

CHAPTER SIX

Amateur Theatricals

TOWARDS CHRISTMAS OF 1854, amateur theatricals were in the air again at Tavistock House. This time the entertainment was to be a pantomime, in order that the Dickens children should have an opportunity of acting. The play selected was Planché's *The Fairy Extravaganza of Fortunio and his Seven Gifted Sons*, the only grown-up parts being played by Mark Lemon, Wilkie and Dickens. Wilkie, as Gobbler, had only a dozen words to say but the part offered 'great Pantomime opportunities—which require a first-rate old stager to devour Property Loaves'; his instructions from the producer were to make up 'dreadfully greedy.' He appeared in the playbill as Wilkini Collini.

Dickens was becoming increasingly restless, and in February, 1855, took Wilkie with him for a fortnight's holiday in Paris. The cold was intense on both sides of the Channel, but, wrote Wilkie, 'compared with French frost our national frost seems to be always wrapped up in more or less soft fog. We should have felt this difference unpleasantly enough on the railway from Boulogne to Paris—but for the excellent metal cases of boiling water placed in each carriage, and renewed several times in the course of the journey. These kept our feet and legs warm and made the air like the air of a room.' He was most impressed with the accommodation secured by Dickens at the Hotel Meurice. 'We are settled here in a delightful apartment, looking out on the Tuileries, gorgeously-furnished drawing-room, bedrooms with Turkey carpets, reception-room, hall, cupboards,

passages—all to ourselves.' Wilkie was not in the best of health, and Dickens wrote to Georgina: 'Collins continues in a queer state, but is perfectly cheerful under the stoppage of his wine and other afflictions.' They dined in 'all manner of places' and usually visited two or three theatres each day. Wilkie just managed to last out the fortnight but retired to bed immediately on his return to London, where we find him dispensing hot gin-and-water to visitors at his bedside, and turning over in his mind an idea for a play.

Ever since the Blandford Square days the theatre had held a special fascination for him. The time had now come to try his hand as a playwright. Some months earlier he had written to Charles Ward: 'I have plenty of hard work in prospect—some of it, too, work of a new kind, and of much uncertainty as to results. I mean the dramatic experiments which I have been thinking up, and which you must keep a profound secret from everybody in case I fail with them. This will be an anxious winter for me. If I were not constitutionally reckless about my future prospects, I should feel rather nervous just now.' During the intervening period the secret had been well kept, and even Dickens knew nothing of the play until it was finished. He wrote to Wilkie on May 11th:

I will read the play referring to the lighthouse with great pleasure if you will send it to me—of course I will at any time, with cordial readiness and unaffected interest, do any such thing.

And a week later, to Clarkson Stanfield, the artist:

I have a little lark in contemplation, if you will help it to fly. Collins has done a melodrama (a regular old-style melodrama), in which there is a very good notion. I am going to act in it, as an experiment, in the Children's Theatre here [Tavistock House]. I, Mark, Collins, Egg, and my daughter Mary, the whole *dram. pers.* Now there is only one scene in the piece, and that, my tarry lad, is the inside of a lighthouse. Will you come and paint it?

Stanfield accepted the commission and also painted an Act-drop depicting the Eddystone Lighthouse, the original sketch

for which fetched the remarkable sum of 1,000 guineas at the Gad's Hill sale after Dickens' death.

The Lighthouse called for a more elaborate production than anything previously done at Tavistock House and Dickens lavished every care upon it. No time was lost, however; rehearsals started within a fortnight of his reading the play for the first time, and the opening performance took place on June 16th. The play at least provided some strong melodramatic situations, and a fine acting opportunity for Dickens in the part of Aaron Gurnock, the old lighthouse-keeper who believes himself to be an accessory to murder. Carlyle, who was one of the enthusiastic first-night audience, gave high praise both to the play and to Dickens' performance. *The Lighthouse* became the talk of the town and Dickens remarked that, at a dinner-party at Lord John Russell's, it was the chief topic of conversation. The demand for seats greatly exceeded the capacity of the tiny auditorium and Dickens was persuaded by a friend, Colonel Waugh, to give a series of performances in his private theatre at Campden House, Church Street, Kensington.

Already one actor-manager, Benjamin Webster, was nibbling, through the agency of Mark Lemon to whom Wilkie wrote on June 28th :

I am anxious to know what Mr. Webster's intentions are on the subject of *The Lighthouse*. If you will kindly communicate to him the terms on which I am willing to dispose of the play for a limited period, I think we shall come to a definite understanding immediately.

The terms, then, that I propose (if *The Lighthouse* is acted in public) are: Five pounds a night to be paid to me during the first twenty nights of the run of the piece—the Play to be, so far as the dramatic right over it is concerned, Mr. Webster's property for twelve months from the first night of its production on the stage at his Theatre. After that period, all rights over it are to revert to me.

There are one or two minor arrangements which it will be time enough to talk over when I know how Mr. Webster is disposed to receive this proposal.

In spite of the far from onerous terms, set down with

typical preciseness by Wilkie, Mr. Webster declined the proposal. According to Dickens, he developed cold feet at the prospect of playing Aaron and, presumably, of having his performance compared with that of the famous amateur. Negotiations with Wigan, manager of the Olympic Theatre, broke down because he too was unable to cast the play—a situation which provoked Wilkie to write: 'The principal part really requires a first-rate serious actor—and where is he to be found Anno Domini 1855?' Dickens, though he considered Wigan's refusal a lucky escape, was most anxious to secure for Wilkie a professional production and arranged for a dozen leading critics to attend one of the Campden House performances. Despite favourable notices, the managers remained aloof and it was not until two years later that *The Lighthouse* first appeared on a public stage. The theatre was the Olympic and the 'great little' Robson was imported into the company to play Aaron Gurnock. On this occasion Wilkie wrote to his mother, on August 10th, 1857: 'Everybody breathless. Calls for me at the end of the first Act. A perfect hurricane of applause at the end of the play—which I had to acknowledge from a private box. Dickens, Thackeray, Mark Lemon publicly appearing in my box. In short an immense success.' These were optimistic words, for not even Robson's remarkable performance did in fact secure for *The Lighthouse* more than a moderate success.

Dickens, who threw himself into acting with the same whole-hearted vigour that characterised all his activities, needed a rest at the end of the *Lighthouse* season. He took the family to Folkestone where Wilkie joined him at 3, Albion Villas towards the end of July. Here they discussed future plans for *Household Words*, including the Christmas Number for 1855, *The Holly Tree Inn*, to which Wilkie contributed two stories, 'The Ostler' and 'The Dream Woman.' Wilkie's other two contributions to *Household Words* during 1855 were 'The Yellow Mask,' another essay in the macabre, and 'Sister Rose,' a story of the French Revolution.

They were longer than his earlier stories, and each appeared in four parts. He was remunerated at the rate of about £10 for each weekly part.

From Folkestone, Wilkie went off to join Edward Pigott on a sailing expedition to the Scilly Islands. Pigott was a great friend of his for many years, and passionately keen on yachting. He owned and edited the *Leader*, a paper which he had founded in 1850, and to which Wilkie was an occasional contributor. Some years later Pigott was appointed Examiner of Plays in the office of the Lord Chamberlain, a task he performed with notable success. He has been described by an acquaintance as 'courteous and kind, well-read, especially in French literature, and agreeably witty.'

The Scillies trip provided the material for Wilkie's first non-fiction article in *Household Words*, 'The Cruise of the Tomtit,' in which the protagonists are lightly disguised as Jollins and Migott. They hired a 36-foot cutter of 13 tons and sailed her from the Bristol Channel. Several friends had declined to join the crew, taking a different view of the hazards involved, and in the end—and perhaps wisely—they engaged three brothers well-versed in ship handling. Apart from bad weather at the start which forced them to run for shelter, it was an uneventful and pleasant voyage. Wilkie proudly records that they made the return trip in only 43 hours.

He was back at work in Hanover Terrace by the end of September preparing a book of short stories which Smith Elder had undertaken to publish. He selected for inclusion five of his *Household Words* stories and wrote a sixth especially for the occasion. This last story, 'The Lady of Glenwith Grange,' is one of his most successful—a strangely moving tale, told with a rare economy of words. He also devised an ingenious connecting thread which gives to *After Dark*, as the collection of stories was named, a certain measure of coherence.

This same year, 1855, was a notable one in the life of his friend John Everett Millais. The Ruskins' strange and un-

happy marriage had recently been annulled after a painful lawsuit, and Effie Ruskin, whom Millais had painted in 'The Order of Release,' was free at last. After an interval no longer than propriety demanded, Millais asked her to marry him, and a month or so later she consented. To celebrate the event Wilkie gave a last bachelor dinner for Millais on the eve of his departure for Scotland, where the marriage was to take place.

One of the guests on this occasion was the already well-known author of the *Book of Nonsense*, Edward Lear, who also became a lifelong friend of Wilkie Collins. It is however a friendship of which hardly a trace remains. Over thirty years later Lear wrote, in one of his depressed moods: 'I am about to make a new arrangement i.e., to correspond only with those I have been in the habit of writing to since 1850. They include Lushington, Tennyson, Wilkie Collins . . .'; and yet in the two volumes of Lear's published letters not one to Wilkie appears. The single other reference is in a letter dated January 7th, 1884: 'Received long and very nice letter from Wilkie Collins.' It is also known that he was one of the few friends to whom Lear sent, in 1886, a manuscript copy of his last nonsense-poem 'Uncle Arly.' A piquant aspect of the friendship of the two writers was their close personal resemblance. Lear remarked once that he was frequently being mistaken for Wilkie Collins.

It is about this time that we see signs of a deterioration in Wilkie's health. Hitherto he had led a normal, moderately active life and despite occasional ailments there was nothing to indicate, in the first thirty-two years of his life, that his health was below average. In 1856 however, he had three distinct periods of sickness, the nature of which is not specified, although Dickens in one instance refers vaguely to 'a chill.' In the light of Wilkie's subsequent medical history it is at least probable that these troubles were largely rheumatic, and the forerunner of the gout to which he later fell a chronic victim. His proneness to rheumatic complaints

was almost certainly inherited either from his father or, as he himself believed, from his paternal grandfather.

The first of the attacks in January, 1856, delayed his visit to Paris to see the Dickens family who were spending the winter there. In inviting him Dickens had held out the prospect of 'theatrical and other lounging evenings, and also of articles in *Household Words*, adding, 'it will not be the first time that we shall have got on well in Paris, and I hope it will not be by many a time the last.' Not until the end of February was Wilkie able to leave for Paris where Dickens had found for him an apartment at 63, Champs Elysées, which he described as 'the snuggest little oddity I ever saw—the lookout from it the most wonderful in the world.' Wilkie was enchanted with the place as soon as he set eyes upon it, and wrote to E. M. Ward: 'I have got a most perfect little bachelor apartment; a 'Pavilion' like a house in a Pantomime, and the most willing, pleasant *concièrge* and wife in the world to wait on me.'

Wilkie, who was quite accustomed to receiving communications such as :

My Dear Collins :

Form of trip appointment, in compliance with Act of Parliament, Victoria, cap. 304.

Day	Thursday
Hour.....	Quarter past 11 a.m.
Place.....	Dover Terminus, London Bridge
Destination....	Tunbridge Wells
Description of Railway Qualification	
Return Ticket	

(signed) Charles Dickens.

Entd.

was probably not surprised when a messenger arrived at the Pavilion, bearing the following document from No. 49, a few doors away :

The Humble Petition
of
Charles Dickens
A Distressed Foreigner

SHEWETH,—That your Petitioner has not been able to write one word today, or to fashion forth the dimmest shade of the faintest ghost of an idea.

That your Petitioner is therefore desirous of being taken out, and is not at all particular where.

That your Petitioner, being imbecile, says no more. But will ever etc. (whatever that may be).

It is not recorded where Wilkie took his distressed friend; one result of the expedition was that Wilkie developed a chill, accompanied by 'rheumatic pains and aguish shiverings,' which kept him indoors for a fortnight.

The invalid, confined to his sick-room, is apt to develop a morbid preoccupation with ill-health in all its manifestations. In the changing scenes of Parisian life which Wilkie watched from his window, only those incidents which could be in some way related to his own sick condition held any real interest for him. Of the hundreds of passing vehicles, two in particular impressed themselves on his memory.

A sober brown omnibus, belonging to a Sanitary Asylum, and a queer little truck which carries baths and hot water to private houses, from a bathing establishment near me. The omnibus, as it passed my window at a solemn jog-trot, is full of patients getting their airing. I can see them dimly, and I fall into curious fancies about their various cases, and wonder what proportion of the afflicted passengers are near the time of emancipation from their sanitary prison on wheels. As for the little truck, with its empty zinc bath and barrel of warm water, I am probably wrong in sympathetically associating it as frequently as I do with cases of illness. It is doubtless often sent for by healthy people, too luxurious in their habits to walk abroad for a bath. But there must be a proportion of cases of illness to which the truck ministers; and when I see it going faster than usual, I assume that it must be wanted by some person in a fit; grow suddenly agitated by the idea; and watch the empty bath and hot water barrel with breathless interest, until they rumble away together out of sight.

Similarly, of the people he comes to know by sight, one figure he cannot forget.

She is a nursemaid, neither young nor pretty. Very clean and neat in her dress, with an awful bloodless paleness in her

face, and a hopeless consumptive languor in her movements. She has only one child to take care of—a robust little girl of cruelly active habits. There is a stone bench opposite my window; and on this the wan and weakly nursemaid often sits, not bumping down on it with the heavy thump of honest exhaustion, but sinking on it listlessly, as if in changing from walking to sitting she were only passing from one form of weariness to another. The robust child remains mercifully near the feeble guardian for a few minutes—then becomes, on a sudden, pitilessly active again, laughs and dances from a distance, when the nurse makes weary signs to her, and runs away altogether, when she is faintly entreated to be quiet for a few minutes longer. The nurse looks after her in despair for a moment, draws her neat black shawl, with a shiver, over her sharp shoulders, rises resignedly, and disappears from my eyes in pursuit of the pitiless child. I see this mournful little drama acted many times over, always in the same way, and wonder sadly how long the wan nursemaid will hold out.

In his careful observation of this moving little scene we can see the Wilkie Collins of later years, a semi-invalid himself, morbidly fascinated by human infirmity and always interpreting it with sympathy and understanding.

By March 19th he was able to announce to Charles Ward that, 'after relieving my mind by swearing,' he had emerged victorious from the struggle. In the same letter he mentions that Paris has been illuminated in celebration of the birth of the 'Imperial Infant, who was created Prince of Peace and King of Algeria as soon as he could squall and dirty his napkins.' Wilkie was soon caught up again in the stream of entertainment provided by his unflagging companion. Dickens arranged a continuous round of theatres, art galleries, and social occasions of every kind. At various functions they met leading figures in French literature and drama, many of whom were known to Dickens already. Wilkie too made a number of friends. Among them was Emile Forgues, editor of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, who had recently brought Wilkie's work to the notice of the French public through an article in his paper, and who later translated many of his books; Scribe, who on the evidence of a

single story (Mad Monkton) prophesied his success as a novelist; and Regnier, of the *Comédie Française*, who subsequently collaborated with him in a dramatisation of *Armada*.

Paris afforded an opportunity for Dickens and Collins to indulge their passion for the theatre. Their most memorable experience was Frédéric Lemaitre's performance in the hoary old melodrama, *Thirty Years of a Gambler's Life*, at the Ambigu. As the last curtain fell they were so overcome with emotion that neither moved or spoke for several minutes. Dickens wrote half a dozen ecstatic pages to Forster which, according to Wilkie, were 'not one whit exaggerated.' The Ambigu's next production, *Paradise Lost*, was of a very different type. Before the opening night the wildest rumours were current in Paris concerning the measure of nudity to be displayed by Adam and Eve, and tickets were rapidly sold out. Wilkie and Dickens attended the first night only to discover that the play was a ludicrous compound of Milton's epic and Byron's *Cain* and that, contrary to expectation, Eve was dressed 'very modestly.'

Ristori, the Italian actress over whom Paris was going mad, was dismissed by both of them as an impostor. Writing to E. M. Ward, Wilkie reports :

Perfect conventionality of the most hopelessly stage kind—walk, attitudes, expression, elocution, all nothing but commonplace in a violent state of exaggeration. We saw her in a play of Alfieri's exhibiting the unnatural bestiality of a daughter in love with her own father in long classical speeches. Virtuous females of all nations, sitting in balloons of crinoline petticoat, observed the progress of this pleasant and modest story with perfect composure.

On the more frivolous side they were delighted with a farce, *Les Cheveux de ma Femme*. A man surreptitiously secures a lock of his wife's hair and takes it to a clairvoyante who possesses an infallible gift for telling character from such evidence. She announces that the owner of the hair has been engaging in the most frightful dissipations, and the husband returns home distraught and mad with jealousy;

only to discover what his wife had successfully concealed hitherto—that she wears a wig.

A trivial incident which occurred during this visit had a far-reaching effect on Wilkie Collins' subsequent career. He told the story many years afterwards to a friend: 'I was in Paris, wandering about the streets with Charles Dickens, amusing ourselves by looking into the shops. We came to an old book-stall—half-shop and half-store—and I found some dilapidated volumes and records of French crime—a sort of French Newgate Calendar. I said to Dickens: "Here is a prize!" So it turned out to be. In them I found some of my best plots.' These volumes, Maurice Méjan's *Recueil des Causes Célèbres*, remained in Wilkie's library until his death. But for them *The Woman in White* would probably never have been written.

Wilkie returned to London in April, a sick man again. The house in Hanover Terrace had been let for a short term to the Wards and the family were staying in the country. He went to an hotel for a night and set off the next morning to look for a Furnished Apartment. At almost the first notice he saw advertising Rooms to Let, which was in the window of a house in Howland Street, off Tottenham Court Road, he stopped his cab and went in to inspect them. They were uninviting, and the street was gloomy, but he felt too depressed and ill to continue the quest, and paid his deposit. In Howland Street he suffered from the most devastating of afflictions, an obtrusive and maternal landlady. Mrs. Glutch—the name Wilkie gives her in writing of these experiences—is likened to a healthy bluebottle waiting on a sick fly, 'a woman suffused in a gentle melancholy proceeding from perpetual sympathy for my suffering condition.' He is however far too weak to think of escaping.

Dickens writes from Paris: 'The Pavilion looks very desolate and nobody has taken it as yet . . . I found the evening sufficiently dull, and indeed we all miss you very much.' And again a week later:

I have been quite taken aback by your account of your alarming seizure; and have only become reassured again, firstly by the good fortune of your having left here and got so near your Doctor; secondly by your hopefulness of now making head in the right direction. On the 3rd or 4th I purpose being in town, and I need not say that I shall forthwith come to look after my old Patient.

Several pages of this long letter are devoted to anecdotes calculated to cheer the convalescent. Dickens has seen the Comédie Française version of *As You Like It*—

Which is a kind of Theatrical Representation that I think might be got up, with great completeness, by the Patients in the asylum for Idiots. Dreariness is no work for it, vacancy is no word for it, gammon is no word for it, there *is* no word for it. Nobody has anything to do but sit upon as many grey stones as he can.

Chauncey Hare Townshend has called with his dog Bully, whose antics are described in a paragraph primly expurgated by Georgina Hogarth in her edition of the *Letters*.

The Bully disconcerted me a good deal. He dined here on Sunday with his master, and got a young family of puppies out of each of the doors, fell into indecent transports with the claw of the round table, and was madly in love with Townshend's boots, all of which Townshend seems to have no idea of, but merely says—'Bul-la!' when he is on his hind legs like the sign of a public house. If he dines here again, I mean to have a trifle of camphor ready for him, and to try whether it has the effect upon him that is said to have upon the Monks.

There have been hints that 'Paris pleasures' for Dickens and Wilkie were not all of an intellectual or gastronomic nature, and the final paragraph might be construed as lending substance to these suggestions.

On Saturday night I paid three francs at the door of that place where we saw the wrestling, and went in, at 11 o'clock, to a Ball. Much the same as our own National Argyle Rooms. Some pretty faces, but all of two classes—wicked and coldly calculating, or haggard and wretched in their worn beauty. Among the latter was a woman of thirty or so, in an Indian shawl, who never stirred from a seat in a corner all the time I was

there. Handsome, regardless, brooding, and yet with some noble qualities in her forehead. I mean to walk about tonight and look for her. I didn't speak to her there, but I have a fancy that I should like to know more about her.

By the beginning of May when Dickens visited him at Howland Street, Wilkie was very much better and shortly afterwards was able to turn his back on the tiresome Mrs. Glutch for good. The three miserable weeks in lodgings formed the subject of an article for *Household Words*, which he subsequently included in *My Miscellanies*.

The article is chiefly remarkable for an expression of his views on domestic service, a matter in which he was quite at variance with his time. In the Victorian novel, as in the Victorian household, servants were only permitted to obtrude their personalities so long as these were of regulation pattern. Usually they were excluded from any real participation in the plot. In Trollope's novels the domestics are seldom more than mere accessories to the story; even Dickens is embarrassed in his handling of the master-servant relationship on more than one occasion. Wilkie Collins, however, depicts the domestic servants of his novels without a trace of condescension as real people with real emotions, not as stock figures but as characters in the round. In this article he is writing of one of several maids who came and went during his short time in Howland Street :

She looks very much surprised, poor creature, when I first let her see that I have other words to utter in addressing her besides the word of command; and seems to think me the most eccentric of mankind, when she finds that I have a decent anxiety to spare her all useless trouble in waiting on me. Young as she is, she has drudged so long over the dreariest ways of this world, without one leisure moment to look up from the everlasting dirt on the road at the green landscape around, and the pure sky above, that she has become hardened to the saddest, surely, of human lots before she is yet a woman grown. Life means dirty work, small wages, hard words, no holidays, no social station, no future, according to her experience of it. No human being ever was created for this. No state of society which composedly accepts this, is the cases of thousands, as one

of the necessary conditions of its selfish comfort, can pass itself off as civilized, except under the most audacious of all false pretences.

Such an attitude was bound to incur the obloquy of the employing class, and as late as the nineties it was possible for Percy Fitzgerald to write :

Another feature in Wilkie Collins's work was his odd interest in the secrets of servant-life, which he seemed to think were of extraordinary value. The housekeeper's -views, the still-room maid's opinions and observations, were retailed with much minuteness, and made to influence the story. Such things are below the dignity of official narrative: for it is notorious that the opinions and judgments of servants are not only valueless, but are often actual distortions of the truth.†

It is to Collins' lasting credit that he was not prepared to treat the domestic servant as an inferior species. One hardly imagines that he would have been dismayed by Fitzgerald's sneers.

More stories from Wilkie's pen appeared in *Household Words* during 1856. 'A Rogue's Life,' for which he received £50, came out in five successive numbers during March, and 'The Diary of Anne Rodway' in two parts in July. Concerning the latter, Dickens writes :

I cannot tell you what a high opinion I have of 'Anne Rodway,' I read the first part at the office with strong admiration, and read the second on the railway coming back here . . . My behaviour before my fellow-passengers was weak in the extreme, for I cried as much as you could possibly desire. Apart from the genuine force and beauty of the little narrative, and the admirable personation of the girl's identity and point of view, it is done with an amount of honest pains and devotion to the work which few men can have better reason to appreciate than I, and which no man can have a more profound respect for. I think it is excellent, feel a personal pride and pleasure in it which is a delightful sensation, and know no one else who could have done it.

In their discussion of future plans the thoughts of both

† *Memoirs of an Author*. Percy H. Fitzgerald. (Bentley, 1894).

writers were turning once more towards the Drama. The success of *The Lighthouse* had meant as much to the principal actor as to its author. The acclamation of a whole world of readers, accorded him in a measure hardly known by a writer before or since in his lifetime, was not enough for Dickens; he was beginning to find it too distant, too impersonal. What he needed more and more was the applause he could see and hear, the excitement of the theatre. The same streak of exhibitionism which was to drive him to undertake the reading-tours that sapped his strength and ultimately killed him, now prompted him to seek still greater renown as an actor.

The writing of a new play would have to devolve upon Wilkie, since Dickens was up to his eyes in *Little Dorrit* and the day-to-day affairs of the magazine. They sketched out the plot together in Paris during March. The subject, Arctic Exploration, was very much in the public mind—and in Dickens'—because of the recent Admiralty publication of a Report on Sir John Franklin's tragic expedition. The two leading characters, Naval officers forming part of a similar expedition, were to be played by Wilkie and Dickens. Both men began to let their beards grow in order that, by the time the performance took place nine months later, they should really resemble Arctic explorers. Wilkie retained his beard until the end of his life.

After his illness he seems to have laid the draft aside for a time, but Dickens, who had set his heart on the project, keeps on prodding in letters with such phrases as 'All to come—in the fulness of the Arctic Seasons.' In April he tells Wills, 'Collins and I have a mighty original notion (mine in the beginning) for a play,' and offers Mrs. Wills the part of a Scotch housekeeper.

In June, Wilkie and Pigott chartered the *Coquette*, a 'delightful vessel' attached to the Royal Yacht Squadron, and sailed with one or two professional hands from Gravesend to the Bristol Channel, by way of Cowes, Cherbourg and Torquay. Their intention had been to sail to Dublin, but

the winds were unfavourable. They crossed the Channel instead, calling at Cherbourg—'a dull, neglected place, full of the most intricately composite Continental stenches'—in order to take on board a stock of champagne and sauterne. On his return in early July, Wilkie received a letter from Dickens pressing him to join the party at the Villa des Moulineaux which had been rented again for the Summer :

On the 15th we shall, of course delightedly expect you, and you will find your room in apple-pie order. I am charmed to hear you have discovered so good a notion for the play. Immense excitement is always in action here on the subject, and I don't think Mary and Katey will feel quite safe until you are shut up in the Pavilion on pen and ink.

His stay was cut short by a diphtheria epidemic in Boulogne which drove the whole party back to England early in September. He had, however, made good progress with the play, and on September 10th, Dickens wrote: '*An Admirable idea.* It seems to me to supply and include everything the play wanted.' Some suggestions follow, and the letter ends: 'Turn it how you will, the strength of the situation is *prodigious*; and if we don't bring the house down with it, I'm a—Tory.'

Another matter which Dickens had been turning over in his mind was Wilkie's position in relation to *Household Words*. He had become one of its most frequent contributors of stories, and had also written some non-fiction articles. Would it not be preferable to have him on the staff of the magazine, at a regular salary? Dickens was satisfied that *Household Words* would benefit from such an addition to its strength, and he knew that occasional payments to Collins were running at a high rate. Striking a careful balance between a desire to treat his friend fairly and a disinclination to swell the salary list more than he need, Dickens wrote to his sub-editor on September 16th :

My dear Wills,—I have been thinking a good deal about Collins, and it strikes me that the best thing we can just now do for *H. W.*, is to add him on to Morley, and offer him Five

Guineas a week. He is very suggestive, and exceedingly quick to take my notions. Being industrious and reliable besides, I don't think we should be at an additional expense of £20 in the year by the transaction.

I observe that to a man in his position who is fighting to get on, the getting his name before the public is important. Some little compensation for its not being constantly announced is needed, and that I fancy might be afforded by *a certain engagement*. If you are of my mind, I wish you would go up to him this morning, and tell him this is what we have to propose to him today, and that I wish him, if he can, to consider beforehand. You could explain the nature of such an engagement to him, in half a dozen words, far more easily than we could all open it together. And he would then come prepared. Of course he should have permission to collect his writings, and would be handsomely and generously considered in all respects. I think it would do him, in the long run, a world of good; and I am certain that by meeting together—dining three instead of two—and sometimes calling in Morley to boot—we should knock out much new fire.

What it is desirable to put before him, is the regular association with the work, and the means he already has of considering whether it would be pleasant and useful to him to work with me, and whether any mere trading engagement would be likely to render him as good service.

If Wills expected Wilkie Collins to jump at this offer he was quickly disillusioned. As Dickens had foreseen, Wilkie was fully aware that unsigned stories and papers in *Household Words* did little to enhance his growing reputation as a writer of fiction. He seems to have had the temerity to suggest that he might suffer by the readers' confusing his work with that of Dickens. No less acute than Dickens in pecuniary matters, Wilkie also appreciated that Five Guineas a week was not much of an increase over his current remuneration, and that the acceptance of a salary must in some degree limit his freedom. On the whole Wilkie was disinclined to accept the offer as it stood. If, however, Dickens and Wills could make certain concessions, he would be very willing to reconsider the proposal. Would they, perhaps, agree to his contributions being signed? Or, failing that, to

undertake the serialisation of a full-length novel—over his name of course? Wills was doubtful, but promised to communicate with his chief.

Back came Dickens' reply by the next post :

Don't conclude anything *unfavourable* with Collins, without previous reference of the subject, and the matter of your consultation, to me. And again put before him clearly, when he comes to you, that I do not interpose myself in this stage of the business, solely because I think it right that he should consider and decide without any personal influence on my part.

I think him wrong in his objection, and have not the slightest doubt that such a confusion of authorship (which I don't believe to obtain in half-a-dozen minds out of half-a-dozen hundred) would be a far greater service than dis-service to him. This I clearly see. But, as far as a long story is concerned, I see not the least objection to our advertising, at once, before it begins, that it is by him. I *do* see an objection to departing from our custom of not putting names to the papers in *H. W.* itself; but to our advertising the authorship of a long story, as a Rider to all our advertisements, I see none whatever.

Now as to a long story itself, I doubt its value to us, and I feel perfectly convinced that it is not one quarter so useful to us as detached papers, or short stories in four parts. But I am quite content to try the experiment. The story should not, however, go beyond six months, and the engagement should be for twelve.

On these terms agreement was reached and Wilkie joined the staff of *Household Words* about October 1st, 1856. More than one publisher was later to lament that Wilkie Collins drove a hard bargain, but he seldom had better cause to be satisfied with his negotiating ability than on this occasion, when his personal relationship with Dickens placed him at something of a disadvantage. Dickens obtained his services cheaply, but Wilkie made a great stride forward in achieving such a wide circulation for the serial version of his next novel.

Dickens, it must be admitted, interpreted the arrangement generously. Wilkie suggested that serial publication should only begin after he had written half, or at least a third of

the story, and had submitted it for the Editor's approval. Dickens, however, brushed aside the suggestion and assured Wilkie of his confidence in the novel. *The Dead Secret* was, in consequence, written 'hot,' or virtually instalment by instalment, and began to appear in January, 1857, barely three months after Wilkie was taken on to the staff of the paper.

Wilkie Collins lost no time in getting down to work for the magazine. In addition to pushing ahead with the novel, and completing *The Frozen Deep*, both of which were pressing commitments, he found time to collaborate with Dickens on the coming Christmas Number. to be entitled *The Wreck of the Golden Mary*. To this, Wilkie contributed two chapters. 'John Steadiman's Account' and 'The Deliverance.'

By the middle of October the first two acts of *The Frozen Deep* are finished; suggestions for dialogue and details of the action continue to pervade Dickens' letters. A little later he is learning his part and writes in a postscript, 'Took twenty miles today, and got up all Richard's words, to the great terror of Finchley, Neasdon, Willesden, and the adjacent country.' In November the play is finished; rehearsals begin; Stanfield gets to work on the scenery; Francesco Berger is consulted about the incidental music; the playbills are sent to the printer. Next, and most important, there are the invitations to be despatched. Even after a careful pruning of the list, Dickens finds that four hundred guests represent the irreducible minimum. At a pinch the 'Smallest Theatre in the World' will accommodate an audience of a hundred, so there must be four performances. The Duke of Devonshire must be allowed to choose his evening, and there are other important guests to be invited on the same evening to meet him at supper. On December 16th, Dickens was able to write to Wilkie, 'All progressing satisfactorily. Telbin painting on the Stage. Carpenters knocking down the Drawing-room.'

The first performance was given on January 6th, 1857.

Forster declaimed a Prologue in verse on a darkened stage, to the strains of 'soft music' throughout, beginning:

One savage footprint on the lonely shore,
Where one man listn'd to the surge's roar,
Not all the winds that stir the mighty sea
Can ever ruffle in the memory.
If such its interest and thrall, O then
Pause on the footprints of heroic men,
Making a garden of the desert wide
Where Parry conquer'd death and Franklin died.

At the closing words 'Vanish ye mists!' the lights were turned up to reveal the living-room of a house in Devon. Clara Burnham is affianced to Frank Aldersley, played by Wilkie Collins, and is loved by but has rejected Richard Wardour, played by Dickens. Both men, unknown to one another at the time, have left England some months earlier as members of an Arctic expedition. Clara is distracted by premonitions of disaster and visions of blood on the icy wastes. The second act is set in an Arctic encampment; supplies are nearly exhausted and a small party is selected by lot to search for relief. It includes both Wardour and Aldersley. Just before the fall of the curtain, Wardour discovers that Aldersley is the man who has robbed him of Clara's love and whom he has sworn to kill. The last act takes place on the shores of Newfoundland, whither Clara and the wives of other officers in the Expedition have been transported to greet the survivors. Wardour and Aldersley are not among them. Clara is convinced that the worst has happened and that her lover has met death at his rival's hand, when a haggard, half-demented figure appears, whom she recognises with difficulty as Wardour. He leaves the stage, to return a few moments later carrying in his arms the insensible Aldersley whom he has snatched from the jaws of death at the cost of his own life. Clara understands his sacrifice as Wardour expires at her feet and the curtain falls.

Such is the brief outline of what is emphatically not a

good play. By the standards of Victorian melodrama it is perhaps no worse than the average, and has the advantage of an original background. That it created something of a sensation among the audiences at Tavistock House and elsewhere must be attributed chiefly to Dickens' performance as Wardour. By all accounts this eclipsed anything he had ever done on the stage; he played, according to Wilkie, 'with a truth, vigour, and pathos never to be forgotten by those who were fortunate enough to witness it.' Dickens himself records that 'For about ten minutes after his death, on each occasion of that event occurring, Richard Wardour was in a floored condition. And one night . . . he very nearly did what he never did—went and fainted off, dead, again. But he always plucked up, on the turn of ten minutes, and became facetious.' He adds that Wilkie, when the time came for him to be carried on to the stage in the last act, 'always shook like a mound of jelly, and muttered, "This is an awful thing."'

The theatre at Tavistock House was dismantled, but the last had not been heard of *The Frozen Deep*. This crued melodrama had one effect out of all proportion to its small intrinsic merit. The character of Richard Wardour made a deep impression on Dickens' dramatic sense and the notion of a man achieving regeneration through self-sacrifice began to germinate in his mind. From this small seed sprang the ideas which ultimately found expression in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Richard Wardour was transformed into Sydney Carton. In his preface to the novel Dickens wrote: 'When I was acting, with my children and friends, in Mr. Wilkie Collins's drama of *The Frozen Deep*, I first conceived the main idea of this story.' For its French Revolution background Dickens drew upon other sources, including Carlyle and perhaps Bulwer-Lytton, but here again the influence of Wilkie Collins can be seen. There are striking similarities of detail between Dickens' novel and Wilkie's story of the French Revolution, 'Sister Rose,' which appeared in 1855. It is also clear from their correspondence that Wilkie was

more than once consulted during the writing of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and that his suggestions were always carefully considered. All this indicates, not of course that the novel is derivative in any but a minor way, but that Wilkie Collins was beginning to exercise a certain influence upon his friend's work. One sees this influence at work in the increasing attention that Dickens pays to the plot in his last four or five novels, which display a tautness of construction not to be found in the earlier books. The process culminated in *Edwin Drood*, the only Dickens' novel where plot is supreme, and an undisguised invasion of the territory Wilkie had by then made his own.