

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### “ Armadale ”

APART FROM THE fact that *No Name* was selling well the year 1863 began badly for Wilkie. He had thought he would either 'go mad with the sudden emptiness of head' that followed the completion of his book, or seek oblivion in Paris 'that city of dissipation.' A renewed attack of gout, making it difficult for him even to get up and down one flight of stairs, settled the problem. His mother had been seriously ill, but was slowly mending, and to her he made light of his own trouble. 'It is not a violently inflammatory attack. The pain in the foot is easily kept under by a simple poultice of cabbage leaves covered with oiled silk.' None the less he determined to try and rid himself of the complaint once and for all. Dickens, ever ready with medical advice, had suggested spa-treatment and Wilkie began to collect information about Continental spas from a fellow-sufferer. In March he told his mother of his plan to try Aix-la-Chapelle 'when I am strong enough for the hateful railway travelling, which disgusts and depresses me even when I am in health.' If Aix-la-Chapelle did not suit him he would try a famous spring at Wildbad in the Black Forest. Taking with him a German travelling-servant supplied from Coutts' register of couriers he left England in early April. He travelled via Lille ('a good hotel, and no drawback but a fiercely-snoring Frenchman in the next bedroom'), and Ghent, where he 'hobbled out' to inspect the Prince Bishop's Palace celebrated in *Quentin Durward*, and reached Nuellen's Hotel, Aix-la-Chapelle on April 17th.

Aix suited him admirably at first. It was not gay, but if he could only get well there he was 'willing to think it Paradise.' He drove out every day to the hills and exercised his legs in the bracing air. He found himself as well known as in London, with German, French and American readers 'all vying in civilities and attention,' and demanding autographs. Recounting this to his mother he added, characteristically, 'Keep this to yourself—it would look like vanity to other people, but I know you will like to hear it.'

The details of the cure are contained in a lighthearted letter to Nina Lehmann :

As for me, I am all over sulphur, inside and out; and if ever a man felt fit for the infernal regions already, I (in respect to the sulphurous part of the Satanic climate) am that man. The invalid custom here is to rise at seven in the morning, to go out and drink the water hot from the spring, and to be entertained between the gulps with a band of music on an empty stomach. You who know me will acquit me of sanctioning by my presence any such uncomfortable proceeding as this. I have an excellent courier. I send him to the spring with a stoppered bottle, and I drink my water horizontally in bed. It was nasty enough at first, but I have got used to it already. The next curative proceeding discloses me, towards the afternoon, in a private stone-pit, up to my middle in the hot sulphur spring; more of the hot water is pouring down on me from a pipe in the ceiling; a worthy German stands by my side, directing the water in a continuous shower on all my weak points with one hand and shampooing me with the other. We exchange cheerful remarks in French (English being all Greek to him and German all Hebrew to me); and, oh, don't we massacre the language of our lively neighbours! In mistakes of *gender*, I am well ahead of the German—it being an old habit of mine out of my love and respect for the fair sex, to make all French words about the gender of which I feel uncertain, feminine words. But in other respects my German friend is far beyond me. This great creature has made an entirely new discovery in the science of language—he does without verbs. 'Trop fort? Bon pour vous fort. Trop chaud? Bon pour vous chaud. Promenade aujourd'hui? Aha! bon pour vous promenade. Encore la jambe—encore le dos—frottement, ah, oui, oui, frottement excellent pour vous. Repos bon pour vous—à votre ser-

vice, monsieur—bon jour!’ What an excellent method! Do think of it for your boys—I would practise it myself if I had my time to begin over again. The results of all these sulphurous proceedings—to return to them for the last time before I get to the end of my letter—are decidedly encouraging in my case. So far I can’t wear my boots yet, but I can hobble about with my stick much more freely than I could when I left London; and my general health is benefiting greatly by the change. As for the rest of my life here, it is passed idly enough. The hotel provides me with a delightful open carriage to drive out in, contains a cellar of the best Hock and Moselle wines I ever tasted, and possesses a Parisian cook who encourages my natural gluttony by a continuous succession of entrées which are to be eaten but not described.

The water, he informed his brother Charley, tasted like ‘the worst London egg you ever had for breakfast in your life,’ and he went on to describe how his doctor, ‘a jolly German with a huge pair of gold spectacles and a face like an apple,’ smoked a cigar with him every morning after breakfast. Since, besides displaying a reverence for tobacco, the doctor allowed ‘all wines provided they are of the best vintages, and all cookery provided it is thoroughly good,’ we can recognise without much difficulty the original of Herr Grosse, the ophthalmic surgeon of *Poor Miss Finch*.’

Wilkie’s stay at Aix was clouded by news of the death of his great friend Augustus Egg. Egg’s health had long been giving cause for anxiety and his friends had persuaded him to spend the winter in the milder climate of Algeria. Wilkie now learned that he had died just before he planned to return, and lay buried on a hillside overlooking Algiers. To Holman Hunt, who brought the news, Wilkie exclaimed: ‘So I shall never any more shake that dear hand and look into that beloved face!’ Dickens, too, was deeply affected and sent Wilkie a long letter recalling their happy association with the ‘Kernel,’ concluding ‘We must close up the ranks and march on.’

After a month, though somewhat better in health, he was far from cured, and decided to move on to Wildbad. Situated by a mountain stream in the heart of the Black



Forest, this little town, hardly more than a village, was dominated by palatial hotels and 'a Bath House as big as Buckingham Palace, and infinitely superior to it in architectural beauty.' It was strange, he reflected, to see all this magnificence, 'and stranger still to think that some of the acutest forms of human misery represent the dismal foundation on which the luxury and grandeur are built up. Paralysis comes here and pays the bills which encourage the enterprising landlord to add to the size of his palace of an hotel. Rheumatism puts its aching hand in its pocket with a groan, and justifies the Town Council in keeping up the splendour of the Bath-House.' Here he underwent a month's course of a bath a day, which roused every lurking ache and pain. The result of this martyrdom, he was persuaded, would be to drive out the gout from its very sources. He left for home about the middle of June, 1863, 'unquestionably better and on the road, I hope, to recovery at last.' It was a vain hope.

Since completing *No Name* he had written nothing at all. In ordinary circumstances this would have mattered little since he had earned sufficient money to enable him to take a prolonged rest. There were however other considerations. As long ago as July, 1861, he had been approached by George Smith, who had never ceased to regret having missed the chance of publishing *The Woman in White*. Deciding that there would be no mistake this time, Smith put in a pre-emptive bid of £5,000 for the copyright of 'a work of fiction a little longer than *The Woman in White*,' to follow *No Name* and to be published serially in *The Cornhill*. Telling Charles Ward of the offer Wilkie wrote: 'No living novelist (except Dickens) has had such an offer as this for one book. † If I only live to earn the money, I have a chance

† At the time of writing (August 1861) this was probably correct. A few months later, however, Smith Elder offered George Eliot £10,000 for the rights of *Romola*. When the book turned out to be less than the stipulated length she accepted a figure of £7,000.

of putting something by against a rainy day, or a turn in the public caprice, or any other literary misfortune.' A week later, he was able to write in triumph to his mother :

'The five thousand pound negotiation is settled. I signed the agreement on Saturday morning. The first monthly part of the new book to be delivered in manuscript on the 1st of December, 1862—the fifteen remaining parts to follow regularly each month—and the five thousand pounds to be paid, as the novel is written, in monthly instalments—no bills at long dates, and no difficulties or complications of any kind. Smith & Elder have dealt with me like princes.'

As George Smith intended, the figure was beyond all possibility of competition from *All the Year Round*. Dickens, though disappointed at losing his most successful serial-writer, was very reasonable and fully approved his going to *The Cornhill*. Smith stated that he was also prepared to bid for the book rights of *No Name* and although these were secured by Sampson Low, Smith Elder's intervention was certainly responsible for pushing up the price to £3,000. Well might Wilkie invite his mother to consider him ' (if life and health last) in the light of a wealthy novelist.'

By the summer of 1862 it had become clear that *No Name* could not be finished before the end of the year, and he was forced to ask Smith for a postponement. Nor did the state of his health in the New Year encourage him to embark on a long serial. On March, 19th, 1863, he wrote : 'The Smith & Elder's book is put off again—not by any means given up. They have behaved most kindly and considerately about it'; and three months later he received a letter from Smith allowing him until December 1st to send in the first number. On his return from Wildbad he was in high hopes of being able to get down to work again, and at last had a basic idea for the new novel. Patient George Smith merely asked him to state in the coming October whether he might advertise the book as beginning in *The Cornhill* in the New Year—more than twelve months late.

It was desirable during this hiatus in his writing that Wilkie's name should be kept before the public, and he accordingly arranged for Sampson Low to publish a selection of his articles from *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. A letter written in August, 1863, to his publishers, in referring to 'the liberal promptitude with which you have met my wishes' and confirming acceptance of 'terms suggested by myself,' makes it clear that he had again driven a good bargain. The two volumes of *My Miscellanies* appeared the following November.

His reputation as a journalist had brought him some months earlier an offer from a new quarter. Strahan, the publisher, was about to establish the magazine *Good Words* and approached Wilkie through John Hollingshead with a view to his taking on the editorship. Two considerations led him to decline the offer, his obligations to Smith Elder and the state of his health. Replying to Hollingshead on the 15th January, 1863, he considered that it would be unfair to *The Cornhill* if he were to divide his labours in the manner proposed. The letter continues:

'I could not consent, in justice to Messrs. Strahan and in justice to my own sense of responsibility, to undertake the conductorship of the new journal unless I exercised a regular supervision over the contents of each week's number before publication, and unless I rendered such assistance to my fellow-labourers in the way of suggestion (where suggestion was wanted) as might assist in giving the journal a character and position of its own in the public estimation. In the present state of my health—which is very far from satisfactory or assuring—I should not be equal to meet such a demand on my resources as this (and I know, by experience, that the demand would certainly come), at a time when the mental strain of writing a long serial story, in a form of publication out of my customary practice, would be laid on me for many months together. The necessity of husbanding my energies for the present is a necessity which I have good reason to know is not to be trifled with.'

He nursed himself carefully through the summer, with a week at Gad's Hill, a visit to the Lehmanns, and a trip to Cowes with Pigott to hire a yacht for a month. Part of the



12. Harley Street. W.  
21<sup>st</sup> April 1864

Gentlemen

On the other side, I return  
you the notice of my life for the  
new edition of "Men of the Time".  
I have made certain alterations  
and additions — but by removing  
two sentences at the end (which  
~~it is~~ <sup>it is</sup> not absolutely necessary to retain)  
I have avoided increasing the  
length of the notice, while I have  
I hope added to its fulness and  
accuracy.

Faithfully yours

Walter Collins

to / Messrs Routledge Warren & Routledge

SPECIMEN OF COLLINS' HANDWRITING

Autograph letter to Messrs. Routledge

new story was to be set in the Isle of Man and he wanted to sail there if possible. The boat was hired, but they got no further than Torquay. 'All my nervous pains and susceptibilities to changes in the temperature increased as soon as I left the shore. For ten days and nights I stuck by the vessel in spite of them. But time did nothing to acclimatise me to the penetrating dampness of the sea-air.' The laborious spa-treatment had achieved nothing after all. It was a bitter disappointment. There was nothing for it but to ask Smith for yet another postponement and 'to run for it before the winter sets in,' to Naples and perhaps to Sicily. Any delay was preferable to another breakdown. As for the book, he was still under forty and reckoned that he could afford to wait.

He was, however, determined to see the Isle of Man, 'the one inaccessible place left in the world.' Accompanied by Caroline and 'little Carrie' he reached Douglas at the end of August. The steamer trip had been tiresome—'rain half the way across, and no room below, if I had been inclined to venture there. Tide out when we got there—disembarkation in boats—fearful noise and confusion—an old lady tumbled into the water, and fished up again by her venerable heels.' The Douglas hotels were 'crammed with thousands of rough and ready visitors from the manufacturing districts'; every third shop was a spirit-shop and every second inhabitant drunk. It was, he decided, too late in the year to be visiting northern islands in his rheumatic condition. He especially wished to see the Calf of Man, and the Sound separating it from the main island. After an unsuccessful attempt to reach the place by boat, he travelled across country in the hotel's jaunting-car and found the scene 'wild and frightful, just what I wanted—everything made for my occult literary purposes.' He was prepared to go to immense trouble to have his local colour accurate, and always preferred to rely on his own experience. Having obtained his objective he hurried back to London, only to find that the penalty for this ill-advised excursion was another sharp attack of gout.

It was with a sigh of relief that he left England early in



October, with Caroline and her daughter, bound for a warmer climate. From Marseilles they travelled by 'veturino' to Genoa, following the route he had taken with his parents nearly thirty years before. Nice, in the meantime, had grown thrice as large and was unrecognisable. Mentone and San Remo were carefully inspected as possible havens in the event of disturbances in Southern Italy driving them northward again. Nothing was threatening yet, but in a newly-established kingdom whose lazy population was being conscripted to serve in the Italian army, anything could happen. Wilkie believed in looking ahead, and in securing his line of retreat. By the time they reached Genoa his health was already improving in the mild climate. He could walk up the hills on the road faster than the horses could follow, and he no longer got into bed at night 'with the infirm deliberation of a man of seventy or eighty years old.' Indeed the mosquitoes were proving more troublesome than the pangs of rheumatism. Intent on proving that his ingenuity embraced more than the construction of plots, he devised a 'protective night-dress' for himself.

I have got a small muslin balloon which ties under my beard, and encloses my whole head and face—without touching nose, eyes or mouth, and I have the sleeves of my nightgown sewn up with a couple of old cambric pocket handkerchiefs. In this extraordinary costume I can hear the mosquitoes humming all round me with the most supreme indifference. When I wake, in the grey of the morning, I see them crawling over my muslin balloon and my cambric mufflers, trying hard to find a way in—failing at every point—stopping to consider in 'indignation-meetings' of twos and threes—expressing their sentiments in a sound like a very small wind at a very great distance—and then flying away in disgust.

From Genoa they took a coasting steamer to Civita Vecchia en route for Rome. The sea-trip was a mistake. At Pisa the sirocco descended and with it rain, fog and damp which brought on sciatica 'in both hams at once.' Then the wind blew up and 'the two Carolines suffered sea-martyrdom.' The elder Caroline was so ill that she could not be moved

from the deck all night, and was feeling the effects a week later. A promise was extracted from Wilkie that he would avoid night-voyages in future. After only a week in Rome they went on to Naples, a city he loved dearly, with every intention of remaining there for some months. Naples proved another disappointment. Though the weather was glorious he found it too relaxing: 'My appetite is beginning to fail me,' he wrote, 'I don't sleep as well as I did, and my foot . . . is getting stiff and painful again.' A fortnight was enough to convince him that Naples was doing him harm instead of good. He was warned against Sicily as being still more relaxing and though recommended to visit Cairo, decided to turn northwards. He would try Florence because he felt that he needed 'stringing up with a little brisk bracing cold air.' When they reached Rome, however, he discovered that Rome could supply just the dry, cold air that he needed, and here they stayed for nearly three months.

It seems to have been on the whole a happy three months. They lived in great comfort in a five-room apartment on the first floor of the Hotel des Iles Britanniques. Rome was full of English folk with whom he politely exchanged cards, pleading illness 'when there is a threatening of anything more serious than cards.' Thus he was able to avoid their dances and dinner-parties and to live his life in Rome in his own way. The Opera, for which he was full of praise, provided most of the entertainment he wanted. For two shillings he could hear the finest performances of Verdi from the best stall in the house, and there was 'no infernal fuss and expense of evening costume.' It was a great advance on London where, he complained, they would not let him in unless he spent a guinea and put on a pair of black trousers. The one drawback of Rome was the presence of the French garrison which shattered 'with incessant martial noises' on drums and bugles the quiet of the ancient city. 'Nothing is serious to a Frenchman,' he wrote, 'except soldiering—and nothing astonishes him but the spectacle of his own bravery.'

As his health improved so his spirits rose. On his birthday, ' January 8th, 1864 (Feast of St. Collins),' he wrote to his mother :

If your reckoning is right—which I have a melancholy satisfaction in doubting—I am now writing to you at the mature age of *Forty*. Mercy on us! Who would ever have thought it? Here is forty come upon me—grey hairs springing fast, especially about the temples—rheumatism and gout familiar enemies for some time past—all the worst signs of middle-age sprouting out on me—and yet, in spite of it all, I don't *feel* old. I have no regular habits, no respectable prejudices, no tendency to go to sleep after dinner, no loss of appetite for public amusements, none of the melancholy sobrieties of sentiment, in short, which are supposed to be proper to middle-age. Surely there is some mistake? Are you and I really as old as you suppose?

The letter goes on to describe a visit to one of Rome's smaller churches where, to his surprise and delight, he found children preaching :

Children of five, six and seven years old, who had learnt their little sermons and their little gesticulations and genuflexions and crossings, and let them off at the congregation with perfect solemnity and composure. As each child ended, the congregation cried ' Bravo!' and the next child (male and female indiscriminately) popped up into the temporary pulpit like a Jack-in-the-Box. I ventured on asking a Priest near me (I am on excellent terms with the Priests as we all take snuff together) what it meant. He said—' You read the New Testament, my dear Sir? You remember the passage " Out of the mouths of Babes and Sucklings, etc., etc."? Very good! There *are* the babes and sucklings! And what have you got to say against *that*?' I had nothing to say against it—and I cried ' Bravo!' with the rest of the congregation.

The same letter makes reference to Thackeray's sudden death, of which he had just learned : ' I, as you know, never became intimate with him—but we always met on friendly and pleasant terms. He has left a great name, most worthily won, and he has been spared the slow misery of a lingering death-bed.' At the same time he mentions a personal loss he has suffered in the death, from gastric fever, of his travel-



ling-servant, Nidecker, to whom he had become very attached.

Wilkie could hardly avoid interesting himself in Italian politics, and exchanged views with Dickens on the immediate prospects of the new regime. The main phase of the *Risorgimento* was over, and only the Papal State of Rome and the Austrian-held province of Venice stood in the way of the complete unification of Italy. The Pope, supported by French arms, was to defy Garibaldi successfully for another six years. In Rome the political situation was reflected in a bewildering confusion of currencies, of which Wilkie wrote to Charles Ward: 'There is one price for the Pope's gold and another for Victor Emanuel's and another for Louis Napoleon's and another for silver—and I have opened an account with Freeborn, and have got a primitive Roman cheque-book—and when I don't make mistakes (which I generally do) I get paper-money to pay in, and paper-money is at par, and I save I don't know how much.'

Caroline had apparently been unwell for he adds:

My little domestic landscape begins to look brighter at last. Caroline is very much better—able to walk out, and beginning to show some faint signs of colour in her cheeks. She wants to be at home again (how like cats women are!) and bids me tell you with her kind regards that she wishes she was pouring you out a glass of dry sherry on a nice gloomy English Sunday afternoon. Caroline junior has had a dirty tongue, but we threw in a little pill and fired off a small explosion of Gregory's Powder, and she is now in higher spirits than ever, and astonishes the Roman public by the essentially British plumpness of her cheeks and calves. As for me, I go on thriving in the cold.

It is of some interest that, whereas he had often in the past asked Ward to send on his letter for Mrs. Collins to read, on this occasion he appended a brief note to be cut off the foot of the letter and forwarded to her, merely saying that he was well. Most probably he did not wish her to see the references to Caroline and her daughter.

At last he felt well enough to begin the rough outline of

his book for George Smith, to be called *Armadale*. Ideas were coming to him 'thicker and thicker' and he was satisfied that he had a fine subject. By the time he returned to England in March most of the important preliminary work was done and on April 20th, 1864, he told his mother: 'After much pondering over the construction of the story I positively sat down with a clean sheet of paper before me, and began to write it on Monday last. So far my progress is slow and hesitating enough—not for want of knowing what I have to do, but for want of practice. After a year and a half of total literary abstinence, it is not wonderful that my hand should be out. Patience and time will I hope soon give me back my old dexterity—and meanwhile it is something to have begun.' He advised Smith that *Armadale* could be announced as beginning in the November issue of *The Cornhill*—almost two years after the date first proposed—and made the pleasant discovery that one monthly part for *The Cornhill* was only the equivalent of two weekly parts for *All the Year Round*.

During the spring and summer he made fairly good progress with the new novel, determined this time to have a substantial portion written before the serial commenced. He found time to visit Stratford-on-Avon with Dickens and Browning for the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth, and once or twice went down to stay with Dickens at Gad's Hill. In August he was in Norfolk 'studying localities' for the book, and taking time off to go sailing with Charles Ward and Pigott. About this time he was contemplating the purchase of a boat of his own, but never in fact acquired one.

He had made his mind up to leave Harley Street. For one thing it was noisy, and he was becoming more and more sensitive to noise. In a short time he had lost 'five working days, through nothing but pianos at the back of the house and organs, bagpipes, bands and Punches in front.' Although at one time he thought there was nothing for it but the Temple, they managed to find a reasonably quiet flat at 9,

Melcombe Place, off Dorset Square, to which they moved about Christmas, 1864, 'for the time being.' In fact they remained for nearly three years. This was the first of his addresses at which Mrs. Graves openly resided according to the London Directories.

With the onset of winter he began to worry about his health again and persuaded Frank Beard to call in a brain and nerve specialist. He was told that nothing was seriously wrong, only a 'gouty irritation' which had upset his nerves. The doctor placed him on a new regimen, which he detailed in a letter to his mother: 'Dine lightly at two—work from four to seven or eight o'clock—go out—come back for supper at half past nine or ten. Bed between eleven and twelve. Light breakfast—read and idle between breakfast and two o'clock. Eat light things—game poultry—eggs, farinaceous puddings—*no lean meat*—claret and hock to drink—and for the present no exerting myself with society and dinner parties.'

*Armadale* began in serial form in November as scheduled and made a good impression from the start. The following month it opened in America in *Harper's Monthly*, and probably saved that magazine from extinction. Its sales had fallen disastrously during the period following the Civil War and Harper Brothers were considering bringing it to an end. There was, however, a great increase in demand for the issue containing the first instalment of *Armadale*, and before the story was completed the magazine had regained its former circulation. Dickens, who had read the proofs during a week-end they spent together at Dover, 'prognosticated certain success,' and Wilkie was almost more pleased to learn from George Smith that the printers were highly interested in the story; for to them, he wrote, 'all books represent in the first instance nothing but weary hard work.' He had hoped to persuade Millais to do the illustrations, but Millais was swamped with work and he fell back upon George Housman Thomas, a bank-note engraver who also illustrated Trollope's *Last Chronicle of Barset*.



The following year, 1865, was uneventful. He took Caroline to Paris for a week or two in February and went to the theatre every night. In April, he was invited to take the chair at the Twentieth Anniversary Festival of the Royal General Theatrical Fund, where he spoke at some length. E. M. Blanchard, the dramatic critic, reported that he was a good chairman and made an excellent speech. Not long afterwards Rossetti invited him to join a committee which was organising a testimonial to George Cruikshank. It may be remembered that Cruikshank, previously a heavy drinker, had been converted some twenty years earlier to total abstinence. As with many such converts it had been a case of substituting intolerance for intemperance, and he became one of teetotalism's most violent advocates; at a dinner he was apt at any moment to make a vehement attack on any fellow-guest who was drinking anything but water. It is hard to see why Rossetti imagined that such a *bon viveur* as Wilkie would wish to be associated, however indirectly, with the Temperance Movement. He cannot have been altogether surprised when Wilkie declined in somewhat sharp terms. He had a general objection to Testimonials, he said, and as for this particular one, 'I cannot honestly say that I feel the necessary respect for Mr. Cruikshank's use of his abilities, during the period in which he has been before the public in connection with the "Temperance Movement."'

In the meantime *Armadale*, to which he devoted infinite care, was proceeding on its course and most of his time was occupied with keeping three months ahead of instalments, the minimum safe period in his view. Even the month of August was spent at home, and he discovered the delights of London in August. 'It is wonderfully quiet—all the people who interrupt me are away . . . and I roam the empty streets and inhale the delightful London air (so much healthier than those pretentious humbugs the seaside breezes!) and meet nobody, and come back with the blessed conviction that I have *not* got to dress to go out to dinner.'

*Armadale* was finished early in April, 1866, after two years in the writing, a good deal longer than he took over any other book. 'I was never so excited myself,' he wrote, 'when finishing a story as I was this time. Miss Gwilt's death quite upset me.' He had managed to save a certain amount of money out of Smith Elder's substantial monthly payments, and informed Charles Ward that he now had £1,500 invested in 'the Funds.' 'About as much saved from *Armadale* as Marshal & Snelgrove make in a quarter of an hour by the brains and industry of other people. If I live I will take a shop—and appeal to the backs or bellies (I have not decided which) instead of the brains of my fellow creatures.' His other news is that he is reported dead in France, and is requested to deny the rumour by a Frenchman who has 'betted ten bottles of champagne' that it is false. He celebrated the completion of his labours by going to Paris for ten days with Frederick Lehmann, where he was quite happy to idle in the open air and enjoy the comfort of his favourite small hotel. 'And yet,' he told his mother, 'such is the perversity of mankind, I am half sorry to have parted from my poor dear book.'

The novel was published in two volumes about the end of May, 1866, and dedicated to John Forster 'in affectionate remembrance of a friendship which is associated with some of the happiest years of my life.' Since Wilkie was incapable of irony, at least in his personal relationships, this gesture towards one whose hostility he must have recognised was somewhat generous. Though Forster brought himself to pay a handsome tribute to the book, there is no sign of his having grasped the olive-branch. On the contrary his jealousy of Wilkie Collins continued to smoulder for the rest of his life.

*Armadale* is Wilkie Collins' longest and in some respects his most ambitious novel. If the plot of *The Woman in White* is complex, that of *Armadale* is labyrinthine. The success of the earlier book told him that the reading public had an appetite for sensation, and in *Armadale* he set out

to provide a banquet. Although there is little actual mystery it is an exciting, well-told story. About it hangs that tense, thundery atmosphere of sensationalism which Wilkie Collins could so effectively conjure up. And yet the book is a failure. The fact is that he had deliberately set himself the task of eclipsing *The Woman in White*, a task that proved beyond his powers. In the end the very surfeit of sensation antagonises the reader, and the unbridled use of coincidences, especially when they contribute nothing to the plot, goes far to destroy his receptiveness. It is however a failure which comes near to success; if Wilkie had not over-reached himself in his search for the last word in sensationalism, if he had brought himself to discard one or two improbable situations and to simplify the plot slightly, what a book *Armada* might have been!

The mainspring of the story is the idea of fatality. Wilkie's obsession with Doom is given full rein. The course of the plot is foreshadowed in a Dream which the hero, Allan Armadale, dreams aboard a stranded wreck. This dream is carefully noted down by him on waking, in true Collins fashion, and even subdivided into seventeen sections. The earlier sections represent a hint of things past, as yet unknown to the dreamer, the remainder a forewarning of things to come. There is a characteristic of melodrama, cited by T. S. Eliot as typical of Wilkie Collins, that of 'delaying longer than one would conceive it possible to delay, a conclusion which is inevitable and wholly foreseen.' No better example could be found than the plot of *Armada*, in which each of the prophecies of the Dream is fulfilled in its turn.

The book is prolific in incident, rich in character and atmosphere. No summary of the plot of this most tortuous of romances could do justice to its author's inventiveness. It opens with a Prologue in which Allan's father makes his dying confession, at some length, in the bedroom of an inn in the Black Forest. It is typical of Wilkie's prodigality in the matter of plot and incident that there would be in this



prologue alone material enough for a whole sensation-novel, whereas it provides little more than the background to the story proper. In his essay on Wilkie Collins, Swinburne wrote: 'The prologue is so full of interest and promise that the expectations of its readers may have been unduly stimulated; but the sequel, astonishingly ingenious and inventive though it is, is scarcely perhaps in perfect keeping with the anticipations thus ingeniously aroused.'

In *Lydia Gwilt* he presents a full-dress portrait of the '*femme fatale*,' unscrupulous, fascinating, vicious. It is a difficult thing to do convincingly, and it would be idle to pretend that Miss Gwilt, memorable and striking though she be, is an entirely satisfactory figure. If he was inhibited to some extent by the literary conventions of the time, many critics held that in his handling of this vicious creature, he had in fact overstepped the limits of good taste. None the less, Miss Gwilt does succeed in dominating the book, as he intended she should, and her half-unwilling love for Midwinter is strangely real and moving. She is a figure, said Swinburne, who would have won the deepest sympathy from English readers had her creator possessed a French instead of an English name.

With the lesser characters Wilkie's touch is surer, and if they are mostly unpleasant they entertain no less on that account. The Pedgifts, father and son, country solicitors, pit their wits against Miss Gwilt's in a manner which recalls those other duels between Fosco and Marian, and between Mrs. Lecount and Captain Wragge. Their clerk, Bashwood, seedy and downtrodden, nurses a hopeless passion for Lydia Gwilt which, from being at first merely comic, develops almost in spite of the author into something deeply pathetic. Here is our first glimpse of him :

He was a lean, elderly, miserably respectable man. He wore a poor old black dress-coat, and a cheap brown wig, which made no pretence of being his own natural hair. Short black trousers clung like attached old servants round his wizen legs; and rusty black gaiters hid all they could of his knobbed ungainly feet.

Black crêpe added its mite to the decayed and dingy wretchedness of his old beaver hat; black mohair in the obsolete form of a stock, drearily encircled his neck and rose as high as his haggard jaws. The one morsel of colour he carried about him, was a lawyer's bag of blue serge as lean and limp as himself.

Finally there is Mrs. Oldershaw, Lydia Gwilt's confidante and accomplice, a Hogarthian figure who carries on the Ladies' Toilette Repository in Diana Street, Pimlico. It was S. M. Ellis who discovered† that Wilkie had based this character upon a certain Madame Rachel Levenson, who had a flourishing business at her Beauty Parlour at 47a, New Bond Street. Here large sums of money were extracted from gullible women whose beauty she claimed to be able to preserve, or enhance, by means of various cosmetic preparations with romantic names, and a wide range of remedial treatments such as the 'Arabian bath.' At this time Madame Rachel, to whom blackmail and procuring did not come amiss, was at the peak of her prosperity, occupying her own box at the Opera and advertising herself as 'Purveyor to the Queen.' It was not until two years after the publication of *Armada* that she was convicted of fraud after a sensational trial, and sentenced to five years' penal servitude. Unabashed, she re-opened her shop on her release and continued to prosper for another six years, at the end of which she again found herself at the Old Bailey. At this trial it was revealed that the Arabian baths consisted of bran and hot water, and that the wildly expensive 'Jordan Water' came from the pump in the backyard of her shop. Madame Rachel received a further five-year sentence and died before completing it in Woking Prison.‡ Mrs. Oldershaw was certainly no more fantastic than her counterpart in real life.

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

‡ A detailed account of Mme. Rachel Levenson's career is included in *Six Criminal Women* by Elizabeth Jenkins. (Sampson Low, 1949).

Collins the scene-painter is much in evidence, always ready with his careful brush-strokes to lend realism and colour to the happenings of melodrama. Here he sets the scene for *Armadale's* famous Dream :

It was past two; the moon was waning; and the darkness that comes before dawn was beginning to gather round the wreck. Behind Allan, as he now stood looking out from the elevation of the mizen-top, spread the broad and lonely sea. Before him were the low, black, lurking rocks, and the broken waters of the channel, pouring white and angry into the vast calm of the westward ocean beyond. On the right hand, heaved back grandly from the waterside, were the rocks and precipices with their little table-lands of grass between; the sloping downs, and upward rolling heath solitudes of the Isle of Man. On the left hand rose the craggy sides of the Islet of the Calf—here, rent wildly into deep black chasms; there, lying low under long sweeping acclivities of grass and heath. No sound rose, no light was visible on either shore. The black lines of the topmost masts of the wreck looked shadowy and faint in the darkening mystery of the sky; the land-breeze had dropped; the small shoreward waves fell noiseless: far and near no sound was audible but the cheerless bubbling of the broken water ahead, pouring through the awful hush of silence in which earth and ocean waited for the coming day.

If *Armadale* falls shorts of his best work in certain respects, it remains a powerful contribution to the fiction of the Victorian age.

As might have been expected it caused a considerable flutter on its appearance. Wilkie himself had foreseen something of the kind when he wrote in his brief preface: 'Readers in particular will, I have some reason to suppose, be here and there disturbed—perhaps even offended—by finding that *Armadale* oversteps in more than one direction, the narrow limits within which they are disposed to restrict the development of modern fiction—if they can.' If he hoped by these words to disarm criticism on moral grounds, he failed, as he failed on other occasions. In the *Athenaeum* H. F. Chorley, veteran music-critic and reviewer, wrote :



It is not pleasant to speak as we must speak of this powerful story; but in the interest of everything that is to be cherished in life, in poetry, in art, it is impossible to be over-explicit in the expression of judgment.

He could hardly have been more explicit than the strident reviewer of *The Spectator* :

The fact that there are such characters as he has drawn, and actions such as he has described, does not warrant his overstepping the limits of decency, and revolting every human sentiment. This is what *Armadale* does. It gives us for its heroine a woman fouler than the refuse of the streets, who has lived to the ripe age of 35, and through the horrors of forgery, murder, theft, bigamy, gaol and attempted suicide, without any trace being left on her beauty . . . [This] is frankly told in a diary which, but for its unreality, would be simply loathsome, and which needs all the veneer of Mr. Wilkie Collins's easy style and allusive sparkle to disguise its actual meaning.

Five years or so later, when the hubbub had died down, an article in *Vanity Fair* described *Armadale* as 'perhaps his finest work.' An admirer of our own day is T. S. Eliot, who wrote : †

The one of Collins' novels which we should choose as the most typical, or as the best of the more typical, and which we should recommend as a specimen of the melodramatic fiction of the epoch, is *Armadale*. It has no merit beyond melodrama, and it has every merit that melodrama can have. If Miss Gwilt did not have to bear such a large part of the burden of revealing her own villainy, the construction would be almost perfect. Like most of Collins' novels, it has the immense—and nowadays more and more rare—merit of being never dull.

After some ten years on the shelf, his play *The Frozen Deep* was accepted in September, 1866, by the Wigans for production at the Olympic about Christmas. Soon afterwards he made arrangements for a trip to Rome with his friend Edward Pigott in October, intending to return at the beginning of December in time to see the final rehearsals. Then the opening production of the Olympic season failed, and

† *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (Wilkie Collins and Dickens). T. S. Eliot. (*Faber and Faber*).

the management decided to put on *The Frozen Deep* in October instead of Christmas. In an effort to save time and money he approached Dickens with a view to procuring the scenery of the amateur production, only to learn that it had been cut down into small panels and was virtually useless. Though he would be abroad on the first night—since Pigott could not postpone his holiday—he read the play to the cast and supervised the earlier rehearsals. To make matters worse he caught a bad cold which seized him 'by the nose, teeth, face, throat and chest in succession.'

Finally, after dashing down to Tunbridge Wells to say goodbye to Mama Collins and coming back 'to sketch the play-bill and hear the Manager's last words,' he contrived to leave with Pigott as planned. They stayed a day in Paris where he was able to discuss a dramatic version of *Armadale* which his friend Regnier, of the Théâtre Français, was preparing for the French stage. They travelled through Switzerland and over the Splügen Pass to Milan. From Milan he wrote a long letter to Nina Lehmann—henceforth invariably addressed as 'the Padrona'—who was wintering at Pau.

. . . . I have been living in a whirlwind, and have only dropped out of the vortex in this place. In plain English the first quarter of an hour which I have had at my disposal since you wrote to me, is a quarter of an hour tonight, in this very damp and dreary town. Last night my travelling companion (Pigott) and I went to a public ball here. We entered by a long dark passage, passed through a hall ornamented with a large stock of fenders, grates, and other ironmongery for sale on either side, found ourselves in a spacious room lit by three oil lamps, with *two* disreputable females smoking cigars, ten or a dozen depressed men, about four hundred empty chairs in a circle, one couple polking in that circle, and nothing else, on my sacred word of honour, nothing else going on! Tonight I am wiser. I stay at the hotel and write to you.

After an account of his feverish activities before leaving England, he presents the Padrona with the latest morsel of gossip from literary circles, concerning Anthony Trollope's brother :

We were to have gone and stayed with Thomas Trollope in his new villa at Florence. But a woman has got in his way. A charming person of this sex was governess to the daughter of Thomas Trollope, widower—and Thomas Trollope is going to marry her tomorrow at Paris—and so, there is an end of the Florence scheme. I don't complain—I am all for Love myself—and this sort of thing speaks volumes for women, for surely a man at a mature age, with a growing daughter, doesn't marry again without knowing what he is about, and without remembrances of Mrs. Number One which surround as with a halo Mrs. Number Two? But this is mere speculation.

The letter concludes with a word of advice, and some incidental observations on the subject of fashion :

Cultivate your appetite, and your appetite will reward you. Purchase becoming (and warm) things for the neck and chest. Rise superior to the devilish delusion which makes women think that their feet cannot possibly look pretty in thick boots. I have studied the subject, and I say they *can*. Men understand these things; Mr. Worth, of Paris, dresses the fine French ladies who wear the 'Falballe,' and regulates the fashions of Europe. He is about to start 'comforters' and hobnail boots for the approaching winter. In two months' time it will be indecent for a woman to show her neck at night, and if you don't make a frightful noise at every step you take on the pavement you abrogate your position as woman, wife and mother in the eyes of all Europe. Is this exaggerated? No! a thousand times no! It is horrible—but it is the truth.

While *The Frozen Deep* was being given for the first time at the Olympic, 'and the respectable British Public is hissing or applauding me, as the case may be,' Wilkie was at Bologna on his way to Rome. In fact the public applauded with some enthusiasm. Charles Reade, who was present at the first night in a box, wrote in his diary: 'The play poorly acted. It is a pretty play but wanted a head at rehearsal. Too much narrative; but after all, original and interesting, and the closing scene great and pathetic.' After two or three weeks in Rome, Wilkie had just completed plans to return to England via Pau, where he had promised to stay for a few days with Mrs. Lehmann, when he received serious news from the manager of the Olympic. In spite of the first night



reception and a moderately favourable press, *The Frozen Deep* was failing to attract audiences, and Wigan wanted to discuss with the author what was to be done. There was nothing for it but to cancel his arrangements and get back to London as quickly as possible. Accordingly he and Pigott caught the next steamer from Civita Vecchia to Marseilles, continuing by rail to Paris. They stayed the night at Macon ('to rest after ten hours' shaking on the railway') and in Paris Wilkie had another talk with Regnier. The day after his arrival in London he went to the theatre and examined the accounts, which showed that the play had not even covered its expenses. There was no alternative but to take it off before Christmas after a run of about six weeks. For the author there was 'not a sixpence.'

He wrote to the Padrona to tell her of his disappointment :

The play is (I am *told*, for I have not yet had the courage to go and see it) beautifully got up, and very well acted. But the enlightened British Public declares it to be '*slow*.' There isn't an atom of slang or vulgarity in the whole piece from beginning to end; no female legs are shown in it; Richard Wardour doesn't get up after dying and sing a comic song; sailors are represented in the Arctic regions, and there is no hornpipe danced, and no sudden arrival of 'the pets of the ballet' to join the dance in the costume of Esquimaux maidens; finally, all the men on the stage *don't* marry all the women on the stage at the end, and nobody addresses the audience and says,

If our kind friends here tonight will only encourage us by their applause, there are brave hearts among us which will dare the perils for many a night yet of—'The Frozen Deep.'

For these reasons, best of women, I have failed. Is my tail put down? No—a thousand times no! I am at work on the 'dramatic' *Armadale*, and I will take John Bull by the scruff of the neck, and force him into the theatre to see it—before or after it has been played in French, I don't know which—but into the theatre John Bull shall go. I have some ideas of advertising next time that will make the public hair stand on end. And so enough, and more than enough, of theatrical matters.

Oh, I wanted you so at Rome—in the Protestant cemetery—don't start! No ghosts—only a cat. I went to show my friend

Pigott the grave of the illustrious Shelley. Approaching the resting-place of the divine poet in a bright sunlight, the finest black Tom you ever saw discovered at an incredible distance that a catanthropist had entered the cemetery—rushed up at a gallop, with his tail at right angles to his spine—turned over on his back with his four paws in the air, and said in the language of cats: 'Shelley be hanged! Come and tickle me!' I stooped and tickled him. We were both profoundly affected.

Is this all I have to tell you about Rome? By no means. Then why don't I go on and tell it? Because it is five o'clock—the British muffin-bell is ringing—the dismal British Sunday is closing in. I have promised to dine with the Benzons† (where I shall meet Fred), and to take Charley and Katie (who is in the doctor's hands again) on my way. I must walk to keep my horrid corpulence down, and the time is slipping away . . .

The 'dramatic *Armada*' to which he refers, did not achieve an English stage production, although Regnier's adaptation may have been produced in Paris. Wilkie had sent the manuscript to Dickens some months earlier for his comments, which were frankly given. He considered the play technically brilliant, but feared that almost every situation was dangerous and likely to be unacceptable to an English audience. It was a radically different version of the novel which eventually reached the London stage under the title of *Miss Gwilt*.

† Frederick Lehmann's sister and brother-in-law.