

CHAPTER FOUR

The Dickens Circle

IN VIEW OF the many friends and acquaintances they possessed in common, it is remarkable that Wilkie Collins and Dickens did not meet before 1851. Wilkie's friend, Augustus Egg, who assisted not only at the Blandford Square theatricals but also at the grander entertainments organised by Charles Dickens at his house in Devonshire Terrace, received the following letter from Dickens, written on 8th March, 1851 :

My dear Egg,—I think *you* told *me* that Mr. Wilkie Collins would be glad to play any part in Bulwer's comedy; and I think *I* told *you* that I considered him a very desirable recruit. There is a Valet, called (as I remember) Smart—a small part, but, what there is of it, decidedly good; he opens the play—which I should be delighted to assign to him, and in which he would have an opportunity of dressing your humble servant, frothing some chocolate with an obsolete milling-machine that must be revived for the purpose, arranging the room, and dispatching other similar 'business,' dear to actors. Will you undertake to ask him if I shall cast him in this part? If yes, I will call him to the reading on Wednesday; have the pleasure of leaving my card for him (say where), and beg him to favour us with his company at dinner on Wednesday evening. I knew his father well, and should be very glad to know him.

Wilkie lost no time in accepting the invitation and the two writers met a few days later at Ivy Cottage, Egg's house in Bayswater. Thus began a friendship which was only to end with Dickens' death nearly twenty years later.

Dickens was in his fortieth year; *David Copperfield* had

been recently published and for two years the novelist had been editing his own periodical *Household Words*. His industry was tremendous. Besides writing his novels, engaging in amateur theatricals on the grand scale, editing and contributing to his magazine, communicating with a host of friends in a flood of brilliant letters, bringing up a large family and undertaking periodical Reading Tours in the provinces, he still contrived to live a crowded social life and even to find, on those seemingly rare occasions when his energies flagged, some quiet relaxation such as a country walk.

Dickens was a many-sided personality, and each of his biographers from Forster down to the present day, has, from much the same raw material, fashioned a different figure. In one respect, however, there is substantial agreement. Most of the biographers express surprise that their subject should have become intimate with one whom they regard as so unworthy of his friendship, so obviously his intellectual inferior as Wilkie Collins. Collins is usually dismissed as a mere second-rater, a seeker after pleasure, possessed of none of Dickens' warmth of character or broad humanity.

Dickens, like other great men with a genius for friendship, was surrounded by a crowd of admirers, each of whom strove towards a greater intimacy than the next and among whom, partly for that reason, disharmony was not rare. Two contemporaries who wrote extensively about their idol after his death were Percy Fitzgerald and, of course, Forster. Neither was at any pains to disguise his hostility towards Wilkie Collins, the one by calculated omission, the other by direct statement. The less important of the two, Fitzgerald, was a prolific novelist and journalist of the mid-Victorian era, most of whose work has been long forgotten. He sought to establish, in his last book,† a claim to have been Dickens' closest friend, the one in whose company alone the Great Man relaxed and spoke his inmost thoughts. Hardly

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

a shred of evidence is adduced in support of this fantasy, which does not bear investigation. Fitzgerald only knew Dickens for the last seven years of his life and nowhere is there any suggestion from a third party that he stood in any different relationship to him from the other 'Dickens' young men' who contributed to *All The Year Round*.

Fitzgerald's efforts to foist his claim upon the public, at a time when nearly all Dickens' contemporaries were safely buried, involved him in a systematic belittling of those close to Dickens during his later years, and in particular of Wilkie Collins. 'I always think,' Fitzgerald wrote, 'that Dickens' noble, unselfish, generous nature expended itself rather vainly on such a character, certainly not endowed with anything likely to respond to such affection.' Then follows the surprising admission: 'Not that I knew him sufficiently to judge him, but he had not the warm and rather romantic tone of feeling that 'Boz' looked for.'

Forster's case was different. He had, of course, been Dickens' closest friend for fifteen years when Wilkie Collins came upon the scene. He had acquired that distinction by virtue of his intelligence and acumen, his forthrightness and his sincere admiration of one who frankly liked to be admired; he had managed to retain his position despite his proprietary attitude towards Dickens and his rather childish jealousy which was the occasion of many an embarrassing scene. Dickens frequently sought Forster's advice in literary as well as business matters, and through his assistance was much relieved of the irksome details of the writer's profession. Dickens trusted his judgment, and valued his friendship highly. At the same time, there were aspects of Forster's character that Dickens found, as he grew more restless in middle age, harder to tolerate. He lacked both humour and tact; he was inclined to be dogmatic and to stand upon his dignity to the point of pomposity. His North Country dourness became more and more of a damper on Dickens' periodic exuberance of spirits.

At this period of Dickens' life, he was under considerable

mental strain. Apart from the bewildering variety of his activities, his domestic affairs were not running smoothly. Although appearances were still maintained, he and Catherine were gradually drifting apart. In such circumstances Dickens needed someone in whose company he could forget his eminence, his domestic worries, even his public, and who would yet lend a sympathetic ear when the mood was upon him to talk of his troubles. Forster's was not the temperament to cope with this new situation.

From the moment he met Wilkie Collins, Dickens seems to have taken him to his heart. Here was a man, clever, amusing, young—Wilkie was then 27—who enjoyed good food and wine, and yet who already displayed in his calling those qualities of industry and application to which he attached such great importance. In short, here was at least a promising recruit to the little band of 'Mr. Dickens' young men,' and perhaps even the kind of companion of whom he stood in need.

Forster's possessive instinct was aroused at the outset. With his notorious lack of tact, he was heard to comment unfavourably upon Dickens' new acquaintance. When, in the face of his disapproval, the acquaintance ripened into lasting friendship, Forster made the grudging admission some years later that 'Collins was a decidedly clever fellow,' which was reported by Dickens forthwith to his sister-in-law, Georgina Hogarth, with unconcealed satisfaction. Notwithstanding the sincere efforts made over many years by Wilkie, whose nature was without a spark of jealousy, the two men never became friends. Forster never forgave him for having appropriated his position. Forster remained Dickens' friend until the end, but he ceased to enjoy the privileged relationship to which he felt entitled. For details of the last two decades of Dickens' life his biographer had to rely more on the testimony of others than on the first-hand knowledge and voluminous personal correspondence which had supplied the material for the earlier years. For this Forster held Collins largely responsible and retaliated, in his biography

of Dickens, with a display of pettiness which only mars what is unquestionably a great book. The references to Collins in Forster's *Life* are deliberately reduced to a minimum, and do scant justice to the part he played in the last twenty years of Dickens' life. It is difficult to attribute such omission to any other motive than jealousy.

Later biographers of Dickens seem to have taken their cue from Forster and are content to deplore instead of trying to explain the undoubted influence of Collins on the other novelist. Insofar as this influence extended to Dickens' writing, it may have been detrimental—although this is a matter of opinion, but there is little doubt that in Collins' company he spent some of the happiest periods of his life. A study of the published letters from Dickens to his friend hardly supports the suggestion, made by Dame Una Pope-Hennessy in her *Charles Dickens*, that Collins was merely 'the indispensable companion of his more frivolous hours.'

The performance of Bulwer-Lytton's comedy *Not So Bad as we Seem* duly took place on May 16th, 1851, at Devonshire House, in the presence of the Queen and Prince Consort. The Duke of Devonshire not only lent his house for the occasion but temporarily converted the great drawing-room into a theatre and the library into a green-room. He entertained the company to supper after the performance and Dickens' earliest surviving letter to Wilkie concerns the latter's request that a certain friend might be included in this invitation. Dickens makes rather heavy weather of it but concludes by giving way: 'I do not like to refuse compliance with any wish of my faithful and attached valet, whom I greatly esteem.'

This production of Lytton's play was the first public venture of the Guild of Literature and Art, an organisation sponsored by Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton for the purpose of providing a fund for indigent authors and artists in sickness and old age; or, to quote the playbill, "To encourage Life Assurance and other Provident Habits among Authors and

Artists; to render such assistance to both as shall never compromise their independence; and to found a few Institutions where honourable rest from arduous labour shall still be associated with the discharge of congenial duties.' All seats for the Devonshire House production were sold at £5 apiece, and with further performances at the Hanover Square Rooms and in the provinces, an initial total of £4,000 was raised for the Fund.

The provincial tour, which took place during 1852, was highly successful and reached its climax in the concluding performances at Liverpool and Manchester where an audience of nearly 3,000 stood up and cheered. Besides Dickens, the company included Mark Lemon, famous editor of *Punch*, Douglas Jerrold, Tenniel and Augustus Egg. Early in the tour Jerrold deserted them without warning, and Wilkie Collins took over his roles for the remaining performances. In a letter to Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens said that Wilkie 'fell upon his new part with great alacrity and heartiness,' and wrote to his wife, 'Collins was *admirable*—got up excellently, played thoroughly well, and missed nothing.' Wilkie assured his mother that he was not in the least nervous before these large audiences.

In addition to Lytton's comedy the Guild company produced on tour Charles Mathews' *Used Up* and a farce by Dickens and Mark Lemon entitled *Mr. Nightingale's Diary* in which Wilkie Collins played Lithers, landlord of the 'Water Lily.' In some quarters the programmes were regarded as too frivolous. Writing from the Royal Hotel, Derby, Wilkie told his mother: 'Here the parsons have been preaching against us. One reverend gentleman, we hear, solemnly adjured his flock, all through last Sunday evening's sermon, not to compromise their salvation by entering our Theatre. Considering that we do not act on Sunday evening, and that congregations are to let on weekdays, these parsonic prohibitions seem slightly unreasonable.'

Forster's account of the provincial tour contains the one generous reference to Collins in the whole of the *Life*: 'Mr.



WILKIE COLLINS
(c. 1865)

By courtesy of Picture Post Libra

Wilkie Collins became for all the rest of the life of Dickens one of his dearest and most valued friends.' Shortly after the conclusion of the tour we find Wilkie and Egg staying with Dickens at 10, Camden Crescent, Dover, 'within a minute's walk of baths and bathing-machines.' In letters home Wilkie described the pleasant life they led. Breakfast was at 10 minutes past 8 sharp, after which Dickens would disappear into his study until 2 o'clock, when he would be 'available for every pleasant social purpose that can be imagined for the rest of the day,' such as a long country walk, or a swim in the sea. Dinner was at half-past five, often followed by card games played for modest stakes, and bedtime between ten and eleven. One evening Dickens read the opening chapters of *Bleak House*, 'making his audience laugh and cry with equal fervour and equal sincerity.' When Wilkie suffered an acute attack of earache and face-ache he was cosseted by Mrs. Dickens, and cured in no time. Invited to stay an extra week, he accepted with alacrity.

Wilkie was now living with his mother and brother at 17, Hanover Terrace, a pleasant Regency house facing the Park, the family having moved from the less elegant neighbourhood of Blandford Square in August, 1850. Mrs. Collins entertained a good deal at Hanover Terrace and her small dinner-parties acquired quite a reputation among her son's friends. She was in many ways a remarkable woman. Millais found her a charming hostess and would make an elaborate pretence of being in love with her, a game in which Mrs. Collins, who possessed a keen sense of humour, joined with spirit. Holman Hunt recalls, in his autobiography, her telling him that many years earlier Coleridge had singled her out at an evening party and had discoursed to her for nearly half an hour 'in the highest strains of poetical philosophy.' She had not understood one word and only remembered a stream of eloquence pouring from the lips of a man who had fixed her with large and brilliant blue eyes.

She held decided views on domesticity and considered that

Mrs. E. M. Ward should have abandoned Art when she married, telling her that if she devoted her energies to the home, to tending and cooking for her husband and to making the children's clothes, there would be no time left for painting. She had her eccentricities; according to Mrs. Ward's son Leslie, who later became 'Spy' the cartoonist, 'she wore her kid boots carefully down on one side and then reversed them and wore them down on the other.' He also records her horror of Highlanders, whose kilts she regarded as scandalous. Dickens' daughter Kate, who became Mrs. Collins' daughter-in-law, summed her up as 'a woman of great wit and humour—but a Devil!' If she appeared thus to those outside her immediate family, she was an affectionate and indulgent mother, and both sons were very attached to her.

Holman Hunt was a frequent guest at 17, Hanover Terrace. He describes Wilkie at this time as 'slight of build, about five feet six inches in height, with an impressive head, the cranium being noticeably more prominent on the right side than the left, which inequality did not amount to a disfigurement; perhaps indeed it gave a stronger impression of intellectual power.' He adds that Wilkie was 'redundant in pleasant temperament.'

A year or so earlier, towards the end of 1849, Millais, Holman Hunt and the Rossettis had founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Despite the propaganda put out by *The Germ*, the official voice of the Movement, the public was confused as to the aims and methods of the Pre-Raphaelites. Wilkie Collins, although not a member of the Brotherhood, was one of its earliest supporters and was once pressed to write an article, designed for the widest circulation, explaining the Movement and trying to correct the public's misapprehensions. The Collins' house in Hanover Terrace was a favourite venue of the P-R.B.s, who were accustomed to call at tea-time and consume vast quantities of bread and butter washed down with beer or sherry-cobbler.

Wilkie's brother, Charles, though not a 'founder-member,' soon became an enthusiastic adherent of the Pre-Raphaelites. Unfortunately their self-imposed style did not entirely suit his talent, a fact which probably contributed to his abandonment of painting in favour of literature some years later. Charles Collins was a highly-strung man, much given to sudden enthusiasms and extreme attitudes. Shortly after joining the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood he adopted a most severe form of religious conduct. He began to observe Church fasts and other ordinances with a rigid self-discipline. Wilkie, always the more worldly of the two, became concerned less for his brother's spiritual well-being than for his physical health, which had never been robust and was unlikely to benefit from such abstinence. He wisely persuaded Hunt and his friends not to worry Charles by commenting on his eccentricities, as Millais persisted in doing, but rather to leave him alone to his religious devices, until he tired of them. Within a few months, to his brother's relief, Charles became once again his normal self.

Wilkie Collins' entry into the Dickens' circle brought him many new friends. Among them was W. H. Wills, Dickens' sub-editor—or assistant-editor as he would be called today—on the staff of *Household Words*, who was married to a sister of Robert Chambers, the Edinburgh publisher. Robert's daughter, Nina Chambers, whom Wilkie had met at the Wills' house, married shortly afterwards Frederick Lehmann, a Leith merchant and the son of a German portrait painter. His friendship with the Lehmanns was an enduring one and later extended to their three children. In the early years of this century, R. C. Lehmann, Frederick's son, wrote: 'Wilkie Collins was the kindest and best friend that boy or man ever had. To us he was not merely the grown-up and respected friend of our parents, but our own true companion and close associate.' †

† *Memories of Half a Century*. R. C. Lehmann. (Smith, Elder, 1908.)

The influence of Dickens on Wilkie Collins' writing soon showed itself. Prompted no doubt by the enormous sales of Dickens' Christmas Books, perhaps encouraged by 'Boz' himself, Wilkie produced in January, 1852, a Christmas story of his own, *Mr. Wray's Cash Box*. Based, so the author tells us, upon an actual incident that happened to the Shakespeare bust at Stratford-on-Avon, *Mr. Wray's Cash Box* is a trivial little sketch, remarkable only for its successful imitation of the Dickens' model.

Wilkie's first contribution to *Household Words*, a story in the Grand Guignol manner called 'A Terribly Strange Bed', appeared on April 24th, 1852. This sensational tale of a four-poster-bed designed to smother its occupant, has appeared in several anthologies of the macabre, and is said to have been based on fact. It points the way in which, after one or two false starts, Wilkie Collins' talents were to develop most effectively.

For some months he had been at work on a long novel which was to unfold a melodramatic story against a background of everyday middle-class life. It marked a departure from the conventional mid-Victorian novel in which high society provided the only possible setting for the passions and pangs of love. So much we learn from the Preface to *Basil*, as the novel was ultimately named:

Directing my characters and my story towards the light of Reality wherever I could find it, I have not hesitated to violate some of the conventionalities of sentimental fiction . . . In certain parts of this book where I have attempted to excite the suspense or pity of the reader, I have admitted as perfectly fit accessories to the scene the most ordinary street-sounds that could be heard, and the most ordinary street-events that could occur, believing that by adding to the truth, they were adding to tragedy.

Few Wilkie Collins novels are without a Preface. Rejecting Dickens' argument that a work of fiction should be left to tell its own story, he remained addicted to preface-writing to the end. However deplorable they may be on artistic

grounds, these Prefaces are of interest in revealing something of the writer. They underline his intentions, even where these are perfectly clear from the pages that follow; they tell us a little of his working methods; they are sometimes addressed to his critics, not always in terms calculated to evoke a favourable review; from time to time they attack the prudes, or the snobs; but above all they seek to establish a closer relationship between author and reader. The reader is often warned, sometimes encouraged, occasionally flattered, but all the time Wilkie is assuring him of the author's friendly interest in him, an interest which he modestly hopes will be reciprocated.

Although we cannot be certain, it is probable that Wilkie had recently undergone a violent emotional experience and wrote *Basil* as a form of catharsis. Indeed he goes so far as to state: 'I have founded the main event out of which this story springs, on a fact within my own knowledge. In afterwards shaping the course of the narrative thus suggested, I have guided it where I knew by my own experience or by experience related to me by others, that it would touch on something real and true in its progress.' The course of the narrative suggests that the experience was not a happy one for Wilkie, though it may well have been valuable to him as a novelist.

Basil is the story of a young man's infatuation with a worthless girl of inferior social position, his strange form of marriage to her, and her seduction by another man before the marriage is consummated; the latter part of the novel deals with the seducer's hunting down of Basil, who has disfigured him for life. Basil himself is a colourless figure, vacillating and foolish. Although he bears some superficial resemblance to the author—he is for instance engaged upon an historical novel—Wilkie does not seem to have put much of himself into the character. More interesting are the two fathers, the one inordinately proud of his ancient family, the other a successful linen-draper, mean and hypocritical, by far the greater snob. The gulf that separates their two classes

is an essential part of the plot, and the author's acceptance of current social conventions land him into situations which today approach the ludicrous. Basil's father—who in some respects calls to mind William Collins—has just learned of his son's marriage in a tradesman's family :

' I did not come prepared to hear that unutterable disgrace had been cast on me and mine, by my own child. I have no words or rebuke or of condemnation for this: the reproach and the punishment have fallen already where the guilt was—and not there only. My son's infamy defiles his brother's birthright, and puts his father to shame. Even his sister's name—' He stopped, shuddering. When he proceeded his voice faltered and his head drooped low. ' I say it again. You are below all reproach and all condemnation.'

The most successful character is the seducer, Mannion. As the *déclassé* confidential clerk who carries out his duties to perfection, he is admirably drawn, and it is only when the mask is lifted that one recognises some features of the stock villain of melodrama. Even so Wilkie is careful to furnish him with a credible excuse for his villainy and to obtain for him a measure of the reader's sympathy.

The scene in which Basil virtually witnesses in an adjoining room, Mannion's seduction of his wife is described with uncommon realism: ' I listened; and through the thin partition, I heard voices—*her* voice, and *his* voice. *I heard and I knew*—knew my degradation in all its infamy, knew my wrongs in all their nameless horror.' The reviewer of *Antonina* who had written: ' We must warn Mr. Collins against the vices of the French school—against the needless accumulation of revolting details—against catering for a prurient taste,' doubtless felt that his advice had been deliberately rejected. Perhaps he might have been included among ' those persons who deny that it is the novelist's vocation to do more than merely amuse them; who shrink from all honest and serious reference, in books, to subjects which they think of in private and talk of in public everywhere; who see covert implications where nothing is implied, and improper allusions where nothing improper is alluded to; whose inno-

cence is in the word, and not in the thought; whose morality stops at the tongue, and never gets on to the heart.' To them, concludes Collins in his Preface, 'I do not address myself in this book, and shall never think of addressing myself to them in any other.'

Basil : A Story of Modern Life was published by Bentley in three volumes in November, 1852. The work met with a mixed reception, and, not surprisingly, was attacked in some quarters as being immoral. The reviewer of *The Athenaeum* took the opportunity to pontificate: 'Mr. Collins should know that the proper office of Art is to elevate and purify in pleasing.' After charging the author with adopting the 'æsthetics of the Old Bailey,' he sums up: '*Basil* is a tale of criminality, almost revolting from its domestic horror. The vicious atmosphere . . . weighs on us like a nightmare.' Wilkie's somewhat naïve attempt in his Preface to disarm criticism of this type, failed completely. On the other hand, there was much praise for the telling of the story, and it was generally agreed that the author had succeeded in what he had, so misguidedly, set out to do.

In many respects *Basil* marks a great advance, particularly in the creation of atmosphere and the description of scene. The drawing-room at North Villa affects the reader as it affected Basil, waiting for an interview with his future father-in-law:

Never was a richly furnished room more thoroughly comfortless than this—the eye ached at looking round it. There was no repose anywhere. The print of the Queen, hanging lonely on the wall, in its heavy gilt frame, with a large crown at the top, glared at you: the books, the wax flowers in glass-cases, the chairs in flaring chintz-covers, the china plates on the door, the blue and pink glass vases and cups ranged on the chimney-piece, the over-ornamented chiffoniers with Tonbridge toys and long-necked smelling bottles on their upper shelves—all glared on you. There was no look of shadow, shelter, secrecy, or retirement in any one nook or corner of those four gaudy walls. All surrounding objects seemed startlingly near to the eye; much nearer than they really were. The room would have given

a nervous man a headache, before he had been in it a quarter of an hour.

A copy of *Basil* had, of course, been sent to Dickens, probably with some misgivings on the part of the author, since Dickens took, on the whole, a narrow view of the bounds of literary propriety. A week or two elapsed before Wilkie received the following letter :

Tavistock House,

Monday, 20th December, 1852.

My dear Collins,—If I did not know that you are likely to have a forbearing remembrance of my occupation, I should be full of remorse for not having sooner thanked you for *Basil*.

Not to play the sage or the critic (neither of which parts, I hope, is at all in my line), but to say what is the friendly truth, I may assure you that I have read the book with very great interest, and with a very thorough conviction that you have a call to this same art of fiction. I think the probabilities here and there require a little more respect than you are disposed to show them, and I have no doubt that the prefatory letter would have been better away, on the ground that a book (of all things) should speak for and explain itself. But the story contains admirable writing, and many clear evidences of a very delicate discrimination of character. It is delightful to find throughout that you have taken great pains with it besides, and have 'gone at it' with a perfect knowledge of the jolter-headedness of the conceited idiots who suppose that volumes are to be tossed off like pancakes, and that any writing can be done without the utmost application, the greatest patience, and the steadiest energy of which the writer is capable.

For all these reasons I have made *Basil's* acquaintance with great gratification, and entertain a high respect for him. I hope that I shall become intimate with many worthy descendants of his, who are yet in the limbo of creatures waiting to be born.

Wilkie could hardly have hoped for more generous encouragement from one whom he regarded as the greatest literary figure of his time.