

P A R T   I I

T H E   I N V E S T I G A T I O N

i : Early Experiments

Wilkie Collins began as he was to end: with a protest. He made his debut, as far as we can ascertain, in three pages of The Illuminated Magazine for August, 1843, with The Last Stage Coachman. This article is an arch protest against the ousting of the stage coach by the railways. Insincerity permeates this tirade by a nineteen-year-old against railway pioneers; we are told that the coachman's cigar will provide all the smoke we need, that steam may be had "naturally concocted from the backs of four blood horses." Collins takes us on a nightmarish fantasy in which the ghost of the last remaining coachman, "pacing the worn and weedy pavement" of the desolate inn-yard, tells the story of the "oastler" who was killed by a train while unsuccessfully attempting to save a superannuated coach horse from the onrush of an iron monster. A phantom coach appears in the sky. It has a railway director strapped fast to each wheel, a stoker between the teeth of each of the four horses and, in place of luggage, there are fragments of broken steam carriages and "carpet bags filled with mementos of railway accidents." The coach passes on, the coachman cracking his whip - to the accompaniment of the groans of James Watt and the cursing of "the invisible insides".

(Collins

Collins has not yet found his métier, but we are later to meet again, under better control, the deserted inn-yard and the supernatural.

It is evident that he did a considerable amount of writing before he published the two volumes of Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A. in 1848.; and we know that his father thought sufficiently highly of his promise as a writer to be able to enter into his diary, "... 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 ...." <sup>1</sup>. Collins himself tells us that he had, in 1847, completed the first volume of Antonina, but had put it aside "to do honour to my father's genius." <sup>2</sup>.

It would be too much to expect of a young man on the threshold of life a mature biography of his father, and we find the Memoirs more important as a history of events and a descriptive catalogue of his father's paintings than a living portrayal of the man. Nevertheless, the Memoirs indicate a great advance in writing technique. Collins's descriptions of his father's paintings were later to stand him in good stead; this training led to the development of his especial gift for so describing a scene that the atmosphere and mood become part of character portrayal and often essential to the unravelling of his plot. In the Memoirs we find this description of a visit to the Dutch captain of a boat:

( "After

1. Memoirs, Vol. II, p.247.

2. Wilkie Collins: Memorandum, in Parrish, op. cit. p. 4.

"After a few words in Dutch between him and his crew - neither of the three (sic) speaking a word of English, - the captain pulled from the shelf a bottle of 'Schnapps', three glasses, and a map of Europe. Having poured out the spirit, he spread forth the map on a locker, slowly placed his thumb on that part of it occupied by England, nodded his head solemnly at the guests, and drank off his dram in utter silence. He then pushed the map to the painter and his companion, who, finding it necessary to act their parts in this pantomime of international amity, put their thumbs on Holland, nodded their heads, and emptied their glasses in humble imitation of their host." <sup>1</sup>.

Artists play important rôles in The Woman in White, Hide and Seek, and After Dark; and many of the experiences which Collins shared with his father find an echo in later work. In A Passage in the Life of Perugino Potts we find a character adapted from two models who had sat for Collins's father in Italy. Collins describes one as:

"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'." <sup>2</sup>.

The other, a "burly handsome fellow" <sup>2</sup>, was ready to procure any costume and pose as a cardinal or a country shepherd at the shortest notice.

An adventure which father and son shared when lost on the Shetland moors finds a place thirty years later in The Two Destinies. A pattern is already beginning to emerge: Collins writes from his own experience. More and more we shall see that he did not possess that faculty which enables some writers to project themselves into the hearts of persons other than themselves. Collins was to write of what he had experienced, or upon his observations of those with whom he was in intimate contact. His novels are biographical to a degree greater than is usual.

(The

1. Memoirs, Vol. II, p. 221.  
2. ibid. pp. 93-94.



## THE LAST STAGE COACHMAN

BY W. WILKES COLLINS.



THE Last Stage Coachman! It falls upon the ear of every one but a stranger in railway, with a feeling indelibly etched. In spite of our natural reverence for the wonders of science, our hearts grow heavy at the thought of never again beholding the sweet-smelling manure, the unapproachable top boots, and fair white breeches; more so prominent as the uniforms of the stentors. With all our respect for expeditions and business-like travelling, we experience a feeling nearly akin to disgust, at being marshalled to our places by a tall and a fellow with a badge on his shoulder; instead of hearing the cheery yammers: "Now then, gentlemen," and being regaled by a short and instructive conversation with a ruddy-faced personage in a dustless olive green coat and princely bachelor handkerchief. What did we want with coaches? Had we not the coachman's sign, if we were anxious of observing his cheques and appearances? Who would be so unaccountable as to languish for steam, when he could inhale it in a cool, unobtrusive, unobtrusively concocted from the backs of four blood horses? Who!—Also! no man proposes questions and find not answers to the end of the chapter, and yet still in referring the perverted state of the present generation; we know that the attempt is useless, and we give up in scornful and pessimistic resignation, and possess ourselves by the probable state of railway direction, to the rest of—

### A VISIT.

Mathew thought I would both see a man coming to observe the arrival of a stage coach. I wandered on, yet nothing of the kind met my eye. I tried many

an old public road—they were now grass-grown and airy, as frequented by the obnoxious presence of a "station." I walked my way towards a famous roadside inn; it was deserted and silent, on its other side. "The Lot!" I looked for "the commercial room," but a pot of beer adorned the mantelpiece table, and not a pipe lay coiled over the wide and beautiful chimney of its once numerous "bar." It was deserted and silent; the voice of the traveller rang no longer round its walls, and the heavy beam of the gutter started no more the sleepy dog, who once congregated round its hospitable door. The still fireplace and broad, antiquated, painted glass presented but one hill—the starting time of an adjacent railroad; surmounted by a representation of those engines of destruction, in full, heavy, thorough.

I turned to the yard. Where was the coacher with his unbraided breeches and his ragged shirt sleeves? Where was the stable boy with his mop of straw and his sleeve of oats? Where were the portulack mare and the tall blood horse? Where was the manger and the stable door?—All gone—all disappeared: the buildings dilapidated and rotting—of what use is a stable to a coacher? The coacher and stable boy had passed away—no but friendship have either with a horse! Far too pure are the days! The very dog-drawn in its harness never was checked by dust and old boots, and the work, the pride of the country road, disappeared no longer on the wind and weather wall. I thought it was possible that he had called long since the cravings of a railway committee; and I set down on a raised water-cut to give way to the melancholy reflections called up by the sight before me.

I knew not how long I meditated. There was no officious waiter to ask me, "What I would please to order?" No chambermaid to suggest me, "This way, Sir,"—not even a stray cat to claim acquaintance with

The family had been left in fairly easy circumstances. Collins attended the requisite number of dinners to permit of his being called to the Bar in 1851, pursued the life of a young gentleman, translated a French play and took part in amateur theatricals.

Collins re-wrote the early chapters of Antonina and pushed ahead with it to have it done by the middle of 1849. When Antonina was accepted by Bentley, Collins was properly launched on his career as a writer; and in 1851 he was invited first as a recruit and then as a member of "The Amateur Company of the Guild of Literature and Art", Dickens's group of amateur actors. Yet it is difficult to find hints of the future Collins. Ellis says " . . . . . neither the subject nor the period - the Fifth Century - was the right medium for him. It was a ballon d'essai, and its characteristics were not repeated in future books." <sup>1</sup>.

Antonina tells the story of Goisvintha's desire for revenge for the killing of her husband and the rivalry of the dissolute Senator Vetrico and the heroic Gothic warrior, Homanric, for love of Antonina. Interwoven is the story of the mad priest of Serapis who seeks to preserve the rights of his ancient pagan religion. The discovery of the breach in the wall, leading to the sack of Rome, is written with a careful, graphic accuracy which suggests that Collins may have been stimulated in his youth while visiting Rome, by the sight of such a breach.

Antonina is derivative. In the first edition

(Collins

1. Ellis S.M.: Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu and Others, p. 13.

Collins paid tribute to Gibbon by means of frequent footnotes referring to The Decline and Fall. The treatment, the date of publication, the title and the general plan declare his indebtedness to Lytton; and the very first page reveals a certain resemblance to the opening of Scott's Talisman:

"The mountains forming the range of Alps which border on the north-eastern confines of Italy, were, in the autumn of the year 408, already furrowed in numerous directions by the tracks of the invading forces of those northern nations generally comprised under the appellation of Goths. In some cases these tracks were denoted on either side by fallen trees, and occasionally assumed, when half-obliterated by the ravages of storms, the appearance of desolate and irregular marshes."

Collins is not yet at home in expressing himself without ambiguity. In Chapter I he writes:

"Leading the horse that carried the woman with the utmost care, and yet with the utmost rapidity, down the paths which they had so recently ascended, the men in a short space of time reached the place where the army had halted . . . ."

Nor is he sure of his effects:

"For this had the rough old kingdom shaken off its enemies by swarms from its vigorous arms! For this had the doubtful virtues of the Republic, and the perilous magnificence of the Empire, perplexed and astonished the world! In such a conclusion as Honorius, ended the dignified barbarities of a Brutus, the polished splendours of an Augustus, the unearthly atrocities of a Nero, and the immortal virtues of a Trajan! Vainly, through the toiling ages, over the ruin of her noblest hearts, and the prostitution of her grandest intellects, had Rome stridden pitilessly onward, grasping at the shadow - Glory; the fiat had now gone forth, that doomed her to possess herself finally of the substance - Shame!"

In his depiction of persons and scenes, the evidence of his pictorial art training is strong, but he has not yet learned to suggest character or make it emerge as an integral part of the story:

"The conformation of the upper part of his face was thoroughly intellectual - the forehead high, broad, and upright; the eyes clear, penetrating, and thoughtful - but the lower part was, on the other hand, undeniably sensual. The lips, full and thick, formed a

(disagreeable

disagreeable contrast to the delicate chiselling of the straight Grecian nose; while the fleshiness of the chin, and the jovial redundancy of the cheeks, were, in their turn, utterly at variance with the character of the pale, noble forehead, and the expression of the quick, intelligent eyes. In stature he was barely of the middle size; but every part of the body was so perfectly proportioned that he appeared, in any position, taller than he really was ..... his ears, hands and feet were of that smallness and delicacy which is held to denote the aristocracy of birth ....."

His characters speak almost throughout in declamatory tones:

"Promise me that this blockade of the city shall not hinder my vengeance! Promise me that the first victim of our righteous revenge shall be the first one that appears before you - whether in war or in peace - of the inhabitants of Rome!"

There is little to recommend this novel. The characters are unconvincing, the style is turgid, the interpolation of historical event is awkward and little true appreciation of the historical background is revealed. Goisvintha's desire for revenge, Vetrano's attempted seduction of Antonina, and a happy ending cannot sustain our interest for almost four hundred pages.

On the credit side we find a rich vocabulary, a delightful picture of a sycophant <sup>1</sup>, some touches of humour and some excellent vignettes of the common people of Rome. <sup>2</sup> Chapter III, which depicts Rome as it was in the Fifth Century, comes to life in a way which suggests that Collins is relying upon what he saw in Rome as a youth.

There are several features in Antonina which are of interest. We meet for the first time Collins's obsession for Jezebels, mutilated and deformed bodies,

(and

1. e.g. Chap. II: "I shall leave Ravenna, this evening" said Vetrano. The parasite made three bows and smiled ecstatically. "You will order my travelling equipage to be at the palace gates an hour before sunset." The parasite declared he should never forget the honour of the commission and left the room.

2. Chap. III.

and secret passages.

In later days, especially in the Christmas Numbers, Collins is to break into verse. In Antonina the verse is of the lowest order and seems to be a poor imitation of Scott:

"Siona, mourn not! - where I go  
The warriors feel nor pain nor woe;  
Their wounds, yet warm, untended heal;  
Their arrows bellow through the air  
In showers, as they battle there;  
In mighty cups their wine is pour'd,  
Bright virgins throng their midnight board!" 1.

The careful description of the method by which human sacrifice was carried out in the temple foreshadows his interest in diabolical machinery later to be found in stories such as A Terribly Strange Bed:

"The body of the monster, protruding opposite the steps almost at a right angle from the wall, was moved in all directions by steel springs, which communicated with one of the lower stairs, and also with a sword placed in the throat of the image to represent the dragon's tongue. The walls around the steps narrowed so as barely to admit the passage of the human body, when they approached the dragon. At the slightest pressure on the stair which the spring communicated, the body of the monster bent forward, and the sword instantly protruded from its throat, at such a height from the steps as ensured that it should transfix in a vital part the person who descended. The corpse, then dropping by its own weight off the sword, fell through a tunnelled opening beneath the dragon, running downward in an opposite direction to that taken by the steps above; and was deposited on an iron grating washed by the waters of the Tiber, which ran under the arched foundations of the temple." 2.

Collins is once again writing from personal observation, but such elaborate machinery belonged to the later Middle Ages rather than to the Fifth Century.

We may consider ourselves fortunate that Collins did not again attempt an historical novel.

(Rambles)

1. Chap. XVIII.  
2. Chap. XXV.

Rambles Beyond Railways: or, Notes in Cornwall

Taken A-Foot (1851) is remarkable mainly for the brooding beauty of the engravings done by Collins's companion on the tour, Henry C. Brandling. This account of a walking tour is still the work of an apprentice. There is some heavy pedestrian humour, some clumsy writing. Collins fails to make the best of what was really an uneventful tour, and he fumbles ineptly with his statistics on the pilchard fishery. His "magic lantern show", giving verbal pictures of the early Phoenicians, St Michael's as a chapel in the Eleventh Century, as a castle in the Seventeenth Century, and in ruins in modern times is arch and artificial.

Redeeming features are his descriptions of the copper and tin mines, the pilchard fishery and the good life led by the nuns of Mawgan. Collins's description of the melodrama The Curate's Daughter as performed at Redruth by "the most talented company in England", I found much more delightful than Dickens's Crummles in Nicholas Nickleby. The picture of the way of life of the Cornish villagers which emerges from the pages of the Rambles is most interesting, and here and there is a breezy bit of dialogue:

"The guide introduces himself to me by propounding a sort of stranger's catechism. 1st. 'Do I want to see everything?' - 'Certainly.' 2nd. 'Am I giddy on the top of high places?' - 'No.' 3rd. 'Will I be so good, if I get into a fix anywhere, as to take it easy, and catch hold of him tight?' - 'Yes, very tight!'"

Later, in The Dead Secret, Collins used what he observed of the oyster fisheries at Saltash, and the Cornish cliffs provide the scene for the final pages of Basil; but it is strange that he, who made capital of

(almost

almost everything he saw, neglected to make use of the possibilities of the shafts and passages of Botallack Mine.

Rambles Beyond Railways was so kindly dealt with by the critics that Collins was encouraged to write another travel narrative in similar vein: A Pictorial Tour to St George Bosherville (1851).

The Twin Sisters (1851) is the first short story traced. It is difficult to understand how Bentley could give up thirteen and a half pages to so clumsy and inept a story. Collins still has a great deal to learn about the art of writing, and makes an unconvincing and typically Victorian effort at verisimilitude.

A young gentleman of fortune sees a young woman on a balcony and falls in love with her at first sight. After finding out who she is, he arranges a meeting, presses his suit and is accepted within six weeks. The marriage is to take place in the country, from the young lady's home. A large party assembles and all greetings and introductions are postponed until dinner.

"Grace had been said; the covers were taken off; a loud cheerful hum of conversation was just beginning, when Mr Streatfield's (the young Gentleman's) eyes met the eyes of a young lady who was seated opposite at the table. The guests near him, observing at the same moment that he continued standing after everyone else had been placed, glanced at him enquiringly."

The young gentleman pales, stares and exclaims abruptly:

"That is the face I saw in the balcony! - that woman is the only woman I can ever marry!"

He hurries from the room as his fiancée faints. The father writes: "Two hours hence, I shall expect to see you alone in the library." An impossibly stilted

(conversation

conversation ensues in the library, but Streatfield learns that his fiancée has a twin sister and that she had left to visit an aunt immediately after Streatfield's first sight of her. He is now permitted to pay his attentions to the twin sister, and with such success that a quiet wedding is soon arranged. After the wedding, the unmarried sister languishes:

"..... all that had been brilliant in her character was gone; but all that was noble in it remained."

She goes to live with her aunt, inherits her aunt's estate and declines all offers of marriage.

"Thus she lived - alone, and yet not lonely; without hope but with no despair; separate and apart from the world around her, except when she approached it by her charities to the poor ....."

It is difficult to believe that this is the work of the writer who is to find his way through the tangled threads of The Moonstone. If the story has any redeeming feature, it is that section which deals with the preparations for the wedding, the tableaux, the charades, the boating trips, the riding excursions and the dinner. Once again, Collins draws upon his own experience: he has recalled his visits with his father to the houses of the great.

Collins's meeting with Dickens early in 1851 and their association at the theatre at Tavistock House, which Dickens loved to describe as "the tiniest theatre in the world", was to change the whole tenor of Collins's career. The first evidence of Dickens's influence is provided by Mr Wray's Cash-Box (Dec., 1851). Robinson calls this a "successful imitation of the Dickens' model", but he neglects to place sufficient stress on "successful"; and this is important because Collins was the only one

(with

with whom Dickens could collaborate; and Mr Wray's Cash-Box is the best of the many imitations of Dickens's Christmas stories. The story is according to recipe: a confidential style, a great deal of heartiness, eccentric characters, sentiment and melodrama, adding to taste glorification of The Home, The Family, and The Happy Ending. The story closes with a huge Christmas dinner rendered after the manner of Dickens's Christmas Carol (1844).

Collins is not yet master of the "carpentry of fiction". His preface provides an unparalleled example of clumsy fumbling. With his passion for 'true stories' he writes of the tale told by a friend of "the circumstances under which the original mould was taken, not realising that he is robbing his story of any interest which it may arouse in the reader. When this was pointed out to him, he wrote in haste to his publishers requesting that the preface "be left out of any fresh copies sent to the binder. It must be cancelled altogether . . . . ." <sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, a number of copies had already been bound; and these early copies of the first and only edition of Mr Wray's Cash-Box have become rare collector's items. In this way he learned a lesson in suspense which he was never to forget. In another way, however, he has progressed far beyond his technique as displayed in Antonina: he has learned the trick of making all the ingredients known and how to set the machinery in motion while delaying the resolution in such a way as to sustain interest to the end.

There are several interesting aspects to Mr Wray's Cash-Box. The careful description of the taking of the mould for the mask obviously comes from first-hand knowledge, and we find it used again in The Yellow Mask (1855).

(The

1. From a letter to Marsh, Dec., 24th, 1851 (Illinois MS) quoted in Davis: Wilkie Collins pp. 111 & 316

The frequent mention of stage-players and theatres reflects Collins's interest in play-acting which was the basis of his early friendship with Dickens. Dickens's individual style, especially in dialogue, is most punctiliously imitated:

"'Stop!' cried old Wray, suddenly withdrawing it (the snuff-box). He always lectured to Julius Caesar (his servant) on elocution when he had nobody else to teach, just to keep his hand in. 'Stop! that won't do. In the first place, "Thank ye kindly, sir," though good-humoured, is grossly inelegant. "Sir, I am obliged to you", is the proper phrase - mind you sound the hi in obliged - never say obleeged, as some people do . . . .'"

The story has a lightness which we do not find in his earlier work. One interesting little point, Mr Wray's excuse about dining and sleeping with friends, makes us wonder if Collins drew on personal experience for this. We know that Collins was still living with his mother in Blandford Square, and that he was soon to be embarrassed by the "periwinkles" (as he and Dickens termed the light wenches whom they picked up<sup>1</sup>), who were not as easily to be cast aside as he had thought. Collins had perhaps made use of a similar subterfuge.

If further proof were required as to the great influence Dickens had on Collins, it is to be found in the strangely neglected story, A Passage in the Life of Perugino Potts (Feb., 1852). This is a delightful story written with facility and ease and a feeling for his effects indicative of great strides in Collins's craftsmanship. It opens:

"Personally, when I have my high-heeled boots on, I stand five feet three inches in height . . . I have nothing great about me but my mustachios and my intellect."

Potts, in whom we are later to recognise Uncle Joseph in The Dead Secret and Pesca in The Woman in White, tells his own story (a new technique for Collins,

(and  
1. Lindsay J.: Charles Dickens: A Biographical and Critical Study: p. 323.

and one which he employs to create a delicate humour, better than anything we are later to meet). These are Potts's pictures which have been refused by the Royal Academy:

"'Smothering of the Princes in the Tower', muscular murderers, flabby children, florid colouring, quite in the Rubens' style . . . . ., 'The Wise and Foolish Virgins', ten angular women, in impossible attitudes, with a landscape background, painted from an anti-perspective point of view, Sterne's 'Maria', with her goat; Maria was crying; the goat was crying, Sterne himself (in the background) was crying, with his face buried in a white cambric pocket-handkerchief, wet through with tears. A young housemaid in the kitchen plighting her troth at midnight to a private in the Grenadier Guards, while the policeman of the neighbourhood, a prey to jealousy and despair, flashed his 'bull's-eye' on them through the window, from the railings above, . . . . . three ruined columns, five pine-trees, a lake, a temple, distant mountains and a gorgeous sunset, the whole enlivened by a dance of nymphs in Roman togas, in front of the ruined columns . . . . ."

Potts proceeds to Italy to paint "Father Polycarp writing his Epistles", a canvas which is to be several times larger than life. He finds an apparently suitable model who robs him of his purse and watch-chain. When he rushes to the thief's dwelling, the sitter's burly mother orders him to go home: so he goes. The Italian police will not help him: the prisons are full, and in any event he will not recover his belongings; furthermore, being an Englishman, he can well afford his losses. When Potts hears that there is every likelihood that the sitter and his friends will "put me out of their way in the night, by sticking an inch or two of stiletto into my ribs", he precipitously leaves Rome to pursue the study of his art in Florence. He engages cheap lodgings in a ruinous palace where the Marchesa's daughter, "five foot eleven in her slippers, hair and eyes as black as ink, her arm is as thick as my leg; her complexion is sallow..."

falls in love with him. Potts is taken to see the blind man who prayed for two days to the statue of the Madonna

(and

and had his sight restored. He recognises his sinner from Rome, threatens to expose him, and is, in turn, threatened with being thrown out as an English heretic. The Marchesa's daughter saves him from this predicament. When she decides to marry him, he flees to England but she is hot on his trail. The last we hear of Potts is that he is off to hide in the furthest Hebrides.

Many writers have expressed surprise at the readability of Basil compared with Antonina, but Collins's progress has been steady. He has learned the art of writing natural dialogue, the trick of humour, how to use the diary form and to keep to modern life and the incidents with which he was well acquainted. He is about to write what some critics consider to be his best short stories, and he is on the threshold of a close working association with Dickens which is to determine the character of his future work.

#### ii : Finding his Forte

Though the extent of Collins's admiration for Dickens is reflected in Mr Wray, it would seem that Dickens at this stage limited his friendship with Collins to amateur theatricals. He turned down The Monkstons of Wincot Abbey, offered by Collins for publication in Household Words in 1852, on the grounds that the subject of hereditary insanity would cause distress among those "numerous families in which there is such a taint." <sup>1</sup>.

(This

1. Dexter W.: Letters of Charles Dickens, Vol II, p.446: from a letter to Willis, his assistant manager. The story, though written in 1852, was first published in Feb., 1855 in Fraser's Magazine, and was later included in The Queen of Hearts as Brother Griffith's Story of Mad Monkton.

This must have been a great disappointment to Collins as he had taken especial care with the construction of the rather complicated story and had manipulated his material with such success that it foreshadowed not only The Moonstone but provided a model which many successors were to use.

The Monkstons had a history of insanity in the family. The son, Alfred, upon hearing of his uncle's death as the result of a duel in Italy, proceeds thence and behaves so strangely in Naples that he is thought by all to be mad. He seeks in vain for further information as to the scene of the duel until his friend decides to assist him. Inquiries have been made all along the road from Naples to Rome. His friend deduces that, as the party had been away for only two days and as they would not remove the body a great distance from the scene of the duel, the body is most likely to be found somewhere about a day's journey from Naples, and in all probability somewhere along the Neapolitan boundary. At first the search is unsuccessful, but at Fondi the friend finds the body resting on trestles in an outer room of a Capuchin monastery.

Alfred's concern does not arise from love of his uncle but from a prophecy concerning the Monkstons:

"When in Wincot vault a place  
 Waits for one of Monkston's race;  
 When that one forlorn shall lie  
 Graveless under open sky,  
 Begared of six feet of earth,  
 Though lord of acres from his birth -  
 That shall be a certain sign  
 Of the end of Monkston's line." 1.

His friend is now inclined to believe Alfred's story that the ghost of his uncle in visible form haunts him night and day and will do until his corpse rests at Wincot Abbey. The body is taken to England, but the ship is lost with the coffin on board. Alfred takes

a fever and dies, bringing the prophecy to fulfilment.

This story presents several interesting features. It is a first-person narrative, a form which Collins was to use with increasing success. The first part of the story is set in Italy and he writes with confidence. He succeeds better than ever before in creating an atmosphere of the mysterious which prepares us for the discovery of the corpse:

"Not a sound broke the oppressive silence. No bird's note rose from the leafy wilderness around me; no voices spoke in the convent garden behind the scowling wall; no clock struck in the chapel-tower; no dog barked in the ruined outhouse. The dead silence deepened the solitude of the place inexpressibly. I began to feel it weighing on my spirits - the more because woods were never favourite places for me to walk in."<sup>1</sup>

He writes with an unforced humour, giving a delightful picture of the Capuchin monk at the gate:

"'Oh! my son!' said the monk, 'What delectable snuff! Oh, my son and amiable traveller, give the spiritual father who loves you, yet another tiny, tiny pinch!'"<sup>2</sup>

The careful fulfilment of all the details of the prophecy, the skilful presentation of different points of view while using only one mouthpiece, the humour, the suspense, the creation of atmosphere as an intrinsic vehicle for the furtherance of the story, the logical deduction which led to the discovery of the corpse and the careful manipulation of many threads: all these indicate how near Collins is to maturity.

Collins was not daunted by Dickens's refusal of The Monkstons of Wincot Abbey and soon submitted a story, A Terribly Strange Bed, which achieved print in Household Words on April 24th, 1852. Ashley considers that this is "the most exciting story he ever wrote and a first-rate story by any standards, Victorian or modern."<sup>3</sup> I do

(not

1. Chap. V.

2. *ibid.*

3. Ashley: Wilkie Collins, p.48.

not feel, however, that it is as well-knit as The Monk-stons; the characterization is not as clear-cut and the atmosphere not created with the same facility.

The story tells of a young man who is seized with a gambling fever in a rather unsavoury gambling house in Paris. He has a run of luck and an attempt is made to drug him; when this fails he is persuaded to spend the night in the house rather than face the streets of Paris at that late hour. He settles down in a "clumsy British four-poster", but finds himself unable to compose himself to rest. In trying to find some sleep he fixes his mind upon the details of a picture hanging on the wall when, to his amazement, he notices that the picture is disappearing from his view. With horror he realises that the top of the four-poster is descending upon him. At first he is transfixed with horror but manages to roll off the bed just in time to see the canopy pressed flat against the base of the bed.

Collins seems to have recognised that his talents lay in the direction of dealing with complicated engines of destruction and the unravelling of mystery. The machinery which actuates the double bed is described with the same care as is the monster which we encountered in Antonina. In his preface to After Dark, he states that his friend, W.S. Herrick told him "the curious and interesting facts" upon which the tale is founded. Ellis says that it is the first story of its kind and that Joseph Conrad probably obtained from it "the details of the idea for his own supreme tale of horror The Inn of The Two Witches".<sup>1</sup> The mounting suspense and horror are dealt with competently enough, but the dialogue is  
(stilted

1. Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu and Others, p. 19.

stilted and unnatural and the characters do not come to life. A notable exception is the "sub-prefect" who conducts his investigations with a Gallic verve which suggests that Collins had not been unobservant on his trips to Paris. Incidentally, nobody seems to have noticed that this "sub-prefect" is Collins's first official detective, or that The Monkstons of Wincot Abbey contains the first bit of detection through deduction.

In March, 1852 a translation of Balzac's Episode sous la Terreur, entitled A Midnight Mass, appeared in Bentley's Miscellany. Davis <sup>1</sup>. sees fit to ascribe this to Collins on the grounds that Collins offered it to Bentley as the work of a friend whom he was careful, in four letters, <sup>2</sup>. not to identify. Collins wrote:

"I have given the translation a dash or two of my pen here and there; and mean to go <sup>3</sup>. over the fair copy before I put it into your hands.

Believing that the friend existed only in Collins's imagination, Davis accepts the translation as being entirely his work; but fails to find in it anything more than that translation is an excellent exercise for a budding author.

A story using the same setting as A Midnight Mass, entitled Nine O'Clock, seems to have been written by Collins. It contributes little to our examination of his work. It is a story of the supernatural in which a man in the St Lazare prison during the Reign of Terror, who is to die at nine o'clock the following morning

(tells

1. The Life of Wilkie Collins. pp. 115 & 317.
2. *ibid*: quoting from letters in the Library of the University of Illinois.

tells of how various members of his family, blessed with second sight, knew beforehand of their impending deaths, which all occurred at nine o'clock in the morning. If this story is of any value to us at all it is as the first sign of Collins's interest in the French Revolution, which was to lead him to the writing of Sister Rose, which was, in turn, to inspire Dickens into writing A Tale of Two Cities.

The Collins who now turns his attention to Basil is a very different young man from the one who wrote Antonina. After his return from his tour of Cornwall with Brandling, he went to live with his mother and brother at 17 Hanover Terrace, a much better neighbourhood. As a writer with three books published, in addition to a number of short stories, his position was much more secure. Though he is not yet in a position to have a novel published serially, his approach to Bentley in which he confidently suggests that three hundred and fifty pounds as an outright sale would suit him best, is very different from his humble and diffident peddling of Antonina. He had finally committed himself to professional authorship and spent a great

(deal

1. This story was printed anonymously in Bentley's Miscellany, Vol. XXXII, pp. 222-234, and identification is based on the fact that it is derivative from A Midnight Mass with which Collins was obviously acquainted, and on a letter to Bentley (dated 14th July, 1852, University of Illinois MS) in which Collins writes: "I will bring in my article for the August number on the 16th - certainly not later than the 17th. It will be about 12 pages, I think." (References to letters: Davis, op. cit., p. 317.)

deal of his time travelling around London on a bus in search of "the actual". An adventure on a bus and something of what he had learned about the theatre, especially during his tour with Dickens's "Splendid Strollers", is to be found reflected in Basil.

Basil is the story of a young man of good family who marries the daughter of a successful linen draper and who, because he fears his father, agrees to the strange restriction imposed by the draper that he wait a year before consummating the marriage. Mr Sherwin, the draper, hopes that by this device his daughter will have time to acquire the accomplishments of a lady and so be acceptable to Basil's father.

Mannion, Sherwin's confidential clerk, has great influence over Margaret Sherwin and seduces her on the eve of the expiry of the year's probation. Through a series of accidents Basil becomes witness to his own dishonour. A fight with Mannion ensues in which Basil disfigures Mannion for life. It transpires that Mannion's father had been sent to the gallows for forgery by Basil's father, and that Mannion has decided to wreak vengeance on Basil for the wrongs he feels he has suffered. The latter part of the novel deals with the hunting down of Basil by Mannion and culminates with Mannion's death in a wild scene set on the rugged cliffs of Cornwall.

Ten years later a new edition of Basil was published in which Collins ruthlessly slashed many pages of digressions, musings about Fate and the supernatural, giving his novel an appearance of condensation and simplicity which we find again only in A Rogue's Life (1856), though this is a very light piece. In a letter of

(dedication

dedication addressed to Ward, Collins brings out several points which are of interest. He states that the story is founded "on a fact within my knowledge" and that the course of the story was guided "by my own experience, or by experience related to me by others". When we consider the nature of his story, it is not surprising that many readers have been tempted into feeling that Basil is to be taken as being autobiographical in the sense that David Copperfield is. The points of similarity between Collins and Basil are striking: they are of about the same age, they are both young authors who make a habit of studying character from the top of a bus, both are concerned with the writing of historical novels, both have spurned the universities to choose the study of law as offering a leisured life which will make literary pursuits congenial. In addition, Basil has just returned from the Continent which provides the scene for his story. It is not surprising that Elwin concludes that "the real love-meeting from which it was drawn was doubtless a personal experience".<sup>1</sup>

These points of resemblance are all superficial. Basil is a colourless, vacillating fool who is presented without any real self-revelation. It is possible that Collins was careful not to put too much of himself into this character lest the inevitable comparisons be made. If we are to find Collins within the pages of Basil he is more likely to be found in Ralph, Basil's brother, a high-spirited, convivial and energetic young man who is worldly-wise and has something of the cynic about him.

(In

1. Victorian Wallflowers, p. 209.

In the preface Collins states that he believes that "the Novel and the Play are twin sisters in the family of fiction". This belief was to influence the nature of much of his later work, many of his novels being written with an eye to eventual adaptation for the stage, and some of his plays being re-written so as to pass for novels.

He is a typical Victorian in that he protests that his aim in depicting "the darker scenes of my story" was motivated by a desire "to exhibit human life" and show "the conduct of the vile as always, in a greater or lesser degree, associated with something that is selfish, contemptible or cruel in motive." In the 1862 preface he protests that he will pay no attention to "the certain class of readers" who are guilty of "prurient misinterpretation of certain perfectly innocent passages." In 1888 he wrote, referring to Basil:

"The conviction of my duty that I owed to my art, expressed in those terms, has remained my conviction to the present time. In the thousands of pages I have written, I never remember to have asked myself: 'Will this passage be favourably received if the prying eyes of prudery discover my book?'" <sup>1</sup>.

Collins refrains, however, from mentioning his eagerness to make changes when requested to do so before publication, by Bentley. <sup>2</sup> In spite of all his

(protests

1. Collins: Reminiscences of a Story-Teller, Universal Review, 1888, p. 436.
2. Letter from Collins to Bentley, Nov., 1852, in the Illinois MS, quoted by Davis, op.cit., p. 125: "As I have managed the alteration now, I think the difficulty of the last chapter is got over altogether. If you will look at Folio 104, you will see that I have only mentioned the hotel as a deserted, dreary-looking building."

protests, Collins was careful in future not to offend in the same degree. Though he railed against the power of circulating libraries, he paid attention to their dictates. Only in The Captain and the Nymph, which was published initially in America, do we find anything comparable to the offending passages in Basil.

It was the vividness of the seduction scene which aroused the ire of the critics:

"I listened; and through the thin partition I heard voices - her voice, and his voice. I heard and I knew - knew my degradation in all its infamy, knew my wrongs in all their nameless horror. He was exulting in the patience and secrecy which had brought success to the foul plot, foully hidden for months on months; foully hidden until the very day before I was to have claimed as my wife, a wretch as guilty as himself!"<sup>1</sup>

We must needs be interested in the sources from which sprang this amazing novel. The superficially autobiographical matter is clearly discernible; we know that Collins was attracted to the subject of forgery<sup>2</sup>; the sense of fatality and elemental cruelty are strongly reminiscent of Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights; but most of all, in its intensity, it seems to owe something to Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre.

Both Davis<sup>3</sup> and Ashley<sup>4</sup> find Collins much indebted to William Godwin's Caleb Williams (1797), Davis believing that it is "a good deal similar in flavor." I find Caleb Williams altogether different in structure,

(mood

1. Basil, Part II, Chap. VII.
2. Highly Proper (1858); A Rogue's Life (1856); Fauntleroy the Forger (1858).
3. Davis, op. cit., p. 120.
4. Ashley, op. cit., p. 35.

mood, approach, theme, treatment and ending. It is a bitter novel, lacking in unity, which hits out, in the words of the preface, "at the tyranny and perfidiousness exercised by the powerful members of the community against those who are less privileged than themselves." It seems to me that this novel contributed nothing to Basil.

Basil's father is convincingly portrayed as a man proud of the name he bears and ruling his family with an iron hand. Mr Sherwin, in many ways more of a snob than Basil's father, is mean, sneaking and scheming. He makes a "low and rather cringing bow", speaks with unctiousness to Basil and rudeness to his wife.

Margaret Sherwin is depicted as a sensual, vain, deceitful and heartless young woman whose poverty of intellect and vulgar ambition make her accept Basil's attentions on the one hand while paying heed to Mannion's suggestions on the other. She is empty and vulgar. Indeed it is difficult to understand the attraction which she has for Basil. Collins makes use again and again of the convention of love at first sight and we are asked to accept it in this novel. In addition, Basil feels that it is written in the stars that he must win her. Margaret is, nevertheless, "a credible and conceivable beast." <sup>1</sup>.

Mannion is the most clear-cut character, in spite of his amazing conduct in Volume III, where he deteriorates into the stock villain of melodrama. He foreshadows Fosco, and his possibilities are wasted on the limited scope allowed in Basil for a villain of the first order. His character is skilfully portrayed:

("His

1. Swinburne A.C.: Studies in Prose and Poetry, p. 112.

"His bald forehead was as smooth and massive as marble; his high brow and thin eyelids had the firmness and immobility of marble, and seemed as cold; his delicately formed lips, when he was not speaking, closed habitually, as changelessly still as if no breath of life ever passed them .... Never had I before seen any face which baffled all enquiry like this. No mask could have been made expressionless enough to resemble it; and yet it looked like a mask." 1.

Collins's skill in depicting Mannion's character lies, however, not in direct portrayal but in suggestion. We feel his evil power in the way in which Sherwin fears to treat him as an employee, in the terror he inspires in Mrs Sherwin and the uncanny hold he has over Margaret. Mannion is a masterpiece of dramatic innuendo.

In Basil we see early signs of social protest. Collins has something to say against the way in which the fever hospitals are run, against hypocrisy and the privileges accorded to the wealthy at the universities. Nor does he allow the finishing school to escape his pen:

"Her schooling alone was a hundred a year, Sir, without extras ..... A school, Sir, where it was a rule to take in nothing lower than the daughter of a professional man - they only waived the rule in my case - the most genteel school, perhaps, in all London! A drawing-room-department day once every week - the girls taught how to enter a room and leave a room with dignity and ease - a model of a carriage door and steps, in the back drawing-room, to practise the girls (with the footman of the establishment in attendance) in getting into a carriage and getting out again, in a ladylike manner." 2.

The construction of Basil is of interest. It evinces characteristics which suggest that Collins hoped to find periodical publication for his novel. The arrangement into parts, each with a number of short chapters, many ending on a note of suspense, would have made it suitable for serial publication. The story proper begins to move

(only

1. Basil: Part II, Chap. II.  
2. *ibid.* : Part I, Chap. 10.

only from the middle of Part I and ends in the early pages of Part III. It seems likely that, failing to find a periodical which would accept Basil, Collins spun the story out with the melodramatic touches provided by Mannion's hounding of Basil so as to bring it to the length of the conventional three-decker.

There is an intensity of mood which precludes much humour. The overall impression is one of a sense of fatality and doom. Collins experiments with the multiple narrative, a form which he is to use later with such consummate skill. Here, to the autobiographical form he adds excerpts from Basil's journal and a few letters from characters other than Basil. He does not yet weave these into the body of the first-person narrative, but employs them to clear up loose threads "in conclusion".

Basil represents a great advance on anything Collins had written before. In the creation of atmosphere, the description of scene and the interplay of natural phenomena on the actions and experiences of his characters, he now experiments with what is later to be his forte.

Here is Sherwin's drawing-room:

"Everything was oppressively new. The brilliantly varnished door cracked with a report like a pistol when it was opened; the paper on the walls, with its gaudy pattern of birds, trellis-work, and flowers, in gold, red, and green on a white ground, looked hardly dry yet; the showy window-curtains of white and sky-blue, and the still showier carpet of red and yellow, seemed as if they had come out of the shop yesterday; the round rosewood table was in a painfully high state of polish; the morocco-bound picture books that lay on it, looked as if they had never been moved or opened since they had been bought; not one leaf even of the music on the piano was dogs-eared or worn. Never was a richly furnished room more thoroughly comfortless than this - the eye ached<sup>1</sup> at looking round it. There was no repose anywhere."

(Here

1. Basil: Part I, Chap. 10.

Here Basil is with Mannion:

"Once our talk ceased altogether; and, just at that moment, the storm began to rise to its height. Hail mingled with the rain, and rattled heavily against the window. The thunder, bursting louder and louder with each successive peal, seemed to shake the house to its foundations. As I listened to the fearful crashing and roaring that seemed to fill the whole measureless void of upper air, and then looked round on the calm, dead-calm face of the man beside me - without one human emotion of any kind even faintly pictured on it - I felt strange, unutterable sensations creeping over me; our silence grew oppressive and sinister; I began to wish, I hardly knew why, for some third person in the room - for somebody else to look at and to speak to." <sup>1</sup>.

It is a sense of the inevitable, a feeling of the grinding of the wheels of fate which gives power to this tale. Collins succeeds in arousing in us a feeling of acute suspense, and we read on until, after his discovery of Mannion and Margaret, our credulity rebels against the melodrama.

Coincidence plays far too prominent a part in the story. Basil meets Margaret by chance; it is chance which makes Mannion meet the son of the man who condemned his father to death; and it is a far-fetched coincidence which leads to the meeting between Ralph and Jack Bernard; but the whole story hinges upon the greatest coincidence of all: the series of events which leads to Basil's entering the building in which Margaret and Mannion are.

The plot is simple and straightforward, and Collins still has to write several novels before he is equipped to tackle The Woman in White.

Two features of Basil later writers have seen fit to copy: the use of the columns of a newspaper to impart information to the opposing faction; <sup>2</sup>. and the

(sleuthing

1. Basil: Part II, Chap 2.

2. ibid. Part III, Chap. 2.

sleuthing technique as described by Collins:

"I stopped instinctively, and looked behind me. Many figures were moving in the distance; but the figure that I had seen in the churchyard was nowhere visible among them. A little further on, I looked back again, and still with the same result. After this, I let a longer interval elapse before I stopped; and then, for the third time, I turned round, and scanned the busy street-scene behind me, with eager, suspicious eyes. Some little distance back, on the opposite side of the way, I caught sight of a man who was standing still (as I was standing), amid the moving throng. His height was like Mannion's height; and he wore a cloak like the cloak I had seen on Mannion, when he approached me at Margaret's grave. More than this I could not detect, without crossing over. The passing vehicles and foot-passengers constantly intercepted my view, from the position in which I stood.

Was this figure, thus visible only by intervals, the figure of Mannion? and was he really tracking my steps? As the suspicion entered my mind that it was so, the remembrance of his threat in the churchyard: 'You may shield yourself behind your family and your friends: I will strike at you through the dearest and the bravest of them --' suddenly recurred to me; and brought with it a thought which urged me instantly to proceed on my way. I never looked behind me again, as I now walked on; for I said within myself:- 'If he is following me, I must not, and will not avoid him: it will be the best result of my departure, that I shall draw after me that destroying presence; and thus at least remove it far from my family and my home!'"<sup>1</sup>

### iii : Working with Dickens

Dickens was well pleased with Basil and saw in Collins a young writer of greater promise than the other young men who were contributing to Household Words. He accepted Gabriel's Marriage (April, 1853), a novelette published in two parts in Household Words. This story tells of Gabriel, son of a Breton fisherman, who hears his grandfather confess on his death-bed to having been an accomplice, together with Gabriel's

(father,

1. Basil: Part III, Chap 8. A chase in a cab much copied may be found in Part II, Chap. 7.

father, to the murder of a benighted stranger. The body was left for dead in a hollow place under the "Druid monuments" known as "The Merchant's Table". Père Bonan, a legendary figure for good in those wild Revolutionary times, listens to Gabriel's confession to knowledge of the murder and reveals that he was the young man thought to be murdered. He had been saved by smugglers who had discovered him while using "The Merchant's Table" to hide their contraband. Upon taking Orders he had returned to Brittany with the clear purpose of seeking out and redeeming the man who had attempted to murder him. Having identified Gabriel's father, he makes him confess to his crime, forgives him, and prescribes a penance.

This story is flimsy and lacks unity. We are taken to a farm and introduced to the father of Gabriel's fiancée, we are given some background material concerning the upheavals of the time; but this is out of all proportion to the rest of the story and serves little purpose. A great deal of time is devoted to the dying grandfather who must have had the most loquacious death ever recorded.

Once again we find a story which hinges upon a series of improbabilities: the grandfather conveniently recovers in time to deny his confession, the father returns from a storm which has drowned many other fishermen, and Père Bonan is discovered and given timely assistance by the smugglers.

For Collins this story was an excellent exercise in the creation of suspense. He used his knowledge of Brittany and Cornwall for the setting: "Druid monuments" which were reputed to be haunted. He employed the

(visions

visions of a dying man; and he chose Revolutionary times and the persecution of the Church to whet the reader's expectations. He was not yet, however, master of his art. The effects are strained and the dialogue all too declamatory. Here are the words of the grandfather, who is on the brink of death:

"'Silence!' exclaimed the harsh voice from the bed. 'The wail of dying men rises louder than the loud sea; the devil's psalm-singing roars louder than the roaring wind! Be silent and listen! Francois drowned! Pierre drowned! Hark! Hark! ..... Ah! Woe! Woe!' groaned his grandfather, sinking back exhausted on the pillow, 'Darkness to you; but bright as lightning to the eyes that are allowed to see them. Drowned! Drowned! Pray for their souls, Gabriel. - I see the White Women where I lie, and dare not pray for them. Son and grandson drowned, both drowned!'"<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately the grandfather turns out to be a most unreliable seer, as both Francois and Pierre return hale and hearty.

The background of the French Revolution and the germ of the idea of a magnificent character who faces danger and death for the redemption of another (Père Bonan) indicate how Collins's mind is turning towards a hero who can say "This is a far greater thing I do ...." Gabriel's Marriage is a preliminary to Sister Rose (April, 1855), without which A Tale of Two Cities could never have taken quite the form it did.

Gabriel's Marriage was eighteen months later adapted as a drama entitled The Lighthouse, and produced at Tavistock House. Dickens is reported as delighting in playing the part of the "murderous but repentant old sinner." It was not printed in England but was published in translation in France.

(Collins

1. This reference to White Women is of some interest. In Basil the young hero has a dream concerning a White Woman (Part I, Chap. 8), and in Antonina the appearance of Antonina to Homanric (Chap. 8) is as a woman in white.

Collins was at this time working on his next novel, Hide and Seek (June, 1854), but he accompanied Dickens, along with Egg<sup>1</sup> on the Grand Tour. Dickens found him a likeable companion, though given to complaining about the service, rather parsimonious and also given to tall stories about his conquests and discussions with adults when last in Italy (at the age of thirteen!). The attraction which Collins exerted upon Dickens is, perhaps revealed in a letter from Italy, full of self-revelation, which Collins wrote to his brother Charles:

"I must not forget to say that Charles Iggulden - the pattern goodboy who used to be quoted as an example to me - has married a pretty girl without his parents' consent - is out of the banking business in consequence - and has gone to Australia to make his fortune as well as he can. I was rather glad to hear this as I don't like 'well-conducted' young men! I know it is wrong, but I always feel relieved and happy when I hear that they have got into a scrape."

Hide and Seek is the story of a brother who, with infinite patience and pertinacity, discovers how his sister was cruelly deserted, a desertion which started a train of events which at last led to her death. He forgoes the vengeance he has sworn to take on the man responsible, because of his love for his friend, son of the betrayer of his sister.

Of the characters, that of the young hero, Zack Thorpe, is the most interesting. This is because of the autobiographical treatment. It is perhaps not without significance that Collins dedicated this three-volume to Dickens: Hide and Seek is, in part, Collins's personal David Copperfield. Zack Thorpe can be read as

(Wilkie

1. Augustus Egg, R.A.

Wilkie Collins in a way which could never have been applied to Basil. The opening chapter gives a picture of Zack as a child, and the feelings aroused are much the same as we felt when David was in Mr Murdstone's hands. As a young man, Zack is attractive, impetuous and rebellious. He likes the theatre, dislikes being a tea merchant's clerk. He is convivial and seeks good company. Collins writes with such authenticity of many of Zack's experiences, that, knowing him as we do for an author who writes from first-hand knowledge, it seems reasonable to infer that he tells of what he has himself been through - and these experiences are just those which we might expect of Collins. The tricks he played while he should have been about the business of Tea; the nocturnal tours of disreputable places of entertainment; his tippling; the excellence of the brawl in "The Snuggery" and the subsequent behaviour of the mob; the doctoring of alcoholic drinks and his drunken stumbling as he attempts to creep quietly to bed; the careful and accurate description of the type of quarters which Mat Marksman had taken: these are among the best passages in the novel and are in line with what Collins might have experienced while with Dickens on their "Haroun-al-Raschid" expeditions. If we remember that the Collins family had moved to Blandford Square, which was then a suburb in the process of development, we shall see that Baregrove Square was no further from Collins's home than Collins was from Zack. Furthermore, William Collins's diaries and his letters to his wife indicate a rather narrow religious outlook which finds an echo in Mr Thorpe; to make the comparison complete, we find Mrs Thorpe's

(treatment

treatment of her son very similar to Mrs Collins's treatment of her rather wayward Wilkie. Zack Thorpe is a real young man who breathes the very air we breathe, and with whom Collins associates himself so closely that he time and again departs from the plot of the story to fill in the picture of Zack. Basil, Ralph and Zack are young men portrayed in a manner quite beyond Dickens. Indeed Dickens was to learn much from Collins in the matter of writing about wild young gentlemen. Sydney Carton, <sup>1</sup>. Arthur Pocket <sup>2</sup>. and Bentley Drummle <sup>2</sup>. are drawn with much more conviction than Monks <sup>3</sup>. or Nicholas Nickleby <sup>4</sup>.

Matt Marksman is the most interesting character in the novel. It is difficult to believe that Collins is drawing on first-hand experience; it is more likely that Fenimore Cooper, or Captain Marryatt, both of whom Collins confessed to admiring, contributed something, and that Dickens's love of an eccentric had something to do with it. He is interesting, refreshing and in many ways convincing; but he is not of the calibre of Mannion. He wears a skull-cap to hide the fact that he has been scalped by Indians; he is known as Marksman for obvious reasons; and he is so accustomed to a spartan life in the wastes of America that he can abide no furniture. His room has the furniture in a corner and his personal belongings lie in a heap in the middle of the room:

(".....some

1. A Tale of Two Cities (1859);
2. Great Expectations (1860-61);
3. Oliver Twist (1837-38);
4. Nicholas Nickleby (1838-39).

" .... some bearskins and a splendid buffalo hide, neatly packed, a pipe, two red flannel shirts, a tobacco-pouch, and an Indian blanket; a leather bag, a gunpowder flask, two squares of yellow soap, a bullet mould, and a nightcap; a tomahawk, a paper of nails, a scrubbing brush, a hammer, and an old gridiron."

Criticism has been levelled at Madonna because she does not influence the course of the narrative at all. Collins introduced her because she was a deaf-mute. His aim was to portray such a character "simply and exactly after nature", he tells us in his preface. Collins had a predilection for heroines who were suffering from some disability. We find a cripple in Antonina and we are to encounter many more heroines disabled in some way or other. We know that Collins thought highly of Scott and of Bulwer-Lytton. It is possible that his admiration takes the form of moulding his characters on the pattern of Nydia in The Last Days of Pompeii or the feigned deaf-mute in Peveril of the Peak. Be that as it may, he writes in an appendix:

"I do not know that any attempt has yet been made in English fiction to draw the character of a 'Deaf Mute' simply and exactly after nature - or, in other words, to exhibit the peculiar effects produced by the loss of the senses of hearing and speaking on the disposition of the person so afflicted. The famous Fenella, in Scott's Peveril of the Peak, only assumes deafness and dumbness; and the whole family of dumb people on the stage have the remarkable faculty - so far as my experience goes - of always being able to hear what is said to them."

It is obvious that Collins's Madonna is portrayed with care. She rings true and is a most appealing young heroine.

Mr Thorpe, the strong-minded, stern parent who turns out to have feet of clay, whose religious fervour is a sublimatory compensation for his sins, is well done. Valentine Blyth, the painter who is a failure

(by

by worldly standards, is convincingly depicted as an artist who paints potboilers to support a paralysed wife; an artist who is kindly and unworldly and who can adopt a deaf-mute to save her from the horror of being an exhibit at a fair.

Collins's debt to Dickens is clearly apparent in some of the minor eccentric characters. Take Mr Jubber, for instance:

"Hullo! You take that tone with me, do you?" said Jubber, setting his arms akimbo, and tapping his foot fiercely on the floor; "you're trying to come the Tommy Grand over me already, are you? Very good! I'm the man to give you change in your own coin - so wheree goes! What do you mean by enticing away my Mysterious Foundling? What do you mean by this private swindle of talent that belongs to my circus?"

Dickens had many imitators who found it no easy matter to capture the spirit of his genius. In this Collins excelled them all, and he was chosen above all others by Dickens as collaborator. At his best he imitates Dickens so well as to confound anyone attempting to assess the degree of collaboration.

Once again Collins relies heavily on chance and incredible coincidence. The plot is not a complicated one and the reader has guessed the secret before he is half-way through the book. Though interest is sustained there is no great suspense; we read on to make sure that our conclusions are correct, and we are not misled. Only when Mat steals into Madonna's room to examine the hair bracelet and identify the hair, does the novel take an unexpected turn.

The tempo is at times slow, at times the mood is a little sombre, too emotional and rather exaggerated. Collins does not rely on a first-person narrative, but

uses a third-person narrative as his framework, combined with skilful interpolation of epistles and documents. His dialogue now reads naturally and has been turned into an instrument for the revelation of character, though there is still an occasional lapse into stilted dialogue:

"Dear old Blyth! How are you?" cried Zack. "Have you had any leap-frog since I was here last? Jump up, and let's celebrate my return with a bit of manly exercise in our old way. Come on! I'll give the first back. No shirking! Put down your palette; and one, two, three - and over!"

There is evidence that Collins is paying more attention to style. The description on the first page is good writing:

"The garden in the middle of Baregrove Square - with its close-cut turf, its vacant beds, its brand-new rustic seats, its withered young trees that had not yet grown as high as the railings around them - seemed to be absolutely rotting away in yellow mist and softly-steady rain, and was deserted even by the cats. All blinds were drawn for the most part over all windows; what light came from the sky came like light seen through dusty glass; the grim brown hue of the brick houses looked more dirtily mournful than ever; the smoke from the chimney-pots was lost mysteriously in deepening superincumbent fog; the muddy gutters gurgled; the heavy rain-drops dripped into empty areas audibly."

This is the description of the brawl in "The Snuggery":

"One ricketty little man, with a spirituous nose and watery eyes, urged on by some women near him, advanced to the stranger's bench, and, expressing his admiration of a skull-cap as a becoming ornamental addition to a hat, announced, with a bow of mock politeness, his anxiety to feel the quality of the velvet. He stretched out his hand as he spoke, not a word of warning or expostulation being uttered by the victim of the intended insult; but the moment his fingers touched the skull-cap, the strange man, still without speaking, without even removing his cigar from his mouth, very deliberately threw all that remained of the glass of hot brandy before him in the ricketty gentleman's face.

With a scream of pain as the hot liquor flew into his eyes, the miserable little man struck out helplessly with both his fists, and fell down between the benches.

(The

The friend who was with him, advanced to avenge his injuries, and was thrown, sprawling on the floor. Yells of 'Turn him out!' and 'Police!' followed; people at the other end of the room jumped up excitedly on their seats; the women screamed, the men shouted and swore. Glasses were broken, sticks were waved, benches were cracked, and, in one instant, the stranger was assailed by every one of his neighbours who could get near him, on pretence of turning him out."

When Dickens read of Mat's visit to Joanna Grice, did some cell in his brain start him along a path that led to Miss Havisham and Satis House?

"He followed close behind her; and was standing by her side when she opened a door, and pointed into a room, telling him to take what he found there, and then go - she cared not whither, so long as he went from her.

She descended the stairs again, as he entered the room. There was a close, faint, airless smell in it. Cobwebs, pendulous and brown with dirt, hung from the ceiling. The grimy window-panes saddened all the light that poured through them faintly. He looked round him, and saw no furniture anywhere; no sign that the room had ever been lived in, for years and years past."

At times Collins's description is so methodical that he might be painting a picture:

"On a shady seat, among the trees, Mrs Joyce is just visible, working in the open air. One of her daughters sits reading on the turf at her feet. The other is giving the younger children a ride by turns on the back of a large Newfoundland dog, who walks along slowly with his tongue hanging out, and his great bushy tail wagging gently ..... Across the picture, of which Vance and the luncheon-table form the foreground, and the garden with Mrs Joyce and the young ladies the middle-distance and background, there flits from time to time an unquiet figure."

Though Hide and Seek is no novel of protest but rather Collins's best attempt yet at a mystery, we find many expressions of opinion on what he has seen around him. Though he seems at this stage to admire athletes and describes Zac as "a tall young gentleman" whose "height, strength, and science as a boxer carried him triumphantly to the opposite bench"<sup>1</sup>, he hits out

(against

1. He was to adopt a completely different attitude in Man and Wife.

against Sabbatarianism, especially that form which represses sternly a child's innocent pleasure. He has a word to say against undertakers, "the smug human vultures who prey commercially on the civilised dead". Nor do jerry-builders escape him:

"Alexander's armies were great makers of conquests; and Napoleon's armies were great makers of conquests; but the modern Guerilla regiments of the hod, the trowel and the brick-kiln, are the greatest conquerors of all; for they hold the longest the soil they have once possessed. How mighty the devastation which follows in the wake of these tremendous aggressors, as they march through the kingdom of nature, triumphantly bricklaying beauty wherever they go."

In view of the many passages which reflect Dickens's influence, from the opening to the final pages, which are in the tradition of a Christmas number, it is not surprising that Dickens described this novel as "far and away the cleverest novel I have ever seen by a new hand."<sup>1</sup> But Dickens owed a debt to Collins too, and not only for the description of the room festooned with cobwebs that inspired the depiction of a similar room in Satis House, but also for Wemmick's home. Collins cannot resist a 'contraption', and Mrs Blyth's bedroom is described as being equipped with

"an extraordinary complication of loose cords, which ran through ornamental pulleys of the strangest kind, fixed at different places in the ceiling, and communicating with the bell, the door, and a pane of glass in the window which opened easily on hinges."

We are later to find Collins not always at home with the diseases which are to assail his characters but, in Hide and Seek, his doctors are most knowledgeable on the matter of Madonna's hearing.

As a mystery, this novel presents several interesting features. The device by which Mat takes a wax impression of a stolen key is one which writers

(of

1. Dexter W.: The Letters of Charles Dickens, Vol. II, p.570: From a letter to Georgina Hogarth.

of detective fiction are to use often in later years. Even at this early stage, Collins is observing the fair-play rule. There is no attempt to mislead us as to the fact that Mat is Mary Grice's brother and, even more important, the colour and type of both Carr's hair and Zac's hair is stressed. The only thing left for the reader is to realise the significance of the similarity. Collins's progress has been steady. Item by item he equips himself for the tour de force on which his fame is to rest.

In December, 1854 Collins collaborated for the first time with Dickens in the writing of The Seven Poor Travellers for the Extra Christmas Number of Household Words. The Seven Poor Travellers consists of seven short stories set within a connecting framework. The first traveller, who is poor in a relative sense only, tells in the first person how he found himself in the little city of Rochester and read this inscription:

"Richard Watts, Esq.  
by his Will, dated 22 Aug. 1579,  
founded this charity  
for Six poor Travellers  
who not being ROGUES or PROCTORS  
May receive gratis for one Night  
Lodging, Entertainment,  
and Four-pence each."

He decides that he is neither a Proctor nor much of a Rogue and allows himself to be invited in by a matronly body. He learns that the woman and her daughter occupy the best part of the house and that they consider themselves ill-treated in that the biggest room with the fire is reserved for the travellers. The Board has, however, agreed that "a slip of a room"

(is

is to be built in the back yard for the accommodation of the travellers. An examination of the books shows that the endowment has become rich, but that the income is swallowed by the Board (who have a dignified board-room) and by a rigmarole of law, poundage and collectorship, leaving little for the poor travellers who have become, in fact, an embarrassment to the board. The traveller orders a huge Christmas dinner for the remaining poor travellers who comprise "a very decent man with his right arm in a sling who had a certain clean, agreeable smell of wood about him, judged to be somebody to do with shipbuilding"; a little sailor-boy; a "shabby-genteel personage in a threadbare black suit and apparently in very bad circumstances, with a dry suspicious look; the absent buttons on his waistcoat eked out with red tape; and a bundle of extraordinarily tattered papers sticking out of an inner breast pocket"; a watchmaker from Geneva; a little widow; and a book pedlar who boasted that "he could repeat more verses in an evening than he could sell in a twelvemonth".

After the dinner has been eaten, a "brown beauty" of a Christmas pudding consumed and the fire poked into a blaze, comes the time for story-telling.

So far there are so many touches that are unmistakably Dickens, that we may assume that he got this Christmas Number under way. Parrish<sup>1</sup> believes that the second, third, fourth, fifth and seventh stories are all by Collins, but adduces no evidence in support of this view. Collins's biographers mention only the fourth story which was later published in After Dark as The

(Stolen)

Stolen Letter. As it presents several interesting aspects, I shall deal with it last.

The Traveller who has provided the feast tells The Story of Private Doubledick. This is the melodramatic story, written in pedestrian fashion, of a wild young man who is told by his fiancée that she will never marry him because he has treated her badly. He seeks death in the wars, wins the friendship of Captain Taunton, whose mother nurses him after he is seriously wounded at Waterloo. After hovering between life and death for many weeks, he recovers and is told by his fiancée that she had married him when he was on the brink of death.

This story is rather a puzzle. It presents no Dickensian characteristics. We are, however, not justified, by means of a process of elimination, in ascribing this story to Collins. It bears no resemblance to any of his work. Some of the many characteristics which we find recurring again and again in his stories should surely have evinced themselves had this story been his work. In the absence of such evidence I am inclined to ascribe this story to some other hand. We know that in other Christmas Numbers Dickens often made use of a number of contributors whose stories were fitted into a preconceived framework, often with some straining; and it seems likely that this is what occurred here.

The Story of the Second Poor Traveller is as much of a puzzle. It is a fantasy which tells of a miser's visit to the "Sky Fair". This opens only once every hundred years, but jewels and gold are to be had at

(bargain

bargain prices. There is a catch, however, and anyone who is so overloaded by his purchases that he cannot manage to pass the gates within ten minutes of the ringing of a bell will be turned to stone. The miser, so impeded by his load which he is unwilling to jettison until it is too late, is told by the porter that there is a small window from which he may jump. He does so and falls for six months and at least 60,000 miles. According to his wife and daughter, he had returned home some time previously much the worse for liquor, had fallen asleep in his chair and had tumbled into the fire striking his head against the tongs.

If this story is to be attributed to Collins at all, it must be because of the similarity of the wild fantasy to The Last Stage Coachman. It is, of course possible, that this is an example of Collins's earlier work for which he had failed to find a publisher. In any event, it contributes nothing to our study of his work; and my feeling is that Collins, had he been responsible for this piece, would not have been able to resist introducing rather more explicit details regarding the machinery of the "Sky Fair"; nor would he have gone to any lengths to provide the story with a rational ending. He never was one to boggle at introducing the supernatural. <sup>1</sup>.

The Story of the Third Poor Traveller is in verse of a sort. Written in iambic tetrameter in stanzas of ten lines with alternate rhyme for four lines and then switching over to couplets, it tells in doggerel, a most melodramatic story which does not succeed as a ballad

(or

1. Gabriel's Marriage, The Dream Woman, Armadale, The Frozen Deep, The Two Destinies, The Haunted Hotel, etc.

or anything else.

It begins:

"You wait my story next? A well  
Such marvels as you two have told ...."

This opening indicates that it was written especially for inclusion in the Christmas Number. We know that Collins occasionally broke into poetry of this order<sup>1</sup> but he had discarded it by the time he came to write his major novels.

The story tells of how an earl fell in love with a young woman from the village. He offered to wed her on condition

"....that nevermore  
She would behold her child again  
But hide his name from hers and men."

All unknowing, her child loved to watch her pass by in all the panoply of her grandeur. She would pause to talk to him and seemed to love the boy more than her son by the earl. On her deathbed she sends for the boy and acknowledges him as her child.

The Story of the Fifth Poor Traveller possesses characteristics which seem to indicate that it is Collins's work. The itinerant watchmaker tells of two children he encountered upon a long, dusty, tiresome road. They brought him food and drink and refused payment on the grounds that their mother had told them that it was their duty to assist poor travellers. They tell him of their drunkard father who beat them and their mother, to practise his trade as a wheelwright. They love their father and believe that he will return, but the padre says he will never return; their brother

("drew

1. cf. Antonina and The Wreck of the Golden Mary.

"drew the bad number" and has been conscripted, so their mother tills the fields and leaves the children in charge of the home and the "cabaret". Finally they ask permission to inspect the traveller's tongue so as to examine the black line which, they believe, is the cause of travellers not being able to speak French after the manner of Frenchmen.

This seems to be ascribable to Collins, and for several reasons. We know that he was not one to waste an experience and he had just spent July and August at Boulogne with the Dickens family. Furthermore, though his French was not altogether grammatical, it was fluent and, as we are to see in Sister Rose, he had a sympathetic appreciation of French idiom and French customs. The French scene attracted him and several of his stories have French settings. The little girl is blind, and we know that Collins had a penchant for deformity of some sort in his characters. Collins had a way with children and many of his youthful creations are done with a sympathy and understanding similar to that found in this little story. Finally, as it concerns an itinerant traveller, the Swiss watchmaker, this story was obviously written especially for the Christmas Number.

The Story of the Sixth Poor Traveller also possesses characteristics which incline me to identify it as the work of Collins. In spite of his being able to make no marriage settlement, or being willing to impart information as to his occupation or place of work; in spite of her sister's earnest pleadings, the young woman marries a man who is later revealed to be a

(forger.

forger. The sister comes to live with them and it is apparent that there is some secret between her and the husband. One day the wife becomes convinced that her husband has returned to the home in secret and, upon hearing a scream upstairs, rushes to her sister's room to find her dying. The husband fetches a doctor who is unknown to them and who pronounces that death is due to natural causes. The wife is not satisfied and keeps vigil. The apparition of her sister appears at midnight and reveals that she was murdered. She confesses to having had a sinful alliance with the husband. A careful examination of the corpse shows bruises on the throat and a small wound. The wife forces her husband's desk and discovers the stamps, dies and moulds which expose his occupation as a forger. In the desk she also finds a long slender dagger, a handful of her sister's hair and an incriminating letter in her husband's hand addressed to the sister. She senses something behind her, turns, beholds her husband. In terror she flees into the darkness "where I lived, oh! for many, many months!"

The ending to the story is weak and not characteristic of Collins, but this is explained if we consider that it was necessary to motivate in some way the woman's being of the company of travellers. In other respects it is not only a typical Collins mystery, but is especially typical of him at this stage. The sister in the character of a Jezebel, the evil husband who nefariously carries out his forgeries<sup>1</sup>, the secret,

(the

1. Highly Proper, Fauntleroy the Forger, and A Rogue's Life all concern forgery.

the method of building up suspense and the treatment of the supernatural, all indicate that this story may, with some justification, be accredited to Collins. Most important of all, however, is the attention to detail and the careful revealing of the evidence; important, because these are early signs of what is yet to become Collins's strength.

The Story of the Seventh Poor Traveller is written in verse of the same quality as that of the Third Poor Traveller. The eight-line stanzas are in iambic trimeter with the rhyme-scheme abcbdefe, i.e. two ballad stanzas run together. A Tyrolean maid learns of the decision to attack Bregenz, and speeds to the stable, looses a white charger, swims him across the Rhine and gives timely warning to the town of her birth: an act which is commemorated, we are told, "to the present day" by the warder calling the maiden's name when he calls the midnight hour. It is not unlikely that this is Collins's work, but, once again, it represents a field which is of no real significance for us.

This Christmas story ends with The Road. It is written in the hearty Dickens Christmas tradition, but seems to lack his authentic touch. It occupies one page of Household Words, quarto in six-point type, and describes a nightmare in which a conglomeration of all the stories disturbs the rest of the First Traveller. It is probably one of Collins's exercises in the acquisition of Dickens's style, after the manner of Mr Wray's Cash-Box.

The Story of the Fourth Poor Traveller is of especial interest to us because it evinces characteristics which mark it as a milestone on the way to The Moonstone. It is not only the first English detective story but also the first story which concerns an amateur detective. In many ways it is ~~far and away~~ the best thing Collins has done. It is a first-person narrative written in a racy, breezy style which brings out with the greatest clarity the character of the young lawyer turned detective. The pace is good, the plot most taut, worked out in lucid detail, and the deduction makes most pleasant reading. Add to all this something of the flavour of Dickens, some interesting vignettes and traces of influence upon Dickens himself, and we have a story well worth while. Once again we find characteristics which are used by Collins's successors, and so often, that they have become commonplace in the genre of the detective story.

Naturally the title under which it was published in After Dark, A Stolen Letter, begs comparison with The Purloined Letter (1845) by Poe, the last of the Dupin stories. While we must accept that, in all likelihood, Collins was acquainted with Poe's stories of detection<sup>1</sup>, this story does not lose by the comparison.

Collins fixes the young lawyer's character when

(he

1. The Murders in the Rue Morgue (1841);  
The Mystery of Marie Roget (1842);  
The Purloined Letter (1845);  
and the brilliant mystery story, The Gold Bug (1843).

he puts into his mouth the sentiment:

"'Speaking as a lawyer, I consider report, in a general way, to be a liar.'"

Report, however, turns out to be correct in this matter. His friend is in love with "the sweet darling girl, as he called her; but I'm not sentimental and I call her Smith, the governess." His friend obtains his father's consent only with the greatest difficulty, and then learns that his happiness is threatened as the "ugliest and dirtiest blackguard" is threatening blackmail. It appears that the girl's father has been injudicious enough to admit in a letter to being guilty of forgery: "He had a signature to write; and, by the most natural mistake in the world, he wrote another gentleman's name instead of his own." The young lawyer interviews the blackmailer, lures him into admitting that he does not have the incriminating letter upon his person, pretends to be willing to come to terms, has the villain followed, arranges to search, first his clothes and then his room. The letter is found and the blackmailer thwarted.

This story possesses an admirable succinctness of style:

"Up to town comes the squire, and his wife and daughter, and a lot of sentimentality not in the least material to the present statement takes place among them; and the upshot of it is that old Gatliffe is forced into withdrawing the word No, and substituting the word Yes."

What could be more terse than:

"..... he had been in the army; had sold out; set up as a winemerchant - failed - died: ditto his wife as to the dying part of it."?

The story is once again based upon "a shocking secret", upon a forgery, fascinating deduction and some really clever touches of suspense. For instance,

(the

the lawyer has arranged to search the blackmailer's room; a watch has been set to warn him of the untimely return of the blackmailer. He searches fruitlessly; the clue he possesses seems to have failed him. Then, just at the very moment when his persistence is about to be rewarded, he hears a step outside the door - but it is only that of an accomplice.

This young lawyer has anticipated Sherlock Holmes. His powers of deduction are such that he does not have to wait for his client to supply information:

"You please to stop talking, and let me ask questions. Answer in the fewest words you can use. Nod when nodding will do instead of words."

And when he does ask a question, he becomes most impatient when the client attempts an answer, cuts him short, and supplies all the details himself.

There is a strong similarity between this lawyer and Jagers of Great Expectations. They both insist on precision; they have a similar way of conducting an interview: brusque, energetic and business-like; Jagers stabs a finger at his clients to subdue them, our young lawyer raps a paper-knife to the same effect. Both are given to the trick of suppositious cases:

"Now,, suppose I have got a magistrate's warrant to apprehend you in my pocket? Suppose I have a constable to execute it in the next room? Suppose I bring you up tomorrow - the day before the marriage - charge you only generally with an attempt to extort money, and apply for a day's remand to complete the case? Suppose, as a suspicious stranger, you can't get bail in this town? ....."

Unfortunately the blackmailer also has much which he invites the lawyer to suppose; but he has, in the meantime fallen into the trap.

The Stolen Letter appeared six years before Great Expectations.

If we find that Dickens was indebted to Collins for Jagers, we can just as easily find that Collins is in Dickens's debt:

"There never was such a sharp boy of fourteen before, and there never will be again, as my boy, Tom . . . . Tom was the smallest, quickest, quietest, sharpest, stealthiest little snake of a chap, that ever dogged a gentleman's steps and kept cleverly out of range of a gentleman's eyes."

Indeed, when we remember that The Seven Poor Travellers was written in collaboration, and that Dickens time and again found himself in trouble for tampering with the manuscripts of contributors to his periodicals,<sup>1</sup> it seems likely that Dickens knew well the following lines in The Stolen Letter:

"My experience in the law, Mr Frank, has convinced me that if everybody burnt everyone else's letters, half the courts of justice in this country might shut up shop."

It would be interesting to know whether Collins obtained this sentiment from Dickens or whether Dickens arrived at his attitude towards correspondence as a result of reading The Stolen Letter. The ironical situation has arisen that Dickens made a bonfire at Gad's Hill Place of letters which he had received, most inconsiderately including many which he must have received from Collins, and which would have made most illuminating reading; yet thousands of Dickens's letters to others have been preserved, published, and submitted to analysis, with the most astonishing results.

1. Dexter W.: The Letters of Charles Dickens, Vol. II, p. 645

iv : Friend of Dickens

We know that Collins had spent July and August with the Dickens family at Boulogne and that at Christmas he was occupied with amateur theatricals at Tavistock House. Collins had by this time replaced Forster in Dickens's affections. This is not surprising, as Dickens was forty-three years of age and had reached a stage in his life when he required stimulation which neither Forster nor Mrs Dickens could supply. Collins, as a younger man, and by reason of his nature, was able to give the sort of companionship which Dickens craved. Collins is reported at this stage in his life as being rather Bohemian in his dress, a gourmet in his gastronomical appetites, a sybarite in his love of luxurious living, a Iothario in his amorous pursuits, and generally abounding in high spirits and readiness for any mad adventure. Furthermore, the freedom of his bachelorhood, his open admiration of Dickens's genius and his easy-going nature, made him an ideal companion with whom to share the midnight prowls with which Dickens sought to escape the frustrations which beset him.

In February, 1855, Collins and Dickens spent a fortnight in Paris. There is little information as to how they spent their time; but we may surmise, from information regarding subsequent visits, that they saw many French plays and sought amorous adventure. Collins was later to declare that the French Theatre was far in advance of the English, and the influence of French drama is clearly discernible in his work. <sup>2</sup> While on

(this

l. e. g. Sister Rose, The Frozen Deep, Miss or Mrs?, etc.

this trip he acquired at an open bookstall what he was later to term "a sort of French Newgate Calendar."

"I was in Paris, wandering about the streets with Charles Dickens, amusing ourselves by looking into the shops. We came to an old book-stall - half-shop and half-store - and I found some dilapidated volumes and records of French crime - a sort of French Newgate Calendar. I said to Dickens: 'Here is a prize!' So it turned out to be. In them I found some of my best plots."<sup>1</sup>

This discovery was a milestone in Collins's career. There can be little doubt that his interest in the possibilities of the French Revolution as material for a story, already evinced in Gabriel's marriage, was stimulated by the trip to Paris and by this find. Sister Rose (7th - 28th April, 1855) furnishes evidence of some source providing intimate knowledge of French criminal court procedure and the methods of the French police.

(Sister

1. Robinson, op. cit., p. 98, no reference given, identifies these volumes as Maurice Mejan's Recueil des Causes Célèbres (twenty-six volumes, Paris, 1808). This seems to be correct as this Parisian advocate dealt with the court records from 1770 into the Napoleonic period, and it is upon this source that Collins must have drawn for Sister Rose (April, 1855).

Puttick and Simpson's Catalogue for the sale by auction of Collins's books includes M. Richer's Causes Célèbres et Intéressantes (eighteen volumes, Amsterdam, 1772-1781), the work of a French advocate which records French court trials before 1770, and Jacques Peuchet's Memoires Tireés des Archives de la Police de Paris (six volumes, Paris, 1837-38). Of these volumes, Davis (op. cit., p. 168) writes: In it he could find documents which had been used as sources for Quentin Durward and Notre Dame de Paris ..... Les Misérables, L'Affaire Lerouge, and The Count of Monte Cristo." It is likely that these volumes were acquired at the same time. They were to serve Collins as source material for The Woman in White, A Marriage Tragedy and other stories and articles.

Sister Rose appeared in Household Words in four parts, and tells the story of Rose, who marries a scoundrel and opportunist, Danville. During the Reign of Terror, Rose persuades her brother to assist her mother-in-law to escape from France. Danville, who hates the brother and is unaware that it is his own mother who is being assisted, uses his position to have his brother-in-law arrested for working against the interests of France. Rose is arrested along with her brother and, at the trial, through her it is revealed that an earlier attempt on the part of Danville to procure his mother's escape from France had proved abortive. When Danville is charged with this, he clears himself by admitting the charge; but says he has made amends by bringing about the arrest of both his wife and brother-in-law. Rose and her brother are condemned to death.

Lomaque, land-steward to Rose's brother, has always revered Rose because she treated him as a human being and not as a creature of a lower order. Furthermore, Rose's father had helped him when he had been in serious trouble. During the Reign of Terror he attains a position of trust in the secret police. He erases the names of Rose and her brother from the list of those who are to be executed the following day, thus gaining a respite of some days. He believes that the Reign of Terror is coming to an end; and, when that does happen, Rose and her brother are set free as, in the confusion reigning, no charge can be found against them under the names they have assumed. They go into retirement. When, more than three years later, Lomaque comes to inform them that Rose's husband, believing her to be dead, is

(contemplating

contemplating a second marriage, they come out of hiding and announce themselves. Danville's perfidy is revealed and he is killed in a duel with the father of his prospective bride.

This novelette is written in the third person, and Collins does not seem to be quite at home with the technique of opening such a story. The dialogue between the two servants who are to acquaint us with the state of affairs is clumsy and contrived.

With the exception of the opening pages, however, the dialogue is well written and contributes materially to the excellent pace:

"I know your news is bad, for I know beforehand that it is news of Danville."

'You are right, my bad news is of him.'

'He has discovered the secret of our escape from the guillotine?'

'No - he has not a suspicion of it. He believes - as his mother, as everyone does - that you were both executed the day after the Revolutionary Tribunal sentenced you to death.'

'Lomaque! You speak positively of that belief of his - but you cannot be certain of it.'

'I can, on the most indisputable, the most startling evidence - on the authority of Danville's own act. You have asked me to speak out ----'

'I ask you again - I insist on it! Your news, Lomaque - your news, without another word of preface!'

'You shall have it without another word of preface. Danville is on the point of being married.'"

Collins is learning more about the art of suspense, though he is still over-melodramatic:

"His father was the saving of me,' muttered Lomaque; 'that is the truth, and there is no getting over it: his father was the saving of me; and yet here am I - no! it's too late! - too late to speak - too late to act - too late to do anything.'"

These are words to whet the appetite of any reader who has just been introduced to an innocent and unsuspecting young woman on the verge of marrying a man who has been presented to us as having qualities most inauspicious for a happy marriage.

(There

There is something tragic in the suspense created by the scene in which Danville's mother, rejoicing in the prospect of a good second marriage for her son, asks her devoted servant, Dubois, to look into the street to see whether a mob has gathered to see her enter her coach.

"The street is almost empty, madame," he said. "Only a man, with a woman on his arm, stopping and admiring your carriage. They seem like decent people, as well as I can tell without my spectacles. Not a mob, I should say, madame; certainly not a mob!"

There is a bitter dramatic irony to this: We know that Rose and her brother are in the street about to denounce Madame Danville's son as a scoundrel, a coward and a liar.

Charles Dickens claimed that the central idea of A Tale of Two Cities came to him while he was taking a leading part in The Frozen Deep (1857). While it is true that the theme of both works concerns the heroic self-sacrifice of an unsuccessful lover so that his beloved may marry the man of her choice, there too many points of concurrence between A Tale of Two Cities and Sister Rose for there to be any doubt that Collins's story, which predates the other by four years, was Dickens's main source of inspiration.

Sister Rose is laid in its entirety in France, and in it the double-identity motif is subordinate; but in other respects A Tale of Two Cities is obviously derivative. The setting for both is France during the Reign of Terror; both works are divided into three periods; both are concerned with a miraculous escape on the brink of death by the guillotine; both feature trial scenes which have a similar impact upon us and

(both

both of which take a dramatic turn when a witness unintentionally implicates a close relative.

Lucy Manette is a sweet, ineffectual and silly character - as is Rose; Charles Darnay and Dr Manette each owe something to Louis Trudaine, Rose's brother, who is a research chemist and who is imprisoned as a result of coming to the assistance of someone suffering under the Reign of Terror. But the most significant comparison is to be made between Sydney Carton and Lomaque. When Lomaque informs Trudaine of the steps he has taken, he will not hear of thanks. There is a bitter strain in what he says which brings Sydney Carton to mind most strongly:

"I am weary of my life. I can't look back to it with pleasure. I am too old to look forward to it with hope. There was something in that night at your house before the wedding - something in what you said, in what your sister did - which altered me. I have had my days of gloom and self-reproach, from time to time, since then. I have sickened at my slavery, and subjection, and duplicity, and cringing, first under one master, then under another. I have longed to look back at my life, and comfort myself with the sight of some good action, just as a frugal man comforts himself with the sight of his little savings laid by in an old drawer. I can't do this, and I want to do it. The want takes me like a fit, at uncertain intervals - suddenly, under the most incomprehensible intervals. A glance up at the blue sky - starlight over the houses of this great city, when I look out at the night from my garret window - a child's voice coming suddenly, I don't know where from - the piping of my neighbour's linnet in his little cage - now one trifling thing, now another - wakes up that want in me in a moment. Rascal as I am, those few simple words your sister spoke to the judge went through and through me like a knife. Strange, in a man like me, isn't it? I am amazed at it myself. My life? Bah! I have let it out for hire to let it be kicked about by rascals from one dirty place to another, like a football! It's my whim to give it a last kick myself, and throw it away decently before it lodges on the dunghill for ever. Your sister kept a good cup of coffee hot for me, and I give her a bad life in return for the compliment. You want to thank me for it? What folly! Thank me when I have done something useful. Don't thank me for that."

(It

It would be idle to pretend that Lomaque can compare with Carton as we know him in the closing scenes of A Tale of Two Cities, or Carton offering "to give his life to keep a life you love beside you." Collins did not have that spark of genius which made Dickens immitable. On the other hand, it has been said with some truth, that Collins was unfortunate in being overshadowed by the especial virtues of his contemporaries as novelists. In another age he would have compared more favourably and, if we take the passage above on its merits, Lomaque speaks to us in a manner as deeply tragic in the sense of waste that it evokes.

The character of Dubois, the servant who remains faithful to his mistress, who helps her preserve the fiction of her still belonging to the aristocracy, and this at a time when he could have sought the advancement open to any citizen, is drawn with consistency. When Madame Danville learns of her son's perfidy, her feelings are all the more poignant because we see them reflected in Dubois:

"The old servant, Dubois, was crouched on his knees at her side, kissing her cold right hand, chafing it in his, reiterating his faint mournful cry, 'Oh! my mistress! my dear, dear mistress!' but she did not appear to know that he was near her."

If Dickens is in Collins's debt for much of A Tale of Two Cities, it is a debt similar to that which Shakespeare owed to his sources; and, once again, Collins is himself indebted to Dickens. Our introduction to Lomaque makes this quite clear:

"'I feel deeply indebted,' rejoined the land-steward, 'to the admirable Madame Danville for having chosen me as her escort hither from her son's estate near Lyons, and having thereby procured for me the honour of this

(introduction.

introduction.' Both Monsieur Lomaque's red-rimmed eyes were seized with a sudden fit of winking, as he made this polite speech. His enemies were accustomed to say, that whenever he was particularly insincere, or particularly deceitful, he always took refuge in the weakness of his eyes, and so evaded the trying ordeal of being obliged to look steadily at the person whom he was speaking with."

While Collins was in Paris with Dickens he fell ill. From this time on he was to suffer increasingly from rheumatism, and gout in the eyes. On his return from Paris he was confined to his bed and was reported to have entertained visitors by dispensing hot gin-and-water. He had determined to experiment with a new form of writing and kept the whole thing a secret until he could present Dickens with a fait accompli. This was The Lighthouse, adapted from Gabriel's Marriage, a drama in three acts which was produced in June, 1855 at Tavistock House. Dickens was delighted with the rôle of the lighthouse-keeper raving under the obsession of a guilty secret. This play also had a short run at the Olympic Theatre in August.

For The Yellow Mask, a novelette which was published in four numbers of Household Words (July, 1855), Collins acknowledges his indebtedness<sup>1</sup> to his friend, W.S. Herrick, for the "curious and interesting facts" upon which the tale is founded. The story owes something however, to Mr Wray's Cash-Box; the plot hinges on the use of a wax mask taken secretly from a piece of sculpture.

(It

1. Preface to After Dark.

It is rather more than "an essay in the macabre" <sup>1.</sup> or "another imitation of Poe" <sup>2.</sup>, though it does not have the power of Sister Rose. The manner in which each chapter ends indicates that this is another exercise in the creation of suspense written specifically for periodical publication.. Nevertheless the story presents several interesting features.

Father Rocco believes that a young nobleman, Fabio, is possessed of land forcibly seized by his ancestors from the Church. He persuades Nanina, a poor sculptor's model with whom Fabio is in love, that she cannot marry Fabio. Rocco assists his niece in her plans to marry the young nobleman, as the priest believes that she may be able to persuade Fabio to return to the Church its former possessions. His plans are successful in so far as the marriage is concerned, but his niece dies shortly after the birth of a daughter. Rocco makes a wax mask from a sculpture for which his niece had sat, and persuades Brigida, an avaricious dressmaker, to wear it under circumstances which will persuade Fabio that his deceased wife has appeared to him to protest against any re-marriage.

Fabio is so overcome by the apparition that he is taken with a fever from which he cannot recover, until Nanina accidentally discovers what has happened and makes known to Fabio the truth. Rocco and his accomplice are forced to leave Rome, and Fabio and Nanina marry.

Father Rocco is the most interesting character

(in

1. Robinson, op. cit. : p. 91.  
2. Davis: op. cit.: p. 174.