

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Last Years

DURING THE LAST ten years of his life Wilkie withdrew from society more and more. Whilst it is an exaggeration to state, as does the *Dictionary of National Biography*, that he became a hermit, he certainly avoided public functions almost entirely, dined out infrequently and then only at the homes of his more intimate friends such as the Lehmanns, and entertained hardly at all. This way of living was not so much of his own choosing as dictated by health considerations. By the year 1880 he was a semi-invalid, immured in his house for long periods. Though still in his middle fifties, he was already an old man. 'Your Wilkie is getting old,' he had written a year earlier, '—there is no mistake about that!' He was often unable to eat a normal diet. Sometimes at dinner he would take only bread soaked in meat gravy, and would then get up in the middle of the night and have cold soup and champagne—dry champagne, of course. His doctor warned him against meat, but his adherence to doctor's orders was not always strict. Writing to thank the Padrona for a parcel of butter which arrived 'on the very day when I was thinking of keeping a private cow in the backyard and presiding myself over the pastoral churn,' he added a post-script: 'Oh! I was foolish enough to eat slices of plain joints two days following. The bilious miseries that followed proved obstinate until I most fortunately ate some *pâté de foie gras*. The cure was instantaneous—and lasting.' A year or so later he is requesting 'weak brandy-and-water and NO wholesome joints' in his acceptance of an invitation to lunch;

on another occasion he asked the Padrona to order a handy stick with which to rap him over the knuckles 'if you find me raising to my guilty and gouty lips any other liquor than weak brandy-and-water.'

An affecting letter to Frederick Lehmann describes what had become virtually his normal state of health: 'The inflammatory and painful part of this last gouty visitation is at an end. Weakness is now the obstacle to be got over—my knees tremble on the stairs and my back aches after half an hour's walking—no, *tottering*—on the sunny side of the street. I am told to drive out—but I won't. An airing in a carriage is (to me) such a depressing proceeding that I am ready to burst out crying when I only think of it. I will get stronger on my wretched old legs, and report myself in Berkeley Square as soon as I have ceased to be a human wet blanket.' Wybert Reeve records that for exercise he used often to walk up and down stairs with the aid of the balusters, many times on end. Few of his friends expected that he would last another ten years.

Early in 1880, at Frederick's request, he sat to Rudolf Lehmann for a portrait which was to be a present to the Padrona, and the artist has left his impressions of the sitter, in print as well as on canvas. Wilkie would arrive at the studio muffled up in the heavy fur coat which he had acquired during his American tour. He was a good sitter, as befitted 'the true son of a Royal Academician.' His face was pallid and smooth, with hardly a wrinkle. Rudolf Lehmann remarks, as others have done, upon the curious congenital swelling on the right side of his forehead, and tells us that he chose for the portrait an aspect which partly concealed this malformation. Wilkie himself used to refer to it, complaining that Nature had got him 'all out of drawing,' in addition to giving him a short body quite out of proportion to his unusually large head. His eyes, according to the painter, had a weird, far-off look about them, giving the impression that they 'invested almost everything with an air of mystery and romance.' He would ply Lehmann with ques-

tions about this or that object which caught his attention. Once it was a door which formed part of an improvised partition. Having stared at it for some time he asked in a whisper, 'Where does that lead to? It looks as if it opened into a subterranean vault or passage, and might easily be an escapada in case of sudden surprise,' and fell into a deep reverie. He never lost this desire—it was indeed almost a compulsion—to weave a story around the most trivial incident. In one of the later books he wrote: 'Not one man in ten thousand, living in the midst of reality, has discovered that he is also living in the midst of romance.' He himself made this discovery very early in his life, and saw in that special awareness the quality which, basically, distinguishes the novelist from his fellow-men.

Broken down in health though he was, he carried on writing as hard as ever to meet the steady demand for his books, resting only when blinded with gout and tortured by rheumatic pains. Work was for him an anodyne hardly less effective than his opium. In eight out of the ten years that were left to him a new book by Wilkie Collins appeared in Chatto and Windus' list. In 1880, they published *Jezebel's Daughter*, adapted from his play *The Red Vial* which had so miserably failed twenty years before. For some time he had been pondering this notion of turning it in to a book. Twelve years before he had even lighted upon 'a splendid idea for boiling down *The Lighthouse*, *The Frozen Deep* and *The Red Vial* into *one novel*,' and offering it to 'the penny journals.' The operation may have involved more boiling than he anticipated, for he proceeded no further.

It is not difficult to detect the germ from which this somewhat crude melodrama sprang. As a young man he had visited Frankfurt and had been shown round the mortuary, or Deadhouse, as he preferred to call it. In the course of his inspection he learned that at one time a superstitious fear of being buried alive had been common throughout Germany, and that it still prevailed to some extent in Frankfurt. As a precaution against such a calamity the Dead-

house authorities had long since established, and still carried on, a particularly grisly practice. To the fingers of each corpse a series of strings was attached, leading to a bell. Any movement on the part of the 'corpse' would thereby automatically ring the bell and rouse the attendants. It hardly needed the macabre imagination of a Wilkie Collins to reflect upon the situation of a cadaver thus dramatically announcing its own resurrection. Such indeed is the climax of *Jezebel's Daughter*, a kind of Walpurgisnacht performed by a madman, a murderess and a drunken nightwatchman. Of the authenticity of the setting we are left in no doubt, being told in the Preface 'that the accessories of the scenes in the Deadhouse of Frankfurt have been studied on the spot. The published rules and ground-plans of that famous mortuary establishment have also been laid on my desk, as aids to memory while I was writing the closing passages of the story.'

The story, as a whole, though readable enough, is merely a structure to support the sensational climax and displays little of the ingenuity that might have marked its development had he written it twenty years earlier. None of the characters come fully to life, and if Madame Fontaine, the Jezebel of the title, occasionally recalls Lydia Gwilt she also serves as a melancholy reminder of how far below that standard his writing had fallen; nor can we share the author's interest in Jack Straw, yet another of his mentally deranged characters. For the rest, there is more than enough of obscure poisons and their antidotes—a subject which never ceased to fascinate him—and too little of that careful creation of atmosphere in which the most sensational event carries conviction.

The Black Robe, published a year later and serialised in *The Canadian Monthly*, is probably the best of the later books. Begun as an attack on the Jesuits, whom he depicts as engaged in a world-wide conspiracy to further their power and influence, it develops into a fairly straightforward sensation-novel. The propaganda element is kept well in

check. The pace seldom drags and there is far less padding than is usually found in these later novels. Two characters stand out. In Mrs. Eyrecourt, the heroine's mother, Wilkie succeeds for once in drawing a satirical portrait which stops short of caricature. We are introduced to a vain, sophisticated, frivolous woman of Society, pursuing with tireless energy the seasonal round of social engagements. Only when her daughter's interests are threatened does Mrs. Eyrecourt reveal beneath this brittle exterior not only the normal instincts of a mother but unsuspected strength of character. In acumen and resourcefulness she becomes a match for Father Benwell, the Jesuit priest who dominates the story. Father Benwell, an important figure in a network of religious intrigue with headquarters in Rome, makes a most satisfying villain. In plotting the restitution to the Catholic Church of a valuable estate, he displays something of Count Fosco's ingenuity and suave arrogance.

Sending a copy of *The Black Robe* to his friend Winter in New York, Wilkie wrote: 'It is thought, on the European side of the Atlantic, in Roman Catholic countries as well as in Protestant England, to be the best thing I have written for some time. And it is memorable to *me* as having produced a freely offered gift of forty pounds from one of the pirates who have seized it on the American side!'

During the year 1881, he sought the services of A. P. Watt, founder of the earliest firm of literary agents, in disposing of the rights of his next book. This was a remarkable move for one who had in the past revelled in the commercial side of his calling, who so obviously delighted in bargaining with publishers and making the most of his market. But with advancing years he had lost some of his zest for these things, and may have found that competition was becoming stiffer. The initial transaction with Watt, successfully concluded, was followed by others, and within a few months he established himself as Wilkie's literary agent, handling nearly all negotiations on his behalf. His letters to Watt have been preserved and reveal the steady

development of a professional association into a warm personal friendship. They also show, incidentally, the elaborate care with which Wilkie tackled the intricacies of serial publication, his strict routine for the correcting of proofs and for the despatch of advance sheets to foreign periodicals. By appointing Watt his sole literary executor Wilkie demonstrated his confidence in him both as adviser and friend.

In the autumn of 1881, Wilkie had a particularly bad attack of gout which compelled him to rest for some months. He spent this period of enforced idleness at Ramsgate, which had long been his favourite watering-place and became almost a second home. During the remaining years of his life he would never leave his home in London except to go to Ramsgate. He seems invariably to have stayed at 14, Nelson Crescent, where he probably rented an apartment. The town figures in a number of his later books, including *Poor Miss Finch*, *The Two Destinies*, and *The Fallen Leaves* and he paid many a tribute to its climate, which suited him admirably. To a friend convalescing at nearby Broadstairs he wrote :

We are the Corsican Brothers of human infirmity. For three months the gout has again tortured my eyes—and here I am recovering within two miles of you! Are you well enough to get here by railway (if walking is still bad for you) and take your luncheon, on any day you like, from 2 to 2.30? I could then answer your questions in the pleasanter way—besides sparing my eyes letter-writing at length, in the interests of some light work which I am just able to do after four months of utter literary eclipse. Why don't I go to you at Broadstairs? It is the most dreadful place in the world to me now. The ghosts of my brother, Dickens, Augustus Egg, and of two other dearly-loved friends—who all lived with me at Broadstairs—now haunt the place. Two years ago I *tried* to go to Broadstairs. At the first view of 'The Fort House' the old and dear associations completely overwhelmed me and I turned back to Ramsgate.

From Ramsgate he would often go yachting in the Channel, or perhaps further afield. As late as the summer of 1886 we find him writing to Archer from Nelson Crescent: 'I

have been sailing, and I have just found your letter waiting for me here. Send the story to this address (headquarters for work after idling at sea) and I will read it with the greatest pleasure.' His enthusiasm for sailing and the sea did not diminish with the years. He could of course no longer command the physical agility and alertness which such expeditions as the 'Tomtit' cruise of his younger days demanded. Of necessity his yachting became a staid pastime. Winter recalls his dictum that the perfection of enjoyment could only be obtained 'when you are at sea in a luxurious well-appointed steam-yacht in lovely summer weather.'

As soon as he felt well enough for sustained work he began a new novel, not very happily entitled *Heart and Science*, which was to expose the horrors of vivisection. It may well have been a case heard some six months before at Bow Street which enlisted his support for the cause of dumb animals. The facts of the case have been recalled by S. M. Ellis.† David Ferrier, Professor of Forensic Medicine at King's College, was charged under the Vivisection Act with performing experiments calculated to cause suffering to two monkeys. The proceedings were brought by the Victoria Street Society for the Protection of Animals who showed that experiments had resulted in the total deafness of one monkey and paralysis of the other. The magistrate, however, dismissed the summons. Professor Ferrier is mentioned by Wilkie in the Preface.

In August, 1882, he describes himself as 'just now immersed in physiology, in my spare hours, in preparation for coming numbers of *Heart and Science*.' For six months he wrote furiously—'one part sane and three parts mad,' he told the Padrona—during the whole of which time he was miraculously free of his ailments. As soon as the book was finished he realised that he was 'half dead with fatigue,' and the very next day the gout had attacked his right eye. Henceforth he was compelled for long periods to shade the

† *Wilkie Collins, le Fanu and others*. S. M. Ellis. (Constable, 1931).

eye with a black patch. At the end of February he wrote to the Padrona: 'I am nearly well, and I pull off my black patch indoors. But I am forbidden the night air, and I am so weak that I slip down in my chair towards night, like old Rogers. But *he* was only eighty—I am a hundred.'

Heart and Science, published in April 1883, is yet another failure. This time even the plain narrative is handled clumsily and fails to grip. The persons of the story, Ovid Vere, the vacuous hero, Mrs. Gallilee, Dr. Null and Mr. Mool, are as unreal as their names; apart from Dr. Benjulia in the last volume, only the little girl Zo, who enchanted Swinburne, has any semblance of life. The anti-vivisection propaganda is hardly more than incidental to the plot, and argument is limited to the bare assertion that medical research has no need of such practices. Concern for his readers' feelings precludes him from taking them inside the laboratory. We are allowed to listen, but may not see. The book's purpose is further weakened by his belated sympathy for the vivisector himself. The character of Dr. Benjulia develops almost in spite of his creator, who shows us not an inhuman sadist, as he seems to have intended at the outset, but a man suffering deeply because of the pain he is compelled to inflict in the course of his researches.

Wilkie's immersion in the scientific literature of his day, claimed in the Preface as evidence of technical authenticity, merely enable him to sprinkle his pages with the current jargon of science. There is no awareness of the rapidly widening horizons of scientific discovery, only a spurious air of topicality which no doubt impressed the casual reader. The conflict suggested by the title is a conflict within the author himself. He found himself in a fast-changing society, a world, to use his own words, 'in the most rampant stage of development.' The old, familiar world was dying and he was inclined to be suspicious of, because he no longer fully understood, the new. The march of Science he regarded in some vague way as a threat even to those basic human emotions which endure from age to age, and for this reason

he felt impelled to restate their validity. In short, he was growing old and a little out of temper with his time.

Very different, but no less disappointing, is *I Say No*, the oddly-named novel which appeared a year later. The plot follows the pattern of his early books in that there is a 'secret' hidden, or half-hidden, from the reader until the final chapters, but there the resemblance ends. In the later novels there is a growing tendency to rely upon pure coincidence as the very mainspring of plot-construction. In *I Say No* everything hangs upon coincidence. At every turn some chance meeting, some unsuspected relationship, or some other fortunate accident is required to carry the story along. Every law of probability is heedlessly jettisoned. The result is a story which will beguile only those whose credulity can stand the strain.

I Say No marked a further round in the continuous war waged by Wilkie Collins and Harpers against the American pirates. As the story appeared in *Harpers Weekly* a Philadelphia paper was copying the instalments week by week. Since there was every chance that Harpers would be forestalled in publishing the book, Wilkie co-operated by sending them the concluding chapters in manuscript as he wrote them instead of waiting for corrected proofs of the English serial version. The result was that the book was published in New York in July, 1884, a good four months prior to its London publication.

It had been hinted more than once that Wilkie Collins during his last years had recourse to the practice known as 'ghosting.' Not a shred of evidence has been produced in support of the theory, which seems to have appeared first in an article by Arthur Waugh entitled 'Wilkie Collins: and his Mantle.'† Waugh speaks of 'that period in which, so I have been told, the pens of kindly companions helped his failing vigour to keep pace with the demands of the market.' The charge is repeated by Lewis Melville in his book, *Victorian Novelists*. All the facts seem, however, to contradict

† *Academy Magazine*. 5th April, 1902.

such a theory. First of all, Wilkie's style, undistinguished though it was—particularly in the later books, is consistently recognisable. There is a flat sameness about the last half-dozen novels, whatever may be the differences of plot and background. The falling-off in quality is fairly steady, and shows none of the sharp variations one would expect to follow the interventions of 'kindly companions.' The virtues of the later books, such as they are, are essentially Wilkie's own; clarity of expression, a certain narrative fluency and some measure of ingenuity can still be seen. Similarly, their shortcomings are his too, the overworked repertory of melodramatic tricks, the stilted dialogue, the passion for the fortuitous and the rather arch attitude towards the reader. Then there is the undoubted fact that throughout the 1880's his literary output bore a direct relationship to the state of his health; we can easily trace the periods of serious illness as being also periods of literary inactivity. In handing over his last novel to Walter Besant to complete, Wilkie provided him with a minutely-detailed scenario of the unwritten chapters. Why go to Besant at all, during his last illness, if anonymous pens were already in his service? But the most compelling argument of all is that the practice of employing ghosts would have been utterly alien to Wilkie's character and to his integrity as a writer. Throughout his career he took his work, and his duty to his readers, with the utmost seriousness. In correspondence and in the Prefaces there is the fullest evidence of this. It would be wholly inconsistent with this attitude for him to have palmed off upon a faithful public work under his name which was not entirely his own.

In April, 1883, he wrote to Frank Archer: 'Miss Lingard is to play the chief part in that new piece of mine which has been waiting for a true artist with such special capacities as the part needs.' The 'new piece' was an original melodrama in four acts entitled *Rank and Riches*, and accepted for production at the Adelphi Theatre, rival of the Olympic

as a home of melodrama. A strong cast had been assembled including George Alexander, G. W. Anson, Miss Lingard, and, in a small part, Charles Hawtrey. Everything was set for a great success. The producer, Edgar Bruce, was very confident, telling everyone, not quite accurately, that Wilkie Collins had never had a failure with any of his plays. On the first night, June 9th, 1883, A. W. Pinero recalls standing beside the author at the back of the dress-circle, just before the rise of the curtain. He noticed that Wilkie was sporting a large camellia in his buttonhole, expecting no doubt to take his bow in due time.

Nothing went right from the start. Finding the dialogue somewhat stilted and seizing upon a phrase here and there capable of more than one interpretation, the audience began to titter. Then G. W. Anson made his entrance as Mr. Dominic, a 'bird-doctor,' scattering birdseed around the stage. This was too much for the audience; the laughter became an uproar, the actors could carry on only with great difficulty and poor Miss Lingard was reduced to tears. The first act curtain came down to a chorus of 'howling, hooting and hissing,' mingled with raucous counter-cheering from the partisans of author and producer. At the end of the third act Anson, courageous if ill-advised, came before the curtain and made a short speech in which he upbraided the audience for their hostility towards the work of 'a great master' and begged them at least to show courtesy to Miss Lingard. They were however in no mood to be lectured and showed their resentment by a renewed clamour. There were shouts, according to *The Times*, of 'Bosh,' 'Nonsense,' and 'Get on with the play.' Whereupon Anson finally lost his temper, shook his fist and called them 'a lot of damned cads.' † The company got through the last act somehow, and the effect of the evening on Wilkie Collins, who was acutely

† Sir Charles Hawtrey tells us in *The Truth at Last* (Thornton Butterworth, 1924) that the regular first-nighters never forgave Anson, greeting him with yells and boos at every subsequent first-night. This treatment forced the wretched actor to leave the country for Australia, where he ended his stage career.

nervous even at a successful first-night, can be imagined. The play was quickly withdrawn.

Rank and Riches marked the end of his theatrical ventures, if one excepts the dramatisation of *The Evil Genius*, which received a single performance for copyright purposes in October, 1885. The fiasco suggests that his particular style of melodrama had outlived its vogue and that he could no longer satisfy the changing demands of the theatre-going public. It is true that *Man and Wife* and *The New Magdalen* were still considered worth reviving, and that *The Woman in White* continued to turn up in the provinces, but these plays survived as adaptations of novels still widely read, and as theatrical successes in their own right. He was still a popular dramatist in America, where, strangely enough, *Rank and Riches* enjoyed a considerable success.

In April, 1884, he suffered a great personal loss in the death of Charles Reade. To an American correspondent he wrote: 'In this country we have lately lost one of the "last of the Romans"—my dear old friend, Charles Reade. I look out for the new writer among us who is to fill that vacant place—and I fail to see him.' George Eliot had died in 1880, Trollope two years later. Of the great names of mid-Victorian fiction, Wilkie Collins survived almost alone. Who would have forecast, at the time of *The Moonstone's* appearance, that this sick man, addicted to laudanum as he was, would not only outlive his literary contemporaries, but would still retain twenty years later his hold upon the great mass of the reading public? His later work may have been inferior stuff which the critics no longer took seriously, but in a ballot organised about this time by the *Pall Mall Gazette* to decide the most popular author, Wilkie Collins outdistanced all his competitors.

In America, too, he was still a best-seller. Within a year or so he achieved eponymous fame of a somewhat unexpected kind. A well-known trotting stallion in the United States was named after him and he was delighted to receive a pam-

phlet outlining the horse's virtues and stating that 'Wilkie Collins covers mares at \$75 each.'

If many of his old friends were dead, he had not lost his gift for making new ones. Early in 1885 he met, through an introduction of William Winter, the young American actress, Mary Anderson, who had just made her London *début*. Despite the thirty-five years that separated them, they became the greatest of friends. Though generally disinclined to pay social calls any more—he used to describe himself as 'completely out of the world'—he would often visit Mary at the house in Cromwell Road where she lived with her mother and brother.

In later years Wilkie seems to have felt more at home among theatrical folk than in any other society, apart from one or two intimate friends like the Beards or the Lehmanns. Mary Anderson tells in her Memoirs† of many entertaining evenings they spent in his company, when he would tell stories of Dickens, Reade and Thackeray. She remembers his describing the feeling of desolation when he, the last of the four, stood at the edge of Reade's grave. He talked frankly to her of his drug-taking, telling how the laudanum, though it numbed the pain, used to excite his mind so that when going up to his room at night, the staircase seemed crowded with ghosts trying to push him down. She considered him excessively modest; on an occasion when she praised one of his books he brushed the tribute aside with the words: 'Ah, I am only an old fellow who has a liking for story-telling, nothing more.'

His letters to Mary Anderson are full of references, in the usual light-hearted vein, to his ailments. In March, 1885, a new complication had been added.

Illness, nothing but illness, has kept me away. My heart has been running down like a clock that is out of repair. For the last fortnight the doctor has been winding me up again. He is getting on well enough with his repairs, but I have been (medi-

† *A Few Memories*. Mary Anderson (Mme. de Navaro). (Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1896).

cally) intoxicated with sal volatile and spirits of chloroform; and the result has been a new idea of a ghost story.'

And a month later :

If I can get to the theatre, it is useless to say that I will seize the opportunity. But the weather is terribly against me. I may tell you (between ourselves) that the mischief this time is a deranged condition of the nerves near the heart, and a very slight cause sets in action a terrific pain in the chest and in the arms. But I am getting stronger . . .

For a time he toyed with the idea of writing a play for her, once going so far as to submit a first-act scenario. Mary considered her part unsuitable, and described in a letter the kind of role she had in mind. Wilkie replied: 'I already understand what is wanted—and I am eager to consult with you as to the details—to ask hundreds of questions and to try if we can together meet the one serious difficulty that I see—finding a good subject. If something could be found in *American* history—not connected with wars—I should like it best, because the dramatic writers of the United States have left that field free.' But not even a perusal of Bancroft's long *History of the United States* could produce a suitable theme, and the idea was ultimately dropped.

Wilkie's friendship with Mary Anderson lasted until his death. It was a happy association, as can be seen from the last letter she quotes, dated January 20th, 1888:—

Mr. Terriss, dear Mary Anderson, is not Romeo. I am Romeo—because I am in sympathy with you. At the time when, by my calculation, you must have been writing your nice little note, I was asking myself at what time in the afternoon I should be most likely to find you at home and disengaged, if I put my patch on my weak eye and called at Cromwell Houses. When may I climb the area railings, with my umbrella in one hand and my guitar in the other, and hope to see Juliet in the balcony (well wrapped up)? . . . Over and over again I have thought of writing, and have put it off in the hope of being well enough to speak for myself. At last there is nothing the matter but weakness and certain vagaries of the optic nerves, which persist in seeing a pattern of their own making, as black as black lace, in this form: [a sketch follows] It might be

prettier, might it not? I think it is a reptile of the pre-Adamite period.

Always yours affectionately,

Wilkie Collins.

His next book, *The Evil Genius*, published in 1886, marked a departure from the type of novel with which his name had become associated. Sub-titled *A Domestic Story*, it is concerned not with crime but with forbidden passions and divorce, a field he would have been better advised to leave to those who were already exploiting it successfully. It is an uninspired performance, containing many echoes both of character and incident from his earlier works. Technically, it suffers from the same defect as *Man and Wife* and *The New Magdalen* in being written in such a way as to permit easy stage adaptation, and is full of obviously contrived exits and entrances. The story embraces no special 'purpose' but Wilkie could not resist a passing dig at the American law of copyright. The subject is dragged by the ears into a conversation between a lawyer and his friend :

'What made you go to America? You haven't been delivering lectures, have you?'

'I have been enjoying myself among the most hospitable people in the world.'

Mr. Sarrazin shook his head; he had a case of copyright in hand just then. 'A people to be pitied,' he said.

'Why?'

'Because their Government forgets what is due to the honour of the nation.'

'How?'

'In this way. The honour of a nation which confers the right of property in works of art produced by its own citizens, is surely concerned in protecting from theft works of art produced by other citizens.'

'That's not the fault of the people.'

'Certainly not. I have already said it's the fault of the Government.'

In the *dénouement* of the story a couple who were divorced in the first volume are brought together again in

marriage. Such an event was almost unheard of at the time, and the author was regarded as having overstepped the bounds of probability. He might have claimed that he was merely anticipating the social habits of a generation still to come. This was not the first occasion on which Wilkie was ahead of his time.

Whatever the merits or demerits of *The Evil Genius*, it was at least a commercial success for its author. Writing to Wybert Reeve in Australia he said :

My new novel, now shortly to be published in book form, has appeared previously in various newspapers, and the speculator purchasing all serial rights in England and the Colonies has given me the largest sum I have ever received for any of my books before.

As for my health, considering I was sixty-two years old last birthday, that I have worked hard as a writer (perhaps few literary man harder) and that gout has tried to blind me first and kill me afterwards on more than one occasion, I must not complain. Neuralgia and nervous exhaustion generally have sent me to the sea to be patched up, and the sea is justifying my confidence in it. I must try, old friend, and live long enough to welcome you back when you return to be with us once more.

The serial rights of *The Evil Genius* were purchased by Tillotson's of Bolton, a progressive firm who were pioneers of the practice known as syndicating. They controlled several Lancashire newspapers and used to provide for their own and other papers a weekly service of serial fiction. For many years this was carried on by the stereo method, stereos of each instalment being produced in Tillotson's works and furnished weekly to the newspapers subscribing to the service. The aggregate fees received by the firm enabled it to enter the market for serial fiction with some success, and Wilkie Collins was perhaps the first front-rank novelist to have dealings with Tillotson's. His association with them began in 1879 when *Jezebel's Daughter* appeared as a serial in the *Bolton Weekly Journal* and twelve other Northern newspapers. For the serial copyright and German translation

rights he received £500. Then followed one or two shorter stories, each spread over about three instalments, for which he was paid sums varying from £35 each for 'Who Killed Zebedee' and 'The Devil's Spectacles,' to £150 for 'The Ghost's Touch.' † As the syndicating business prospered and the name of Wilkie Collins proved an attraction, so the price rose and for *The Evil Genius* Tillotson paid £1,300, to cover 'the sole rights of consecutive serial publication in English newspapers.' This was almost certainly the largest figure he ever received for serial rights in the United Kingdom. His last book to be syndicated by Tillotson was *The Legacy of Cain* for which he was paid £1,080. If one adds the payments from Chatto and Windus for book publication, from Harpers for serial and book publication in America, as well as sundry amounts for translation rights, ‡ it is clear that he was still able to earn large sums with every book he wrote.

Another lively publisher with whom he made contact was J. W. Arrowsmith, of Bristol, for whose 1886 *Christmas Annual* he wrote a short novel entitled *The Guilty River*. It was a rushed job from the start. He did not begin writing until September and on October 12th he told Archer: 'I am still hard at work on my Christmas book—and, woe is me, working against time. But the shade is off my eye and, though I am feeling weary, I hope to get through my work in (say) three weeks more.' Less than a month later it was finished, and its author exhausted. 'I am like the old posting horses in the old posting days. While I was whipped my pace was wonderful. Now we have got to our desination my head hangs down and my forelegs tremble. But, considering that I was twelve hours a day at work for the last

† 'The Devil's Spectacles' never appeared in book-form in this country, although it was published in the American *Seaside Library* as 'The Magic Spectacles.' The other two stories were included in *Little Novels* under different titles.

‡ He had recently learned that his books, beginning with *The Woman in White*, were in process of being translated into Bengali.

week of my labours, I have no reason to complain of my constitution.' By the middle of November the book was in the shops, and the publisher engaged upon a big campaign of sales promotion. 'The good man himself (Arrowsmith) was here on Tuesday last to report what he had done in the way of launching *The Guilty River*. He likes the story and believes in it—and he has advertised by posters, shopcards, newspapers—and by a hundred "sandwich men" promenading London with *Guilty River* all over them—and this for a shilling book! We had sold 20,000 copies between Monday and Friday last.'

He looked forward to a period when 'pen and brain shall rest together.' When an idea knocked at his head, he told a friend, the answer was 'Not at home.' But his body exacted the penalties of overwork. Neuralgia set in, and he was permitted only short walks 'followed by bathings and rubbings and restings.' Beard managed to beat back a threatened attack of gout, but the remedies employed so weakened the patient that he had to recuperate by the sea. The Padrona, wintering in Cannes, was always a sympathetic audience and he wrote to her on February 2nd, 1887 :

If you were only at the North of Scotland—say Thurso—I would rush to you by steamer and become young again in the fine cold air. But when I think of that fearful French railway journey, and of the Southern climate of Cannes, I see madness on my way to the Mediterranean and death in lingering torments on the shores of that celebrated sea. We have had here—after a brief paradise of frost—the British sirocco. Fidgets, aching legs, gloom, vile tempers, neuralgic troubles in the chest—such are the conditions under which I am living and such the obstacles which have prevented my writing to you long since.

Although he boasted that he was not even thinking of another book, Wilkie could not be completely idle for long. He occupied himself with arranging the collection in book-form of various stories he had contributed over the past ten years to periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic. *Little*

Novels, in three volumes, was published by Chatto and Windus in the spring of 1887. The quality of the stories is far below that of *After Dark* and *The Queen of Hearts*, as he himself recognised.

About this time there appeared in the *Contemporary Review* a eulogistic article on Wilkie Collins and his work written by a dilettante of the arts named Harry Quilter. His avowed purpose was to secure 'some public recognition of Wilkie Collins' long service to literature.' This was something of a change from the apathy, or at best the tepid respect, which the name of Collins now seemed to evoke in critical circles, and it is not surprising that the novelist invited Quilter to call at 90, Gloucester Place. Quilter was charmed by the old man, as he had been entranced by his books, and became an even more ardent propagandist. If his attempt to redress the critical balance erred on the side of idolatry, it must have warmed Wilkie's heart to find himself referred to as having 'told stories better than they have ever been told in the world before, and probably better than they will ever be told again.'

Quilter is one of many who testify to the unstinting help and advice that Wilkie was always ready to offer a younger writer. 'I know how,' he wrote, 'with no slightest call upon him, towards the end of his life, jaded, suffering, and with insufficient strength for his daily work, he helped me freely, unaffectedly and continually.' After Wilkie's death he heard from several others 'the same story of how unselfishly this man helped them when they were young and struggling.'

These were no isolated instances. Frank Archer—who ultimately deserted the stage for literature—submitted his first short story to Wilkie for his criticism, and received in reply a long letter in which he analysed the story in great detail, made a number of constructive suggestions, and promised an introduction to a periodical. Another friend wrote that 'he was always most kind, attentive and encouraging to all young literary aspirants who applied to him for advice, and took the greatest pains to read their MSS. and pass judgment on

them.' He would always do this with diffidence, pointing out that it was only his opinion. Many a letter still exists in which he sought to place with a publisher or editor the work of authors often quite unknown to him. These were the actions of a man of whom it has been unjustly said that he was embittered and jealous of the younger generation of writers.

He was faced, towards the end of 1887, with the prospect of tearing up the roots of more than twenty years' residence at 90, Gloucester Place. For a man of his age and settled habits, and in his state of health, it was a bitter blow. To Mary Anderson he wrote: 'My lease at Gloucester Place has expired, and my landlord, the enormously rich Lord —, asked me such exorbitant terms for allowing me to continue to be his tenant that I confronted the horror of moving in my old age.' So Caroline went house-hunting and eventually found a suitable 'upper part' at 82, Wimpole Street, still within the boundaries of St. Marylebone. On February 3rd 1888, he wrote to Fred Lehmann:

After a month's confinement in the house (nervous seizure) I am soon to be turned out of the house. Half my furniture has gone already—I live in a dressing-room. The new house is at 82, Wimpole Street. On or before the 25th (when my lease expires) I must be moved—perhaps in the van, unless the weather improves.

A few days later he sent Hall Caine an invitation to call and see him: 'If you don't object to a room without a carpet or a curtain, I can declare myself still possessed of a table and two chairs, pen and ink, cigars and brandy-and-water, and I should be delighted to see you.' In the circumstances it is not surprising that Hall Caine found the large house rather dingy and cheerless. The door was opened by a manservant—his valet George—whose nervous questioning betrayed the fact that to unexpected visitors the master was nearly always 'not at home.' This is confirmed by a letter Wilkie wrote two years before to Ada Cavendish's husband:

If I go down on both knees to Ada—with the tears rolling over my cheeks—will she send me a postcard the next time she thinks of kindly coming to see me? How am I—working at the back of the house—to know who it is who honours me with a visit? And if I say 'at home to everybody who calls' reckon up (if you understand Algebra) the number of ladies and gentlemen with manuscripts, the number who want introductions to publishers, the number who want advice on their affairs in general and the number who are anxious to borrow a little money—whom I should have the pleasure of receiving.

Although Wilkie had been pointed out to Hall Caine by his friend Rossetti some years earlier, this was their first meeting. Hall Caine noticed that he looked more feeble and had grown paler and more flabby in the interval. 'His eyes were large and protuberant, and had the vague and dreamy look sometimes seen in the eyes of the blind, or those of a man to whom chloroform has just been administered.' Noticing his guest staring at them, Wilkie said, 'I see that you can't keep your eyes off my eyes, and I ought to say that I've got gout in them, and that it is doing its best to blind me.'

At this first meeting they talked of many things, among them the law of copyright, a topic ever near Wilkie's heart; he was 'very full, very precise and very emphatic on the subject.' Among fellow-novelists he expressed admiration of Victor Hugo and of Dumas *père*, whom he had several times been on the verge of meeting in his younger days. Scott, of course, was spoken of in terms of reverence.

In these last two years Hall Caine saw him fairly often, and has left a sympathetic picture of the novelist in old age.

Wilkie Collins was a good and animated talker, never spontaneous, but always vigorous and right. His voice was full and of even quality; a good voice, not at all a great one. In manner he was quiet, a little nervous, and not prone to much gesture. He sat while he talked with his head half down, and his eyes usually on the table; but he looked into one's face from time to time and his gaze was steady and encouraging. He had many good stories and told them well. His style was quiet but emphatic, precise and perhaps slow, the points cumulative in

their effect, most carefully led up to, and ending always in complete success. The pistol never missed when Wilkie pulled the trigger.

Without being the most magnetic of men, Collins was a man to set one at ease, to get the best out of one, to send one away with a comfortable feeling towards oneself; and yet a man with a proper sense of personal dignity. You never knew it for dignity and that was exactly where its strength lay. The same large grasp of fact and command of detail which one found in the novels, one found in the novelist. If his conversation was not luminous and large, if his outlook on life was not wide, if his horizon was not far away, neither were they little and narrow and near. His insight was sure, his memory un-failing, and his invention strong.†

He was a methodical worker and even when writing against time permitted himself an hour's relaxation between four and five p.m. 'when a friend is always welcome.' Frank Archer recalls an afternoon spent with him about this time, in response to an invitation to keep him company with a cigar. There had been a time when Wilkie smoked almost continuously but finding that it interfered with his sleep, he had now to limit himself to a very occasional cigar. At this meeting—the last time Archer saw his friend—the conversation turned to the subject of actors. Wilkie talked of his experiences of the French stage, of actors such as Coquelin, Got, Regnier, Lafont and the greatest of all in his opinion, Frédéric Lemaître. So many of his friends in Paris were dead that it was for him a sad place which he no longer cared to visit. Among English actors, it was his great regret that he had never seen Kean; and as for the elder Farren, whom he at one time idolised, he had experienced the disappointment of meeting him and finding him 'quite stupid.'

Although Archer thought he looked well, if rather more bent than usual, others were remarking how decrepit he had become. One evening after he had dined with the Beards, they stood on the doorstep watching him walk slowly up the street. Bent almost double and leaning on his heavy stick, he looked like an old man of eighty. 'Who could suppose,'

† *My Story*. Hall Caine. (*Heinemann*, 1908).

asked Frank Beard, 'that he was ten years younger than I?' It was said that he had a morbid terror of being written about as a dying man.

On moving into 82, Wimpole Street, his immediate task was to keep up the instalments of his new book. *The Legacy of Cain*, which had just begun serial publication in Tillotson's newspapers. He managed to finish the work by early summer and in July 1888 a copy was filed in New York for copyright purposes, six months before its appearance in book-form in England. By enabling Harpers to publish not only well in advance of London publication, but also before the serial came to an end, he fired his last and perhaps most effective shot in his campaign against the American pirates. To his English publisher, Andrew Chatto, he wrote on December 7th: 'Five and twenty years ago I should have felt tolerably sure of the reception of *The Legacy of Cain*. Today, I don't know that I may not have aimed over the heads of the present generation of novel-readers. For your sake, and mine, I will hope.' Could he really delude himself into thinking that *The Legacy of Cain* stood comparison with the books he was writing twenty-five years earlier? For it is one of his very worst novels. Crime and madness, poison and mistaken identity, all the familiar ingredients are there, but it is no longer the old expert hand that mixes them. In fact *The Legacy of Cain* might almost be mistaken for a parody of the Collins sensation-novel.

For *The Universal Review* of June, 1888, he wrote an article entitled 'Reminiscences of a Story-Teller.' It is disappointing to find this merely a collection of anecdotes dealing mainly with the reactions of his books upon various types of reader. There was the woman who, having failed to catch his name on being introduced, talked to him at dinner of novels. 'To a man who has been hard at work all day writing a novel,' he comments, 'this interesting subject fails to produce the effervescent freshness which stimulates the mind.' He listened languidly until his companion suddenly said, 'I hope you don't like Wilkie Collins' novels.' Search-

ing frantically for a way of saving her embarrassment he quickly replied: 'I haven't read them.' But the lady discovered her mistake later in the evening and never forgave him. Then there were the people who had recognised themselves or their friends in his books and wrote indignant letters; and the prudes, who throughout his life bombarded him with protests against this scene or that incident. Finally there was the host of readers who would rush to correct any mistake of fact, as when he allowed a character in a story of 1817 to travel by train. Among his correspondents on this occasion was a young man who described himself as a mine of information, and 'suggested living with me (on a sufficient salary), so as to be always on hand, and able to enlighten me on a subject at any hour of the day or night.' Quite unable to face the idea 'of this living encyclopædia getting into the house, and dropping useful information all the way along the hall and up the stairs,' Wilkie declined the offer. For a time he toyed with the idea of writing a book of reminiscences, and talked eagerly of the project on the last occasion he met Hall Caine. The work did not however progress very far, if indeed it was ever begun.

For his last book, *Blind Love*—originally entitled *The Lord Harry*—he had the advantage of a ready-made plot from real life. Towards the end of 1887, when lunching with the Lehmanns, a fellow-guest told him the story of the notorious von Scheurer insurance fraud, perpetrated some four years earlier but only just discovered. Briefly the facts were these. The young and handsome Baron von Scheurer had insured his life with five London offices for a total of £15,000, the policies being in favour of his mistress, Juliana Metz. They then took up residence in France, leasing a cottage in the village of Meudon where they employed a German maid. Having taken into their limited confidence a rascally doctor named Castelneau, they embarked on a series of philanthropic visits to the pauper wards of the Paris hospitals, until one day, seeing a man in an advanced stage of consumption, they offered very kindly to take him to the

cottage, where he would have the benefits of fresh air and personal attention. Since the man had been chosen for his strong resemblance to the Baron, it was inconvenient when he began to recover, and Dr. Castelnau was compelled to administer a lethal dose of poison. The corpse was then photographed but its resemblance to the Baron was less marked than in life, and the Baron had himself to pose on the deathbed. The false 'Baron' was interred at Père Lachaise cemetery with great ceremony and a monument erected. Juliana submitted the claim to the insurance companies, supported by all necessary 'proofs.' The insurers were suspicious from the first, finding it incredible that a man passed as a first-class life in June should die of consumption the following December, and held up payment as long as possible; they were however unable to prove fraud and the monies were eventually paid. By this time the Baron was living in a Paris hotel as the Comte de Ségur. Then coincidence stepped in. Dr. Castelnau ran across the German maid from the cottage, and made advances to her which she strongly resented. Unsuspected by the conspirators she had been able to understand French and was well aware of what had been going on. She promptly told the whole story to her journalist fiancé who passed on the information to the insurance companies. Dr. Castelnau, who had been tricked into accepting £1,000 as his 'half' share of the proceeds, made a full confession. The Baron and his mistress were traced to Vienna where Juliana was arrested, but the Baron managed to escape. He wrote to the police in a chivalrous attempt to exculpate his mistress, and then committed suicide by blowing his brains out. Eventually £11,000 was recovered, and the two other conspirators received long prison sentences.

Wilkie recognised the story at once as a plot for a sensation-novel, and wanted to jot down the details there and then. His informant, a director of one of the insurance companies concerned, promised however to send him a full account by post, which he did the next day. Wilkie wrote in acknowledgement :

My one regret is that I am not able to begin making use of my materials at once. But a new serial story, which is to begin in February next, claims all my working hours . . . How the law disposes of the two surviving conspirators—and especially what became of the interesting Juliana—will probably appear in the newspapers. In any case, I shall keep a wary eye on the foreign news in *The Times* . . .

The letter concludes :

As I get older I find it more and more difficult (in the matter of literary workmanship) to please myself. By comparison with my late colleague Anthony Trollope, with his watch on the table, and his capacity for writing a page in every quarter of an hour, I am the slowest coach now on the literary road.

The last year of his life started badly. In January he was travelling in a four-wheeled cab when it collided with another vehicle. The cab overturned, smashed glass flew all about him, and the unfortunate Wilkie was thrown out on the pavement. Miraculously he escaped both cuts and bruises but was badly shaken. A few weeks later he developed bronchitis, followed almost immediately by an attack of angina. By April however he had recovered sufficiently to be able to dine out on oysters.

With *The Legacy of Cain* off his hands he turned eagerly to the story he was destined never to finish. There is good reason to believe that in his younger days he might have fashioned this admirable material into another *Woman in White*; as it was, without realising the full dramatic possibilities of the story, he did at least produce in *Blind Love* one of the best of the later books. A needlessly elaborate preamble to the conspiracy occupies the entire first volume; thenceforward Wilkie sticks fairly closely to the original case. The Baron becomes a dissolute Irish lord, involved in the plottings of a secret political society—an echo of *The Woman in White*. Iris Henley is a less guilty accomplice than Juliana Metz; it is 'blind love' which drives her to condone the misdeeds of the raffish Lord Harry, to whom, no doubt to appease the strait-laced, Wilkie marries her.

Doctor Vimpany is a satisfactorily odious villain. There is no attempt at mystery, and it is hard to understand Wilkie's description of this straightforward narrative as 'Another *Moonstone*.'

On June 30th, 1889, a day or two before the first instalment appeared in the *Illustrated London News*, he had a paralytic stroke. His general physical condition was not such as to encourage hopes of recovery, and for some weeks he lingered near to death. Frank Beard, in consultation with a specialist, did what little could be done. Harriet Bartley, his adopted daughter, wrote to Archer on July 11th: 'We are terribly anxious . . . his brain is what we now fear for. He knows all of us, but he cannot command his wonderful imagination . . . He had a restless night and is weaker. Mr. Beard says the paralysis left his heart more affected by it than we thought.' Caroline and a nurse took it in turns to watch over the patient; the doctors allowed no one else in the sick room. Harriet, besides keeping his many friends posted with news, did much of the fetching and carrying. Two days later she wrote: 'The dear patient is weaker, because he gets no sleep. But he has taken a *little* nourishment—and so we keep on hoping.' Soon afterwards, amazingly, he rallied and began to make steady progress. Within a week or two he was allowed to get up and by August he was able to leave his sickroom on the third floor and move about the house.

Work was, however, out of the question. Eighteen weekly instalments, or about two-thirds, of *Blind Love* were written, but he realised that he would never be able to finish it. About the middle of August he said to A. P. Watt, 'Ask Walter Besant if he will finish it for me. Tell him I would do as much for him if he were in my place and I in his. If he has the time I think he will do this for me. We are both old hands at the work and we understand it.' Besant, who was on holiday in Yorkshire, readily agreed and asked for Wilkie's notes to be sent on to him. In the Preface to *Blind Love* he writes:

I found that these were not merely notes such as I had expected—simple indications of the plot and the development of events—but an actual detailed scenario, in which every incident, however trivial, was carefully laid down: there were also fragments of dialogue inserted at those places where dialogue was wanted to emphasise the situation and make it real . . . The plot of the novel, every scene, every situation, from beginning to end, is the work of Wilkie Collins.'

On September 3rd Frederick Lehmann received this note from him, the close of a correspondence extending over thirty years:

A word to report myself to you with my own hand. I am unable to receive Martin today, for the reason that I have fallen asleep and the doctor forbids the waking of me. Sleep is my cure, he says, and he is really hopeful of me. Don't notice the blots, my dressing-gown sleeve is too large, but my hand is still steady. Goodbye for the present, dear old friend, we may really hope for healthier days.

My grateful love to the best and dearest of Padronas.

The improvement in his condition continued until mid-September when he developed bronchitis and suffered an immediate relapse. Early in the morning of September 23rd a messenger hurried round to Beard's house with a note, the last thing Wilkie wrote. It was a small piece of note-paper with the words: 'I am dying—come if you can,' faintly and almost illegibly pencilled upon it.

Frank Beard went across to Wimpole Street at once. The curtains of Wilkie's room were drawn, the lights dim, a fire blazed in the grate. Beside it, leaning back in his big armchair, his head sunk in a pillow, surrounded with blankets, lay his old friend, pale and emaciated. For many days he had been able to eat nothing. Beard sat down beside him and from time to time felt his pulse, which was growing steadily weaker and more irregular. Though his eyes opened now and then, Wilkie was past consciousness. His life was ebbing away in perfect calm. Just after half-past ten in the morning there was a slight convulsive movement, the head sank to one side, and the heart ceased to beat.