CHAPTER FOURTEEN

American Journey

ONE OF WILKIE'S closest friends, now that Dickens was dead, was his doctor and near neighbour, Francis Carr Beard. We do not know a great deal about Frank Beard himself, except that he was ten years older than Wilkie and greatly attached to him, but his son, Nathaniel, had left an intimate sketch of the novelist in the course of some reminiscences.† Wilkie was a frequent visitor at their house and used to turn up in 'a strange variety of costumes.' He would be as likely to sit down to dinner in a light camel-hair or tweed suit, worn with a shirt of broad blue or pink stripes, and perhaps a bright red tie, as in a dark suit or evening dress. Whenever he was feeling well the family looked forward to his entertaining conversation and amusing stories, but they always knew when an attack of gout was imminent by the nervous depression which overcame him, and by 'the horrible shaking of the room produced by his fidgetting with one foot upon the floor.'

There were times when the ocular gout would compel him to keep his eyes bandaged for days, and sometimes weeks, at a stretch, and on many such occasions Frank Beard would write down page after page of his book as he dictated. Wilkie invariably consulted him on the medical details that were so liberally sprinkled about his novels—silver nitrate treatment for epilepsy, for instance, or ophthalmic surgery, or the effects of various poisons. Frank was even

† 'Some Recollections of Yesterday.' Nathaniel Beard. (*Temple Bar Magazine, Vol. cii*).

called upon to conduct him to a professional running-track in order that the scene of the 'foot-race' in *Man and Wife* might be authentic in atmosphere and detail.

Nathaniel Beard found him strangely uninformed about topics of current interest, and accustomed to ask naïve questions about matters which, although possibly of no great moment, were common knowledge at the time. This he largely attributed to the fact that Wilkie seldom read newspapers and would normally, when discussing a particular subject, use the phrase 'I hear' or 'I am told' where other people would say 'I read' or 'I see.' This view conflicts with that of an American journalist who wrote in an article on Wilkie Collins: 'He is an excellent representative and type of a modern class of English literary men, who mingle freely and happily with the world and are of it; who take a keen interest in the events of the world and keep well apace with their times . . . He thinks positively on all subjects, and in politics he stands fairly on the liberal and progressive side.'†

Beard was not the only one to discover that Wilkie was a man of strong prejudices, and in particular, an unabashed Francophile. Almost everything, he considered, was better done on the Continent, especially cookery. He kept a French cook and had himself studied French cuisine. When he was in France he made friends, in his favourite role of gourmet, with every good chef he came across. In the same spirit he had written to the 'Padrona': 'I wish I knew of another cook to recommend—but unless you will take *me*, I know of nobody. And I am conscious of one serious objection to myself. My style is expensive. I look on meat simply as a material for sauces.' At dinner he used to discourse lyrically on the subject of French dishes and succeeded in infecting Frank Beard with his enthusiasm. Inevitably Beard learned to share his friend's passion for garlic-flavoured food. To his family's horror he persuaded their plain English cook to ex-

†'Wilkie Collins.' George M. Towle. (*Appleton's Journal*, New York, 3rd Sept., 1870).

periment with garlic, a task she undertook with such zeal that soon it was introduced into every dish—in grossly excessive quantities. The end of the sad story can best be told in Nathaniel Beard's own words:

One evening Wilkie and my father had talked themselves into quite a culinary frenzy over a certain 'Don Pedro pie' which Wilkie had recently tasted during his travels. At last they arranged that the thing should be put to tangible proof. The next day, the materials having been procured for this delicacy, Wilkie came round and he and my father went solemnly into the kitchen together, each adorned with an apron which had been borrowed from the cook, and instructing, pointing out, and occasionally joining with the cook in the practical details of the manufacture of the much-praised dish . . . It was a glorious success, but there was just one little drawback. The garlic had predominated so strongly that no one save the two chefs themselves could venture upon tasting it. The upshot of it all was that Wilkie went home and took to his bed, while my father remained at home and took to his. They were both very ill for several days with a horrible gastric attack, and garlic was nevermore mentioned in the house.

Another of Wilkie's peculiarities in the matter of flavours was his intense liking for black pepper. 'It is seldom provided at dinner-tables to which I repair,' he said on one occasion, 'and therefore I take care to provide it myself.' He used to produce his private pepper-mill with great flourish and mock ceremony.

The Beard family had a strong affection for him which offset any faint disapproval they may have felt towards his unconventional way of living—'a rather "rapid" mode of existence,' as Nathaniel primly describes it. He always took the greatest interest in the three children—'ill-behaved young people' according to the eldest of them—and they loved him dearly. Then there was Frank's elder sister who, whilst liking Wilkie as a person, took strong exception to his books and opinions, and frequently crossed swords with him at dinner-table conversation. She was very indignant at his description of Jenny Lind as a superb singer but in other respects a charlatan, and declared that he was incapable of

appreciating the absolute truth and purity of Jenny Lind's life. He retaliated by telling the story of her watching from a window the crowds streaming into Her Majesty's Theatre, and saying, ' What a pity to think of all these people wasting their time in going to hear me sing, when they might be doing so much good with it.' For Wilkie no further evidence of her insincerity was needed.

During the early eighteen-seventies, although his output of fiction was maintained, he was far more interested in the theatre. In a period of about eighteen months no fewer than three Wilkie Collins plays were produced in the West End of London; two of them ran for a time concurrently. They were his three greatest stage successes. An incidental outcome of their production was that each brought him at least one enduring friendship in the theatrical world.

First came the dramatic version of *The Woman in White* upon which he had lavished exceptional pains. It had proved an intractable book to dramatise, and he was never entirely satisfied with the stage version. There had been a preliminary try-out in August 1870, at the Theatre Royal, Leicester, with Wilson Barrett as Fosco, but for some reason London did not see the play until more than a year later. The popularity of the book ensured plenty of advance interest in the play which was further stimulated by the appearance on the hoardings of a strikingly original poster. Frederick Walker's design for *The Woman in White* can almost be said to mark the birth of modern English poster art. Walker, an Academician who died young, dashed off the original sketch at Charles Collins' house in Thurloe Place, Kensington. Wilkie was delighted when he saw the design, a woodcut of a woman in a white dress gliding through a French window against a background of starlit night; it caught exactly the atmosphere of mystery and romance that he wanted. This was apparently the first time an artist of repute had been commissioned to design a poster for the theatre. The original was twice exhibited during the 'seventies, and is now in the possession of the Tate Gallery.

The play was presented at the Olympic Theatre on October 9th, 1871, with a cast which included Ada Dyas in the dual role of Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie, Mrs. Charles Viner as Marian Halcombe, George Vining as Fosco, and a little known actor named Wybert Reeve as Walter Hartright. The friendship which sprang up between Reeve and the author dates from the play's second rehearsal. Wilkie attended many rehearsals, in the course of which endless arguments arose among the cast and tempers became frayed. The author, Reeve tells us, 'looked through it all perplexed in the extreme, but he was gentlemanly, patient and good-tempered, always ready with a smile if a chance offered itself, or a peaceful word kindly suggesting when a point was to be gained.' He also mentions Wilkie's 'full, massive, very clever head and forehead, and bright, intellectual eyes looking out of strong glasses mounted in gold.' His beard was already flecked with white.

The Woman in White was well received on the first night and achieved a run of twenty weeks at the Olympic. The provincial tour which followed lasted for several years. In the provinces Wybert Reeve took over the more important part of Count Fosco, in which he made his reputation. He played it more than 1,500 times on both sides of the Atlantic.

His next play, *Man and Wife,* was accepted by the Bancrofts for inclusion in their highly successful season at the Prince of Wales Theatre, now the Scala. In selecting a melodrama such as this to succeed the light comedies of T. W. Robertson which had put the theatre on the map, the Bancrofts made a surprising decision, but had no reason to regret the choice. Negotiations began eighteen months before the play was produced, for on August 1st, 1871, Wilkie wrote to Bancroft:

Let me assure you that I feel the sincerest gratification that *Man and Wife* has been accepted for the Prince of Wales Theatre. Every advantage that I could possibly wish for is, I know beforehand, already obtained for my work, now that it has secured the good fortune of addressing itself to the public with Mrs. Bancroft's introduction.

In their reminiscences, *On and Off the Stage*, the Bancrofts commented: 'So commenced a friendship, which it has been our privilege to enjoy ever since, with one whose masterly romances had lightened many an hour and given us infinite delight.'

After various postponements *Man and Wife* was billed to follow Lord Lytton's *Money*. Towards the end of 1872 Wilkie was invited to read the play to the company. 'This he did,' wrote Bancroft, 'with great effect and nervous force, giving all concerned a clear insight into his view of the characters.' He too bears witness to the author's valuable suggestions and accommodating attitude at rehearsals, and his readiness to make alterations for the improvement of the play. The chief parts were to be filled by John Hare as Sir Patrick Lundie, Lydia Foote as Anne Sylvester and Coghlan as Geoffrey Delamayn, the Bancrofts being content with comparatively minor roles.

It was an especially brilliant first night, and seats were at premium, ticket speculators extracting as much as five guineas for a stall. Of the audience the Bancrofts wrote: 'Literary and artistic London was present in unusual force, and an audience more representative of the intellect of the time has seldom been gathered within the walls of a theatre.' All this served to reduce poor Wilkie's nerves to an even more shattered state than usual. He remained in Bancroft's dressing-room throughout the performance 'in a state of nervous terror painful to see,' and the frequent loud bursts of applause coming from the auditorium provided only momentary relief for his sufferings. He had his sole view of the stage that night when the audience called enthusiastically for the author after the final curtain. He devoted the few sentences he could stammer out to unstinted praise for the acting, which he had not of course seen. The following day he wrote to a friend, 'It was certainly an extraordinary success. The pit got on its legs and cheered with all its might the moment I showed myself in front of the curtain. I counted that I had only thirty friends in the house to match

against a picked band of the " lower orders " of literature and the drama assembled at the back of the dress circle to hiss and laugh at the first chance. The services of my friends were not required. The public never gave the " opposition " a chance all through the evening. The acting, I hear all round, was superb.'

Dutton Cook wrote of the first performance on February 22nd, 1873 : ' Mr. Collins has successfully accomplished the end he had in view, and has proved himself to be a dramatist of unusual ability. His play is . . . a complete and coherent work, endowed with an independent vitality of its own.' A technical innovation in *Man and Wife* was the first use on the stage of electric lightning during the storm scene. Towards the end of the run of 136 nights, Wilkie wrote to Bancroft :

I should be the most ungrateful man living if the result of *Man and Wife* did not far more than merely " satisfy " me. My play has been magnificently acted, everybody concerned with it has treated me with the greatest kindness, and you and Mrs. Bancroft have laid me under obligations to your sympathy and friendship for which I cannot sufficiently thank you. The least I can do, if all goes well, is to write for the Prince of Wales Theatre again, and next time to give you and Mrs. Bancroft parts that will be a little more worthy of you.

An unauthorised version of *Man and Wife* had been given on the New York stage more than two years before. The adaptation had been made by that most industrious of dramatic ' pirates,' Augustin Daly. Not until a week after the first night on September 13th, 1870, had Wilkie got wind of the venture, and he hastily wrote off to New York to try and put a stop to it. Needless to say he failed, and the piece was highly successful.

It was during the run of *Man and Wife* at the Prince of Wales that Charles Collins fell desperately ill. Never very robust, his health had been gradually worsening for many years. For a time he and Katey had lived in the warm Mediterranean climate, but he seemed to get no better. Although

his final illness was caused by gastric ulcers, it was assumed by many of his friends that he was consumptive, and this may well have been so. Dickens, as long ago as 1864, had feared that he would never recover and that Katey would be left a young widow. On April 9th, 1873, Wilkie had arranged to accompany Wybert Reeve to the theatre in order to see how his play was progressing. Reeve found him very depressed at the grave news he had just received of his brother's condition; Charley was lying unconscious in his home in Kensington. Reeve went alone to the play, promising to come back to supper and report on the performance. When he reached Gloucester Place late at night, he found Wilkie just returned from his brother's bedside, to which he had been hastily summoned to witness the end. He was so utterly broken down with grief that he even talked to Reeve of a possible 'future state of existence,' about which, as an avowed materialist, he was normally sceptical. It was his firm belief that death meant 'a sleep of eternity,' and ended everything.

From childhood there had always been a strong attachment between the two brothers and, though dissimilar in temperament, they had remained close friends in adult life. Charley, whose own comparative failure was inherent in his character, had never been in the least jealous of his elder brother's success. Wilkie performed the last service to his brother's memory in writing the brief article on Charles Allston Collins in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. In it he said: 'His ideal was a high one; and he never succeeded in satisfying his own aspirations.' The entry concludes with these words, which could apply with equal truth to the writer's own last years: 'The last years of his life were years of broken health and acute suffering, borne with a patience and courage known only to those nearest and dearest to him.' Wilkie Collins might have been writing his own epitaph.

Work was always an anodyne for his mental and bodily suffering, and it was fortunate that at this time of bereave-

WILKIE COLLINS' HOUSE IN GLOUCESTER PLACE, W.1.
The upper part was damaged by enemy action in the war of 1939-1945

By courtesy of Picture Post Library

THE 'WOMAN IN WHITE' POSTER
Woodcut by Frederick Walker, R.A.

ment preparations were in full swing for the publication of his latest novel, *The New Magdalen,* and for the production of the stage version. He had been kept busy with both during most of the previous year, in the course of which the novel had been appearing serially in the *Temple Bar Magazine.* He mentioned it in a letter to Forster, dated November 16th, 1872, which is remarkable on two counts; first, for the friendly, almost deferential tone he adopts towards the man who had so recently snubbed him over the Bentley-Dickens letters; secondly, because it contains his only favourable criticism on record of Forster's *Life of Dickens*:

90, Gloucester Place,,
Portman Square,

My dear Forster,—For three days past I have been trying—and vainly trying—to get to Palace Gate House, and to thank you heartily (as I thank you now) for the new volume of the Life. I am devouring you at night (the only time when I have any 'leisure hours' at my disposal) and I am more interested than any words of mine can tell in your admirable narrative—to my mind, the most masterly biographical story you have ever told. More of this when I do contrive to see you. In the meantime, I congratulate you with all my heart.

Ramsgate cured me. I was there five weeks—and felt better and better every day.

How are you? I have heard a report (which I hope and trust is as false as most reports) that you are suffering again. Pray send me a line to say what the truth is, and whether you are settled in London for the present.

I know you will be glad to hear that my story *(The New Magdalen)* is, so far, a great success. Will you wait till it is done? or shall I send you the proofs, when the number I am now writing is in type—say in a week's time?

Pray give my kindest regards to Mrs. Forster and believe me,

Ever affectionately yours,

Wilkie Collins.

The fulsome tribute to Forster's book may be explained by the fact that he had not yet had the opportunity of read-

ing the third volume, which appeared later. It was this concluding volume, dealing with the period of Dickens' life so well known to Wilkie, which aroused his anger. His own copy of the book was freely annotated with marginalia, usually critical of Forster. Some of these notes are described in an article which appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* a day or two before the sale of Wilkie's library in 1890.† They are of special interest as containing his only recorded opinions of Dickens' works. On the first page, where Dickens is described as 'the most popular novelist of the century,' Wilkie adds the words 'after Walter Scott.' Forster's opinion that *Oliver Twist* was a well-constructed story is dismissed as 'nonsense.':

The one defect in that wonderful book is the helplessly bad construction of the story. The character of Nancy is the finest thing he ever did. He never afterwards saw all sides of a woman's character—saw all round her. That the same man who could create Nancy created the second Mrs. Dombey is the most incomprehensible anomaly that I know of in literature.

Another note concerns the plot of *Barnaby Rudge*. Dickens had a notion of introducing three men who should become the natural leaders of the crowd in the Gordon Riots, and later turn out to have escaped from Bedlam. Forster thought the idea unsound and records that he dissuaded Dickens from adopting it. Wilkie comments in the margin, 'Where is the unsoundness of it? I call it a fine idea. New, powerful, highly dramatic, and well within the limits of truth to nature. It would have greatly improved the weakest book that Dickens ever wrote.' In a note in the second volume he describes *Martin Chuzzlewit* as in some respects Dickens' finest novel, but severely criticises its successor:

The latter half of *Dombey* no intelligent person can have read without astonishment at the badness of it, and the disappointment that followed lowered the sale of the next book *Copperfield,* incomparably superior to *Dombey* as it certainly is.

†I am indebted to Mr. K. J. Fielding for tracing this article.

Forster's assertion that there is scarcely a page of Dickens which could not be placed in the hand of a child provokes the explosion we might expect:

It is impossible to read such stuff as this without a word of protest. If it is true, which it is not, it would imply the condemnation of Dickens' books as works of art, it would declare him to be guilty of deliberately presenting to his readers a false reflection of human life. If this wretched English claptrap means anything it means that the novelist is forbidden to touch on the sexual relations which literally swarm about him, and influence the lives of millions of his fellow creatures [except] those relations are licensed by the ceremony called marriage. One expects this essentially immoral view of the functions of the novelist from a professor of claptrap like the late Bishop of Manchester. But that Forster should quote it with approval is a sad discovery indeed.

Elsewhere he takes Forster to task for comparing a descriptive passage in *Edwin Drood* unfavourably with a page of dialogue from *Oliver Twist,* observing that 'a novelist knows what Forster did not know—that dialogue is more easily written than description.' He adds, however, 'To my mind it was cruel to compare Dickens in the radiant prime of his genius with Dickens' last laboured effort, the melancholy work of a worn out brain.'

When Forster writes in his final chapter of his thirty-three years' friendship with Dickens, marked by 'unbroken continuity of kindly impulse,' Wilkie comments:

The "kindly impulse" did unquestionably exist, but not in "unbroken continuity". More than once there were fierce quarrels between Dickens and Forster (sometimes at Forster's own table), which took place in my presence. Dickens' sense of what he owed to Forster's devotion—rightly and properly a strong sense—was often subjected to severe trial by Forster himself. The assertion (quite sincerely made) that no letters addressed by Dickens to other old friends revealed his character so frankly and completely as his letters to Forster, it is not necessary to contradict. Dickens' letters published by his sister-in-law and his eldest daughter may be left to settle the question.

It is said that he used to refer to the book as 'The Life of John Forster with occasional anecdotes of Charles Dickens.' If this cynical description does scant justice to a great biography, Wilkie would have been more than human had he accepted in silence his virtual elimination from the story of Dickens' life. Whether or not Forster liked or approved of him, it is a fact that for twenty years he was as close to Dickens as any man. To gloss over such an association in a few sentences is to sacrifice biographical truth on the altar of personal jealousy. The letter quoted above marks the end of those friendly overtures Wilkie was prone to make towards 'the Bear' from time to time, and during the few years that remained of Forster's life there is no record of any further communication between them.

There can be no doubt that *The New Magdalen* was first conceived as a stage-play. The novel betrays, and suffers from, its dramatic origins even more obviously than *Man and Wife.* Dialogue was never his *forte,* and the book consists in the main of long stretches of dialogue, more stilted and theatrical than usual, connected by narrative passages which are little more than amplified stage directions. The theme is the age-old one of society's intolerance of the fallen woman. The story tells of a young woman forced by poverty to earn her living on the streets, who seizes a desperate chance to rehabilitate herself in the eyes of society, and of her eventual reformation at the hands of the clergyman of noble mien and still nobler character. It is a theme which, if it fails to evoke tragedy, can hardly avoid sentimentality, and Wilkie Collins had not the powers to carry through the task he set himself. He had, here and there in his best work, touched upon genuine tragedy, in the stories of Rosanna Spearman and Anne Catherick, for example and perhaps of Ezra Jennings or Magdalen Vanstone, but to sustain tragedy, to keep an entire novel on the tragic plane, was now beyond his capabilities. He was more interested in the propaganda aspect of his story, in upbraiding society for its hypocrisy and inhumanity, and in preaching tolerance toward human

frailty. Unfortunately, he insisted on weighting the scales so heavily in favour of the reformed prostitute as to destroy any illusion of impartiality, and his plea thus loses much of its effectiveness. The crude melodrama and sentimentality of the book were perhaps more acceptable on the stage, but *The New Magdalen* must be numbered among his least satisfactory novels. This was not however the view of Matthew Arnold, who said it was his favourite sensation-novel.

It was of course a daring theme in its day, which may account for the remarkable success of both novel and play. The first production took place at the Olympic Theatre on May 19th, 1873, two days after publication of the book, under the management of Ada Cavendish, who also played the leading role of Mercy Merrick; the Reverend Julian Gray was played by Frank Archer. Both became life-long friends of the author. *The New Magdalen* was rapturously received by the public, although the ethics of the play were condemned by the Press. *The Times* ventured the opinion that 'in the time of our fathers the conclusion of the New Magdalen's history would not have been tolerated.' After a run of 19 weeks Ada Cavendish took the production on an extended provincial tour; she subsequently revived it twice in London, and altogether made a good deal of money out of the play. Early in the run Wilkie wrote to Wybert Reeve:

'The reception of my *New Magdalen* was prodigious. I was forced to appear half-way through the piece, as well as at the end. The acting took everyone by surprise, and the second night's enthusiasm quite equalled the first. We have really hit the mark. Ferrari translates it for Italy, Regnier has two theatres ready for me in Paris, and Lambe of Vienna has accepted it for his theatre.' Nor was this catalogue complete, for within a year or so one could have seen "Die Neue Magdalena" in Berlin, "De Newe Magdalen" in the Hague, and "Novaia Magdalena" in Moscow.

Some months earlier he had received an invitation from America to undertake a Reading Tour in the autumn and

winter of 1873. The project was a formidable one for a man in his state of health but it held at the same time many attractions. He wrote to Wybert Reeve : ' I have had a great offer to go to America this autumn and " read." It would be very pleasant and I should like it if we could go together. I am really thinking of the trip.' He doubtless recalled the prodigious sums which Dickens had been able to earn during his last Reading Tour of the U.S.A., and if he could hardly expect similar rewards, his reputation across the Atlantic stood high, perhaps higher than at home, and the financial return would not be negligible. His books had made him many friends in the States, and as for his relations with Harpers, seldom can an author have been on better terms with his publisher. Bouquets from the one to the other had become almost monotonous. Only the previous year Harpers had written : ' You know that we are always glad of your stories, and we know that there is no author more prompt and thoughtful of the interest and convenience of publishers than you. Your careful and regular transmission of copy . . . has frequently elicited the grateful admiration which is naturally felt by us as practical printers for authors who are never behindhand.' Finally, America interested him, and he had often expressed a wish to see that country. All things considered, it was worth taking the chance, and hoping for the type of weather which best suited his ailments, he chose the season when the climate of the Eastern States would be mainly cold and dry.

Having had no experience of reading in public he thought it desirable to give a ' try-out ' performance in London. The opportunity came when a special charity matinée was arranged at the Olympic Theatre, during the run of *The New Magdalen,* for the benefit of a M. Waldec, a baritone. The programme lacked nothing in variety. Mme. Aimée Desclée, the great French actress—to die soon afterwards at a very early age—recited Victor Hugo's ' Le Revenant ' and was billed to give an organ solo when it was discovered that no organ was available. Gounod played several pieces

including his 'Funeral March of a Marionette,' upon which the pianist Ferdinand Hiller subsequently improvised. Ada Cavendish recited 'The Charge of the Light Brigade.' In the midst of this rich feast Wilkie read his early short story 'A Terribly Strange Bed.' There seem to have been conflicting views as to his reception. Percy Fitzgerald was present and, some forty years later, described the occasion with at least a touch of malice.† The reader, he said, had little or no voice and scarcely attempted to raise it; he seemed to think that the word '*bed*stead' was full of tragic significance and repeated it until it became almost comic. It was 'a most singularly inefficient performance,' and he was reminded of 'an elderly gentleman at his club boring his neighbour with a long story of something he had read in the papers.' Fitzgerald hastened away to share his glee with Forster, who 'laughed his rhinoceros laugh,' as one might have expected. Frank Archer, prejudiced in the other direction, listened to the reading and thought it 'earnest and impressive.' The press was also in two minds. The *Pall Mall Gazette* reported: 'Mr. Wilkie Collins, appearing for the first time in the character of a reader, may be congratulated on the favourable reception accorded to him as a novelist.' It described the reading as a failure largely because he attempted unsuccessfully to 'act' the story, an opinion which hardly squares with Fitzgerald's. Quick to Wilkie's rescue came the *Illustrated Review*. Having quoted the *Gazette's* verdict that the reading was a failure, the article continues:

That it was nothing whatever of the kind, we can attest from our own careful and certainly dispassionate observation . . . The novelist was cordially welcomed, was attentively (at moments breathlessly) listened to throughout, was rewarded every now and then with sudden bursts of laughter, and at the end with distinct rounds of applause of the heartiest possible description. If that constitutes a failure, he certainly had one to his heart's content. What better reception any new entertainer

†*Memoirs of Charles Dickens*. Percy Fitzgerald. (*Arrowsmith*, 1914).

could possibly be expected to elicit we cannot for the life of us conjecture.

Wilkie himself was sufficiently encouraged by his reception to press on with arrangements for the American tour. Since Wybert Reeve was unable to get away until later, he sailed alone in early September in the Cunard steamship *Algeria,* arriving at New York on the 25th. The first person he recognised on disembarking was his old friend Fechter who had come to the wharf to meet him. They went along together to his hotel, the Westminster, where Dickens had stayed five years earlier. He was given the same suite that Dickens had occupied and when he saw the desk at which his friend had worked, he appeared deeply moved. Fechter took him out to dinner that evening and Wilkie recalled his saying when they parted for the night, 'You will find friends here wherever you go. Don't forget that I was the friend who introduced you to Soft Shell Crab.'

Within a few days of his arrival Wilkie received an invitation from his New York publishers to dine with them in Twenty-second Street. In accepting he mentioned that he only drank dry champagne, a remark that sent Harpers scurrying around New York to find the wine he required. It was procured with the greatest difficulty since Americans at that time drank only the sweet variety. Shortly afterwards Harpers wrote to Reade:† 'Mr. Wilkie Collins, whom we have seen repeatedly since his arrival in New York, seems to be enjoying his American sights and sensations.' To celebrate Wilkie's visit they issued a library edition of his works. This incidentally included the first U.S. publication of *The Dead Secret*, which had appeared in 1857 as an anonymous serial in the first volume of *Harper's Weekly.*

For the first two or three weeks after landing he was constantly beset by newspaper reporters, whose methods, then as now, were more ruthless than those of their English counterparts. In particular he suffered at the hands of that formidable species, the female reporter, already common in

†*The House of Harper.* J. Henry Harper. (*Harper Bros.*, 1912).

the United States. One of these ladies burst into a dinner-party at which he was being entertained and begged for a few minutes private conversation with the guest of honour. He was in the midst of apologising to his hostess when he realised that she saw nothing unusual in the intrusion, and was in fact pleading with him not to disappoint the enterprising reporter. On another occasion he found himself surrounded in his hotel by a grim circle of a dozen female magazine-editors, of which ' the oldest and ugliest stood forth and solemnly observing " Let me embrace you for the company," offered me a chaste salute.' His lukewarm reception of the embrace, ' however much I might have appreciated the same from a youthful beauty,' was such as to summon forth ' very moderate praises ' of his personal charms in the pages of the magazine concerned.

The other plague with which he had to contend was the autograph-hunters. They pursued him everywhere. In Boston he went so far as to change his hotel for the sole purpose of avoiding them. One experience he described in a charming letter written some years later to young Nathaniel Beard, in response to a request for his autograph:

Once upon a time, while I was on my way to a grand breakfast in the City of New York, I was stopped in one of the squares by a very well-bred young gentleman, who said he recognised me by my photographic portraits, and who asked me if I would give him an autograph. I said, ' Yes, but where am I to send it?' He said ' Quite unnecessary, sir. If you don't mind you can give it to me now.' With that he pulled an autograph book out of one pocket, a pen out of another, and an ancient ' inkhorn ' out of a third. ' How am I to write it?' I asked. He answered, ' You can write it on my back.' He turned round and ' gave me a back ' as if we were playing at leap-frog. I wrote him his autograph (greatly to the amusement of the public in the square), and we shook hands and parted. I quote this young gentleman's example as giving you a useful hint in the pursuit of autographs. If he had not stuck to me while he had me, I might have forgotten him—just as inexcusably as I forgot *you*.

And now here is my autograph *at last*!

Greatly to his surprise he acquired an immediate reputation for being well-dressed. There are two versions of the story. According to Mrs. Walford,† whom he saw shortly after his return to England, he told her that on the trip across to America rats gnawed into his luggage and ruined the best suit which he was carefully keeping for his first press interviews. On arrival in New York he had therefore to visit the tailor and buy a ready-made suit which he described as 'atrocious.' Thus attired he met the Press. Next day he was astonished to read 'Mr. Collins is a small man, but well made and very well dressed,' and could only assume that the cut he had objected to was in fact the accepted 'Yankee cut.' The other version, recounted by Wybert Reeve, insists that the suit in question was purchased, not in New York, but in the East End of London, as a rough travelling-suit. Whatever its origin, its success seems to have been complete.

The first important function to which he was invited was a reception and dinner at New York's famous Lotos Club, where the guests included Bret Harte and Charles Bradlaugh, also on his first visit to the States. Whitelaw Reid, the United States Ambassador to Britain, presided and paid a gracious tribute to the guest of honour. Replying, as an author of 'that order of books for which heavy people have invented the name of light literature,' Wilkie recalled his first experience of American kindness and hospitality, at Sorrento thirty years before. He continued: 'I venture to say that I see in this reception something more than a recognition of my humble labours only. I think I see a recognition of English literature, liberal, spontaneous and sincere, which, I think, is an honour to you, as well as an honour to me . . . On my own behalf, I beg to assure you that I shall not soon forget the encouragement you have offered to me at the outset of my career in America. Permit me to remind you that I am now speaking the language of sincere gratitude,

†*Memories of Victorian London.* L. B. Walford. (*Arnold,* 1912.)

and that it is essentially a language of very few words.† He told Reeve that it was a delightful evening, which ended only as dawn was breaking.

After spending a few days with Fechter at the beginning of October on his small Pennsylvania farm, he opened his tour with Readings in a number of towns in New York State, including Troy, Syracuse, Albany and Rochester. The first large city he tackled, Philadelphia, was also the scene of his first unfavourable reception. He had chosen for his reading a revised version of *The Dream Woman.* The story proved too strong meat for Philadelphia, whose *Press* thought it was ' not fit for intelligent and cultured people,' and that ' the moral was just as bad as bad could be.' ' It was not pleasant,' the newspaper went on, ' to hear a famous Englishman describing, before several hundred pure girls, how one wretched, fallen woman, after mysteriously killing her man, had captivated two more, and stabbed another to death in a drunken frenzy.' The audience found his voice too low and monotonous, and showed some disappointment after a hearty initial welcome. Nowhere in America was there criticism that his style was histrionic, which had been the complaint of the *Pall Mall Gazette.* His introductory remarks made it clear that his intention was precisely the reverse. After explaining that the story was ' a re-written, enlarged, and I hope greatly improved version of one of my shorter stories,' divided into two parts between which there would be ' an interval of ten minutes for the repose of the audience and the reader,' he continued: ' I have never, in presenting myself to your notice, had the object in view of acting, or even attempting to act, as in my opinion the duties of the reader and the duties of the actor are widely at difference. My position as a reader is, as I understand it, this: I am in a very large parlour surrounded, I hope I may say, by friends, and it is my duty to keep myself in the background and to let my story find its way to your favour with whatever merits

†The speech was reprinted in full in *Speeches to the Lotos Club* (printed for private circulation, New York).

of its own it may be so fortunate as to possess.' The *New York Herald* commented on this last sentence with tart brevity: 'Since Mr. Collins' enterprise is commercial, appeals to friendship are humbug.'

With the commercial motive well in mind, Wilkie made no attempt to appease the moralists by substituting a more innocuous story. He knew the value of a '*succès de scandale*' and perhaps recalled that Dickens' greatest successes had been made with his more gruesome Readings. After a brief visit to New York where he was entertained to breakfast at the Union Club, he travelled to Boston on October 29th. The following day he read to a very large audience at the Music Hall. Boston, where he might have expected another outburst of moral indignation, liked him. The papers were friendly, commenting on his 'handsome long beard' and 'fine robust countenance.' The *Boston Advertiser* said that he held the audience's attention despite 'the London intonation which was apparent on the flattening of his vowels.' Wilkie was particularly delighted when he heard that a Western newspaper, copying this report, had written: 'Mr. Collins is decidedly a Londoner which is apparent in the flattening of his bowels.'

Rehearsals for *The New Magdalen* were in progress at Daly's Broadway Theatre, and Wilkie returned to New York early in November to lend what assistance he could. The play opened on November 10th to an enthusiastic reception. He had to appear on the stage at the end of the second Act with Carlotta Leclercq, who played the lead, and took several bows and thanked the audience. The critics were on the whole favourable, although the *Daily Tribune* advanced the type of argument that was to be used against Ibsen's plays on the London stage twenty years later:

> Its subject is one that ladies and gentlemen cannot discuss . . . The theatre is not a dissecting room, nor a place for the examination of social problems.

The review concluded:

But if [the author] means to say that society, organised on virtuous principles, ought to accept reformed courtesans as wives and mothers, and place them on the same footing with women of unblemished purity, he announces a doctrine that is false in itself and that may prove pernicious in its results.

One correspondent went so far as to assert: 'A play so utterly vicious . . . has never before been produced in a New York theatre.'

The day following the 'Magdalen' first night he gave his first reading in the city of New York, at Association Hall, where he scored a great success. The *New York Times* referred to his 'pleasant, clear voice and agreeable manner,' and reported that the audience had listened attentively and applauded heartily. The *Herald* condemned the story as 'a mixture of voluptuousness, cruelty and horror' and claimed that some of the audience went to sleep and others left before the end. He was on tour again during the latter half of November, and appeared at Washington on the 28th. Soon afterwards he was back in New York to supervise the production of *The Woman in White,* which succeeded *The New Magdalen* on December 15th. Wybert Reeve, who had followed Wilkie across the Atlantic, played his familiar part of Count Fosco.

Towards the end of the month he set off on a short Canadian tour, spending Christmas in Toronto and reading there on Boxing Day. By January 2nd, 1874, he was back in the United States and from Buffalo, N.Y., he sent Frederick Lehmann an account of his impressions of the country, and of his tour to date.

I hear you have called like a good fellow at Gloucester Place, and have heard something of me there from time to time. No matter where I go, my reception in America is always the same. The prominent people in each place visit me, drive me out, dine me, and do all that they can to make me feel myself among friends. The enthusiasm and the kindness are really and truly beyond description. I should be the most ungrateful man living if I had any other than the highest opinion of the American people. I find them to be the most enthusiastic, the

most cordial, and the most sincere people I have ever met with in my life. When an American says, 'Come and see me,' he *means* it. This is wonderful to an Englishman.
Before I had been a week in this country I noted three national peculiarities which had never been mentioned to me by visitors to the States.

I. No American hums or whistles a tune either at home or in the street.

II. Not one American in 500 has a dog.

III. Not one American in 1,000 carries a walking-stick.

I who hum perpetually, who love dogs, who cannot live without a walking-stick, am greatly distressed at finding my dear Americans deficient in the three social virtues just enumerated.

My readings have succeeded by surprising the audiences. The story surprises them in the first place, being something the like of which they have not heard before. And my way of reading surprises them in the second place, because I don't flourish a paper-knife and stamp about the platform, and thump the reading desk. I persist in keeping myself in the background and the story in front. The audience begins at each reading with silent astonishment, and ends with a great burst of applause.
As to the money, if I could read often enough I should bring back a little fortune in spite of the panic. The hard times have been against me of course, but while others have suffered badly I have always drawn audiences. Here, for example, they give me a fee for a reading on Tuesday evening next—it amounts to between £70 and £80 (English). If I could read five times a week at this rate (which is my customary rate), here is £350 a week, which is not bad pay for an hour and three-quarters reading each night. But I cannot read five times a week without knocking myself up, and this I won't do. And then I have been mismanaged and cheated by my agents—have had to change them and start afresh with a new man. The result has been loss of time and loss of money. But I am *investing* in spite of it, and (barring accidents) I am in a fair way to make far more than I have made yet before the last fortnight in March, when I propose to sail for home. I am going 'Out West' from this, and I *may* get as far as the Mormons.
The nigger waiters (I like them better than the American waiters) are ringing the dinner bell. I must go and feed off a variety of badly cooked meats and vegetables ranged round me in (say) forty soap dishes. Otherwise I am comfortable

here; I have got the Russian Grand Duke's bedroom, and a parlour in which I can shake hands with my visitors and a box at the theatre, and the freedom of the club.'

The reference at the beginning to Frederick's calling at Gloucester Place would seem to indicate that Caroline Graves was installed there once more, and was in regular receipt of letters from Wilkie. Although he moved west from Buffalo, giving readings at Cleveland and Chicago on January 8th and 16th the projected tour ' as far as the Mormons ' fell through, perhaps because he felt unequal to the strain of travelling further long distances by train. Instead, he toured a number of towns in New England. In a postscript he mentioned that ' Providence (the city, not the Deity) paid me 400 dollars in spite of the panic.'

At home there was talk of reviving *The New Magdalen* and Wilkie was kept informed of developments by his friend Frank Archer. A certain Stefan Polès, of doubtful nationality and repute, whom Archer describes as ' a skilful linguist of persuasive, insinuating manners,' had been given some vague commission to look after Wilkie's interests in connection with the play. He seems to have been in the first instance an acquaintance of Reade, who had employed him in some capacity before introducing him to Wilkie's notice. Polès, of slight build with small searching eyes, bore, it is said, a marked resemblance to a well-known Russian spy. During Wilkie's absence in the States, Polès had been trying to negotiate a revival of *The New Magdalen* at the tiny Charing Cross Theatre where there had been for some time an unbroken run of failures. Against his better judgment Wilkie gave his consent upon learning from Ada Cavendish that she had taken the theatre on her own responsibility. Writing to Archer on January 8th, he hoped he would be able to play Julian Gray again, and asked him for news of ' how this venturesome Charing Cross experiment promises to turn out.'

Some three weeks later he learned that the revival plan had fallen through and that someone, presumably Polès,

had entered into negotiations on his behalf to present the play at the Holborn Amphitheatre, a totally unsuitable home for it. His next letter to Archer is dated January 27th, 1874, from St. James' Hotel, Boston:

A thousand thanks for your kind attention to my interests. *Nobody* has any right to sanction any performance of the 'Magdalen' in London but myself. Nobody has any authority to sign an agreement for me. They must be mad—I can account for the selection of the Holborn Amphitheatre and the utter setting aside of my rights in the matter in no other way.
I write by this mail to caution Miss Cavendish—without mentioning to whom I am indebted for my knowledge of the state of affairs. I also write to my lawyer (this is between ourselves) to tell him to interfere at once if any new absurdity is perpetrated in my absence. You will be adding to the service which I already owe to your friendly kindness, if you will inform him of any new attempt to produce the piece without my authority.

Henceforth Polès disappears from the story, and all we know is that he died in Middlesex Hospital where his body was unclaimed. The play was in fact revived a year later at the theatre first selected, the Charing Cross.

At the St. James' Hotel, Boston, a reception was given in Wilkie's honour to which were invited Longfellow, Mark Twain, Whittier and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Whittier and Mark Twain made speeches and Holmes read a tribute in verse. We learn, on the authority of the *Boston Evening Transcript,* that 'each gentleman was presented with a bonbon box, in shape and size like the cabinet edition of Mr. Collins' works, covered in Turkey morocco, and containing the author's photograph and autograph, the number of his important works corresponding with the number present at the reception.' The same newspaper provided a voice for the Pecksniffs who had been gathering their forces in and around Boston since his first visit. 'It is surprising,' wrote the editor, 'that an Englishman with the reputation and favour enjoyed by Wilkie Collins, should be willing to create such an impression as the reading of *The Dream Woman*

creates, and having created it, knowingly to spread it all over New England by nightly repetitions. Great names are not achieved by such work, nor can they long survive such.' For his Farewell Reading at Boston he decided to try a different story, and dug out of his trunk the old play, *The Frozen Deep*. Having refurbished it in narrative form he read it to an appreciative audience at Parker's Hall on February 27th.

It was now nearly six months since he had sailed from England and he was due to return home. After a farewell dinner in New York with Fechter, whom he never saw again, he sailed on March 7th from Boston on the s.s. *Parthia*. To Oliver Wendell Holmes he wrote:

I must say (most imperfectly) in writing that I am indeed gratefully sensible of all that I owe to your cordial welcome, and that I shall prize as long as I live the charming little poem which speaks to me of your genius and your kindness whenever I look at it. Farewell, dear Doctor Holmes, *for the present*. I have few dearer hopes than the hope of my return to America.

Whilst at sea he wrote to another American friend, Cyrus T. Field: 'I leave America with feelings of sincere gratitude and sincere respect. If all goes well with me, my first visit to my kind friends in the United States shall not be my last.' It is doubtful if he really expected to cross the Atlantic again.

Wilkie must have earned something like £2,500 in the course of his American tour. Any disappointment he may have felt that the Readings had been less successful or less profitable than he hoped at the outset, was mitigated by his real enjoyment of the tour. He returned home with the sincerest admiration for the American people and with a deep appreciation of their hospitality, their good humour and their fresh outlook on life. Unlike Dickens he made no violent criticisms of his hosts and in consequence left no enemies behind. If he missed the kind of triumph that Dickens had enjoyed on his last tour of the States, at least there can be no doubt of the genuine welcome accorded to

him as a novelist by the American public. The dry winter climate of the Eastern States he could not praise too highly. A few days after his return he said to Lucy Walford, 'I was never better in my life. I did not have an ache or a pain all the time. As for gout, it left me entirely for the time being. I shall certainly crack up America as *the* place for sufferers from rheumatic gout. And whatever else I can say in its favour I will, for a kinder, warmer-hearted set of people surely does not exist—only their ways *are* queer.'

His two 'Readings,' the narrative versions of *The Dream Woman* and *The Frozen Deep,* were published by Bentley in November, 1874, together with a story *John Jago's Ghost, or The Dead Alive,* written during his stay in America and based upon a murder trial at Manchester, Vermont which had in its day caused a great sensation. The two volumes were entitled *The Frozen Deep and other Tales: Readings and Writings in America.* The English edition was dedicated to Oliver Wendell Holmes 'in sincere admiration of his genius and in cordial remembrance of our intercourse during my visit to America.'