Five

Towards the Unknown Ocean (1855-1862)

[W]here's the pleasure of staying when the feast is over and the flowers withered and the guests gone –

Thackeray to Anne Procter
26 November 1856

During his second American trip, Thackeray travelled further than before, spending less time in New York (where the Clarendon Hotel was again his base), and getting as far south as New Orleans. After four months, he announced that 'your Pa is prospering and at Midsummer will actually be worth 10000£ – At present it is only a little more than 8.… I think little Dorrit capital as far as I have read – (Do you perceive the connexion of ideas? I was thinking to myself how much is Dickens worth? I suppose).'[1] He endured the relentless travelling and endless cycles of lectures, for 'the making of dollars is the object of this tour – I want these for the sake of the young ones at home and against the rainy day w^{h}. cant be far distant – My health is a good deal hit – since I made a journey to Rome 2 years ago I never have been well from one ailment or another.'[2]

The novelty of first impressions was lacking this time, but there were more personal disappointments too. He was pulled up short when he learnt of Sally Baxter's engagement, passing off as a joke what had come as startling news. 'Sally is not improved. She has been awfully flattered since I went away and O Minny! What do you think shes going to be – to be – mum mum – married! – w^{h}. I don't envy the young man – who they say is a fine fellow.'[3] Sally comes off worst in a comparison with Jane Brookfield 'who is always noble and pure

and generous and unselfish – am rather ashamed that I sh[d]. have let this wild American girl be fond of me'.[4] To present himself as the recipient of former unlooked-for affections is at best a partial reading of the facts. He was invited to the wedding, but was able to offer his absence in Boston and a feverish chill as convenient reasons for not travelling to New York. The strength of the Baxters' friendship had considerable calls upon his loyalty, such that 'I feel as if I was doing wrong though I am doing right',[5] but doubtless the occasion would have been impossible for him.

He was able to tell Annie afterwards that the wedding had gone off 'very smartly', and disingenuously would spin a story about Sally being the one inclined towards fantasy and coquettishness, trusting that his own daughter will marry for real love – and only to a man with the wherewithal to keep her. This curious sequence of ideas was prompted by his attention being drawn to a possible attachment between the eighteen-year-old Annie and a clergyman called Creyke. Thackeray was sufficiently startled by his mother's unsubstantiated news to make his views brutally clear to the daughter who could deny him nothing.

> My girls I suppose must undergo the common lot; but I hope they wont Sallify – Indulge in amours de tête I mean. Indeed I dont like to think of their entering into that business at all unless upon good reasonable steady grounds – with a Tomkins who is likely to make them happy and has enough to keep them – and who above all falls in love with them first.… No my dearest old Fat you mustnt hanker after a penniless young clergyman with one lung. It is as much as I can do to scrape together enough to keep my 3 daughters (your mother being one): and you must no more think about a penniless husband, than I can think about striking work – these luxuries do not belong to our station. Besides has he ever thought about you? Girls are romantic, visionary, love beautiful whiskers & so forth – but every time a girl permits herself to think an advance of this sort she hurts herself – loses somewhat of her dignity, rubs off a little of her maiden-bloom. Keep yours on your cheeks till 50 if necessary.… I dont say banish him from your mind – perhaps it is a fatal pashn ravaging your young bussom – perhaps only a fancy w[h]. has left already a head that has taken in a deal of novels – but settle it in your mind that it would be just as right for you to marry Charles Pearman (what do I say? Charles is healthy & can make his 40£ a year) as poor Creyke.[6]

No more is heard of this match until after his return to London, when it is dismissed as nonsense, an imagining of his mother's. Annie laughed it off, but for Thackeray a lingering doubt remained. 'No, if there had been anything in it, I am sure my girl w[d]. have told me.'[7] Having felt the heat of his reactions, 'dearest old Fat' may have chosen to guard some of her secrets closely, even having to ask Mrs Fanshawe for advice about her possible future career, for 'I have no one much to talk to'. In some matters, her father was the one least able to offer an objective opinion. Having to confront the possibility of Annie's marrying and the question of her future independence made him concede that she might succeed as a writer, though not in terms which can have given her much confidence. 'Perhaps Nan will be able to write and earn for herself – it's not unlikely – yes it's unlikely, but not impossible.'[8] To his mother, he is far more generous in his assessment. 'Her drawing is very good in spite of what the Master may say – much better than mine at her age, and so is her writing too.'[9]

Revisiting America did not change Thackeray's views on slavery, but his interest in the people intensified. He set out his final position on black emancipation to Mrs Procter, predicting a time 'when the sufferings of the negroes will be awful – when they begin to fall in value and cost more than they are worth – then will be the pinch for the poor wretches, whom the selfish white race will wish to be rid of'.[10] He made time to sit and sketch individual slaves, particularly the children whom he found irresistible. 'I wish I had a sketch book and a hundred of them drawn.'[11] In New Orleans it was disconcerting to be mistaken for a slave owner. 'A man came up to me in the street & asked me if I could sign him any one who wanted to buy a field hand? It was because I looked like a Kentucky farmer my friends tell me, that this obliging offer was made to me.'[12] But he never risks taking the slave issue too seriously, reverting without difficulty to a mix of humour and routine prejudice. 'If one of these imps w[d]. remain little I think I would buy him and put him into buttons as a page for the young ladies – but presently he will become big, lazy, lying, not sweet smelling doing the 4[th]. of a white mans work and costing more to keep.'

Because on this occasion he saw less of New York society and spent more time in provincial towns, he was struck everywhere by the lack of refinements. The southern landscapes he found dreary enough, but the coarse manners of his travelling companions were positively upsetting. He still had not accustomed himself to the spitting, to fingers substituting for handkerchiefs, and to gross dining habits – 'by Heavens at the ladies' table yesterday every single woman had her knife down her throat'.[13] He had been in generally good health on the

last occasion; this time his recent medical history made him altogether more cautious and wiser, an ageing writer in a young country which was moving on at an ever-quickening pace. He was unable to shift his feverish chill, whilst an old urinary complaint was discomforting because of the way it constrained him in public. He admitted to his daughters having had a 'shivering fit' during dinner – 'thats 4 fits I have had since I have been in New York' – and to William Wetmore Story he was more explicit. 'And now I'll tell you of something else besides chill & fever w^{h}. I carry about: an irritation of the bladder w^{h}. causes me great inconvenience, & is sometimes very awkward in lady's society.'[14] On the return voyage in May he was ill on the boat, and told Mrs Baxter of his intention to 'lay myself up either in London or Paris, and see if this crazy old hull of mine can be patched up & made sea-worthy again. The best thing I can do for the next 3 months is to devote myself to being ill.'[15]

In the second half of August he took his daughters for a short trip; they started at Calais, moved through Belgium to Spa, Dusseldorf, and thence to Aix la Chapelle 'w^{h}. disagreed with me as it always does'.[16] Amy Crowe received letters from Spa, Annie reporting on their itinerary – Ghent was 'an uncommonly jolly old town with a moat & gables & convents & all the people wear crinoline'[17] – whilst the practical Minny conserved her travelogue – 'it'll be something to talk about in the long winter evenings' – feeling that Amy would be more interested to learn of the risks they took at night. 'Yesterday we got wet twice then we went to the play & it was so cold that we had an air tight charcole stove live in our bed room like what people kill themselves with & I expected that we would both be dead in the morning.'[18] They turned back to Paris on getting news of the death of one of Major Carmichael-Smyth's sisters-in-law, assuming that the Carmichael-Smyths, themselves travelling in Germany, would be returning home and in need of support. But they found themselves alone in Paris, so whilst his daughters stayed with his cousin, Charlotte Ritchie, Thackeray put up in the Hôtel Bristol in the Place Vendôme.

Paris was also their destination later in October when it was Mrs Carmichael-Smyth's turn to be taken ill, and Thackeray's daughters took charge of their grandparents. Anne Carmichael-Smyth's 'nervous' complaint remained undiagnosed, despite a procession of homoeopathic and conventional doctors, and Thackeray began to resent the demands that it was placing on Annie and Minny. 'In all these botherations the girls are behaving like trumps.'[19] Compelled to make adjustments to his touring schedule for *The Four Georges* he assigned, not entirely fairly, an almost wilful selfishness to his parents' behaviour. 'Why, nearly 3

months have been wasted in this dodging about and sentimentality.'[20] He refused to accept that his mother's condition was serious, although her recovery took several weeks. Despite the evidence of his own past domestic history, Thackeray could still be reluctant to acknowledge illnesses other than those with definite physical symptoms.

Observing her grandmother at firsthand, Annie was more astute in recognising what was evidently a depressive condition. Writing to Amy from le Havre on the Channel coast, to where she and Minny insisted on taking their grandparents 'in the face of all the friends', she monitored the patient carefully.

> She bore the journey famously slept it through & had a better night than she had had for 6 weeks she said & is really a great deal better. But you know after a nervous fever one need not be surprised at nervous attacks occasionally particularly when one has had them before the illness & that is what Granny will insist upon doing & theres no talking her out of it. She had a bad one last night the 1.st for ten days, Eliza came & called me up, & there she was groaning & moaning & starting poor dear, & so wretched it became quite melancholico-comic at last.… Its dreadful to think of going off and leaving them all by themselves those two dear old people & so we shall stay till Xmas at all events.[21]

This sympathetic diagnosis contrasts starkly with Thackeray's insistence that his daughters should spend Christmas with him. 'I wish she could be convinced that her illness is not much. I thought nothing of it when I saw her the first day.'[22] He confided in the indispensable Amy Crowe, his 'dear little Dorrit', that his mother might urge her to go to Paris in place of Annie and Minny. 'So if you are written to say you think you ought to ask my consent (as you ought Miss) and write and ask it and then I will refuse it.'[23] He thought that it was the years of caring for his stepfather that had debilitated his mother, and that her lively spirit had been worn down by the increasingly sedentary old man. There was probably something in this. He agreed with Annie that his parents should move to London to stay with them, but knew that his stepfather would be as reluctant as ever to leave Paris.

And yet, perhaps Thackeray was anxious about broader, long-term problems, for in the midst of the fussing over his mother he feared for the possibility of inherited nervous weakness. 'I lay awake hours & hours last night trying to see a way out of this doubt and trouble & gloom. And my poor wife's youngest daughter mustn't be subject to too much of it. I always tremble about my little Minny.'[24] By the turn

of the year his mother was slowly improving, was taking an infusion of hops to assist her digestion and eating 'like a Trojan'. It had been a long time since she had written to her granddaughters, and she felt as if she was emerging into the light again, 'like wakening out of a long sleep'.[25]

During the time that his mother was at le Havre and still far from recovery, Thackeray delivered repeated cycles of *The Four Georges* in Scotland, virtually his uninterrupted occupation between November 1856 and the end of May 1857. Preoccupied with work and family worries, he yet found time to write thoughtfully to his old friend Anne Benson Procter, whose mother had died. His fine letter serenely evokes hopes for another, unknown world, in language which is measured and free from sentimentality.

> Thinking of it is thinking of God Inscrutable Immeasurable endless, beginningless, Supreme, awfully Solitary. Little children step off this earth into the Infinite and we tear our hearts out over their sweet cold hands and smiling faces that drop indifferent when you cease holding them and smile as the lid is closing over them – I dont fancy we deplore the old who have had enough of living & striving and have buried so many others, and must be weary of living – it seems time for them to go – for where's the pleasure of staying when the feast is over and the flowers withered and the guests gone – Isn't it better to blow the light out than sit on among the broken meats, and collapsed jellies, and vapid heeltaps? I go – to what I don't know – but to God's next world w^{h}. is His and He made it – one paces up & down the shore yet awhile – and looks towards the Unknown Ocean, and thinks of the traveller whose boat sailed yesterday. Those we love can but walk down to the pier with us – the voyage we must make alone – except for the young or very happy I can't say I am sorry for any one who dies – & now havent I got a score of letters to write about business? I came in just now from Glasgow, am off again tomorrow plunge about all next month reading these old papers, and behold one day shall be silent – let us scrape together a little money for tomorrow we die.[26]

He was aged forty-five in 1856, hardly an old man even for the standards of the time. Yet there is a definite weariness about Thackeray's later years, primarily owing to his continuous ill-health of course, and now coupled with a tiredness of ambition. Although a final testing commitment lay ahead in the form of the editorship of the *Cornhill*

– a job for which he would have been temperamentally unsuited even when in the best of health – after his return from America there is increasingly the feeling of an account being settled. His energies were expended on activities which dragged him down – the long lecture-tour for *The Four Georges*, bringing in good money but little personal satisfaction; the coming quarrel with Edmund Yates and the 'Garrick affair', whose essential triviality he might have dismissed in earlier years but which was now to become a distracting obsession; and the familiar struggle to complete his novel before the *Cornhill* swallowed all of his time.

But there is no self-pity, no suggestion that he had earned a right to be spared his full share of ordinary suffering. Instead, he sought a diversion from the routine drudgery of the writer's round. This is perhaps the best explanation for his allowing himself to be persuaded to try for an Oxford parliamentary seat in July 1857; that, and the notion that it was the sort of thing to which a man of his background might legitimately aspire. There had been earlier proposals that he should stand, which he had not accepted, but as he wrote to his mother from Bath, 'the beautiful city where Miss Ann Becher first danced with Captain GP', he was now tempted to show his hand. 'Just when the novel-writing faculty is pretty well used up here is independence a place in Parliament and who knows what afterwards? … I shant be happy in politics and they'll interfere with my digestion – but with the game there, it seems faint-hearted not to play it.'[27] If he had strongly-held political views, he had not previously made them evident. At Oxford he stood against the Whig nominee, but was not a success on the hustings, and like Colonel Newcome was out of his depth in the electioneering machine. Addressing a crowd of noisy voters was not the same as delivering a lecture. His defeat was certainly not a humiliation (he lost by sixty-five votes to an experienced candidate), but it put a close to his political ambitions. It had also been a costly vanity, resulting in personal expenditure of nearly £900.

No sooner had he delivered his final series of lectures than he started *The Virginians*, for which Bradbury and Evans promised the enormous sum of £6,000. '[I] am straightway going to a book w^{h}. in consequence of the popularity of these lectures is paid to me twice as much as any former production.'[28] The size of the payments made him worry whether he could produce value for money. 'I dont think the Virginians is good yet though it has taken me an immense deal of trouble but I know it will be good at the end. I tremble for the poor publishers who give me 300£ a number – I dont think they can afford it and shall have the melancholy duty of disgorging.'[29] In this novel

he would combine his fondness for eighteenth-century themes with a new admiration for the New World, for it deals with family divisions caused by the American revolution. At the same time, by a web of subtle genealogical links he manages to make connections with other novels, to *Esmond* and to a strand of the pre-history of *Pendennis* – the novel whose eponymous hero also becomes the narrator of two of its successors, *The Newcomes* and Thackeray's final completed novel, *Philip*.

For Christmas 1857 he went with his daughters and Amy Crowe to stay at Walton-on-Thames with 'a Merchant Prince', the American banker Russell Sturgis and his family. Thackeray delighted in the lavish entertainment, as much for himself as for his daughters. The wide-eyed wonder of Sturgis's children charmed him, and Julian Sturgis remembered the writer being 'moved to tears at the rapture of my youngest brother at the sight of his first Christmas-tree'.[30] Thackeray was in much need of this break, for his parents were now staying at Onslow Square, which inevitably put a strain on his writing routine.

Other people's visiting was now his source for news of his wife's condition. It became another of the list of duties that Amy Crowe took on as his housekeeper. 'Good accounts from poor Isabella. Her fever is over. Amy brought back the very best report of her and of the care taken of her.'[31] Preoccupied with his writing, Thackeray was resigned to enjoying social life vicariously, for Annie and Minny 'do all the fun and observation of the family now. Their talk is capital: it is delightful to hear the prattle, as they come home from their parties.'[32] *The Virginians* ground on through 1858, its historical detail requiring visits to the British Museum where he took meticulous notes. 'I am myself so constantly unwell now that I begin to think my turn to be called cannot be delayed very long. These Virginians take me as much time as if I was writing a History.'[33] It was a particular pleasure to receive news of the reception of the book in America, and to be told that locals admired his convincing pictures of Virginian life. He had great respect for Washington Irving, and to learn of his unsolicited good opinion was very satisfying. The eminent American writer commented that 'I know what he is capable of doing, a man of great mind, far superior to Dickens. Dickens's prejudices are too limited to make such a book as Thackeray is capable of making of the "Virginians"'.[34] For Thackeray, who was all too ready to give to Dickens the first place as the finer writer, this must have been encouraging, boosting his confidence just as relations between the two men were about to get awkward. In May Thackeray became innocently entangled in the rumours about Ellen Ternan, concerning which he tried to correct an error. 'Last week

going into the Garrick I heard that D is separated from his wife on account of an intrigue with his sister in law. No says I no such thing – its with an actress – and the other story has not got to Dickens's ears but this has – and he fancies that I am going about abusing him! We shall never be allowed to be friends that's clear.'[35] The incident helps explain why Dickens was so ready to take Edmund Yates's part in the Garrick affair.

Both Dickens and Thackeray belonged to the Garrick Club, many of whose members were drawn from the literary world. The Garrick controversy began when the young journalist Edmund Yates, a fellow member, published in *Town Talk* in June 1858 a trivial and mean-spirited piece critical of Thackeray's character and sincerity, describing his conversation as 'affectedly good natured and benevolent'. Yates asserted not just that *Esmond* was 'still-born' and that the English reception of the *Four Georges* lectures had been 'dead failures', but went on to claim for good measure that 'his success is on the wane …[and] there is a want of heart in all he writes'.[36] Thackeray's fury led him formally to complain about the behaviour of this fellow Club member, and instead of letting the dust settle he succeeded in having Yates expelled. Dickens somewhat disingenuously acted as Yates's adviser, but also tried to mediate with Thackeray, thereby prolonging something which would have been best ignored. Thackeray was upset at what he regarded as ungentlemanly behaviour, a reaction probably disproportionate since Yates was an insignificant figure. More personally costly was the break with Dickens, which was only repaired shortly before Thackeray's death. Nevertheless, Thackeray's belief that his fellow novelist was the superior writer never wavered.

He found some relief by escaping to Germany and Switzerland for much of July and August, but was increasingly troubled by his old intestinal problem, as well as the distressingly painful stricture of the urethra. The fact that Annie and Minny seemed such permanent fixtures was a great comfort, but he acknowledged that his motives were less than worthy. 'Nobody in the least is coming to marry them – and nobody I am sure is wanted, by their selfish parent – Annys happiness makes almost me happy.… When I am lying upstairs in bed you know dreadfully ill with those spasms, and yet secretly quite contented and easy, I say to myself "Good God what a good girl that is! Amen".'[37]

In September Mrs Carmichael-Smyth was knocked down and suffered a hip fracture on her way to visit her sick son at the Hôtel Bristol in Paris. He put an almost tragic gloss on the episode, which seemed to be bringing to a sad close the heroic role he had assigned

to her. 'So in decrepitude and ill health, and straitened circumstances ends one who began beautiful & brilliant with a world of admirers round about her.'[38] His mother improved, if rather slowly, and his initial melancholy passed. But increasingly he found himself sympathising with friends after the death of a parent, causing him each time to reflect on his own approaching exit, a prospect he faced with very little regret. He regularly employed the familiar metaphor of departure on a journey, always reluctant to prolong leave-taking and favouring the quick and silent removal, without tears or the opportunity for second thoughts. He wrote to Dr John Brown, whose father had died, that 'he was ready I suppose, and had his passport made out for his journey. Next comes our little turn to pack up and depart. To stay is well enough: but shall we be very sorry to go? What more is there in life that we haven't tried? What that we have tried is so very much worth repetition or endurance?'[39]

His attacks would retreat for a time. At the end of January 1859 Annie was able to confirm that her father was 'fresh and eager for work' and had already started the March number of *The Virginians*. 'Except for a one-day attack on Xmas day he has not been ill for nearly six weeks.'[40] But this was merely an unusually prolonged respite, for by mid-February he was writing to his mother from his bed. He had put himself under the care of his friend Dr Henry Thompson, and owned a copy of his recent specialist work, *Pathology and Treatment of the Stricture of the Urethra*. Thompson had already tried some treatment on Thackeray, but with only short-term success. 'I am in for a second bout of Thompson – an accident rendered the first inefficacious, & left almost all the ground to be gone over again.'[41] These interventions at best eased his problems. He seriously considered surgical treatment for which Thompson's success rate was good – the 'little touch of the knife w^{h}. is hardly felt' – but his concerns about the inevitable interruption to work meant that the decision about surgery was delayed until eventually time ran out on him. It amused him that his daughters hoped that prayer might intercede on his behalf. 'I asked [Minny] why the natural laws were to be interrupted in my particular case? … I have a right to say O Father give me submission to bear cheerfully (if possible) & patiently my sufferings but I cant request any special change in my behalf from the ordinary processes, or see any special Divine animus superintending my illnesses or wellnesses.'

Annie's observations about the on-going quarrel with Yates and difficulties with Dickens throw light on the distress it caused her father, and she found herself drawn into the widely-held fascination with the Ellen Ternan story.

Sketch by Thackeray

> About the Garrick: its only ½ as exciting as it used to be. Papas getting disgusted. Everybody's been bullying him about his susceptibility. M^r^. Dickens finding he w^d^. have to be put up in the witness box wrote off to Papa to say that could not the lamentable affair be arranged.… I am getting confused & indignant Papa says the story is that Charley [Dickens] met his Father & Miss Whatsname Whatever the actress out walking on Hampstead Heath. But I dont believe a word of the scandal – After all the stories told of us we can afford to disbelieve it of other people.[42]

This rumbled on until March 1859, with Yates contemplating legal action against the Garrick but then publishing a final pamphlet instead. Thackeray wisely maintained his silence, perhaps because of his daughters' insistence. 'We are begging our Jupiter to keep in his thunder & not even read it & as he has taken to paying great attention to what we say lately perhaps he wont.'[43] At last he put behind him an episode from which no party emerged untarnished.

By the time that Yates was firing off his pamphlet, Thackeray had signed a contract with George Smith, agreeing to write for a new

magazine to be launched in January 1860. The terms were exceptionally favourable, for Smith was keen to secure Thackeray, probably at any price. The story is well-known – Smith tells it himself – of how he visited Thackeray with the written offer that he hoped would secure him for the as yet unnamed magazine, how he wondered 'whether you will consider it, or will at once consign it to your wastepaper-basket', and how Thackeray, recognising of course the generosity of the terms 'with a droll smile [said] "I am not going to put such a document as *this* into my wastepaper-basket"'.[44] The original contract survives, in Smith's own hand, amongst the Thackeray family papers.[45]

> Smith Elder & Co have it in contemplation to commence the publication of a monthly Magazine on January 1st. 1860. They are desirous of inducing Mr. Thackeray to contribute to their periodical and they make the following proposal to Mr. Thackeray.
>
> 1/. That he shall write either one or two novels of the ordinary size for publication in the Magazine – one twelfth portion of each novel (estimated to be about equal to one number of a serial) to appear in each number of the Magazine.
>
> 2/. That Mr. Thackeray shall assign to Smith Elder & Co. the right to publish the novels in their Magazine and in a separate form afterwards, and to all sums to be received for the work from American and Continental Publishers
>
> 3/. That Smith Elder & Co shall pay Mr. Thackeray £350 each month
>
> 4/. That the profits of all editions of the novels published at a lower price than the first edition shall be equally divided between Mr. Thackeray and Smith Elder & Co.
>
> 65 Cornhill
> February 19th. 1859

The change from serving as a well-paid contributor to taking on in addition the editorship occurred sometime during the summer. Having tried and failed to secure as editor Thomas Hughes, the author of *Tom Brown's School Days*, and Thackeray's friend Alexander Scott, Principal of Owens College in Manchester, Smith considered other names but none seemed quite right. The answer came to him during his morning ride on Wimbledon Common.

> [T]hat good genius which has so often helped me whispered in my ear, 'Why should not Mr. Thackeray edit the magazine, you yourself doing what is necessary to supplement any

> want of business qualifications on his part? You know that he has a fine literary judgment, a great reputation with men of letters as well as with the public, and any writer would be proud to contribute to a periodical under his editorship.'
>
> After breakfast I drove straight to Thackeray's house in Onslow Square, talked to him of my difficulty, and induced him to accept the editorship, for which he was to receive a salary of 1,000l. a year.[46]

As the birth of this new venture approached, time and illness caught up with the Carmichael-Smyths who finally decided to leave Paris, as Thackeray records. 'Since her accident in September last, she shows that she is 67 years old, and walks very very slowly on her stick. Her husband is 80 and pretty well, and as good and gentle as old Colonel Newcome in his last days. We want to persuade them to a house at Brighton where we can be within reach, and she can get sermons of any required strength & length.'[47] The Carmichael-Smyths had been staying at Hythe near Folkestone all through September, but by the beginning of October they were still undecided what to do, and Thackeray gently pushed them towards a decision. Rather than moving to Brighton as he had hoped, they took a house near Onslow Square, at 52 Brompton Crescent. It would be their last move.

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With the final number of *The Virginians* completed on 7 September and his best fiction now behind him, Thackeray started to prepare for the inaugural number of the *Cornhill* and the start of his final adventure. He greatly admired the design of the magazine's paper wrappers, and liked the idea of launching the new vessel in its fresh yellow livery, as 'the good ship dips over the bar, and bounds away into the blue water'. Conscious that his partner lacked business skills, Smith controlled this side of the enterprise himself – indeed, the whole venture was at his financial risk – but neither of them foresaw that Thackeray's aversion to the drudgeries and disciplines of editorship would eventually drive him away. Yet in the months before the first issue of January 1860, both men were tireless in working for its success and in the securing of future contributors. The phenomenal reception of the early numbers, measured in high sales and the enthusiastic response of its readership, is captured by Henry James in his recall at the end of his life 'of the arrival, from the first number, of the orange-covered earlier Cornhill – the thrill of

each composing item of that first number especially recoverable in its intensity. Is anything like that thrill possible today – for a submerged and blinded and deafened generation, a generation so smothered in quantity and number that discrimination, under the gasp, has neither air to breathe nor room to turn round?'[48]

The rediscovery of Smith's *Cornhill* letters to Thackeray permits a fresh view of their working relationship and of the early history of the magazine. Annie alluded to this correspondence in her preface to *Philip* for the Biographical Edition, although she made no use of it there. Matters of publishing policy were not really the kind of thing which interested her. She kept the letters, but bundled them together and put them aside. 'Messrs. Smith & Elder worked hard and converted their editor's suggestions into facts and realities, with an energy and a liberality very remarkable. I have a pile of old letters from them about *The Cornhill Magazine*, which are an example in themselves – punctual, orderly, sparing no trouble. There are more than one on the same day, entering in to every detail.'[49]

Having initiated discussions with a prospective author, Thackeray would leave Smith to clinch the deal. 'I will write to Trollope saying how we want to have him – you on your side please write offering the cash.'[50] Securing *Framley Parsonage* as a serial to open the January number proved to be crucial in sustaining the exceptional sales of the early months. An attempt to persuade the historian Thomas Carlyle to contribute something was unsuccessful – 'Is there any hope? Can you help an old friend? Have you never an unedited chapterkin, or a subject on w^{h}. you wish to speak to the public?'[51] Alfred Tennyson sent 'Tithonus' for the second number, though he expressed concern that Thackeray should have taken on the editorial role at all, the poet believing that such an arrangement must inevitably compromise a serious writer's freedom.

On balance, Tennyson was probably right. The routine nature of the work which now engaged Thackeray's energies was draining, not least when dealing with aspiring contributors. In addition, the two men had decided that their joint agreement should be required for each contribution accepted, an arrangement which began to creak even before the inaugural number appeared. There would be instances of Thackeray implying that what Smith had called his 'fine literary judgement' ought to prevail. It seems that he would tend to accept pieces and expect his partner's rubber stamp. 'My goodness! I daren't write to him & say it wont do – I wrote only yesterday to say I had sent to have it put into type…. I think you are too squeamish about the articles. Churchill, Bell, Edwards are all readable – the geniuses are very very rare.'[52] Smith

took time to be persuaded of the merits of verses by the young Thomas Hood – 'I expect to find that I have been strangely mistaken as to their quality' – but the poems would appear during the opening few numbers. Thackeray was not beyond a little gentle bullying and threats. 'You are not converted about Hood's verses but I am sure they are true metal'; 'You must not refuse them or you will make a fool of me.'[53]

One must not take at face value Smith's subsequent claim that 'I used to drive round to his house in Onslow Square nearly every morning, and we discussed manuscripts and subjects together'.[54] That may have been how it worked at first, but his letters only occasionally mention prospective visits, in a context suggesting that they were scarcely daily, and Smith was evidently sensitive to the possibility that he was intruding. 'I will come for your decision tomorrow morning and if you say yes, will not interrupt you for five minutes'; 'I had intended to come to Onslow Square this morning but I thought that I had better not interrupt you.'[55] It is more likely that most of the detailed business was dealt with by correspondence, a messenger conveying the frequent exchanges between the *Cornhill* office and Brompton. Much later Annie recalled Smith visiting, 'driving in early, morning after morning, on his way to business, carrying a certain black bag full of papers and correspondence, and generally arriving about breakfast time'.[56] But her impressions of the period were filtered through Smith's account of the enterprise, and she remained typically hazy over detail. 'I am told that my Father demurred at first to the suggestion of editing the Cornhill.… I have an impression, also, besides the play, of very hard work and continuous work at that time; of a stream of notes and messengers from Messrs Smith and Elder; of consultations, calculations.'

Within a few months, the *modus operandi* for the working partnership was apparent. If Thackeray supplied undeniable literary gravitas and expertise, most of the hands-on work in assembling each number lay with the publisher. As Smith tried to beat each issue into shape, he did so with a barely-concealed anxiety that perhaps was not fully shared by Thackeray, whose own habits of working right up to a publishing deadline may have inured him to the concerns of the practical businessman. It was probably frustrating for Smith always to be the one to have to seek answers and suggest solutions, and doubtless he would have welcomed a shared sense of urgency. His letter sent as the deadline loomed for the June 1860 issue captures the tone.

> We are getting rather into a corner with the present number – I enclose a list of the contents as it may be made up – but you will observe that 'Muscular Hero Worship' and 'Sir Self

> and Womankind' are included. The latter you did not think up to the mark, but what are we to do. As regards 'Muscular Hero Worship' I have taken out a good deal but even now I don't think it ought to go into the same number with your Roundabout Paper….
>
> Can you give me the words for your Illustration of 'Lovel'?[57]

Much more to the novelist's taste were Smith's monthly dinners for contributors at his Gloucester Square home, for which in a number of instances he sent the invitations through Thackeray. The artists Frederic Leighton and Sir Edwin Landseer were secured in this way, as was Herman Merivale. In drawing up one guest list, Smith also remembered to ask Thackeray to puff the phenomenal sales of the magazine in the forthcoming number, thus tackling rivals who were talking them down.

> I have asked Fields the American Publisher – who will I hope be interested in the CHM by and bye. I like him better than the Harpers. We are now 20 or with Mr Merivale 21 – and if he comes we ought to have another to make the table even.
>
> We published the number this morning, and the demand has been as brisk as ever. I hear that people won't believe in our circulation – and talk of it as 30000. Could there be a little modest swagger on this point in the Preface.[58]

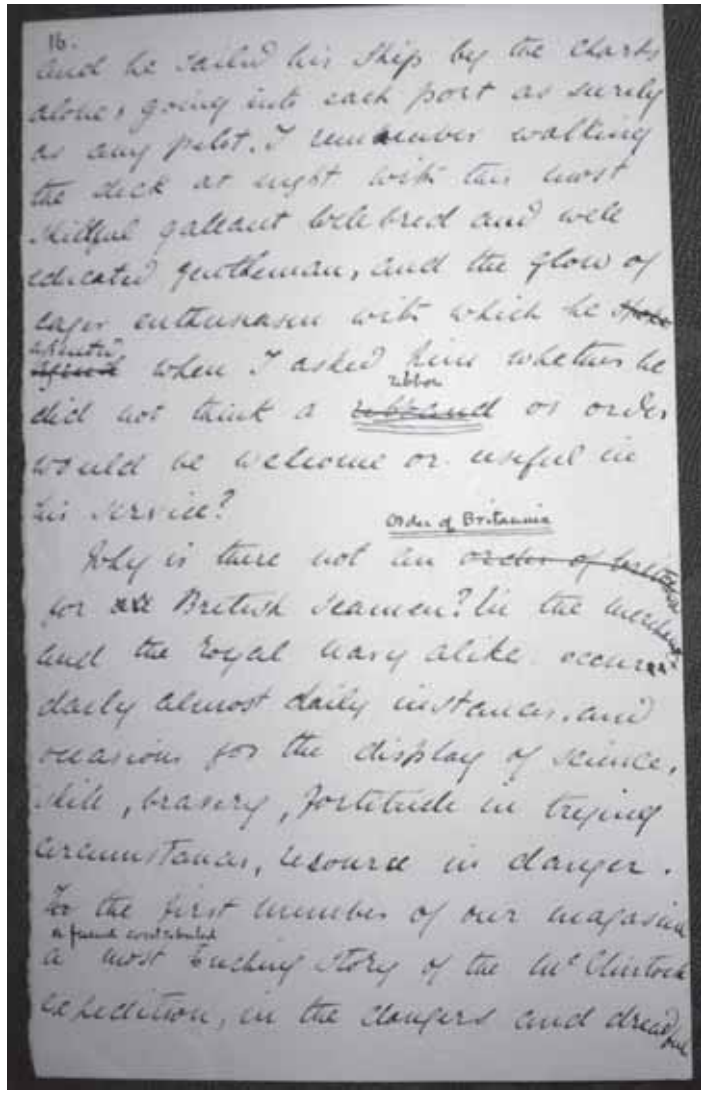
Smith's use of the term 'preface' for Thackeray's regular series of 'Roundabout Papers' captures one of their functions, as editorial introductions to individual numbers of the magazine. Sometimes they include internal references to neighbouring articles, and although they can read oddly when detached from that context this did not prevent Thackeray from agreeing to their republication as an independent volume. The first of the Roundabouts, 'On a Lazy Idle Boy', famously ends with the metaphor of a ship's voyage, emblematic of the optimistic adventure of the freshly-launched *Cornhill*, but the piece also defines (in more domestic terms) the magazine's rationale as a home for serious non-fiction ('plain wholesome tea and bread-and-butter') and not just for the latest serials ('tarts and ices'). Too much indulgence, it was suggested, dulled the taste for things of substance, and Thackeray imagines Dickens, Dumas and others enjoying fiction by other writers, but merely as a diversion. 'I make no doubt that the eminent parties above named all partake of novels in moderation

– eat jellies – but mainly nourish themselves upon wholesome roast and boiled.' Though he refused to take his craft over-seriously, his own fiction, with its broad canvas, episodic, complex plots with their persistent undercurrent of contemporary and historical allusions and expansive range of characters, demanded much of his readership.

Smith's wish to celebrate the outstanding sales of the first six issues resulted in a Roundabout Paper, 'On Some Late Great Victories', in which Thackeray began by writing about successful military skirmishes solely as a pretext for highlighting triumphs of a more prosaic nature in the literary market-place. 'The victories which I wish especially to commemorate in this the last article of our first volume, are the six great, complete, prodigious, and undeniable victories, achieved by the corps which the editor of the Cornhill Magazine has the honour to command.… "I say more than a hundred thousand purchasers – and I believe *as much as a million readers*!"' This effectively reproduced the point which Smith had made during the printing of the second number – '75000 of No 2 have been disposed of, and we are printing 100000! I hope this notable fact will excite attention and increase the demand. If only ten people read each copy (a moderate average) there are a million of readers.'[59]

At such times, Smith knew that he was receiving full value from his editor. And, of course, Thackeray's personal writing commitments for the *Cornhill* were extensive. *Lovel the Widower* appeared from January-June 1860, followed at once by *The Four Georges*, their first publication since being delivered as lectures. *Philip* started in January 1861, a novel which returned to his autobiographical vein by recalling early attempts at artistic training in Paris and which would, as he confided to Smith, 'tell pretty much the career of W.M.T. in the first years of his ruin and absurdly imprudent marriage'.[60] It ran monthly until August 1862. In addition to all of this, there were the regular series of Roundabouts and other occasional pieces.

Early in November 1860 Smith pressed for advertising copy for Thackeray's new work, so that he might provide an insert in the December number – 'Can you let me have the title and drawing for the advertisement slip of the new serial?'[61] It seems that on previously raising the matter Thackeray had not been best pleased with these further demands, though he quickly apologised. 'I am very sorry about the contretemps of yesterday. I never thought about the advertisement of the new story, any more than that S E & Co would announce it.'[62] The blurb was duly delivered, but so tight against the publishing deadline that not all of the December copies could include it. 'We shall not be able to insert it in all the copies of the Magazine, and had I kept it back



Page of the Roundabout Paper *'On Ribbons' in Minny's hand, with Thackeray's annotations*

until tomorrow 30000 or 40000 must have gone without it. Swain has not done justice to your Drawing but he had very little time, and I hope you will let it pass.'[63]

Over the next few days, a revealing exchange shows Thackeray undecided on his final title for his serial, and Smith making encouraging suggestions.

Thackeray to Smith [29 November][64]
Swain has got the 3 Initials and design for the large cut. A man in conversation used the words 'Fit for nothing' yesterday. Hang him, why did he not speak a week sooner

Smith to Thackeray 29 November
Why not call it 'Fit for Nothing or the Adventures of Philip' &c? It's not too late.… You know that Philip is the name of C Dickens' hero.[65]

Thackeray to Smith [? 29 November]
As the posters are out, let Philip stand – and see if we cant make a good fight against tother Philip.

Smith to Thackeray 3 December
It occurred to me yesterday that we should lose the best part of the title of the story if we put no more than 'Philip' at the top of the first chapter. The title will appear no where else but in the advertisements until the story is completed. I have had the first page altered for you to see, but I don't know that it doesn't look best as it stood. Please say how it shall stand.

Thackeray to Smith [December]
How do you like

The adventures of
PHILIP
on his way through the world
Showing who robbed him, who helped him, and who passed him by.

The book will be called Philip, and it is as good a name as any other.

Thackeray was frequently ill when writing the early chapters of *Philip*, delaying its progress, so that by the end of April Smith had to report that the habitual late arrival of the numbers was causing problems with their American partner, Harpers. 'I hope we shall have "Philip" in good time. Low refused to take the sheets of the present number for Harper in consequence of our not presenting them early enough and we only induced him to take them by promising to keep back for a week the copies we send to America for sale. He has frequently

complained and I doubt if he will renew the arrangements at the end of the year.'[66] Thackeray responded breezily. 'Make your mind easy. I expect we shall go into 25 pages – 23 are at the printers and the 2 last I have had copied, and will leave at the Printing office to send with the proofs to Low.'[67] His copyist on this occasion was Minny.

By July he could be more positive again – 'Here's Philip Thank God in good time'[68] – but this month also saw something of a crisis in the relations between the two men, with Thackeray again wanting to accept pieces which Smith subsequently vetoed. An article about the actor/playwright Charles Fechter by Mrs Pollock, together with an 'amusing little Irish fable' by Charles McKay, appealed sufficiently to Thackeray for him to want to take them – perhaps unwisely he had already given an undertaking to Mrs Pollock to that effect – but Smith was unconvinced. Thackeray knew that neither piece was worth fighting over, but his pride was pricked. An unsent draft of the letter written on 9 July shows that his departure as editor could only be a matter of time, offering stark evidence that Thackeray knew the best days of the *Cornhill* adventure were behind him. In the parts which he did not send Smith, he addressed the declining sales of the magazine, which had fallen away since its early and unprecedented success. Circulation had dropped by 1,000 since the completion of *Framley Parsonage* in April, and Trollope's next serial was not due to begin until August. Thackeray felt that his own salary should return to that originally paid when he first took on the editorship, which Smith had subsequently doubled: 'after Michaelmas say, instead of 166.6.8 let it be 83.3.4. – I don't say sooner, because I am as poor as may be, with those building engagements'. At the end of September, he was still being paid the higher salary, though by then even the ever-generous Smith thought that an adjustment might be warranted. 'I hope I may not have to come to you next month with a long face, and a proposal about the amount'.[69] But the more revealing aspect is Thackeray's recognition that their differences over editorial decisions was probably irreconcilable, and he did not want to lose Smith's friendship. '[Y]ou know there does not live a man for whom I entertain a greater personal regard and confidence. But about authors, artists, articles, we have such a difference of opinion that I own the future is very glum' (here he first wrote 'dark and cloudy').[70]

By December, a final disagreement over a piece by Herman Merivale sealed Thackeray's future with the *Cornhill*. He passed the manuscript to Smith and adopted a tone of special pleading, rather than arguing for the article on its merits. 'You must, please, let me accept the article from this good old friend and well-known Scholar. Let me have a word

that I may write him a yes.'[71] Smith's reply does not survive, but unlike his editor he had bothered to read Merivale's piece before deciding against it. The tone of Thackeray's answer is measured, but sad and reflective, the response of one whose frail health was to be expended on such trivial battles no longer.

> You have the pull over me in the argument, that you have read the paper, and I have not.
>
> BUT it is written by an eminent scholar and practised writer, whose works are received with welcome by the old reviews; and I should have accepted it, as you have accepted others, upon the character of the author.
>
> We agreed that both of us should have a veto upon articles, and in this case I can't complain if you exercise your's. [*sic*] We shall lose Merivale. I am sorry.[72]

If there were any more disputes, we have no record of them. Thackeray took the next few weeks to reflect on his position, but surely did not doubt the eventual outcome. A final exchange of correspondence followed two meetings, on 3 and 5 March. In sadly accepting his editor's resignation, Smith conveys the strong impression that he had been misrepresented in Thackeray's opinion of him. Yet the affection remained on both sides.

> I have received your Notes of the 4th and 6th. Instant, and I am grateful to you for the kind manner in which you have conveyed to me the important and unexpected communication they contain.
>
> I forbear from entering into any discussion on the subject; but, perhaps I may be allowed to express my opinion that you have not been well advised. If, in your construction of my conduct towards you in respect of the 'Cornhill Magazine' you have done me any injustice, or if you are acting under a misconception of my feelings or motives, I dare say you will some day discover that you have been mistaken – and I shall then be set right in your opinion.
>
> In the mean time I must, of course, accept your decision as to withdrawing from the Editorship of the Magazine – though I deeply regret it – especially as you seem to think (I hope groundlessly) that it is necessary for me to acquiesce in your determination in order to preserve your friendship.[73]

They agreed that the resignation announcement should not occur until 25 March, the date recorded on Thackeray's letter to *Cornhill* con-

tributors, inserted as a slip into the April 1862 number. In this final public statement as editor, he returns once more to the image of the sea-bound voyage, but as seen and understood now by a weary and wiser captain. 'Those who have travelled on shipboard know what a careworn, oppressed, uncomfortable man the captain is. Meals disturbed, quiet impossible, rest interrupted – such is the lot of captains. This one resigns his commission.… I believe my own special readers will agree that my books will not suffer when their Author is released from the daily tasks of reading, accepting, refusing, losing and finding the works of other people. To say No has often cost me a morning's peace and a day's work.'[74] Particularly, it is fair to add, when his own inclination was to say 'Yes'.