

CHAPTER TWO

Early Years

SINCE SIR DAVID WILKIE'S return from the Continent in 1828 he had continually urged Collins to widen his acquaintance with the masterpieces of painting by taking a long holiday in Italy. Although eager to travel, Collins had always shown reluctance to leave England while his mother remained an invalid. This tie had now been broken and he at last allowed himself to be persuaded. Then followed the question of whether to take the boys or leave them behind to continue their education. Young Wilkie was at this time attending the Maida Hill Academy, where he won a First Prize—a copy of Southey's Essays—at the end of the Christmas term 1835. Most of Collins' friends held the opinion that it would be madness to interrupt the boys' schooling at such a critical stage. On the other hand, Sir David Wilkie and a Mrs. Somerville, for whose opinions Collins had the highest respect, took the opposite view asserting that education embraced far more than mere schooling. To the boys' delight the minority view prevailed.

To transport a wife and two small boys to the Continent for a year, the period originally fixed, was in those days no minor task, and the arrangements occupied several months. At last preparations were completed, the routes mapped out and the luggage packed. On September 19th, 1836, armed with countless letters of introduction and Madame Stark's *Handbook to Italy*, the party set off for Paris via the Dover-Boulogne steamboat.

After a stay of ten days in Paris, during which visits were made to the Louvre and to various exhibitions, they left by diligence for Châlon-sur-Saône. Their experience of this mode of travel was unfortunate, and Collins became so disgusted with the surly conductor, who not only half-starved his passengers but transferred them from a carriage to a cart for part of the way, that he decided to post from Auxerre. At Châlon they took a river-steamer down the Saône to Lyons, and continued by road to Arles. The *Memoirs* recall 'the noble amphitheatre and the peculiar beauty of the female peasantry of Arles.' They covered the next stage by canal-boat across the Camargue, that strange wilderness which lies between the Mouths of the Rhône, and passed the night at Martigues, described as 'a most extraordinary place, built upon piles like a miniature Venice, inhabited by a race of people who seemed half-smugglers and half-fishermen, and furnished with one small inn.' Here they picked up the Marseilles diligence, but, disappointed with the dirtiness and general dulness of that city, they lost no time in pressing on to the 'pretty little coast town of Cannes,' staying there three days.

On arrival at Nice the travellers were met with disturbing stories of an outbreak of cholera in Italy and the establishment of severe quarantine regulations at the frontier. There was no choice but to remain in Nice for the present. Writing to Sir David Wilkie on November 4th, Collins announced his intention of leaving his wife and children in Nice, where the quarters were very comfortable, and of proceeding alone to Florence and Rome as soon as the cholera situation improved. In his reply Wilkie must have earned the boys' deepest gratitude by protesting against this plan. 'I shall answer for this,' he wrote, 'the young gentlemen have no dislike to travelling, with all its inconveniences, to any distance.' Wilkie's view again prevailed and the project was dropped. Six weeks after their arrival at Nice the situation had improved sufficiently to justify taking the family across the frontier. Their first destination in Italy was Florence

and, in the *Memoirs*, Wilkie Collins recalls the snow knee-deep in the streets, the immense icicles hanging from the housetops and the piercingly cold wind as they entered the city on Christmas Eve. Although not yet thirteen years old, he accompanied his father on numerous visits to churches and picture-galleries.

Finding no improvement in the weather, they moved south to Rome during the first days of 1837. Here Collins was offered lodging in the house once occupied by Claude, but, finding the rooms filthy and the landlord of bad character, he declined the privilege in favour of a more comfortable apartment further down the street. They remained there two or three months during which, in addition to much sight-seeing, Collins painted a number of pictures. His son retained a vivid recollection of two models employed during the stay in Rome.

He engaged one burly, handsome fellow to sit, who was ready to procure any dress and assume any appearance that was wanted, at a few hours' notice; and who was painted by him in the somewhat dissimilar characters of a cardinal in full dress, and a Roman gamekeeper—a monk in his everyday robe, and a country shepherd. Another of his models was a beautiful boy, with features dazzlingly perfect, who had sat to everyone for Cupids, angels and whatever else was lovely and refined; and who was in 'private life' one of the most consummate rascals in Rome—a gambler, a thief, and a stiletto-wearer, at twelve years of age!

After witnessing the famous ceremonies of Holy Week, they left Rome for Naples, undeterred by reports of one or two cases of cholera. The two boys, no less than their parents, rejoiced in the city's gloriously romantic setting and the carefree gaiety of its people. They were happy weeks. Collins found subjects on every hand and sketched furiously, anxious not to miss anything, yet hardly knowing where to begin. After a few weeks, however, they began to notice strange-looking yellow sedan chairs, with closed windows, passing in front of their house. These, they were told, were carrying cholera patients to hospital. Collins decided not to

risk being shut up in Naples in quarantine with pestilence raging in the streets, and hastily took his family across the Bay to Sorrento. The decision was a wise one, for within a week or so the epidemic was at its height in Naples, no fewer than four hundred people dying in a single day.

Wilkie Collins, in the *Memoirs*, tells the story of a trip they made by boat from Sorrento to Amalfi, where the inhabitants had somewhat extreme ideas of quarantine. Permission to land having been refused, they ordered dinner to be served in the boat. The local innkeeper complied by sending his cooks down to the beach in procession, laden with the various dishes which were placed at the water's edge. Here they were collected by the boatmen and taken aboard. At the end of the meal the empty dishes and the money in payment had to be thrown into the shallow water to be disinfected by the sea before being touched by the cautious men of Amalfi.

More than thirty years later Wilkie Collins recalled, in a speech to the Lotos Club in New York, this stay at Sorrento. At the time, he said, his appetite for what was termed 'light literature' was insatiable, and he had soon read every such book within reach. Summoning his courage he approached a melancholy fellow-visitor, who turned out to be an American, for the loan of a book. The American reflected for some time and then produced the only books in his possession which came, in his opinion, within the prescribed category. They were *The Sorrows of Werther* and *A Sentimental Journey*. The loan was followed by an invitation to dinner, at which the thirteen-year-old Wilkie treated his host to a critical appreciation of the two works.

At the end of July William Collins was struck down by a serious illness, the symptoms of which suggest rheumatic fever. He was confined to a sick-room for several weeks, suffering violent pain, before being removed in early October to the nearby island of Ischia. Ischia was celebrated for its natural sulphur-baths, which in this instance effected a remarkable cure. Within a month he was well enough to

return to Naples where the cholera epidemic had by now subsided. Here the two boys became favourites of the small English colony, from whom they received presents of 'swords, colours, hoops and other heart-winning things.'

They returned to Rome in February and began the homeward journey by leisurely stages in the last days of April 1838. Collins wanted to miss nothing and yet be home in time to see the Academy Exhibition. In Florence—very different from the snowbound city of a year earlier—they ran across a descendant of Michelangelo who showed them the original manuscript of the Sonnets. A detour had to be made to see the collection of Correggios in Parma, and towards the end of May they reached Venice. Wilkie Collins has something to say, in the *Memoirs*, of a remarkable figure whom they employed as a cook, but who acquired in addition the functions of guide and gondolier. Beppo, as he was called, had been a cook in the service of Lord Byron and spoke of his former master as most generous and indulgent, 'though he ate little but biscuits and fruit.' Beppo had certain fixed notions about English gentlemen, one of which was that they all had their names written up over their house-doors. He accordingly set to and manufactured a three-foot nameboard which he hung up in Collins' absence. The painter's surprise was no less than his delight when he returned home to read the inscription, in large white letters, 'WIMICHIM COLLINS.' Thus it remained for the rest of his stay in Venice. Leaving on June 26th, they spent a few days in the mountains around Innsbruck and Salzburg before proceeding to Munich. The ten days' stay in the Bavarian capital proved a disappointment largely because Collins found himself out of sympathy with contemporary German painting. The final part of the journey was by way of Heidelberg and Mannheim, thence down the Rhine to Cologne and Rotterdam. They arrived in London on August 15th, 1838, after an absence of almost two years.

The long residence in Italy, if an unorthodox part of Wilkie's education, was probably the most important. Now

the changing scenes and strange customs of a foreign land were stored away in his memory, there to mature and fertilize the imagination. Wilkie Collins was a born storyteller and already, at fourteen years of age, he had a wealth of first-hand experience on which to draw.

Back in England the family's first task was to find a home. While abroad Collins had parted with the lease of the Bayswater house, and he now had some difficulty in finding a suitable dwelling. Eventually he decided upon a convenient house in Avenue Road, Regent's Park, which was at that time 'in a quiet situation on the outskirts of London.' A studio was quickly fitted up and he took in hand the innumerable sketches he had brought back from Italy. As long as the light lasted he painted and in the evenings Sir David Wilkie would come round and talk until bedtime of Art and Italy.

Young Wilkie was sent to a private boarding-school run by a Mr. Cole in Highbury, at a cost of £90 per year. He seems to have been reasonably happy there, if we may judge from the half-dozen or so schoolboy letters which have survived. There are one or two interesting points about them. Two are in Italian, and correct Italian at that, which suggests that he made good use of his two years in Italy. All are neatly written, but certain of them are in exquisite copperplate without a blot or a mistake. These no doubt represented 'tasks,' closely scrutinised by Mr. Cole, and are addressed to Mr. Collins; they comprise précis of various books of the *Aeneid*, which 'celebrated poem' was one of Wilkie's form books for the year 1839. The less formal letters, all written at the age of fifteen to his mother, are those of a thoroughly normal schoolboy :

I did not write until I had tasted the cake as I thought you would like to know that it was most *delectably luscious*. The whole parcel arrived quite safe, and I am very much pleased with the trowsers, I think they are the nicest pair I ever had . . . I suppose as you say nothing of yourself and Charles Allston that you are both quite bobbish.

The boys here do Themes three times a week and Mr. Cole has hinted at the probability of the senior boys of our class beginning after Midsummer holidays. Some of the boys in our class have begun to do the same. I suppose Charlie has had some sliding but has I hope had no misfortune with his breeks. On Sunday the frost was so severe that the ponds in the neighbourhood were covered with boys sliding. . . . I think I have now exhausted all my news and remain with love to all at home.

Sometimes he sounds oddly adult :

Poor Charlie's ear-ache was sad news indeed, I know that it is the hardest of all pains to bear, having felt it myself : between them both I really wonder how you keep as well as you do especially with Master Charles to nurse, whom we all know is not very easily pacified. I really hope I shall see poor papa 'himself again,' for our holidays would be most miserable if he was as unwell then as he was last Midsummer. Give him my best love and tell him that I hope he will be able to pass his opinion upon a whole host of *works of art, fecit his son*.

Many years later he used to amuse his friends with anecdotes of his schooldays. One of these, recounted to Mrs. Lucy Walford,† a once popular novelist, concerns a school-mate who made a paying business of swallowing spiders. He charged a penny for admission to watch the performance, sometimes increasing the charge to twopence or threepence if the spider were abnormally large. Having worked up the excitement like an experienced showman, the boy would take out of his pocket a pill-box from which he solemnly extracted the captive spider. This he placed on his lips and allowed to crawl slowly down his throat. 'It was really worth a penny,' said Wilkie. He then told Mrs. Walford that the boy had become one of the leading lawyers of the day and that he sometimes felt tempted to visit him with a pill-box and a spider and say 'Swallow me this for six-and-eightpence.'

Another story concerned the senior boy of the school, who was placed in authority over the boys in Wilkie's dormitory.

† *Memories of Victorian London*, L. B. Walford. (Arnold, 1912.)

He was something of a bully and, in Wilkie's words, 'was as fond of hearing stories when he had retired for the night as the Oriental despot to whose literary tastes we are indebted for *The Arabian Nights*.' Wilkie's budding talent had been recognised and he was invariably the unhappy boy chosen to entertain the prefect. It was useless for him to beg leave to go to sleep. 'You will go to sleep, Collins, when you have told me a story.' The story had to be amusing, otherwise the wretched Wilkie felt the persuasion of a cat-o'-nine-tails. On the other hand, a good story would often receive its reward in the shape of a pastry. 'Thus,' he said, 'I learnt to be amusing on a short notice—and have derived benefit from those early lessons.'

He was often punished at school for petty misdemeanours. Many years later he recalled that the master used to turn him to good moral account, as a means of making his model scholars ashamed of their occasional lapses into misconduct. "If it had been Collins I should not have felt shocked and surprised. Nobody *expects* anything of *him*. But You!!!—etc. etc." The popularity usually accorded by his schoolmates to the victim of frequent punishment did not however, extend to Wilkie. They could never forgive his proficiency at French and Italian, the result of his residence abroad. In vain, when denounced as a 'French frog' because only he could cope with Voltaire's *Le Henriade*, did he protest that his parents were English, his grandfather Irish and his grandmother Scottish.

During Wilkie's years at school his father's health began to deteriorate. In 1839 he developed acute inflammation of the eyes which his doctor attributed to the rheumatic complaint contracted at Sorrento. This disability did not prevent him from painting even though he was forced to give up reading and writing for a time. A year or so later he was taken ill with violent internal pains which were diagnosed as a form of heart disease. He was warned that he must avoid sudden emotion and violent exercise, either of which might bring fatal results. This information, his son tells us,

occasioned him not the slightest depression and he continued to work with undiminished vigour. Far more distressing to him was the news of the death at sea, in June 1841, of his very dear friend Sir David Wilkie, on his way home from the Holy Land.

Wilkie Collins apparently left school towards the end of 1840, shortly before his seventeenth birthday. It had long been his father's wish that he should take Holy Orders, but the young man showed little inclination toward such a career. In the circumstances Collins wisely refrained from exerting any pressure upon him, and the idea of the Church was regretfully dropped. Wilkie was then offered the choice of classics at Oxford, mathematics at Cambridge, or a commercial career. Left to decide for himself, he finally settled upon commerce, without much enthusiasm, as the least undesirable alternative. To this end his father sought the assistance of a Mr. Antrobus, who was both a patron and a personal friend, and some time in 1841, Wilkie Collins entered the firm of Antrobus & Co., tea importers of the Strand, as an apprentice.

In the summer of the following year he accompanied his father on a sea-trip to the North of Scotland and the Shetlands, which is described in some detail in the *Memoirs*. They stayed with a friend for a week in Thurso, where Wilkie 'rode 36 miles on horseback to John O'Groat's House,' as he informed his mother in a letter written 'without *any candle at midnight*'; and from Thurso they went on to the Shetlands where William Collins wished to make sketches for illustrating Scott's *The Pirate*.

While his father was at work on his drawings, Wilkie wandered over the island, the main features of which were 'Dutchmen, peat-bogs, ragged ponies, beggars and fine scenery.' He had several minor adventures. On one occasion he was riding a pony over a solitary moor when a heavy mist descended and the guide lost the way. Dangerous peat-bogs almost surrounded them, and it was mainly due to the sure instinct of the Shetland ponies, left to their own guid-



Wilkie Collins

by his father

William Collins R.A.

By courtesy of Picture Post Library and Mrs. R. C. Lehmann

WILKIE COLLINS AS A CHILD
Pencil Sketch by William Collins, R.A.



By courtesy of The National Portrait Gal

WILKIE COLLINS
(c. 1851)
Portrait in oils by J. E. Millais

ance, that the riders were brought to safety.† On another occasion, Wilkie and his father were looking over some Dutch fishing-boats in the harbour when they innocently stumbled upon a riotous Schnapps party. Under pressure from a couple of blind drunk Dutch sailors they joined in for an uncomfortable half-hour, and only with difficulty made their escape.

The weather for the most part, was unsuitable for sketching, but Collins was indefatigable in the pursuit of his art, and Wilkie gives us this picture of his father sketching under difficulties :

Mr. Collins, with one knee on the ground, steadying himself against the wind; his companion holding a tattered umbrella over him, to keep the rain off his sketch-book; the guide standing by staring at his occupation in astonishment; and the ponies browsing near their riders on the faded grass, with mane and tail ever and anon floating out like streamers on the gusty breezes that swept past them.

Writing home to his mother—they were now living in Oxford Terrace, Hyde Park—Wilkie expresses the hope that she has prepared Mr. Antrobus for his prolonged absence. Mr. Antrobus' generosity in the matter of his apprentice's holidays was to be subjected to repeated strain, as will be seen later.

All we know of Wilkie's reactions to the world of commerce is that they were unfavourable. There is an echo of this period of his life in his novel *No Name*. A job is found for the ne'er-do-well Frank Clare in a great mercantile firm in the City, importers of tea and silk. 'He would be received on a very different footing from the footing of an ordinary clerk; he would be "pushed on" at every available opportunity. If he possessed fair abilities and showed common diligence in exercising them, his fortune was made.' Frank Clare did not make his fortune in the City—nor did Wilkie Collins. Whether he even showed common diligence

†A similar incident befalls one of the characters in Wilkie Collins' novel *The Two Destinies*, written 30 years later.

is doubtful, for he later told Edmund Yates that when he should have been concentrating on Bills of Lading, invoices and the state of the Chinese market, he spent his time composing 'tragedies, comedies, epic poems and the usual literary rubbish accumulated about themselves by young beginners.'

The important fact is that he began to write, and write incessantly. Now and again an article would be accepted by one or other of the periodicals of the day. Since with many of these anonymity was the rule, we cannot be sure of the first occasion of his achieving print, but the earliest signed story appeared in Douglas Jerrold's *Illuminated Magazine* for August 1843, and was entitled 'The Last Stage Coachman.' The theme, the ousting of the stage-coach by the railway, is not particularly original though Wilkie's love of the fantastic runs riot in his description of a special nemesis for railway pioneers, a vision of 'a fully-equipped stage-coach in the clouds, with a Railway Director strapped fast to each wheel and a stoker between the teeth of each of the four horses.'

Whilst in the tea business, Wilkie Collins wrote his first novel, of which all trace has disappeared. It was a wildly improbable story of savage life in Polynesia and was offered in vain to every publisher in London. The novelist's own account of this early failure appears in a letter written some twenty years later : †

The scene of the story was laid in the island of Tahiti, before the period of its discovery by European navigation. My youthful imagination ran riot among the noble savages, in scenes which caused the respectable British publisher to declare that it was impossible to put his name on the title-page of such a novel. For the moment I was a little discouraged. But I got over it and began another novel.

This time he determined to use his knowledge of the Italian scene and embarked upon a long historical novel dealing with the Gothic invasion of Rome in the Fifth

† Quoted in *Appleton's Journal* (New York), 3rd Sept., 1870.

Century. Whenever he could escape during the day from the office in the Strand, he consulted his authorities in the British Museum, and in the evening wrote his story in the seclusion of his father's studio.

Among those who saw merit in these early scribblings was his father. In April 1844 while staying with the President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, he wrote and asked his wife to cut out Willy's stories from the various publications and 'send them by post directly.' They were no doubt submitted, with proper paternal pride, for his host's opinion. Collins's Journal for January 1st, 1844, opens with this entry: 'As I think it quite possible that my dear son, William Wilkie Collins, may be tempted, should it please God to spare his life beyond that of his father, to furnish the world with a memoir of my life, I purpose occasionally noting down some circumstances as leading points, which may be useful.' His failing health however prevented the fulfilment of this intention. He developed a constant cough which interfered with sleep and seriously weakened him. He struggled as long as possible 'not to sink into the mere invalid' but suffered so severe an attack after dining out one evening in July that all such invitations were thereafter refused. Such strength as remained to him was devoted to painting, at which he worked to exhaustion. A few months earlier the artist and his family had made yet another move, to a nearby house at 1, Devonport Street, Oxford Terrace, equipped with a fine studio.

In the meantime Wilkie Collins had emerged from adolescence, and a letter written to his mother in January 1844, a few days after his twentieth birthday, reveals him in the character of a lively young man about town. 'I feel the spirit of *maturity* strong upon me, having been in a state of grace ever since the 8th of this month [his birthday] as regards my mental faculties; and in a state of deplorable feebleness as regards my bodily. The parties have knocked me up—I've made two speeches at supper and drunk so much of the juice of the grape that 'my belly is as wine.

We got home after one of the festive scenes at 10 minutes past 4 a.m. Charlie was so horrified at hearing the cock crow that he showed a disposition to whimper and said that people out so late as we were not in a *fit state to die.*' Clearly he had broken free from the rigid paternal discipline of his earlier years, for the incidents described took place while his father was in fact at home.

A few months later William Collins and his wife stayed for a time in the New Forest and the Isle of Wight in an effort to restore his health. The boys were left to fend for themselves in Devonport Street, and Wilkie urged his mother not to return on their account, assuring her that they 'look into rooms in the dark, peep about at bars and fastenings, get up early in the morning, don't drink anything like a glass of wine in a day, and are on tremendously affable terms with the domestics.' In August, however, he reports that he has had to lecture Susan, the housemaid, upon 'inhumanity.' She had attempted 'to reintroduce by the kitten's *nose* that which the innocent animal had just previously expelled as worthless from an opposite and inferior portion of its body. Charlie tried rage with the cook, I tried philosophy with the housemaid. He failed. I succeeded. Purified is the nose of Snooks.'

The same letter to his mother refers to preparations for his forthcoming holiday in Paris, and contains a dissertation upon Carpet Bags :

I suppose I must take it though I hate Carpet Bags with a great and bitter hatred. They don't protect your linen from damp, your brushes from breaking and your waistcoats from crumpling as a portmanteau does. People sit upon a Carpet Bag because it is soft, trunks tumble upon it for the same reason. There is not an accident to which luggage is liable that a Carpet Bag does not fall a victim to. It never was meant for anything but a few shirts and stockings that may be knocked about anyhow. It is the most disagreeable machine to pack—the most troublesome to unpack—the most impracticable to carry that human science ever invented.

His companion on the Paris trip was to be his friend

Charles Ward, a choice of which William Collins disapproved strongly, but in vain. 'I do not like his flippant companion,' he told Harriet, 'they seem to think of nothing but doing absurd things.' Charles Ward, who was a brother of the artist E. M. Ward, became one of Wilkie's most intimate friends over a period of twenty-five years. A number of letters to Ward have been preserved and show him as being completely in Wilkie's confidence, both in personal and business matters. Ward was employed at Coutts' Bank in the Strand where William Collins, and later Wilkie, had an account. In later years it was common for Charles Ward to be invited to lunch, or dinner, or a week-end with Wilkie, and enjoined to bring with him some sum of money against a cheque. Wilkie made extensive use, through Ward, of the facilities of Coutts' Bank, obtaining not only advice on his investments but anything from a courier to accompany him abroad to a parcel of books at trade price. Charles Ward, who was probably a few years older than his friend, married Wilkie's cousin and had a large family. He eventually attained a high position with Coutts & Co.

Armed with the Carpet Bag and in the company of Ward, Wilkie reached Paris on August 28th, 1844. He was at once enchanted with the city, and the enchantment never died. To his mother he wrote long, dutiful and often amusing accounts of what he reassuringly termed their 'non-adventures.' Within a few days of their arrival he is chiefly concerned to prolong the holiday as far as possible. 'Will you write to Mr. Antrobus to ascertain the utmost extension of leave of absence that he will allow me. Will he give me the first week in October? Or more? Or less? Or what?' In the end Mr. Antrobus granted up to 3rd October, making five weeks in all. The weeks were spent in a whirl of sight-seeing, some of it of the orthodox kind, theatres and the Opera, the churches, the gardens, Versailles and its pictures; some less so, as for instance 'a glorious subject for Charlie—a dead soldier laid out naked at the Morgue, like an un-

saleable codfish all by himself upon the slab.' They propose to see Rachel at the Théâtre Français in *Les Horaces*, although he knows 'by bitter experience what a bore it will be—men in buff-coloured blankets with fuzzy heads growling about their beloved country through five long acts, with porticos *ad libitum* behind them for scenery—have taken care to secure comfortable seats with spring cushions, so as to sleep with dignity—shall lie furiously about it in England—say it was superb, etc. etc. to gain credit for a classical taste.' He returned to England an ardent Francophile and remained so for the rest of his life.

Although he kept up for his parents' benefit some pretence of taking his business career seriously—he described himself to his mother as being 'in a halo of commercial enterprise'—it is clear that much of his working day was devoted to literary composition of one kind or another. His general dislike of office routine was now reinforced by the limitations it placed upon the pleasures of travel, and he became more restless than ever. He could hardly wait until the following summer (1845) to visit Paris again, and on this occasion he travelled alone. Almost his first letter to his mother broached the annual subject. 'Pray find out, whenever you think it *politic to do so*, the *utmost extent* of leave that I can obtain from Mr. A.' Having left London on 7th September, he considered his liberty should be extended 'to the 15th or 20th of October—at least.'

Paris he found as delightful as before. 'The gutters hold their rights unfringed, the churches rejoice in their accustomed emptiness, the sugar plums still glitter in gorgeous indelicacy of design, each shopkeeper leaves his business to his wife, and each grisette is redolent of sentiment and prodigal of smiles.' The only drawback is the presence of 'the beef-eating British,' among whom he has descried Harrison Ainsworth in Galignani's Library, 'sitting, as usual, in the positions of his different portraits.' French manners, especially those of the children, enchant him: 'An evening or two since, a creature (whether masculine, feminine or

neuter, I know not) bowled his hoop against the toe of my boot and made me an apology (he seemed just able to walk and talk) so *elaborately civil* that I was perfectly astounded and took off my hat to him.'

Invited by some friends he had met in Paris to accompany them to Nice, Wilkie wrote to his mother, half-seriously, for an advance of £100 'upon the strength of my MS. and Chapman and Hall.' This was presumably the manuscript of the South Seas novel, and seems to have been regarded by his parents as inadequate security, for the project was quietly dropped. Indeed Mr. and Mrs. Collins were far from happy that their 21-year-old son should be wandering about Paris on his own, and their letters were full of warnings and parental advice. These Wilkie treated with some levity, replying on one occasion: 'Tell the Governor that I will eat plain food (when I get back to England) and read Duncan's *Logic* and Butler's *Analogy* (when I have no chance of getting anything else to peruse).' When William Collins reproves him for not reading his mother's letters carefully, Wilkie accuses him of 'a most unchurchmanlike disposition to scandalise other people.' This provoked a sharp reproof, to which Wilkie replied, 'My joke about Mr. Collins's scandalising propensities was an answer to one of yours; but it shall be my last witticism. People who live in the country and eat beefsteaks are not to be joked at with impunity.' As for the main purpose of this latest letter—'it contains no impiety and it attempts no jokes. It is devoted to a statement of my approaching *INSOLVENCY*.' The balance of his money will suffice for his miscellaneous expenses, but it will not pay his hotel-bill, nor his return fare. He has not of course ignored his mother's parting injunctions about living economically; the original sum has lasted for the trip, as she hoped, but will not unfortunately cover the return trip. To restore him to Devonport Street a further £10 will be needed. 'Should Mr. Collins vow that he will pay no attention to the above modest and, I may be permitted to say, luminous suggestion,

do not be in the least alarmed or put out of the way. I can live here a long time upon my *credit*, and when that is exhausted I can go into a "spunging house"—the actual difference between imprisonment at Paris and imprisonment at the Strand being too inconsequential to be worth ascertaining to a nicety.'

After so dire a threat, Mrs. Collins must be cajoled.

I entirely disagree with you about the unworthiness of the world, for good people. The proof that you are wrong is in the existence of such individuals as Mrs. Collins in the habitable globe—(Don't forget the £10). Excellence such as yours, my dear Madam, cannot exist independent of usefulness, and would not be useful were people altogether unworthy of its softening and humanising influence. (The cheque must be crossed 'Messrs. Coutts & Co.'). Therefore, I am inclined to conclude that, as long as you are in the world, the world must, logically and absolutely, be worthy of everybody and everything in it. (A letter must accompany the cheque directing Ward to forward it to Lafitte & Co., Paris.)

Is it surprising that Wilkie succeeded in wheedling the required sum out of his mother? His next letter thanks her for expressions of affection and for the despatch of the cheque. He will arrange to return to London on the evening of 14th October—Mr. Antrobus having again obliged—and to start work on the following day, thereby obtaining 'the utmost extension possible of my stay in Paris—a very pleasant and necessary achievement, considering that the Italian Opera has begun and that *Pâtés de Foie Gras* are daily expected at the principal restaurants.' Nor were these the only attractions. In his idle wanderings through the Paris streets, some morbid impulse had again drawn him into the chilly corridors of the Morgue. 'A body of a young girl had just been fished out of the river. As her bosom was black and blue I suppose she had been beaten into a state of insensibility and then flung into the Seine.' Fifteen years later he chose this grim setting for our final glimpse of Count Fosco in *The Woman in White*.

During these last two years William Collins's health had

been steadily failing. In vain did Harriet take him into the fresh air and quiet of the countryside for long spells. About the time of his son's return from Paris in 1845, he began to cough blood and early the following year developed dropsy. Although he never entirely gave up hope he suspected, and his family knew, that he was a dying man. Still he continued to paint, working an hour or so a day in an effort to finish two Devonshire landscapes for the Academy, until the brush sometimes fell from his swollen hand from sheer weakness. Much of the time he was confined to bed. He did however collect his strength sufficiently to visit the Academy on varnishing day; many of his old friends clustered around him expressing the sincerest hopes for his recovery. Collins was deeply affected by their sympathy, and must have known that he was saying goodbye to most of them for the last time.

With a dying man's concern to set his family's affairs in order, he turned his attention to his two sons. Charley had already showed promise as a portrait-painter; on the eve of his eighteenth birthday this entry appears in his father's Journal: 'I most fully and sincerely believe that if this boy does justice to the genius with which he is endowed . . . he will, with his tact and taste, produce most satisfactory and popular works.' Of the elder son's literary abilities he was sufficiently convinced to approve his leaving the tea business, but pressed upon him the desirability of acquiring a regular profession as well. Accordingly, Wilkie Collins resigned from Antrobus & Co and entered Lincoln's Inn in May 1846 as a Law Student. He too had some idea of becoming a painter and for a time seemed undecided whether his future lay in the field of Art or of Literature. He did achieve, in 1848, the distinction of having a picture hung at the Royal Academy, but this success seems to have satisfied rather than stimulated his artistic aspirations, for there is no record of his ever painting another picture.

In a final effort to arrest the spread of her husband's disease, Harriet took him once more to the country, to a

cottage she had leased at Iver in Buckinghamshire. This time the change did no more than perhaps delay the end. Collins was now in agonizing pain which he bore with great fortitude. Opiates had long since ceased to be effective. After three months he was taken back to London having said farewell to the English countryside he had loved so well and pictured so charmingly.

Soon after returning to Devonport Street, William Collins took to his bed for the last time. A few days before the end, according to Wilkie, 'happening to observe in the accidental arrangement of some writing and drawing materials placed in and about a small wooden tray at the foot of his bed, certain shades and outlines which resolved themselves to his fancy into the representation of an old ferry-boat lying at a deserted quay, he asked for some drawing materials, and being propped up with pillows, proceeded to make a small water-colour sketch.' Just before sinking into unconsciousness he pronounced 'an eloquent eulogium upon the Christian faith, impressing the advantages of its constant practice upon his family.' His intellect then clouded over and, after a period of delirium when he talked of his approaching recovery and of the many pictures he was going to paint, he died quietly and painlessly on the morning of 17th February, 1847.

In an obituary it was truly said of him: 'Only his intimate acquaintances could rightly estimate the high qualities of his mind and heart; generous and encouraging to young talent, he was always eager to accord praise; neither jealousy nor envy ever gave the remotest taint to his character.' These were among his virtues. He possessed other qualities of the kind less likely to find their way into an obituary. About his constant striving after moral excellence, sincere though it was, there was a touch of priggishness which showed occasionally in his dealings with those less deeply religious. From other sources there are stories which suggest that he paid more attention to social distinctions than was necessary, and endowed convention almost with the authority of law.

To his family, however, he was all that was good and, though they had been long prepared for his death, they felt no less keenly the loss of a well-loved father and husband.

William Collins' influence on his children is more obvious in the case of Charley, who inherited many of his father's characteristics. With Wilkie the effect was different. We can trace his love of Art, his conscientious devotion to work, perhaps his capacity for handling his affairs, to his father's influence, but the pattern of his life is essentially a recoil from the somewhat austere atmosphere of his early home, and a reaction against the ascetic in the person of his father. On the positive side, the dominant influence in the forming of Wilkie's character was almost certainly that of his mother.