

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Caroline

AT THE AGE of thirty-five Wilkie Collins seemed to have settled down to the life of a bachelor in premature middle-age, or so our limited knowledge of his private circumstances would suggest. Most of his time, apart from an occasional yachting expedition or holiday abroad, had been spent in the comfortable surroundings of his mother's house. He liked to dine out, even more to entertain his friends; he was a keen theatregoer and liked to listen to music. In fact he enjoyed the normal pleasures of Victorian middle-class society, and above all he enjoyed work.

As for his emotional life up to this point, any attempt to outline it must be based largely on conjecture. There is no direct evidence. Mention has been made of a serious attachment some ten years earlier as the possible genesis of *Basil*, but the details remain a mystery. If indeed Wilkie was involved in a love-affair that bore some resemblance to Basil's violent passion for Margaret Sherwin, this would only be consistent with a strange infatuation of his childhood. When he was only twelve years old he conceived a passionate affection for a married woman three times his age. So intense was his jealousy of the woman's husband that he could not bear to be in the same room, and ran away whenever he saw him approaching. The story is told in a brief critical study of Wilkie Collins published in Germany in 1885.† Since Wilkie was alive at the time and

† *Wilkie Collins: Ein biographisch-kritisch versuch*. E. von Wolzogen. (Leipzig, 1885).

had corresponded with the author, we must assume that he himself was the source of the information. Usually reticent about his private life, he may have regarded this incident as merely humorous and without any particular significance. It does, however, reveal him as one who would be at least inclined to form strong emotional attachments in adult life. All we can say is that, between the *Basil* episode and the year 1859, he seems to have been free of any serious or lasting attachment.

Judged by his expressed opinions, Wilkie seems to have been disinclined towards marriage. In several articles in *Household Words* he stressed, with apparent satisfaction, his own bachelor state, and in more than one letter of the 1850's he referred in faintly derogatory terms to the institution of matrimony. 'Haven't much time for marriage myself,' he told his mother in a letter from Paris; and writing to his brother Charley he described a mutual acquaintance as 'one of those fresh-complexioned men with a low forehead and a meek character who always take kindly to the institution of marriage,' prophesying that he would achieve 'domestic happiness, a large paunch and a numerous family—in the enjoyment of which advantages he will live respected and die happy.' Marriage was all very well for others, one inferred, but for himself the freedom of a bachelor existence was indispensable—at any rate while his affections remained unengaged.

All this was changed with dramatic suddenness. The turning point in human affairs most often comes as a result of the chance encounter, the accident of time or place. So it was with Wilkie Collins. He met, in strange circumstances, a young woman and fell instantly in love with her. Although they now lie buried in the same grave, they never became man and wife.

This association had a marked effect on Wilkie both as regards his development as a novelist and his social environment. Information concerning it is sketchy and it may be useful at this point to depart from the chronological scheme

so far followed in order to assemble, as far as possible, the various pieces of evidence into a coherent pattern. This is no simple task since his friends, in writing of him, sought by omitting any reference to his mistress to breathe a fog of respectability over his private life. Most of the details which enable us to trace the course of this relationship have come to light within the last ten or fifteen years; some of them appear for the first time here.

In 1899, ten years after Wilkie's death, there was published *The Life of John Everett Millais*, by his son J. G. Millais, in which the following passage occurs :

One night in the '50's Millais was returning home to 83, Gower Street from one of the many parties held under Mrs. Collins's hospitable roof in Hanover Terrace, and, in accordance with the usual practice of the two brothers, Wilkie and Charles, they accompanied him on his homeward walk through the dimly-lit, and in those days semi-rural, roads and lanes of North London . . . It was a beautiful moonlight night in the summer time and as the three friends walked along chatting gaily together, they were suddenly arrested by a piercing scream coming from the garden of a villa close at hand. It was evidently the cry of a woman in distress; and while pausing to consider what they should do, the iron gate leading to the garden was dashed open, and from it came the figure of a young and very beautiful woman dressed in flowing white robes that shone in the moonlight. She seemed to float rather than run in their direction, and, on coming up to the three young men, she paused for a moment in an attitude of supplication and terror. Then, suddenly seeming to recollect herself, she suddenly moved on and vanished in the shadows cast upon the road.

'What a lovely woman!' was all Millais could say. 'I must see who she is, and what is the matter,' said Wilkie Collins, as, without a word he dashed off after her. His two companions waited in vain for his return, and next day, when they met again, he seemed indisposed to talk of his adventure. They gathered from him, however, that he had come up with the lovely fugitive and had heard from her own lips the history of her life and the cause of her sudden flight. She was a young lady of good birth and position, who had accidentally fallen into the hands of a man living in a villa in Regent's Park.

There for many months he kept her prisoner under threats and mesmeric influence of so alarming a character that she dared not attempt to escape, until, in sheer desperation, she fled from the brute, who, with a poker in his hand, threatened to dash her brains out. Her subsequent history, interesting as it is, is not for these pages.

The final sentence can be interpreted as a hint of an association which was not entirely respectable.

The next link is provided by Dickens' younger daughter Kate who, as Mrs. Kate Perugini, lived to a great age and whose reminiscences, edited by her friend Gladys Storey, appeared as recently as 1939. Since Kate's first husband was Wilkie's brother Charles, she was in a position to know the facts concerning her brother-in-law's private life. Unlike the many others who must have known she was not averse to making them public. She quotes the passage from Millais' life referred to above and comments 'Wilkie Collins had a mistress called Caroline, a young woman of gentle birth and the original of *The Woman in White*.' Mrs. Perugini had previously asserted, in conversation with friends, that the woman referred to in the Millais story was the same young woman who lived with Wilkie at No. 12 Harley Street and elsewhere.

Millais states explicitly that this strange meeting engendered in Wilkie's mind the basic idea of *The Woman in White*, and readers of the novel will recognise the situation. We shall however see in the following chapter that *The Woman in White* is based upon an actual case which had been before the French Courts some fifty years earlier. This does not entitle us to dismiss the Millais story as wholly fictitious, even if it does suggest a parallel too neat for unqualified acceptance. The story is, by inference, accepted by Kate Perugini who is a credible witness as to other details of the association, and it was not apparently contradicted at the time of publication when there were still persons living who would know the facts. The most likely explanation is that such an encounter did take place

in circumstances not unlike those described, and that the facts were subsequently adjusted to fit the theory formed after the event either by Millais or his biographer.

The shadowy figure who was to play so large a part in Wilkie Collins' life was Caroline Elizabeth Graves, née Courtenay. At the time of their meeting she was the wife—or possibly the widow—of George Robert Graves, of whom nothing is known. She was born about the year 1834 and probably married while in her teens. She had one child, a daughter, Harriet Elizabeth (also known as Carrie, or 'little Carrie,' and later as Harriette Elisabeth Laura) born in the early 'fifties. It is not possible to fix precisely Wilkie's first meeting with Caroline but there are indications that it took place in the early part of 1859.

In view of the intimacy existing between Dickens and Wilkie one would expect to find in the former's letters references to his friend's mistress. There are in fact three such references in the Nonesuch Edition of the *Letters* published in 1938, all suppressed in earlier editions. Proper names are carefully omitted. In a letter dated October 30th, 1859, Dickens wrote to Wilkie, 'I am charmed with the Butler† O, why was she stopped! Ask her flinty mother from me, why, why, didn't she let her convert somebody! And here the question arises—Did she secretly convert the Landlord?' And on July 12th, 1861, 'Love to the Butler from her ancient partner in the card Trade. And kind regards to the Butler's mama.'

In a letter of August 19th, 1860, to a Mrs. Dickinson he is a little more explicit: 'Wilkie has finished his White Woman (if he had done with his flesh-coloured one, I should mention that too) and is in great force.' One might perhaps draw the inference that Dickens did not at that time regard the association as likely to be a lasting one.

No letter from Wilkie to Caroline has survived, so far as

† Apparently Dickens' pet name for Caroline's small daughter.

is known. Nor was it his practice to refer to her in his own letters, apart from those to Charles Ward. Ward alone receives the normal salutations one might expect, such as 'Caroline sends her kindest regards,' or 'both Caroline and I are delighted to hear that Jane's confinement is over,' and on occasion more extended references which will be alluded to later. The only instance of his even mentioning Caroline to any other correspondent occurs in a letter to Frank Archer in 1875: 'A line to congratulate you (on Mrs. Graves' part as well as on mine) upon your excellent performance.' Although Mrs. Collins must have known of the liaison, there is not even an oblique reference to Caroline's existence in the large number of letters from Wilkie to his mother which have survived. One imagines that either she disapproved of the liaison, or wished to show her son's letters to friends who were not in the secret. Stranger still, perhaps, is a similar omission in letters to his brother. Charley was not only a frequent visitor at Wilkie's house, but spent at least one holiday in company with Wilkie and Caroline Graves. All this would seem to suggest a deliberate intention on Wilkie's part to conceal from all but their intimate friends the fact that a liaison existed. On the other hand, there are repeated entries in the Post Office London Directory, which he must have approved, showing Mrs. Graves as the tenant of successive houses where he was well known to reside.

The first reference to Caroline Graves appears in a letter of May, 1859, to Charles Ward in which Wilkie writes: 'You won't mind my going away at eight o'clock (to the Opera), will you?—and leaving the engagement between us two in every other respect exactly the same. Dine at six—cigar afterwards—tea—I slip off—Caroline keeps you company and makes you your grog—and you stay as long as you feel inclined.' This letter was written from 2a New Cavendish Street which was their address for the next seven months. In December they moved to 12, Harley Street where they remained for five years. Their next move at the end of 1864 brought them to 9, Melcombe Place, Dorset Square

where Mrs. Graves was for the first time shown as the tenant in the Post Office Directory for 1866. When Wilkie took a lease of 90, Gloucester Place in 1867 her name appeared as the occupant continuously until 1880, when all pretence of concealment was abandoned and the Directory proclaimed Mrs. Graves and Wilkie Collins as joint occupants.

On evidence such as this one might justifiably presume a steady and continuous relationship, indeed a marriage in all but name. There are however further facts which considerably alter the picture. After the passage in *Dickens and Daughter* already quoted, Kate Perugini goes on to state that Caroline later married another man and that Wilkie attended the wedding. After the ceremony he visited Kate (she was at that time his sister-in-law) and told her the whole story, saying, 'I suppose you could not marry a man who had . . .?' to which she replied decisively, 'No, I couldn't!' and, we may suspect, promptly changed the subject. Official records corroborate Mrs. Perugini's story of the marriage. On October 4th, 1868, Caroline Elizabeth Graves, described as a widow, and Joseph Charles Clow, son of a distiller, were married at St. Marylebone Parish Church, the witnesses to the register being Wilkie's great friend, Francis Carr Beard and Caroline's daughter Harriette.

About the same time Wilkie formed a liaison with a woman named Martha Rudd, later known as Mrs. Dawson. In the course of the next five years she had three illegitimate children of whom he was the father, the first, Marian, being born at 33, Bolsover Street exactly nine months after Caroline's marriage to Joseph Clow. Another daughter, Harriet Constance, was born at the same address two years later and a son on Christmas Day, 1874, at 10, Taunton Place, Regent's Park. They were all given the surname of Dawson and were acknowledged by Wilkie Collins as his children in his Will, by which he bequeathed half the residue of his estate to Mrs. Dawson in trust for them. Only the son's birth

appears to have been registered; he was given the name of William Charles Collins Dawson. The informant was Martha Dawson and the father's name is shown in the register as William Dawson, Barrister-at-Law. In a letter dated April, 1876, to Frederick Lehmann, Wilkie talks of 'a visit to my morganatic family,' which suggests that the association was no secret from his more intimate friends. For the rest, we know little of Martha Rudd or her progeny. She lived for some years at 10, Taunton Place, and sent a wreath to Wilkie's funeral. She tended his grave for a time after Caroline's death.

Although Martha Rudd became the mother of his children there is little doubt that Caroline Graves was the woman who exercised the greatest influence on his life. As to the nature of that influence there can only be conjecture, but in the absence of direct evidence to the contrary one may assume that their relationship was on the whole a happy one. True, there is the enigmatic sentence in Thomas Seccombe's article on Wilkie Collins in the *Dictionary of National Biography*: 'Intimacies formed as a young man led to his being harassed, after he became famous, in a manner which proved very prejudicial to his peace of mind'; but this could be interpreted to mean almost anything.

Mystery surrounds Caroline's second marriage; from the moment that Joseph Clow signed the register as her husband, his name vanishes from our sight. Less than two years later, Wilkie inscribed a presentation copy of his new novel to 'Mrs. George Graves,' and though there is no record of a divorce it was as 'widow of G. R. Graves,' and not as the wife or widow of Joseph Clow, that Caroline was described at the time of her death. She returned to live with Wilkie early in the '70's and remained with him, as Mrs. Graves, until his death nearly 20 years later.

He adopted her daughter Harriet, who became his amanuensis and attended to all his correspondence whenever he was away. She continued to perform these duties even after her own marriage—to Wilkie's solicitor—in 1878. In



his will he provided for Caroline and her daughter as well as for his own three children and their mother. Caroline Graves died in 1895 at the age of 61, and was buried in Wilkie's grave at Kensal Green Cemetery.