinal doses and the nightly wineglassful of laudanum which he found necessary in later years merely to ensure sleep. What is extraordinary is that so apparently frail a constitution could stand up to excessive drug-taking for so long, and that he was able to earn a good living by his pen right up to the end.

There is frequent mention of ill-health in his letters of 1862, and as early as January, Dickens, who did not hesitate to include among his many roles that of amateur physician, wrote :

It is pretty clear to me that you must go in for a regular pitched battle with that rheumatic gout. Don't be satisfied with Frank Beard's patching you, now that you have leisure, but be set up afresh. I don't like that notion of the eight and forty hours. It's not a long enough time and the treatment *in* the time must be too ferocious. Nature does not proceed in that way, and is not to be proceeded with in that way. With all respect for my hon. friend M.R.C.S., I think it a demonstrable mistake, and I hope you will arrive at the same conclusion.

The Frank Beard mentioned was Francis Carr Beard, younger brother of Thomas Beard who was one of Dickens' oldest friends. He carried on practice at 44, Welbeck Street and became not only Wilkie's medical adviser but also one of his most intimate friends. Beard had prescribed, among other forms of treatment, a course of Turkish Baths.

During the first half of the year Wilkie was fighting a running battle against sickness. In April he sought a change of air on the East Coast and probably stayed at Aldeburgh, which is the scene of much of the second volume of *No Name*. When he returned to London a few weeks later he was a little better, and decided to spend the whole summer by the sea. The place he chose was Broadstairs, for which his affection outweighed even the extortions of the inhabitants. 'No moderate income can cope with their demands,' he had written a year or two earlier. 'A skinny little chicken is three and sixpence—meat equally dear—vegetables three times the London price—my landlord won't draw me a bucket of water without being paid for it—the cook I have engaged sends me up my dinner at the small charge of ten and sixpence a week and her keep, tea and beer besides . . . And the Broadstairs people complain of the shortness of their season! It is a wonder they have a season at all.'

A long search for a cottage at a reasonable rent ended in his taking The Fort House, where Dickens had often stayed, for four months. Caroline and he moved in at the end of June, 1862. In this pleasant cottage, with its view of the sea from every room, his health began to rally. The tonic effect of the sea air was aided by tepid salt-water baths, of which treatment he wrote: 'I swear by tepid salt-water baths—they soothe while you are in them and they invigorate afterwards.'

Though working at some pressure he was able to entertain a succession of visitors. His brother Charley, Frank Beard, Henry Bullar, Pigott and Charles Ward came down to stay at different times. Dickens came over from Folkestone on August Bank Holiday for a few days. The Lehmanns were

unable to accept his invitation because Frederick was about to sail for America on a business trip. In a letter from Broadstairs wishing him *bon voyage*, Wilkie somewhat surprisingly revealed himself as a supporter of the Southern States in the Civil War then raging :

The one chance for that miserable country on the other side of the Atlantic is that those two blatant impostors, Lincoln and McClellan will fail to get the 300,000 new men they ask for. If I thought it would be the least use, I would go down on both my knees and pray with all my might for the total failure of the new enlistment scheme. †

Wilkie was always most anxious to have the factual details of his novels correct. Writing against time, separated from books of reference, he is constantly importuning his friends to supply topographical details and information on a variety of subjects needed for *No Name*. Charles Ward is bombarded with requests to discover and report how long a letter took to reach Zurich in 1847; what is the average length of a round voyage to Hong Kong; what day of the week was March 4th, 1846; whether a letter posted in Dumfries can reach London the following morning; how many days' notice are required for a marriage by licence; and how often the mail leaves for Shanghai. Wills is invited to provide local information about Dumfries and thus spare him a visit to Scotland. Is it a thriving manufacturing town and what does it manufacture? Is the neighbourhood hilly or flat, barren or cultivated? Can he furnish the name of a suitable village on the banks of the Nith where a couple on their honeymoon might hide themselves? If he cannot get the facts he will have to write from pure imagination. 'And won't the letters come pouring in *then* to correct my mistakes! There is nothing the British reader enjoys so much as catching his author in the wrong.'

His publishers had been pressing him to finish *No Name* in time for publication in December, and by mid-September

†The issues of the American Civil War were widely misunderstood in England. Even our leading statesmen made errors of judgment which appear astonishing in the light of subsequent history.

there is a desperate note in his references to the book. 'I shan't have done before the end of the year,' he told Wills, 'perhaps not before the end of January. They seem to like the story and be d——d to them. The women write me letters begging for more each week. I wish they may get it!' Domestic difficulties of one kind and another had added to his worries. Caroline had been unwell. Both their servants had left. Inviting Wills to visit them, he wrote: 'If you don't mind waiting on yourself, I'll black your boots.' A month later, just before their return to Harley Street, he said: 'I am sadly fagged with my work—I hope to God I shall finish in six weeks' time.'

Dickens took an even closer interest than usual in the progress of *No Name*. He found the second volume 'wonderfully fine' and made many suggestions for improvements of detail, even to correcting the grammar. As soon as Wilkie returned to London in late October, his health broke down completely. Dickens, who was about to leave for Paris, heard of his friend's plight at the last moment and dashed off this letter:

My dear Wilkie,—Frank Beard has been here this evening, of course since I posted my this day's letter to you, and has told me that you are not at all well, and how he has given you something which he hopes and believes will bring you round. It is not to convey this insignificant piece of intelligence, or to tell you how anxious I am that you should come up with a wet sheet and a flowing sail (as we say at sea when we are not sick), that I write. It is simply to say what follows, which I hope may save you some mental uneasiness—for I was stricken ill when I was doing *Bleak House* and I shall not easily forget what I suffered under the fear of not being able to come up to time. Dismiss that fear (if you have it) altogether from your mind. Write to me at Paris at any moment, and say you are unequal to your work, and want me, and I will come to London straight, and do your work. I am quite confident that, with your notes, and a few words of explanation, I could take it up at any time and do it. Absurdly unnecessary to say that it would be a makeshift! But I could do it, at a pinch, so like you as that no one should find out the difference. Don't make

much of this offer in your mind; it is nothing except to ease it. If you should want help, I am as safe as the bank. The trouble will be nothing to me, and the triumph of overcoming a difficulty great. Think it a Christmas Number, an Idle Apprentice, a Lighthouse, a Frozen Deep. I am as ready as in any of these cases to strike in and hammer the iron out.

You won't want me. You will be well (and thankless) in no time. But there I am; and I hope that the knowledge may be a comfort to you. Call me, and I come.

Such a generous and timely gesture, coming from one who was already working at high pressure, must have warmed Wilkie's heart. Although it so happened that he was able to do without the promised help, he long remembered this demonstration of true friendship on the part of the man he loved and respected above all others.

Writing to his mother, who was apt to worry about his health, on November 6th, he made light of his illness: 'The weather has upset me . . . cold in the head, cold in the throat, cold in the chest—internal upset as well. I am getting used to it, and I laugh like a fiend over my own maladies. There is only one true friend to the afflicted in body—and his name is Brandy and Water—and he comes with particular healing in his wings when he is *Hot*.' He struggled on, writing when he could, and six weeks later was able to write to Lehmann, 'I have got downstairs today—very, very weak but decidedly, I hope, on the road to recovery.' The novel was finished in December. There is a marked falling off in the closing chapters which show all too clearly the strain and fatigue under which they were written.

*No Name*, dedicated to Francis Carr Beard 'in remembrance of the time when the closing scenes of this story were written,' was published on 31st December, 1862. A first edition of four thousand copies was printed and by five o'clock only four hundred remained. Thanks to the remarkable sales of its predecessor he had been able to make a very good bargain with Sampson Low, who paid £3,000 for the rights—£500 in cash and the balance in notes at three, six and nine months. 'Low has outbidden everybody,' he wrote

triumphantly to his mother, ' and has offered the most liberal price that has ever been given for the reprinting of a work already published periodically—no less a sum than Three Thousand Pounds! Add to this the receipts from *All the Year Round* and from America, and the amount reaches Four thousand, six hundred. Not so bad for story-telling!' Edward Marston, of Sampson Low, admitted that it was a great risk forced upon them by very vigorous competition, but added that the book had a considerable sale and they came off without loss. Charles Reade, at the time little more than an acquaintance of Wilkie, told Marston, '*The Woman in White* was a great book. *No Name* is not. The independent public bought the former largely because it was well worth buying. *No Name* you forced in even greater numbers on the libraries, and the libraries forced it on their slaves the genteel public. But the great public are not crushed under machinery, and they have a judgment and a will of their own.' Despite Reade's assertion, the author of *No Name* had already obtained even better terms for his next novel.

*No Name* is the most unjustly neglected of all Wilkie Collins' novels. Unlike its predecessor, it breaks no new ground; it is at once a less sensational and a simpler story than *The Woman in White*. This time there is no intrinsic mystery to beckon the reader on to the end—the only 'secret,' as the author remarks in his Preface, is revealed midway through the first volume—and yet the progress of Magdalen Vanstone's fortunes stimulate almost as much excitement as the unfolding of Fosco's intrigues or the search for the lost Moonstone. It is an example of plain, straight-forward story-telling at its best.

The book opens with a carefully observed picture of a middle-class household in the West Country. We are introduced to the Vanstone family and their servants one by one as they descend the stairs to begin their daily routine. All is apparently solid, comfortable and conventional. Then follows a series of events which sweep away the very foundations of their happiness and security. The father is killed in

a railway accident, the mother dies of grief, and the two daughters learn with brutal suddenness that they are illegitimate and almost penniless.

It was perhaps permissible to present the situation, if essential to the plot, of a couple living in sin; it was unpardonable to depict them as having lived together for years in perfect concord, loved by the family and respected by the friends they had deceived. Wilkie was careful to provide mitigating circumstances which went some way towards redressing the moral balance of the situation, but the Vanstones show no trace of that sense of shame and guilt which might have appeased the guardians of morality in literature. It was not to be supposed that his audacity would go unchallenged. Nor was it surprising that one of the louder protests should appear in the pages of the *Quarterly Review*, by whose standards even Dickens was deemed vulgar. To this journal Mrs. Oliphant contributed an article on 'Sensation Novels' in the form of a review of some two dozen such books recently published, including *No Name*. In the course of her generally disparaging remarks on this debased form of literature, she took Wilkie severely to task on the moral issue. 'No Name is principally a protest against the law which determines the social position of illegitimate children. But the prosecution of this main purpose involves, as a subordinate purpose, a plea in behalf of the connexion to which such children owe their existence.' She then quotes an admittedly unfortunate sentence in which Wilkie speaks of 'the accident of their father having been married when he first met their mother'—meaning the accident of his having been unable to obtain a divorce—and comments acidly: 'We have often heard an illegal connexion and its result euphemistically designated as a "misfortune"; but this is the first time, so far as we are aware, in which a lawful marriage has been denominated an "accident."' "

Unluckily Mr. Vanstone dies intestate and the fortune which he has intended for the daughters passes to his elder



brother from whom he had long been estranged. Neither Michael Vanstone, nor his son Noel who succeeds to the inheritance shortly afterwards, is prepared to make any provision for the two unhappy girls. The main story concerns the flight from home of the younger daughter, Magdalen, and her campaign of vengeance against cousin Noel, a shifty, weak-kneed valetudinarian.

Magdalen Vanstone is perhaps Collins' most ambitious portrait of a young woman. She is a younger, more beautiful, and more headstrong Marian Halcombe, equally brave and resolute, but with a streak of ruthlessness, almost of cruelty, entirely foreign to Marian's nature. Wilkie would have us regard her as a personification of the struggle between Good and Evil, but his powers were hardly of that order. It is as individuals playing out their own particular drama, and not as symbols, that his characters command our attention.

He places himself under an unnecessary handicap in insisting upon his heroine's extreme youth. It is not easy to accept, in a girl of twenty brought up in a sheltered middle-class home, quite the measure of self-reliance and singleness of purpose with which he endows Magdalen. None the less, this central situation of a young girl alone against the world, turning her back on home and family, no doubt caused a flutter of excitement in the breasts of readers accustomed to the more fragile heroines of the period.

At the outset of her adventures Magdalen enlists the dubious support of Captain Wragge, charlatan, trickster, and petty blackmailer—and the one really successful comic character in the pages of Wilkie Collins. 'His manners were distinguished by a grave serenity. When he opened his lips, he spoke in a rich bass voice, with an easy flow of language, and a strict attention to the elocutionary claims of words in more than one syllable. Persuasion distilled from his mildly-curling lips; and, shabby as he was, perennial flowers of courtesy bloomed all over him from head to foot.'

Captain Wragge will always deserve a disreputable place in the long line of engaging rogues who have enriched

English fiction, from Peregrine Pickle to Christopher Isherwood's Mr. Norris.

That huge, trembling mass of flesh, Mrs. Wragge, is a figure equally of comedy and of pathos. Slow-witted, untidy, forgetful, she is the constant butt of her husband's raillery, and is forever offending against his passionate sense of order. She cannot help sleeping 'crooked,' slipping off her shoes in the presence of company, or perpetrating some other misdemeanour that provokes the Captain's waspish tongue. To overcome her 'constitutionally torpid' nature, he persists in shouting at her; it is 'a necessary stimulus to her ideas.' 'Shout at her—' explains the Captain, 'and her mind comes up to time. Speak to her— and she drifts away from you directly.' And to demonstrate the point he roars, 'Mrs. Wragge! Put your cap straight!'

The Fourth, and longest, Scene takes place at Aldeburgh. Its flat and desolate surroundings provide a perfect background for what is in effect the climax of the book. How vividly he conveys the isolation of the Suffolk landscape :

It was a dull airless evening. Eastward was the grey majesty of the sea, hushed in breathless calm; the horizon line invisibly melting into the monotonously misty sky; the idle ships shadowy and still on the idle water. Southward, the high ridge of the sea dyke, and the grim massive circle of a martello tower, reared high on its mound of grass, closed the view darkly on all that lay beyond. Westward, a lurid streak of sunset glowed red in the dreary heaven—blackened the fringing trees on the far borders of the great inland marsh—and turned its little gleaming water-pools to pools of blood. Nearer to the eye, the sullen flow of the tidal river Alde, ebbed noiselessly from the muddy banks; and nearer still, lonely and unprosperous by the bleak waterside, lay the lost little port of Slaughden; with its forlorn wharfs and warehouses of decaying wood, and its few scattered coasting vessels deserted on the oozy river-shore. No fall of waves was heard on the beach; no trickling of waters bubbled audibly from the idle stream. Now and then, the cry of a sea-bird rose from the region of the marsh; and, at intervals, from farmhouses far in the inland waste, the faint winding of horns to call the cattle home, travelled mournfully through the evening calm.

It is at Aldeburgh that the fascinating duel of wits between Captain Wragge and Mrs. Lecount, Noel Vanstone's faithful housekeeper, is fought. This provides the opportunity for a display, both brilliant and amusing, of Wilkie's chess-game methods. Mrs. Lecount, whose Achilles heel is the memory of her late husband, a biologist, and her consequent reverence for Science, is almost a match for the unscrupulous Captain. He has been studying a popular work entitled *Joyce's Scientific Dialogues*, and insinuates himself into her confidence by pouring out a farrago of elementary Science culled from its pages.

Here too occurs the dramatic scene in which Magdalen, overcome with horror and remorse now that her long-sought revenge is at hand, contemplates suicide by poison. Grasping a bottle of laudanum she watches the coasting vessels glide slowly past her window, determined to leave to blind chance the decision she cannot make for herself. If an even number of ships pass within half-an-hour she will live; if an odd number she will die.

This bottle of laudanum, as Dorothy L. Sayers has pointed out, is something more than a mere accessory to a 'sensation-scene.' It becomes, on its reappearance later in the story, a vital element in the development of the plot. It is certainly true of his best work to say: 'He never wastes an incident; he never leaves a loose end; no incident, however trivial on the one hand or sensational on the other, is ever introduced for the mere sake of amusement or sensation.'†

The pattern of *No Name*, divided as it is into eight 'scenes,' suggests that the author had in mind from the first the idea of a stage adaptation. Two separate dramatic versions were in fact made by him, but neither, so far as we know, reached the stage. This is in some ways surprising when one recalls that he successfully adapted for the theatre three far more complex novels, *The Woman in White*, *The Moonstone* and *Armadale*. He remarked however to-

†Dorothy L. Sayers. Introduction to *Great Short Stories of Mystery, Detection and Horror*. (Gollancz, 1928.)

wards the end of his life that he could never get the dramatic version of *No Name* to come right.

The first attempt, made in collaboration with W. B. Bernard, was published in 1863 by the Office of *All the Year Round*, soon after the appearance of the novel, which it follows fairly closely. It was in five acts and offered formidable difficulties in performance. Seven years later a second version, the work of Wilkie alone, was published privately. This time the ending was completely altered and two important characters omitted. Still he was dissatisfied and refused an Edinburgh Repertory Theatre permission to produce the play. Finally he invited his friend Wybert Reeve, the actor-manager, to try his hand, giving him *carte blanche*. Wilkie was so pleased with Reeve's adaptation that he abandoned all idea of further tinkering with his own versions, and gave it his blessing. Wybert Reeve spent much of his theatrical life touring Australia and the United States, and it was in Melbourne that the only recorded performances of *No Name* took place.