

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### “The Moonstone”

THE YEAR 1867 provides the first evidence of a growing friendship between Wilkie and Charles Reade, which was to have its effect upon the subsequent work of both novelists. Since most writers of the period found their way to Gad's Hill sooner or later, they had almost certainly been acquainted for several years, and we know that Reade had a great respect for both Dickens and Collins. One of Reade's most powerful novels, *Griffith Gaunt*, had been published the year before and had created even more of a stir than *Armada* on both sides of the Atlantic. In some quarters the greatest exception had been taken to Reade's handling of sexual relationships and he was thought to have infringed the accepted code of decency and good taste. Surprisingly, the most violent criticism came from America, where one publication, *The Round Table*, attacked the novel in terms which, in Reade's opinion, transgressed the limits of fair comment. He retaliated, first with one of those vitriolic pamphlets for which he was famous, entitled *The Prurient Prude*, and secondly with a writ for libel against the proprietors of the magazine. In canvassing his literary colleagues he obtained from Wilkie Collins not only a promise of his support but also an offer to enlist that of Dickens if possible. Accordingly Wilkie sent a copy of *Griffith Gaunt* to Dickens and asked for his considered opinion as soon as possible. A week later the opinion arrived. Neither Reade nor Collins could have derived much satisfaction from it from the standpoint of the forthcoming lawsuit. After a generous tribute to the sincerity and accom-

plishment of the story, Dickens proceeded to cross-examine himself in the capacity of Editor of a popular magazine concerning the various situations which had given offence. Would he or would he not, as an editor, have passed this or that passage? In every case he came down reluctantly on the side of the critics. In the event neither Dickens nor Wilkie was required to testify in court, and Reade won his suit, being awarded as damages the derisory sum of six American cents.

There is little doubt that Wilkie's sympathetic attitude over the *Griffith Gaunt* affair brought the two novelists closer together. In many ways it was a curious friendship. In temperament they were poles apart. Reade, with his aggressiveness, his erratic disposition and his inability, or unwillingness, to cope with everyday affairs must have been a strange contrast to the quiet, well-mannered, business-like Wilkie Collins. Years later Augustin Daly, the American 'pirate' playwright, described Reade as 'a surly old gentleman,' contrasting him with 'dear, gentle Wilkie Collins.' And yet they had many things in common. They were both prodigious workers, even if their methods differed fundamentally. They shared a certain contempt for the conventions of their day, for the current coin of morality, and each showed his disregard in the open nonconformity of his domestic life. Like Dickens, Reade shared Wilkie's passionate enthusiasm for the theatre. Finally, they shared a zeal for reform which Wilkie had hitherto kept in check, but which, under Reade's influence, was soon to change the whole direction of his work, and to contribute to his steady decline as a novelist.

He devoted the first few months of 1867 to the planning of a new novel, his only relaxation being a brief visit to Paris at the end of February. By June, the first three instalments were complete and on the 30th Dickens wrote to Wills :

I have heard read the first three numbers of Wilkie's story this morning and have gone minutely through the plot of the rest

to the last line. It gives a series of 'narratives,' but it is a very curious story, wild, and yet domestic, with excellent character in it, and great mystery. It is prepared with extraordinary care, and has every chance of being a hit. It is in many respects much better than anything he has done.

He mentions that they have discussed the best time to begin serial publication—for with *The Moonstone* Wilkie returned to *All the Year Round*—and agreed upon mid-December; in fact the opening instalment appeared on January 4th, 1868.

In the meantime there was other work to be done. A few weeks before, on May 1st, Dickens had written to him: 'Of course I know nothing of your arrangements when I ask you the following question: Would you like to do the next Xmas No. with me—we two alone, each taking half? Of course I assume that the money question is satisfactorily disposed of between you and Wills. Equally, of course, I suppose our two names to be appended to the performance. I put this to you, I need hardly say, before having in any way approached the subject in my own mind as to contrivance, character, story, or anything else.'

It was more than six years since they had last worked in collaboration, and Wilkie readily agreed, despite the claims of his own novel. On July 2nd Dickens wrote: 'This is to certify that I, the undersigned, was (for the time being) a drivelling ass when I declared the Christmas Number to be composed of Thirty-two pages. And I do hereby declare that the said Christmas Number is composed of Forty-eight pages, and long and heavy pages too, as I have heretofore proved and demonstrated with the sweat of my brow.' Towards the end of August, Dickens had written the Overture and was passing on to Wilkie, who had just returned from a brief trip to Switzerland with Lehmann, his ideas of the general outline of the plot. Already the rough division of responsibility appears to have been agreed between them:

I have a general idea which I hope will supply the kind of interest we want. Let us arrange to culminate in a wintry flight

and pursuit across the Alps, under lonely circumstances, and against warnings. Let us get into all the horrors and dangers of such an adventure under the most terrific circumstances, either escaping from or trying to overtake (the latter, I think) some one, on escaping from or overtaking whom the love, prosperity, and Nemesis of the story depend. There we can get ghostly interest, picturesque interest, breathless interest of time and circumstance, and force the design up to any powerful climax we please. If you will keep this in your mind, as I will in mine, urging the story towards it as we go along, we shall get a very Avalanche of power out of it, and thunder it down on the readers' heads.

The ensuing letters—no less than eight dealing with *No Thoroughfare* are included in *The Letters of Charles Dickens to Wilkie Collins*—afford a good insight into their method of working together. The next one, dated September 9th ' requires no answer, and is merely thrown out to be taken up into your meditations ' ; he suggests one or two minor changes in the plot and notifies a new twist in the section he is working on. The following day he proposes a meeting :

I don't think I shall have done Wilding's death by that time (I have been steadily at work, but slowly, laying ground); but the Obenreizer-reproduction chapter will be ready to run over. All the points you dwell upon are already in it. It will be an immense point if we can arrange to *start you for a long run, beginning immediately after Wilding's death*, and if I can at the same time be told off to come in, while you are at work, with the Alpine ascent and adventures. *Then*, in two or three days of writing together, we could finish . . . Have you done—or are you doing—the beginning of the chapter 'Exit Wilding'? I shall very soon want it.

Another week and Dickens is ' jogging on (at the pace of a wheelbarrow propelled by a Greenwich Pensioner) at the doomed Wilding,' and a few days later, ' Like you I am working with snail-like slowness . . . But I think I have a good idea. I send it to you with a view to your at odd times Thinking-out of the last Act.' There follows a snatch of dialogue intended for the climax of the story. By October 5th the end is in sight :

I have brought on Marguerite to the rescue, and I have so left it as that Vendale—to spare her—says it was an accident in the storm, and nothing more. By the way, Obenreizer has received a cut from Vendale, made with his own dagger. This in case you want him with a scar. If you don't, no matter. I have no doubt my Proof of the Mountain adventure will be full of mistakes, as my MS. is not very legible. But you will see what it means. The *Dénouement* I see pretty much as you see it—without further glimpses as yet. The Obenreizer question I will consider (q'ry Suicide?). I have made Marguerite wholly devoted to her lover. Whenever you may give me notice of your being ready, we will appoint to meet here to wind up.

In the middle of all this Wilkie and Caroline had to leave Melcombe Place and find another house. The search is unlikely to have carried him beyond the boundaries of St. Marylebone, to which neighbourhood he remained faithful to the end. Eventually he bought the lease of No. 90, Gloucester Place, near Portman Square, which was to be his home for almost the rest of his life. The house still stands, one of a pleasant Georgian row, distinguished from its neighbours by a chequer-board flight of steps but unadorned as yet by any commemorative plaque.† They moved in early in September and on the 10th he wrote to Lehmann from his mother's cottage :

When your letter reached me, I had an old house to leave—a new house to find—that new house to bargain for, and take—lawyers and surveyors to consult—British workmen to employ—and, through it all, to keep my own literary business going without so much as a day's stoppage . . . Come and see me on my new perch. My dining-room is habitable, and the drawing-rooms are getting on.

Further progress is announced a day or two later in a letter to his mother : ' A certain necessary place has got the most lovely new pan you ever saw. It's quite a pleasure to look into it.'

† Since this was written the London County Council has made good its long-standing omission. A plaque was unveiled by Mr. Michael Sadleir on 23rd May, 1951. The house is now No. 65 Gloucester Place.

The writing of *No Thoroughfare*, which they obviously enjoyed, brought Wilkie and Dickens closer together than they had been for some years. Almost as soon as it was finished, Dickens left for a Reading Tour of the United States, and Wilkie's engagement book was filled with 'dinner public and private, to Dickens on his departure.' As part of the farewell celebrations Dickens dined with him at Gloucester Place 'to warm the house.' On November 8th, 1867, Wilkie travelled to Liverpool in company with his brother Charles, Wills, Charles Kent and various members of Dickens' family to see him off. They had a farewell party aboard s.s. *Cuba*, on which Dickens sailed the next day.

The period of Dickens' absence in America was for Wilkie one of the busiest of his life. First, there was *The Moonstone* which had been more or less shelved during the writing of *No Thoroughfare*; secondly, he had undertaken to assist Wills in the day-to-day affairs of *All the Year Round*; lastly there was the task, which Dickens had entrusted to him, of adapting *No Thoroughfare* for the stage. It was only natural that the idea of a dramatic version should occur to two such theatre-minded authors, and by the time Dickens sailed for New York they had made arrangements for the play, as yet unwritten, to be produced at the Adelphi Theatre at Christmas, with Charles Fechter playing the villain, Obenreizer.

They had both known Fechter for some years, and had a high regard for him as an actor and as a friend. Wilkie saw him first on the stage of the Vaudeville Theatre in Paris during the early 'fifties, and met him in 1860 when he came to London to play in Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas*. In his *Recollections of Charles Fechter*† Wilkie wrote: 'By common impulse we dispensed with the tentative formalities of acquaintance, and became friends from that day to the day of his death.' Fechter, born in London in 1822 of a German father and an English mother, was taken to France as a small child and brought up there. He chose London as his home

† A chapter contributed by Collins to *Charles Albert Fechter*, by Kate Field. (J. R. Osgood & Co., Boston, 1882).

shortly after his first success here, though the last years of his life were spent in the United States. He possessed great personal charm, but was cursed with an ungovernable temper. As a man of business he was hopeless for, according to Wilkie, 'I have met with many children who had a clearer idea than he possessed of pecuniary responsibilities.' Like his friend, Fechter was something of a gourmet and entertained frequently, if unconventionally, at his house at St. John's Wood. No one dressed for dinner and in summer the guests would more often than not find their host in the garden attired in dressing-gown and slippers. Wilkie recalled that no servants waited upon them and each guest was expected to choose the bottle he liked best and place it beside him on the table. Anyone who wished went into the kitchen to help the French cook, whose tolerance must have equalled his acknowledged artistry. 'We had every variety of French cookery, and twice we put the inexhaustible resources of gastronomic France to the test by dining on one article of food only, presented under many different forms. We had a potato dinner in six courses, and an egg dinner in eight courses.'

When Wilkie and Dickens resigned from the Garrick Club for the second time† in March, 1865, as a protest against the blackballing of Wills who had been proposed by Dickens and seconded by Wilkie, Fechter resigned too. He informed the committee that he had acted thus 'because they had blackballed Mr. Wills, and he would trust himself to no community of men in which such things were done.'

Of Fechter's ability as an actor opinion varied considerably. The theatre public took him readily to its bosom as a romantic stage-lover, but his aspirations went beyond such roles. He played Hamlet and Othello in London, on unconventional lines, and was taken to task by many of the critics. His Hamlet in particular, played in a blonde wig and with a

†The first occasion arose from Dickens' championship of Edmund Yates in his famous quarrel with Thackeray in 1860, which culminated in Yates' expulsion from the Garrick.

foreign accent which he never completely lost, aroused fierce controversy. Clement Scott, writing of the performance many years afterwards, recalled being carried away by Fechter's interpretation and confessed that it was the first time he really understood the play. Dickens had no reservations where his friend's acting was concerned, and spoke of his 'unmistakable genius.' He went so far as to provide financial backing for a Fechter season at the Lyceum in 1863.

Fechter in his turn was a great admirer of Dickens and in January 1865 presented him with a Swiss ch<sup>^</sup>let which arrived at Gad's Hill from Paris in ninety-four sections. With much effort and at considerable expense it was erected on a plot of ground on the far side of the Dover Road, and connected with the garden of Gad's Hill Place by means of a tunnel under the road. It was in the ch<sup>^</sup>let that Dickens and Wilkie wrote much of *No Thoroughfare*, and in drawing the character of Obenreizer they had Fechter in mind for the role from the beginning. The proofs were sent to Fechter who 'fell madly in love with the subject,' and prepared a dramatic scenario under the authors' supervision. After Dickens' departure, Wilkie co-opted Fechter to advise on details such as stage directions and costume, and to assist generally. Confident of the play's success, he said to Wilkie: 'Dickens has gone away for six months; he will find *No Thoroughfare* still running when he comes back.' So, in the event, it turned out.

The Extra Christmas Number of *All the Year Round*, containing *No Thoroughfare*, appeared as usual in early December, and the public flocked to buy it, as usual, in their thousands. Dickens had built up over twenty years a regular public for his Christmas Numbers, and *No Thoroughfare*, although not a particularly good specimen, contained all the ingredients the readers demanded, crime, love-interest and excitement.

News that a dramatic version was in the offing reached New York even before the publication of the story in London. Two managements approached Dickens on his arrival



in America in the belief that he had the play in his pocket. He hurriedly wrote to Wilkie asking for a copy of each act as it was finished, having 'little doubt of being able to make a good thing of the Drama.' A day or two later he wrote :

*I find that if the Play be left unpublished in England, the right of playing it in America can be secured by assigning the MS. to an American citizen. That I can do at once by using my publishers here for the purpose. I can make an arrangement with Wallack, in New York, to have it produced at his Theatre (where there is the best company), on a sharing agreement after a certain nightly allowance for expenses, and I have arranged to see Wallack next week.*

By Christmas Eve he had received a letter from Wilkie enclosing a copy of the play complete, to which he replied from Boston :

The play is done *with great pains and skill*, but I fear it is too long. Its fate will have been decided before you get this letter, but I greatly doubt its success . . . There are no end of *No Thoroughfares* being offered to Managers here. The play still being in abeyance with Wallack, I have a strong suspicion that he wants to tide over to the 27th, and get a Telegram from London about the first night of the real version. If it should not be a great success, he would then either do a false one, or do none. Accordingly, I have brought him to book for decision on the 27th. Don't you see?

Dickens was beginning to smell pirates.

The first performance in London was given on Boxing Day, with Carlotta Leclerq, Henry Neville and, of course, Fechter in the leading parts. The Adelphi audience found the melodrama very much to their taste and its success was immediate, contrary to Dickens' fears. Of the critics, Dutton Cook, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* thought it a skilful adaptation which would be improved by cutting—the play lasted four hours on the first night—but did not consider it a production of very high class; E. M. Blanchard was much pleased by the play, whilst Shirley Brooks, of *Punch*, went home 'howling at myself for sitting through such unmiti-

gated wrott.' Everyone spoke well of Fechter's performance, with Wilkie loudest of all in his praise.

On first nights Fechter used to suffer from appalling stage-fright, and Wilkie describes how he saw him on this occasion an hour or two before the show. 'Pale, silent, subdued, he sat in a corner of the room and looked like a man awaiting the appearance of the sheriff to conduct him to the scaffold.' He had been unable to eat for hours, and could not even smoke his pipe. When Wilkie confessed that his own nerves would not permit him to go in front to watch the performance, Fechter begged him to come along to his dressing-room before the curtain rose. Wilkie found him 'half-dressed, sitting helplessly staring into a white basin, held before him by his attendant in the attitude of a sailor on a channel steamer comforting a suffering lady.' Wilkie did his best to encourage him, and proposed a few drops of his own panacea, laudanum. 'Unable to speak, Fechter answered by putting out his tongue. The colour of it had turned, under the nervous terror that possessed him, to the metallic blackness of the tongue of a parrot. When the Overture began—easily audible in the dressing-room—another attack made the basin necessary.' To the horror of everyone around, this continued right up to the moment in the wings immediately prior to his first entrance. Fechter then walked on the stage and gave one of the performances of his life.

Hopes of golden rewards from American productions of *No Thoroughfare* were not fulfilled. The arrangement with Wallack fell through and on January 12th, 1868, Dickens wrote: 'Pirates are producing their own wretched versions in all directions.' Wherever he read in America the theatre cashed in by producing makeshift dramatic versions of his books, in respect of which he received not one cent. In accordance with his intention, he registered *No Thoroughfare* as the property of Ticknor and Fields, his Boston publishers. Instantly the manager of the Museum Theatre, Boston, announced his version of the play. Its quality can be gauged by the fact that it was actually playing within ten

days of the original story's arrival in the States. Ticknor and Fields threatened an injunction, but the manager, well knowing that if they proceeded there would be a public outcry against Dickens, called their bluff and carried on. 'Then,' wrote Dickens, 'the noble host of pirates rushed in, and it is being done, in some mangled form or other, everywhere.'

The London production was well set for a run, and Dickens' tune had changed from that of a fortnight before. 'I am truly delighted to learn that it made so great a success, and I hope I may yet see it on the Adelphi boards. You have had a world of trouble and work with it, but I hope will be repaid in some degree by the pleasure of a triumph.' *No Thoroughfare* ran for 200 nights.

Early in the New Year came the news that Mama Collins, now well over seventy years old, was seriously ill. Wilkie always had the greatest affection for his mother and she obviously adored her son, of whom she was very naturally proud. Although for many years she had lived in the country, mainly at various addresses in the vicinity of Tunbridge Wells, he was in the habit of visiting her several times a year. Moreover such visits were clearly a pleasure to him rather than a mere filial duty, and he seldom went abroad without first going down to her cottage to say goodbye over a game of cribbage. He also maintained a frequent correspondence over a number of years in which he kept her informed of all his social and literary activities.

These letters, humorous, kindly and candid, suggest that there was a real sympathy between them. Sometimes he would indulge in gentle banter at the expense of some foible of his mother's. For instance she was in his opinion far too economical. 'I have—as I wish to encourage you to spend money—bought you a purse at Paris which it is quite a luxury to open,' he wrote on one occasion; and on another, 'Take care of yourself and live well, and don't save money at the expense of your own comfort.' He teased her now and again about her reverence for titles, and took care to inform

her that among his congratulatory letters on *The Woman in White* was one from a French duke. Since she was an admirer of Tennyson he was delighted to retail a remark which 'the great T.,' had made to a friend of his: 'My misfortune is that I have not got anything *in* me. If I had only got something *in* me, I could write as well as Shakespeare.'

She was inclined to worry, like most mothers, about her sons. Wilkie once took the trouble to write specially, following a skating disaster in Regent's Park, to reassure her that he was not involved, so that the letter should arrive with the report of the incident in her morning newspaper. Sometimes he took her fears less seriously, as in his reply to a motherly injunction to be careful when travelling in trains: 'Danger in railways from murdering men is nothing—if you don't carry a banker's bag. But danger from virtuous single ladies whose character is "dearer to them than their lives," is serious. I won't travel alone with a woman—I promise you that. The British female, judging by her recent appearances in the newspapers, is as full of snares as Solomon's "strange woman"—a mixture of perjury and prudery, cant and crinoline, from whom (when we travel in railways) may the Guard deliver us!' He followed this up with some advice of his own: 'If you feel hot, try a bottle of Sauterne from Hastings—four pinches of snuff—and a mild cigar.' Wilkie appointed himself her supplier of wines and spirits and would usually take down with him a case of brandy or claret or hock.

It was therefore with the deepest distress that he learned that his mother's condition was serious. He hurried down to her cottage near Tunbridge Wells, and very soon realised that she was dying. On January 21st, 1868, he wrote to a friend. 'You will be grieved, I know, at the miserable news which I have to tell you. My dear old mother is dying. She is perfectly conscious, perfectly clear in her mind. But the internal neuralgia, from which she has suffered so long, has broken her down—and, at her present age, there is now no hope. Charley is with me here. All that *can* be done to soothe

her last moments is done. The end may be deferred for a few days yet—but it is only a question of time. I can write no more.' The doctor only permitted them to see her for brief spells, and in the intervals Wilkie carried on with *The Moonstone* as best he could. As she lingered on, week after week, he had to divide his time between Tunbridge Wells and London. The strain of the last few months, combined with the worry of his mother's illness, had its effect at last on his own health. In February he was stricken with the most acute attack of rheumatic gout he had yet suffered. As he lay on his sick-bed at Gloucester Place, crippled in every limb, his eyes tortured with pain, the news came on March 19th that his mother was dead. It was, he said, the bitterest affliction of his life.

All this time *The Moonstone* had to be kept going somehow or other. Not more than a third of the story was written and serial publication had started not only in *All the Year Round* but also in *Harper's Weekly*. A letter written to his American publishers from his mother's cottage on January 30th, shows the meticulous care with which he tackled the business side of his work, and also the cordial relations which existed between him and Harper Brothers :

You will receive with this a corrected revise of the twelfth weekly part of *The Moonstone*, and a portion of the thirteenth weekly part. The completion of the thirteenth weekly part will follow, I hope, by Tuesday's mail. But for the inevitable delay in transmitting the manuscript and receiving the proofs by post, caused by my absence from London, you would have received the whole weekly part by the mail of February 1st. I will arrange to send slips (for the convenience of your artist) by every mail so long as my mother's critical condition obliges me to remain here. And I will be careful—as I have hitherto been careful—to forward the duplicates regularly, in case of accidents by the post. After the next two or three weekly portions, I shall hope to be able to send you, beforehand, a list of subjects for the artist, referring to a part of the story which is already settled in detail, and in relation to which he may feel secure against any after-alterations when I am writing for press. The two numbers of the *Weekly* have reached me safely. The

illustrations to the first number are very picturesque—the three Indians and the boy being especially good, as I think. In the second number there is the mistake (as we should call it in England) of presenting 'Gabriel Betteredge' in *livery*. As head-servant, he would wear plain black clothes—and would look, with his white cravat and grey hair, like an old clergyman. I only mention this for future illustrations—and because I see the dramatic effect of the story (in the first number) conveyed with such real intelligence by the artist that I want to see him taking the right direction, even in the smallest technical details.

You may rely on my sparing no effort to study *your* convenience, after the readiness that you have shown to consider mine. I am very glad to hear that you like the story, so far. There are some effects to come, which—unless I am altogether mistaken—have never been tried in fiction before.

Lying prostrate in bed, racked with pain, Wilkie was quite unable to write and had to dictate to an amanuensis. Recalling these grim days in the Preface to a later edition of *The Moonstone* he wrote :

My good readers in England and in America, whom I had never yet disappointed, were expecting their regular weekly instalments of the new story. I held to the story—for my own sake as well as for theirs. In the intervals of grief, in the occasional remissions of pain, I dictated from my bed that portion of *The Moonstone* which has since proved most successful in amusing the public—the 'Narrative of Miss Clack.'

In later years he told the story in greater detail to Mary Anderson, the actress, and, an American friend, William Winter, both of whom have recorded it in their reminiscences.† At first a young man was engaged to take down the dictation, but whenever the pain became so intense that Wilkie had to cry out, the amanuensis would rush to his assistance instead of carrying on with his work. The young man found it all so distressing that he had to leave. Several other men were engaged, each time with the same result; all found their employer's cries and groans unendurable. Finally

† *A Few Memories*. Mary Anderson (Mme. de Navarro). (Osgood, McIlvaine, 1896); *Old Friends*, William Winter. (New York, 1909).

he engaged a young woman 'stipulating that she must utterly disregard my sufferings and attend solely to my words.' To his astonishment—for the worst attacks of all followed her arrival—the young woman was able to do precisely that. Such were the conditions under which he dictated many chapters of *The Moonstone*. Although there is no evidence to support such a speculation, it would be interesting to know whether the young woman was Martha Rudd, who became the mother of his three children. All we do know is that Wilkie and Martha must have met before September of the year 1868.

The attack seems to have lasted for some months. During the day concentration on the intricacies of his novel helped him to endure the suffering. The nights were made bearable by larger and still larger doses of laudanum. Indeed he confessed to Mary Anderson that the last part of *The Moonstone* was written largely under the effects of opium. 'When it was finished,' he told her, 'I was not only pleased and astonished at the finale, but did not recognise it as my own.' Certainly, opium plays a big part in the story. There is a hint, if nothing more, in the original Preface that he tried out on himself the famous narcotic experiment which forms the main clue to the mystery: 'Having first ascertained, not only from books, but from living authorities as well, what the result of that experiment would really have been, I have declined to avail myself of the novelist's privilege of supposing something which might have happened, and have so shaped the story so as to make it grow out of what actually would have happened—which, I beg to inform my readers, is also what actually does happen.'

By the middle of May he was on the way to recovery, although in a letter to the 'Padrona' he still refers to his 'exhausted state' and 'shattered nerves.' He tells her that he is having a hard fight to finish his book but hopes to be through next month. If she comes to see him it should be before four o'clock because 'I am carried out to be aired at 4.'

Early the same month, Dickens returned from his Ameri-

can Reading Tour. Not only was *No Thoroughfare* still running at the Adelphi but negotiations were in train for a Paris production. Fechter fell ill about this time and had to leave the cast, but he obtained his doctor's permission to go to Paris and supervise the rehearsals of *L'Abîme*, as the French translation was called. Dickens was not entirely satisfied with the London production which had 'excellent things in it, but it drags to my thinking,' and he complained that Wilkie and Fechter had missed many pieces of stage-effect. Nothing would satisfy him but to visit Paris himself 'and try my stage-managerial hand at the Vaudeville Theatre.' On June 4th, he reported by letter to Wilkie, who was still unfit to travel, that the piece was a great success. Both he and Fechter had been too nervous to attend the first night and had driven round the Paris streets repairing at intervals to the Café Vaudeville, where Didier, the translator, had furnished them with an act-by-act report.

It is difficult to avoid a belief that shortly after this there occurred some kind of personal estrangement between Dickens and Wilkie. In a letter to Wills dated July 26th, 1868, when *The Moonstone* was nearing the end of its course in *All the Year Round*, Dickens wrote, 'I quite agree with you about *The Moonstone*. The construction is wearisome beyond endurance, and there is a vein of obstinate conceit in it that makes enemies of readers.' In other circumstances these two sentences might be dismissed as no more than dispassionate adverse criticism. But in view of his earlier opinion of the same novel—'in many respects much better than anything he has done'—and his fervent admiration for almost everything Wilkie had previously written, and having regard to the actual words used, it is hard to suppress a notion that personal animosity entered into the matter. There is the further point that Dickens was clearly concurring with a disparaging criticism which Wills had expressed on paper, something Wills would have been most unlikely to do had relations between his editor and Wilkie been normally friendly. It is easy to make unduly heavy weather of this



isolated stricture on Dickens' part, but it seems strange that it should concern a book which is almost unanimously regarded as one of the two really outstanding novels written by Wilkie Collins.

Had there been evidence of a falling off in sales of *All the Year Round* Wills and his chief might have attributed the decline to lack of interest in the current serial, and might indeed have persuaded themselves on that account that their first opinion of the story was wrong. Such an explanation would however conflict with the facts as given by William Tinsley in his *Random Recollections of an Old Publisher*. Tinsley, who published the first three-volume edition of *The Moonstone* in July, 1868, wrote: '*The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White* were two of the very few exceptions of the many serials in *All the Year Round* which increased the circulation to any great extent. *The Moonstone* perhaps did more for it than any other novel, not excepting *Great Expectations*. During the run of *The Moonstone* as a serial there were scenes in Wellington Street that doubtless did the author's and publisher's hearts good. And especially when the serial was nearing its ending, on publishing days there would be quite a crowd of anxious readers waiting for the new number, and I know of several bets that were made as to where the moonstone would be found at last. Even the porters and the boys were interested in the story, and read the new number in sly corners, and often with their packs on their backs.'

Exactly why Tinsley, whose firm was then little known, was chosen to publish *The Moonstone* in book-form is obscure; apparently he told Dickens he would like to handle it, and Dickens introduced him to Wilkie who entered into negotiations. The copyright of all Wilkie's published works had recently been acquired by Smith Elder, but on Dickens' advice he had excluded the new novel from the deal in the hope of making a better bargain for it separately. According to Tinsley, the number of subscribers to three-volume novels had been falling off noticeably in the last year or so, and

this made him unwilling to issue more than 1,500 copies of *The Moonstone* in the first instance, although Wilkie's last three novels had sold many more copies in their original editions. He was even doubtful of being able to dispose of 1,500 copies. Wilkie drove a very hard bargain with him and his solicitors sent Tinsley a draft agreement which he described as ' a regular corker ' ; it would, he said, ' pretty well cover the gable of an ordinary-sized house. ' The first edition sold out quickly and Tinsley admitted that he did very well out of the agreement. Since the type was still standing, Wilkie was anxious for a further edition of 500 copies to be printed and proposed that Tinsley should pay him a flat sum down on a proportionate basis to the original arrangement. Tinsley countered with a offer to pay so much per hundred copies as they were sold. Wilkie refused these terms, and negotiations appeared to be at an end when, to Tinsley's surprise, the printer approached him to ask if he would allow an edition to be printed off the type for another publisher. He was willing to agree to this provided that the second publisher paid a proportion of the original cost of setting the type. Before anything could be done, however, an excellent review of *The Moonstone* appeared in *The Times* and Wilkie instructed his solicitors to accept Tinsley's offer; the latter claims that he deducted £50 to compensate him for his trouble. Wills commiserated with him and admitted that Wilkie had driven an equally hard bargain with *All the Year Round* over the serial rights.

Some twelve years later, Edmund Downey, one of Tinsley's assistants, was in the Gaiety Bar with his chief one afternoon when they saw Wilkie Collins, whom Downey describes as ' a plump, spectacled man, wearing something of a country-squireish air. ' † He made some remark to his chief to the effect that Wilkie looked harmless enough, to which Tinsley replied, ' My boy, you'd be much more awed if you had to negotiate a book with him. He's as shrewd as they

† *Twenty Years Ago*. Edmund Downey. (Hurst and Blackett, 1905).

make 'em,' and went on to describe the business of *The Moonstone*. He concluded by admitting that 'the little breeze cost me the loss of further business with Master Wilkie.'

Across the Atlantic, all the precautions that Harper Brothers could take failed to prevent the simultaneous appearance of four separate editions. Wilkie was now in the front rank of American best-sellers and, as the demand for *The Moonstone* steadily increased many more publishers hastened to bring out editions of their own.

*The Moonstone* is from many points of view Wilkie Collins' most remarkable performance. In this, above all his books, he achieved precisely what he set out to do, and more—for it is unlikely that he intended to produce the archetype of a new branch of English fiction. To the modern reader *The Moonstone* has the special interest of being the first, and indeed the classic, example of the English detective-novel. In support of such a claim no more expert witness need be called than Dorothy L. Sayers, who wrote in her introduction to the Everyman edition: 'Judged by the standard of seventy years later, and across a great gap which acknowledged no fair-play standards at all, *The Moonstone* is impeccable. What has happened, in fact, is that *The Moonstone* set the standard, and that it has taken us all this time to recognise it.'

If, in this book, Collins' art reached its zenith, the reason is not difficult to determine. He chose, consciously or otherwise, a subject fully within his limitations, a subject unentangled with social themes and problems better suited to the talents of a Reade or the genius of a Dickens. The canvas, though crowded, is smaller than that of *Armadale* or *The Woman in White* and, compared with the complexities of the earlier books, the plot of *The Moonstone* is in essence simple. The ingenuity which he brings to bear on its unfolding could hardly be surpassed, and the construction stands as a model. Within this smaller compass the flame of his imagination burned the more brightly, penetrating deep

into human emotions and shedding upon the story in places a strange, almost magical glow.

The Diamond itself, as large as a plover's egg, seems almost a living thing :

The light that streamed from it was like the light of the harvest moon. When you looked down into the stone, you looked into a yellow deep that drew your eyes into it so that they saw nothing else. It seemed unfathomable; this jewel, that you could hold between your finger and thumb, seemed as unfathomable as the heavens themselves. We set it in the sun, and then shut the light out of the room, and it shone awfully out of the depths of its own brightness, with a moony gleam, in the dark.

Wilkie acknowledges in the Preface that he was in part inspired by stories of two famous gems, the Koh-i-Noor and the stone that adorned the Russian Imperial sceptre. There may have been other sources, however. Lady Russell† records that he used to be a frequent guest of Sir George Russell at Swallowfields and that the idea of *The Moonstone* arose from stories he heard there of the family heirloom, the famous Pitt diamond. Walter de la Mare, on the other hand, in a footnote to his essay on Collins' Early Novels, claims that the story was suggested by a moonstone which used to belong to Charles Reade, having been brought from India by his brother, and which is still in the possession of the Reade family.

The other main source of *The Moonstone* is less romantic. The newspapers of 1861 had given great prominence to the sensational Road Murder, in which a young woman named Constance Kent murdered her small brother in particularly brutal circumstances. She did not confess until four years after the murder, and at her trial two important pieces of evidence were a blood-stained shift and a washing-book. Although the crime itself plays no part in *The Moonstone*, there is much ado about a washing-book and a paint-stained nightdress. More important is the undoubted fact that Wil-

† *Swallowfields and its Owners*. Lady Constance Russell (1901).

kie's detective, Sergeant Cuff, is founded upon the Scotland Yard detective in charge of the Road case, Inspector Whicher. Certain of Whicher's earlier cases were described in a series of articles in *Household Words*, where he is thinly disguised as 'Sergeant Witchem,' and he was in all probability known personally to Wilkie. Similarly Superintendent Seegrave, the stupid local policeman, had his real-life counterpart in Inspector Foley, who played an even more inept part in the Road case when supposed to be helping Whicher.

Since Sergeant Cuff has fathered such a multitudinous progeny in the literature of detection, he is worth examining at close quarters.

A grizzled, elderly man, so miserably lean that he looked as if he had not got an ounce of flesh on his bones in any part of him. He was dressed all in decent black, with a white cravat round his neck. His face was as sharp as a hatchet, and the skin of it was as yellow and dry and withered as an autumn leaf. His eyes, of a steely light grey, had a very disconcerting trick when they encountered your eyes, of looking as if they expected something more from you than you were aware of yourself. His walk was soft; his voice was melancholy; his long lanky fingers were hooked like claws. He might have been a parson, or an undertaker—or anything else you like, except what he really was.

Thus he struck Betteridge, the house-steward, on his arrival to investigate the disappearance of the Moonstone. But Cuff's disagreeable appearance hides some very human qualities, such as his dry, salty humour and his passion for rose-growing. His most endearing quality, however, to those of us who may be satiated with detectives of super-human intellect, is his fallibility. Brilliant as are Cuff's deductions, he makes mistakes; he is a human creature after all.

For our part, we follow the detective happily along his false trails, drawing with faultless logic our wrong conclusions while all the essential clues to the mystery are, if not staring us in the face, at least within our knowledge. The secret is well kept until the moment when the author decides to enlighten us; and even then, with the main mystery solved,

he contrives by sheer ingenuity to sustain, and perhaps heighten, our interest in the ultimate fate of the Moonstone.

The narrative method follows the pattern of *The Woman in White*. The book comprises a similar series of 'narratives' by different hands, but here they reflect more the personalities of their respective 'authors' and less that of Wilkie himself. Admittedly, in the case of Betteredge's story and of Rosanna's letter to Blake, there is a convention to be accepted in that these two characters are permitted a fluency of expression they would hardly have attained in reality, but the feelings they express are essentially their own.

Gabriel Betteredge, whose narrative is the first and the longest, combines the functions of Greek chorus and amateur detective. As the house-steward, he is both in the midst of, and outside the drama, which he records with a solid, earthy humour. 'A drop of tea,' he tells us, 'is to a woman's tongue what a drop of oil is to a wasting lamp.' If one can forgive his untiring reverence for *Robinson Crusoe*, the book which is his oracle and friend, and some of his more arch 'asides' to the reader, he proves an entertaining companion. Not only is Wilkie's choice of a family retainer as his narrator a device of some subtlety, but it shows once again his genuine interest in the lives of those who live 'below stairs,' a world which he, unlike nearly all his contemporaries, could describe faithfully, and without either condescension or embarrassment. We can recognise Collins' signature, too, in the portrait of Rosanna Spearman, the deformed housemaid with a prison record. He brings to it real understanding and compassion. Nothing in all his work is more moving than the growth of her hopeless love for Franklin Blake, which leads ultimately to her suicide; it is handled with rare sensitiveness and with a complete absence of sentimentality.

Miss Clack, authoress of the 'narrative' that follows, is pure caricature, and caricature with a touch of malice. Always repelled by ostentatious piety, Wilkie had doubtless suffered in many a drawing-room at the hands of evangelistic females. For one such lady he found himself in the posi-

tion of trustee, a duty which he discharged with less than his usual courtesy, as the following peevish letter to Charles Ward indicates.

'Is the Jones-fund (may "the Lord" soon take her!) paid into *my* account regularly? . . . If it only rests with *me* to decide the matter, pay this pious bitch the two quarters together—so that we may be the longer rid of her . . . Tell me whether (by the help of the Lord) Mrs. Jones's dividends are now regularly paid into my account only. I don't want to pay Mrs. Jones (and the Lord) out of my own pocket.'

The ridiculous Miss Clack, indiscriminately scattering her religious tracts, indefatigable in the exercise of 'Christian duty,' was his revenge. His armoury lacked the equipment for effective satire, and the satire is here applied with a heavy hand. As broad comic relief, however, Drusilla Clack serves her turn.

Of the heroine, Rachel Verinder, Betteredge tells us: 'She judged for herself, as few women of twice her age judge in general; never asked your advice; never told you beforehand what she was going to do; never came with secrets and confidences to anybody, from her mother downwards. In little things and great, with people she loved, and people she hated (and she did both with equal heartiness), Miss Rachel always went on a way of her own, sufficient for herself in the joys and sorrows of her life.' Rachel is no ordinary heroine, to whom events just happen, as for example Laura Fairlie; she is a young woman of intelligence and spirit, fully in command of the situation. Similarly Franklin Blake is far removed from the wooden hero of so many novels of the period. His experience of the world, and of women, is frankly acknowledged. Among a host of minor characters, most of whom are sketched with a deft and imaginative touch, mention must be made of Ezra Jennings. Into this striking portrait of a man haunted by past misfortune, torn by pain and kept alive by opium, Wilkie put much of his own suffering. There is a terrible authenticity about Jennings' confession:

To that all-potent and all-merciful drug I am indebted for a respite of many years from my sentence of death. But even the virtues of opium have their limit. The progress of the disease has gradually forced me from the use of opium to the abuse of it. I am feeling the penalty at last. My nervous system is shattered; my nights are nights of horror. The end is not far off now.

Who can doubt that Wilkie had endured many a night such as that described in Ezra Jennings' Journal?

June 16th—Rose late, after a dreadful night; the vengeance of yesterday's opium, pursuing me through a series of frightful dreams. At one time I was whirling through empty space with the phantoms of the dead, friends and enemies together. At another, the one beloved face which I shall never see again, rose at my bedside, hideously phosphorescent in the black darkness, and glared and grinned at me. A slight return of the old pains, at the usual time in the early morning, was welcome as a change. It dispelled the visions—and it was bearable because it did that.

The *mise-en-scène* is done with all Wilkie's flair for creating atmosphere. The closing pages in particular linger in one's memory long after the book is put aside. The diamond has been restored at last to the sacred Indian city of Somnauth where its story began; a vast throng of pilgrims have gathered from afar to witness the ceremony, and the scene culminates in our final glimpse of the Moonstone :

There, raised high on a throne—seated on his typical antelope, with his four arms stretching towards the four corners of the earth—there soared above us, dark and awful in the mystic light of heaven, the god of the Moon. And there, in the forehead of the deity, gleamed the yellow Diamond, whose splendour had last shone on me in England, from the bosom of a woman's dress.

There is imaginative power too in his conception of the Shivering Sand, and the uncanny spell it cast upon poor Rosanna whose life it claimed.

The last of the evening light was fading away; and over all the desolate place there hung a still and awful calm. The heave of the main ocean on the great sand-bank out in the bay was a



heave that made no sound. The inner sea lay lost and dim, without a breath of wind to stir it. Patches of nasty ooze floated, yellow-white, on the dead surface of the water. Scum and slime shone faintly in certain places, where the last of the light still caught them on the two great spits of rock jutting out, north and south, into the sea. It was now the time of the turn of the tide: and even as I stood there waiting, the broad brown face of the quicksand began to dimple and quiver—the only moving thing in all the horrid place.'

When we recall the circumstances in which the greater part of this novel was written, we can only marvel at the courage and endurance with which he conquered afflictions that would reduce almost any man to utter helplessness. *The Moonstone* has held, and deserved, its special place in fiction as, to quote T. S. Eliot, 'the first, the longest, and the best of the modern English detective novels.'