

Downhill

WILLIAM FRITH, THE painter, had long been a friend of Wilkie Collins. The only correspondence between them that the present writer has seen is a brief note thanking Frith for obtaining tickets for the Academy soirée, but Frith in his autobiography describes Wilkie as 'delightful in his private, as in his public life.' He also tells the story of a guest at his dinner-table who somewhat offensively charged Wilkie to his face with writing books which were read in every back-kitchen. Frith reports that Wilkie was quite unperturbed, well knowing that his books were also to be found in every library and drawing-room. At the same time the incident may have stimulated a notion that had long been germinating in the novelist's mind, the possibility of issuing really cheap editions of his books. He had the idea that an edition costing as little as a shilling or two would sell in enormous quantities and easily recoup the publisher for his outlay. At present there was, he believed, a considerable public for his books still to be tapped, people who were outside the scope of the libraries and also of the existing 'cheap' editions.

He first discussed the matter with George Smith, of Smith Elder, who showed little enthusiasm for the proposal and would have no part in it. He thought such an enterprise would only bring disappointment to Wilkie who was, at existing prices, 'selling very fairly.' Smith later admitted in his memoirs that his judgment might have been at fault. Some time later Wilkie approached Harper Brothers on similar lines, saying that the idea had come to him 'while

tasting wine at the London Docks.' Harpers pointed out, quite legitimately, that so far as the American market was concerned such cheap editions would be much more easily produced by pirates than by respectable publishers who paid their authors a royalty. In fact Wilkie's novels, for which Harpers had paid large sums, were pirated in the *Seaside* and *Lakeside Libraries* at 10 and 20 cents each, roughly the price he had in mind.

In London the first publisher who listened favourably to the idea was Andrew Chatto, of the newly-established firm of Chatto and Windus. The result was that early in 1875 the copyright of all Wilkie's published work was transferred to Chatto and Windus who became his main publishers for for the remainder of his life. Within a year or two of the transfer all his books were available at two shillings each, and ultimately certain titles were issued in a sixpenny edition. Thus Wilkie became to some extent the pioneer of the modern very cheap edition, and there is every reason to believe that the experiment was profitable to both publisher and author.

The first two novels published for him by Chatto and Windus were *The Law and the Lady* and *The Two Destinies*. Neither measures up in any way to his own earlier standards. Deficient in those qualities of inventiveness and ingenuity which distinguished his novels of the sixties, both books display that dull mechanical competence which we find all too often in his later work. Even the narrative power which used to flow like the ink from his pen has lost most of its spontaneity. His faithful public continued to read them however, and there were few signs of any falling-off in his popularity.

The Law and the Lady, published in February, 1875, is first a story of crime, and secondly a purpose-novel in that it seeks to attack the Scottish verdict of 'Not Proven.' The plot concerns an innocent man who has been charged in a Scottish court with poisoning his first wife, without being either convicted or acquitted of the charge. The 'Lady'

of the title is his second wife who sets herself the task of clearing his name by discovering new facts which were not revealed at the trial. The detective work required to bring about the happy ending is negligible, the merest child's play for the author of *The Moonstone*. In stating the case against the Scottish verdict, Wilkie fails to convey the essential tragedy of an innocent man suffering under the stigma of public suspicion; the hero protests at his unlucky fate, but we are left unmoved. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of *The Law and the Lady* is the character of Miserrimus Dexter. In his portrait of this legless megalomaniac, Wilkie's preoccupation with physical deformity, and indeed with mental abnormality, finds its fullest expression. Nothing is spared us. We are shown this half-human monster, dressed like a dandy, playfully torturing the strange young woman who attends with dog-like devotion to his needs; we see him hopping madly about his room like some fantastic bird; we hear him declaim, in the belief that it is great poetry, some crazy ditty of his own composing. Preposterous though he is in many respects, Miserrimus Dexter provides a striking study in the macabre.

The Two Destinies, published 18 months later, after being serialised in *Temple Bar*, is even less successful. Both story and treatment are conventional to a degree. This time there is virtually neither mystery nor surprise to attract the interest. A man and woman, bound together by an emotional attachment formed during childhood, find themselves in adult life endowed with powers of telepathic communication, by means of which their widely divergent paths are made to cross from time to time. The author follows his couple through various commonplace vicissitudes without evoking either the reader's sympathy or his credulity. When they become at last man and wife they are shunned by 'respectable' society because the woman has been the innocent victim of a bigamous marriage.

Charles Reade, to whom the *The Two Destinies*, was dedicated, wrote to him on March 19th, 1876:

I am truly sorry to hear that you are suffering from gout in the eye again. This is the cause of all your troubles being so painful and so hard on you in your art. I do hope you will soon recover and resume these labours, which to my mind were never more successful.

In this story [*The Two Destinies*], as far as I have read it, there is a pace of language, and a vein of sweet tenderness running through the whole, which reveals maturing genius.

It is deplorable that such an artist as you now reaching your zenith should carry such heavy weight in every race you run with your contemporaries.

You can distance them all the same: but I who know and value you in private as well as in public, do deeply deplore the distress and pain in which you have to write these works that afford unmixed pleasure to others.

The friendship between the two novelists had become closer since the day of Dickens' funeral, when Reade had laid his head on Wilkie's shoulder and wept. Reade had a high opinion of his friend's work, and greatly exaggerated the worth of his later books. Shortly before his death he said to James Payn: 'I can imagine that Wilkie's work fails to appeal to some people otherwise good judges, but he is a great artist.' In the Memoir of Reade by two members of his family,† it is stated that he ranked 'his very dear friend Mr. Wilkie Collins' next to Dickens, and that he extended to him 'that sort of genuine admiration which an author offers his brother in art when he esteems him greater than himself.' As early as 1870, Reade, encountering difficulties with his *Cornhill Serial*, *Put Yourself in his Place*, had appealed to Wilkie for criticism and advice. Wilkie took a good deal of trouble and replied at length in a letter headed 'Considerations for R.,' in which he set down detailed and constructive suggestions for the coming instalments. Many of these Reade adopted, making a note at the foot of the letter, 'I was so fortunate as to please him at last.' He in his turn had a considerable influence over Wilkie, and it is

† *Memoirs of Charles Reade*. C. L. Reade and Rev. C. Reade. (Chapman & Hall, 1887).

perhaps to be regretted that he was content to admire where he might have criticised to advantage.

Each was welcome at the other's house, and on one occasion Reade, learning while away from London that Wilkie was ill, wrote peremptorily to his friend Mrs. Seymour: 'Go at once and see him, in bed or out of bed.' Wybert Reeve describes a visit to Reade in company with Wilkie and 'a lady friend'—most probably Caroline Graves. She insisted upon having a joke at the expense of Reade's well-known personal vanity and, fixing her eyes upon him, said: 'Oh! Mr. Reade, pardon me, do forgive me, I like looking at you. There is something in your face so good and so manly.' 'My dear Mrs.—,' he replied, 'you flatter me. Upon my life I should be angry if I did not know you were a woman of judgment,' and thereupon turned automatically to the mirror. Although Reade announced his intention of preserving Wilkie's letters as heirlooms for his family, no such collection appears to have survived. Indeed little evidence remains of this significant friendship between two of the most popular writers of their time.

Wilkie's health was steadily deteriorating; to the gout which attacked his eyes and limbs with increasing frequency were now added bronchial troubles. In April, 1876, he wrote to Frederick Lehmann:

I am slowly mending—able to use my good eye, and still obliged to take care of the other . . . I am still forbidden dinners, theatres, and all assemblies in which part of the pleasure consists in breathing vitiated air and swallowing superfluous particles of flesh given off by our fellow creatures and ourselves in the act of respiration. Work, walk, visit to my morganatic family—such is life.

The morganatic family by now numbered three children, Marian aged seven, Harriet Constance aged five, and his son William Charles born eighteen months before at 10, Taunton Place, Marylebone, where Martha Rudd now lived under the name of Mrs. Dawson. Three months later he

was 'wandering about the south coast' and wrote to Archer just after finishing *The Two Destinies*: 'I am feeling too much fagged to do any more work for some little time to come . . . I must for my health's sake let my brains rest. Plans for the autumn were 'to go abroad and get new ideas among new scenes.'

He was now taking laudanum more or less regularly and his reliance upon the drug was absolute. Curiously enough he seems never to have become a 'slave to opium' in the popularly accepted sense. It can only have been his strength of character which preserved him from sinking into the degradation of the typical opium addict, and to the end of his life he persisted in regarding the drug as no more than an essential medicine. He seemed to experience no sense of guilt and talked of his addiction among friends with the utmost frankness. Included in their number was an American, William Winter, whom he used to see on his periodic visits to London. To him Wilkie described an incident of his childhood which may have been of deep significance as regards the moral issues. Coleridge, a frequent visitor at William Collins' house, arrived one day in a state of acute distress. Despite a supreme effort to conquer the opium habit, he had discovered that his craving for the drug remained irresistible. Unburdening his mind to Collins he even burst into tears. Finally Mrs. Collins said to him, 'Mr. Coleridge, do not cry. If the opium really does you any good, and you must have it, why do you not go and get it?' At this Coleridge recovered his composure and, turning to Collins, said 'Your wife is an exceedingly sensible woman!' Wilkie commented to Winter, after telling him the story: 'I suppose that he did not long delay to act upon the mother's suggestion. I was a boy at the time but the incident made a strong impression on my mind, and I could not forget it.' He also mentioned the account, in Lockhart's biography, of Sir Walter Scott having recourse to laudanum while writing *The Bride of Lammermoor*, and on another occasion he said to Winter, 'Opium sometimes hurts, but

also sometimes, it helps. In general people know nothing about it.'†

Many tales are told of the quantity of laudanum which he required for an effective dose during his latter years. Frederick Lehmann's brother Rudolf, the portrait painter, put the amount at a tablespoonful before retiring at night. In his *Memoirs*‡ Rudolf tells of an occasion in 1868 when Wilkie and Frederick were travelling together in Switzerland and supplies of the drug were running low. Wilkie was in great pain and Frederick went out to replenish the stock, only to find that Swiss chemists were strictly limited by law in the quantity they could sell to one customer. It required visits to four separate chemists before an adequate dose could be mustered.

Hall Caine actually saw him, a year or two before his death, drink a wineglassful of laudanum. They had been discussing a knotty problem arising from a dispute between Hall Caine and a literary collaborator, in which Wilkie had been asked to adjudicate. Suddenly Wilkie said: 'My brain is not very clear,' and walking over to a cabinet took out a wineglass and a bottle of liquid resembling port wine. Pouring himself out a full glass, he said: 'I'm going to show you one of the secrets of my prison-house. Do you see that? It's laudanum.' And to Hall Caine's great alarm he drank it off at a single gulp. Asked how long he had been taking the drug Wilkie replied 'Twenty years,' (which was an under-estimate). 'More than once a day?' persisted Hall Caine, somewhat horrified. 'Oh yes, much more,' replied Wilkie and reminded him that de Quincey used to drink the stuff out of a jug. He then told his visitor a long and gruesome story of a man-servant of his who had killed himself through taking less than half one of Wilkie's normal doses.

†*Old Friends*. William Winter (New York, 1909).

‡*An Artist's Recollections*. Rudolf Lehmann. (Smith, Elder, 1894).

'Why do you take it?' asked Hall Caine finally.

'To stimulate the brain and steady the nerves,' he replied.

'And you think it does that?'

'Undoubtedly.'

'Has it the same effect on other people?'

'It had on Bulwer-Lytton, he told me so himself.'

'Well then, my dear Wilkie, you know how much I suffer from nervous exhaustion. Do you advise me to use the drug?'

Wilkie paused, and then said, quietly and emphatically, 'No.' †

Further evidence is furnished by Sir Squire Bancroft who tells in his reminiscences‡ of a dinner-party at which his guests included Wilkie Collins and a famous surgeon, Sir William Fergusson. Conversation between Wilkie and his neighbour turned to drugs and with his customary candour Wilkie mentioned the quantity he took nightly before going to bed. The incredulous neighbour exclaimed that such an amount would prevent any ordinary person from ever waking. An appeal was made to the doctor who not only agreed but asserted that Wilkie's normal dose was sufficient to kill every man seated at the table.

Wybert Reeve also mentions Wilkie's opium habit, and adds the information that he had frequent injections of morphia latterly in order to relieve his neuralgic pains. In view of the tolerance he had acquired for opium in its various forms it would be misleading to suggest that he was continuously under its influence. One cannot, however, avoid attributing the decline in the quality of his writing, at least in some measure, to the effects of the drug.

Public opinion in the Nineteenth century did not of course condemn excessive drug-taking in quite the uncompromising terms of today, nor was the law as stringent then as now. None the less it is an illuminating comment

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

‡ *Empty Chairs*. Squire Bancroft. (Murray, 1925.)

on the moral standards of their time that, while so many of his friends did not hesitate to publish his addiction to opium, Kate Perugini alone could bring herself to mention the equally important and no more scandalous fact of his association with Caroline Graves.

During the years 1875 to 1877, although he continued to occupy himself with writing novels, Wilkie's focus of attention shifted once more to the theatre. In January, 1875, the much-postponed revival of *The New Magdalen* took place at last at the tiny Charing Cross Theatre, with Ada Cavendish again in the principal role. The author, who had been confined to bed with a bad cold, did not see the play until the third week when he reported to Frank Archer: 'Financially we are playing the piece at a profit. The first week's returns are decidedly encouraging—£93 in the house on the first Saturday . . . My week's fees were at least ten pounds higher than my calculations anticipated.' Archer had been prevented by another engagement from playing Julian Gray.

For Ada Cavendish Wilkie had a great regard, personally as well as in her professional capacity. Their association, dating from the original production of *The New Magdalen*, ended only with his death. On the occasion of her United States tour in 1878 during which she played Mercy Merrick and Lydia Gwilt, he wrote to his friend Winter in New York: 'She has, I think, more of the divine fire in her than any other living English actress—and she has the two excellent qualities of being always eager to improve and always ready to take advice in her art. I am really interested in her well-doing . . .' *The New Magdalen* continued to be a profitable venture for both of them. In March, 1877, he wrote to Archer: 'Your old friend Julian Gray still strolls through the country theatres with Miss Cavendish. He has been translated into Italian, and turned into *an austere magistrate*. The Italian public won't have a priest of any sort on the stage! The piece has been a great success at Rome, Florence, and Milan.' The play was again revived

in London in January, 1884, with both Ada Cavendish and Frank Archer in their original roles, at the Novelty Theatre in Great Queen Street, of which the author wrote: 'Our chance of success depends entirely, in my opinion, on making the public understand that there is such a theatre, and on telling them where to find it.' In this they partially succeeded, for the play lasted 61 performances.†

It was Ada Cavendish who also played the lead in the long-delayed staging of the dramatic version of *Armadale*. The first dramatisation, written in collaboration with his friend Regnier, had been shelved as unsuitable for the English stage—a view strongly held, it will be recalled, by Dickens. A later version had been done by Wilkie alone and entitled *Miss Gwilt*. It still offered formidable difficulties in performance and for this reason a preliminary tryout was given in December, 1875, at the Alexandra Theatre, Liverpool. Some of the small part actors were the remnants of an Edinburgh repertory company recently disbanded following the destruction of their theatre by fire. Among them was A. W. (later Sir Arthur) Pinero, who played Mr. Darch, an elderly solicitor, the part in which he subsequently made his West End *début*, at the age of 21. Some fifty years later Sir Arthur Pinero wrote: 'In the course of the rehearsals Collins was extremely kind to me . . . I remember his appearances at rehearsal very clearly. He used to sit, his manuscript before him, at a small table near the footlights, and there he made such alterations and additions as Miss Ada Cavendish deemed necessary. He did this with the utmost readiness and amiability, influenced perhaps by her habit of calling him 'Wilkie,' a familiar mode of address which, I recollect, surprised and shocked me not a little . . . His goodness to

†In 1895 *The New Magdalen* was once more revived in the West End, probably for the last time. On this occasion Janet Achurch played Mercy Merrick, and an extended review by George Bernard Shaw of the production is included in Volume I of *Our Theatre in the Nineties* (Constable). Shaw, who probably saw the earlier revival at the Novelty, draws an interesting comparison between the performances of Ada Cavendish and Janet Achurch.

me, so flattering from an eminent man to a mere youth, was ever in my mind, and to this day I feel grateful to him.' †

Another anecdote told of this Liverpool tryout reveals Wilkie in a different, and somewhat unusual light. A certain young actor was disappointed with the size of his part, that of Abraham Sage, the gardener, and at one of the last rehearsals decided to amplify his lines with numerous repetitions of the word 'Sir.' When he had finished Wilkie looked sternly at him over his spectacles and said: 'Young man, I have written the word "sir" four times. You have used it thirteen times. Please understand that I want my words spoken as I wrote them.' 'I am very sorry, Mr. Collins,' replied the young actor, 'but, you see, the part is such a poor one, and I wanted to give it character.'

'Thank you,' said Wilkie very quietly, 'I will look into it.'

As soon as the rehearsal was over he turned to the stage-manager and asked for a pencil. 'I think, he said, 'that if we put our heads together, we may do without Abraham Sage'. As a result every line spoken by Sage was struck out, and the character declared redundant. We know that Wilkie took his work with extreme seriousness and that he could be irritable on occasion, but there is no other recorded instance of these characteristics prompting him to act with even the smallest degree of spite.

A few months later, in April, 1876, *Miss Gwilt* was produced at the Globe Theatre. It created something of a stir, and exception was taken in some quarters to 'the uniform unwholesomeness of the subject and to the excess of physical horror' which marked the closing scenes. This five-act drama seems, however, to have been one of his more successful stage adaptations. Dutton Cook likened it to 'one of those sombre but exciting dramas of the Boulevards in which crime and criminals figure considerably, and success is sought not so much by enlisting sympathy as by shocking

† Quoted in a footnote to *The Early Novels of Wilkie Collins* by Walter de la Mare.

sensibility and appealing to a love of the terrible.' For Ada Cavendish's performance he was full of admiration, but his comments upon the stage Allan Armadale serve to show how much more forthright dramatic criticism could be in those days. The character was, he wrote, 'perhaps even more inane in the play than in the novel, the inferiority of his theatrical representative depriving him even of those personal graces of bearing and look with which he was supposed to be highly endowed.'

A dramatic version of his early novel *The Dead Secret*, adapted 'with the author's permission' by E. J. Bramwell, was given in August, 1877, during Miss Bateman's season at the Lyceum. The play seems to have made little impression, and soon sank into an oblivion so complete that it does not even appear in Professor Allardyce Nicoll's exhaustive catalogue of *XIX Century Drama*.

The last of his four major novels reached the stage during the following year. *The Moonstone* was to have opened the Bancrofts' autumn season of 1876, with Mr. and Mrs. Kendal as Franklin Blake and Rachel Verinder, Bancroft as Sergeant Cuff and his wife as Miss Clack. After much discussion it was decided by both Wilkie and Bancroft that the play was too melodramatic for the Prince of Wales Theatre, being better suited to the Olympic where in fact it was produced on September 17th, 1877.

The printed versions of those plays which he adapted from his best-sellers are all described on the title-page as having been 'altered' from the novel in question. The use of this word is peculiarly apt in the case of *The Moonstone*, where liberties are taken with the original story which, had they been taken by anyone but the author, would be denounced as literary vandalism. For example, all reference to opium, the very key to the original plot, is omitted and Franklin Blake's somnambulism results, in the play, from an indigestible supper! As with the drug, so with the drug-addict, Ezra Jennings, and the audience was deprived of seeing a character in which almost any competent actor could have scored

a triumph. The Moonstone itself loses all its historic associations and, thereby, its aura of romance; it might be, as a critic said, 'any other diamond contained in a jeweller's shop.' Finally, and unbelievably, Rosanna Spearman disappears from the stage version. The dramatic *Moonstone* was indeed Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark, and without most of the Court as well. One newspaper actually described it as 'a sort of domestic comedy.'

It is of course possible that the whole business of opium may have been eliminated in deference to the requirements of stage censorship, but the same excuse can hardly apply to the many other changes involved in the translation of novel into play. Admittedly there is in the novel a superabundance of material, much of which had to be excluded anyhow. It is the selection of discards which seems curious. Was it necessary for so many important characters and incidents to go by the board when, as a contemporary critic remarked, precious minutes of the play were devoted to proving the phenomena of somnambulism by quotations from 'such works as Combe on *Phrenology* and Elliotson's *Human Physiology* in reference to diseased brains and disordered stomachs?' The fact is that the theatre was not a suitable medium for those analytical qualities which distinguished his novels. He failed to realise that the dramatist has neither the time nor the obligation to prove beyond doubt every point in a complicated plot, and that to attempt it is the negation of drama. His sense of the dramatic, so infallible in his best stories, was seldom more than intermittent when writing for the stage.

The action of *The Moonstone* was telescoped into a period of 24 hours and the scene, the inner hall of the Verinders' house, remained unchanged throughout. The play by all accounts was indifferently performed, apart from Bella Pateman as Rachel Verinder, and the comic characters overplayed desperately. It was not many weeks before the Olympic management was looking for a successor.

There is no doubt that Caroline Graves had been permanently re-established at 90, Gloucester Place for some time. Her daughter Harriet—now that she had reached her twenties she could no longer be called 'little Carrie'—had come to be regarded generally as Wilkie's adopted daughter. On October 30th, 1877, a few weeks after the production of *The Moonstone* Archer received a letter from Harriet Graves: 'Wilkie and my mother are abroad travelling—he is better for the change. When I last heard, they were at Munich. Thank you for your courteous reminder about the letter. As I have charge of his correspondence during his absence, I have written for it.' The following year, 1878, Harriet married Henry Powell Bartley of 30, Somerset Place, Portman Square who was, or subsequently became, Wilkie's solicitor and one of his executors. She was extremely fond of Wilkie and continued, even after her marriage, to act as his amanuensis from time to time.

The Continental tour which Wilkie and Caroline made in the autumn and winter of 1877 may well have been his last trip abroad. They were away for about a couple of months, and by the end of December he was 'recaptured by the great London net' and facing 'the most hateful of all English seasons (to me), the season of Cant and Christmas.' He wrote to Nina Lehmann: 'Good-natured friends tell me that I look twenty years younger after my travels. I am certainly much stronger than I was, and I hope to fight through the winter. The fog and rain met me in Paris, and prepared me for the horrors of London . . . I have returned to heaps of unanswered letters, bills, payments of pensioners, stupid and hideous Christmas cards, visits to pay, and every social nuisance that gets in the way of a rational enjoyment of life.' The Lehmanns were wintering in Cannes, which he remembered as, thirty years earlier, 'a delightfully snug, small, cheap place, with two English people only established in it—Lord Brougham and another Britisher whose name I forget.' The letter concludes with a rather jaundiced view of his French contemporaries: 'As to modern French novels



THE OLYMPIC THEATRE
From a contemporary drawing



By courtesy of Picture Post Li

WILKIE COLLINS
(c. 1878)

in general, I have read them by dozens on my travels, and my report of them all is briefly this: Dull and Dirty. *The Nabob* by Daudet (of whom I once hoped better things) proved to be such realistic rubbish that I rushed out (it was at Dijon) to get something 'to take the taste out of my mouth,' as the children say. Prosper Mérimée's delicious *Colomba* appeared providentially in a shop window; I instantly secured it, read it for a second time, and recovered my opinion of French literature.' For Wilkie the moral protest is rare, and comes strangely from one who always claimed for himself the greatest latitude of expression and had frequently deplored the narrow fictional conventions of his day.

Apart from Munich, the only place at which we know they stayed during the European holiday is Venice; and Venice provides the setting of his next book, *The Haunted Hotel*. This short novel was published in November, 1878 in two volumes, together with another entitled *My Lady's Money*, and originally written a year earlier for the Christmas Number of the *Illustrated London News*. *The Haunted Hotel* echoes here and there his best work, and hardly merits the description—'a hideous fiction'—which Swinburne bestowed upon it. But if Swinburne overlooked the story's virtues, the judgment of a later poet shows some indulgence towards its defects. T. S. Eliot wrote in an article on 'Wilkie Collins and Dickens' which appeared in 1927 in *The Times Literary Supplement*:

What makes it [*The Haunted Hotel*] better than a mere readable second-rate ghost story is the fact that fatality in this story is no longer merely a will jerking the figures. The principal character, the fatal woman, is herself obsessed by the idea of fatality; her motives are melodramatic; she therefore compels the coincidences to occur, feeling that she is compelled to compel them. In this story, as the chief character is internally melodramatic, the story itself ceases to be merely melodramatic, and partakes of true drama.

This idea of an ineluctable Fate is an echo of *Armadale*. Perhaps the main weakness here, and it is largely a weakness of

construction, is that Countess Naron, even more completely than Miss Gwilt in *Armadale*, condemns herself by her own pen. Abjuring detection, Wilkie lamely allows her to explain the mystery of her husband's disappearance in a written narrative which carries little conviction. Up to that point the book is competent melodrama—indeed its opening pages raise hopes of something more than competence—but the Countess's confession is the kind of clumsy device which Wilkie would never have employed ten years earlier. Significant, too, is his recourse to the supernatural. One of his special attributes as a sensation-novelist had been his ability to achieve by rational means effects of atmosphere more arresting than most writers could achieve by calling upon the whole paraphernalia of the supernatural. That he should have to fall back, in *The Haunted Hotel*, upon such an expedient as the apparition of a disembodied head is further evidence that his pen was beginning to falter.

My Lady's Money is a trivial story about a stolen bank-note. Most of the characters are taken from stock and the *dénouement* can hardly have caused a flicker of surprise on the countenance of even the most ingenuous reader. Its main interest is in introducing a member of Wilkie's household of whose existence we might otherwise have been unaware, a Scotch terrier named Tommie, who would eat anything from *pâté de foie gras* to potatoes. At the end of the story, having said goodbye to each of the characters in turn, Wilkie writes: 'And last, not least, goodbye to Tommie? No. The writer gave Tommie his dinner not half an hour since, and is too fond of him to say goodbye.' The real Tommie died seven years later. A page torn from a pocket-diary, which happens to have survived, records in Wilkie's handwriting ten anniversaries. In one column are the birthdays of Caroline and her daughter, of Martha Rudd and her three children. The other column shows the dates of his parents' and his brother's deaths, and that of 'our dog Tommy'—August 28th, 1885.'

During 1878 another and longer novel, *The Fallen Leaves*, had been appearing both in *The World* and the *Canadian*

Monthly. It was published in July of the following year by Chatto and Windus in three volumes. He intended at the outset to follow it up with a sequel, for the title-page bore the words 'First Series' and a second series was announced in a postscript to the third volume. It was the only novel he dedicated 'To Caroline.' These and other indications suggest that he regarded this as his most important work for some time. Its theme, that of the reformed prostitute, was not dissimilar to *The New Magdalen* which had scored a major success. But *The Fallen Leaves* failed, perhaps more completely than any other book he wrote. The critics disliked it, but that alone would never worry Wilkie Collins. The public was the ultimate court of judgment. This time even the public disappointed him. In the preface to his next book, addressed to the dedicatee, he explained at some length why he had not yet written the promised sequel. *The Fallen Leaves* had by then reached only 'a comparatively limited class of reader in England.' Only when the book was reprinted in its cheapest form would it appeal to 'the great audience of the English people,' and not until then would the sequel, which existed in rough notes, appear. There followed a bitter tirade against 'the nasty posterity of Tartuffe' who had objected to his character of the prostitute, as it had objected to *Basil*, to *Armadale*, and to *The New Magdalen*. He refused to allow limits which no other country but England imposed to be 'wantonly assigned' to his work. 'When my work is undertaken with a pure purpose,' he wrote, 'I claim the same liberty which is accorded to a writer in a newspaper or to a clergyman in a pulpit.' To another correspondent he said he was 'waiting (with some confidence, inspired by previous experience), for the Verdict of the People.' But the People's reaction to the two-shilling edition failed to give him the encouragement he needed to proceed with the Second Series, and the project was abandoned. The published novel ends with the marriage of the young Socialist hero to the girl he has rescued from the streets. Of the proposed sequel Wilkie wrote, in a letter

dated June 22nd, 1880: 'The married life—in the second part—will be essentially a happy life, in itself. But the outer influence of the world which surrounds this husband and wife—the world whose unchristian prejudices they have set at defiance—will slowly undermine their happiness and will I fear, make the close of the story a sad one.' Had this Second Series been written he could no doubt have drawn upon his own experiences of the censorious world and its attitude towards those who defy its prejudices.

The most interesting part of this unpleasantly sentimental novel is the account in the first volume of an American community known as the Primitive Christian Socialists, among whom the young hero is brought up. It was thought by S. M. Ellis that Wilkie found time during his American tour to visit a community, supported for some time by Laurence Oliphant, which had settled at Brocton (Salem-on-Erie) calling itself the Brotherhood of the New Life.† Whether or not his account is based upon first-hand knowledge, we know that he possessed a copy of Charles Nordhoff's book *The Communistic Societies of the United States*, published in New York in 1875, from which he could easily have drawn all the material he required. He describes his Utopian community, in which 'all men have a right to be rich—provided they don't make other people poor as part of the process,' with the sympathetic approval that one would expect a genuine Radical to feel towards these fumbling experiments in the direction of Socialism.

One or two scenes stand out on their own merits, notably the suicide of Mrs. Farnaby, described with a gruesome realism which calls to mind the death of Emma Bovary: 'The fell action of the strychnine wrung every muscle in her with the torture of convulsion. Her hands were fast

†The Brotherhood of the New Life was founded in 1861 by Thomas Lake Harris, a successful charlatan who exercised a powerful influence over Oliphant and relieved him of most of his fortune. Oliphant then sued Harris and recovered several thousand pounds. Further details will be found in *Heavens on Earth*, by Mark Holloway (Turnstile Press, 1951.)

clenched; her head was bent back; her body, rigid as a bar of iron, was arched upwards from the bed, resting on the two extremities of the head and the heels: the staring eyes, the dusky face, the twisted lips, the clenched teeth, were frightful to see.' For the rest, the story seldom emerges from a morass of novelettish mediocrity. *The Fallen Leaves* must stand as the low-water mark of Wilkie's achievement.

Though a visiting American writer had said that Wilkie 'still lingered, not superfluous but not indispensable; like an historic edifice, respected, but unoccupied,' he still had news-value in his own country. About this time Edmund Yates, whom he had known for twenty years, published in his paper *The World* an interview with Wilkie which took place in the large double drawing-room at 90 Gloucester Place. Near the window stood a massive writing-table fitted with a small desk of the same design as Dickens'; beside it was a japanned tin box containing what he called his "stock-in-trade"—outlines of plots, notes for stories and two books of newspaper-cuttings from *The Times*, *Echo*, and *Pall Mall Gazette*. One of these volumes was classified under three headings, 'Our civilisation,' 'Hints for scenes and incidents' and 'Hints for character.' He told Yates that he was never at a loss for a plot, his difficulty always being to work it out to his satisfaction. He was, he said, a rapid inventor and a slow producer. Yates led him to speak of his literary models and invited his opinion of various writers. 'I don't attempt the style of Addison, because I hardly think it worth while. Addison was a neat but trivial writer, not in the least vigorous or dramatic; but the very reverse—analytical and painfully minute. His style bears about as much resemblance to good strong nervous English as a silver filigree does to a bronze statue. Lord Byron's letters are the best English I know—perfectly simple and clear, bright and strong.' Of Fielding and Smollett he said that they were now only read by scholars, 'admirable painters of manners' though they had been. Goldsmith, on the other hand, who possessed the poetic insight which they lacked, 'had left an

imperishable work in *The Vicar of Wakefield*.' They talked of a current biography of Napoleon which sought to show that its subject was 'a mean scoundrel and a shameless liar,' and was so regarded by his contemporaries. 'It is good to tell the truth about Napoleon, of course,' was Wilkie's comment. 'But you cannot break the idol, for his deeds strike the imagination. He was a dramatic man.'†

During the year 1879 more links with the past were severed. In January his old friend E. M. Ward died, and to his son, Leslie (Spy, the cartoonist) Wilkie wrote: 'No ordinary engagement would prevent me from paying the last tribute of affection to my dear lost friend. Illness alone makes it impossible for me to join those who will follow him to the grave tomorrow . . . I first knew your father when I was a boy—forty years since—and it is no figure of speech, it is only the sad truth, to say that I do indeed share in your grief, and feel the irreparable loss that you have suffered as, in some degree at least, my loss too.' August of the same year brought news from across the Atlantic of the death of Charles Fechter. In November Dickens' widow died after an illness of some months. Kate Perugini recalls that Wilkie, 'ever a dear friend of the family,' called frequently at her mother's house in Gloucester Crescent to enquire after her progress.

Other friends of his younger days had gone too. When he published *The Frozen Deep* in 1874 the playbill of the famous performance at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, had been reproduced as a frontispiece. In the preface Wilkie pointed out the melancholy fact that of the nine male actors on that occasion, all friends of his, only three were still alive. His brother Charley, Dickens and his brother Alfred, Shirley Brooks, Egg and Mark Lemon were all dead. Besides himself only Pigott and Charles Dickens Junior were left. The ranks were being thinned indeed.

†The account of the interview was subsequently reprinted in *Celebrities at Home* (Third Series). Edmund Yates. (World Office, 1879).