



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

WHO WAS MRS. GLUTCH?

by
Paul Lewis

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Wilkie Collins Society
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No change the summer sun can bring,
Or even the changing skies of spring,
Or the bleak winter's stormy weather,
For we shall meet them, Love, together!

LAID UP IN TWO LODGINGS.

SECOND.—MY LONDON LODGING.

I LAST had the honour of presenting myself to the reader's notice in the character of an invalid laid up in lodgings at Paris. Let me now be permitted to reappear as an invalid laid up, for the time being, and very uncomfortably, too, in a London cab. Let it be imagined that I have got through the journey from Paris, greatly to my own surprise and satisfaction, without breaking down by the way; that I have slept one night at a London hotel for the first time in my life; and that I am now helplessly adrift in a cab, looking out for Furnished Apartments as near as may be to my doctor's place of abode. These are the few prefatory circumstances of my present narrative on which it is needless for me to enlarge. I mention them as hints which may serve in the reader's fancy to make the appropriate prologue to a sick man's tale.

The cab is fusty, the driver is sulky, the morning is foggy—I feel that a dry dog-kennel would be a pleasant refuge for me by comparison with the miserable vehicle in which I am now jolting my way over the cruel London stones. On our road to my doctor's neighbourhood we pass through Smeary Street, a locality well-known to the inhabitants of Northern London. I feel that I can go no further. I remember that some friends of mine live not far off, and I recklessly emancipate myself from the torment of the cab, by stopping the driver at the very first house in the windows of which I see a bill with the announcement that Apartments are to Let.

The door is opened by a tall muscular woman, with a knobbed face and knotty arms besprinkled with a layer of grate-dust in a state of impalpable powder. She shows me up into a second-floor front bedroom. My first look of scrutiny is naturally directed at the bed. It is of the negative sort, neither dirty nor clean; but, by its side, I see a positive and unexpected advantage in connection with it, in the shape of a long mahogany shelf, fixed into the wall a few inches above the bed, and extending down its whole length from head to foot. My sick man's involuntary egotism is as predominant an impulse within me at London as at Paris. I think directly of my invalid's knick-knacks: I see that the mahogany shelf will serve to keep them all within my reach when I am in bed; I know that it will be wanted for no other purpose than that to which I design to put it; that it need not be cleared for dinner every day, like a table, or disturbed when the servant cleans the room, like a moveable stand. I satisfy myself that it holds out all

these rare advantages to me, in my peculiar situation, and I snap at them on the instant—or, in other words, I take the room immediately.

If I had been in health, I think I should have had two cogent reasons for acting otherwise, and seeking apartments elsewhere. In the first place, I should have observed that the room was not very clean or very comfortably furnished. I should have noticed that the stained and torn druggot on the floor displayed a margin of dirty boards all round the bedchamber; and I should no sooner have set eyes on the venerable arm-chair by the bedside than I should have heard it saying privately in my ear, in an ominous language of its own, "Stranger, I am let to the Fleas: take me at your peril." Even if these signs and portents had not been enough to send me out into the street again, I should certainly have found the requisite warning to quit the house written legibly in the face, figure, and manner of the landlady. I should probably have seen something to distrust and dislike in everything connected with her, down even to her name, which was Mrs. Glutch; and I should have thereupon taken refuge in some polite equivocation (uttering probably, that long-established formula of courteous deceit which is expressed by the words, "Call again in an hour"),—should have got into the street under false pretences, and should not have ventured near it any more for the rest of the day. But as it was, my fatal invalid prepossessions blinded me to everything but the unexpected blessing of that mahogany shelf by the bedside. I overlooked the torn druggot, the flea-peopled arm-chair, and the knotty-faced landlady with the ominous name. The shelf was bait enough for me, and the moment the trap was open, I collected my train of medicine bottles and confidently walked in.

It is a general subject of remark among observant travellers, that the two nations of the civilised world which appear to be most widely separated as to the external aspects of life respectively presented by them, are also the two which are most closely brought together by the neighbourly ties of local situation. Before I had been many days established in Smeary Street, I found that I myself, in my own circumscribed sphere, offered a remarkable example of the truth of the observation just recorded. The strong contrast between my present and my past life was a small individual proof of the great social contrasts between England and France. I have truly presented myself at Paris, as living independently in a little toy house of my own; as looking out upon a scene of almost perpetual brightness and gaiety; and as having to attend on me people whose blessed levity of disposition kept them always cheerful, always quaintly characteristic, always unexpectedly amusing, even to the languid

Household Words, 14 June 1856, XIII, p. 517.

Image from www.djo.org.uk

WHO WAS MRS GLUTCH?

Wilkie Collins did not like Mrs Glutch.

The door is opened by a tall muscular woman, with a knobbed face and knotty arms besprinkled with a layer of grate-dust in a state of impalpable powder. She shows me up into a second-floor front bedroom.... I should certainly have found the requisite warning to quit the house written legibly in the face, figure, and manner of the landlady. I should probably have seen something to distrust and dislike in everything connected with her, down even to her name, which was Mrs. Glutch.

Wilkie went on to accuse her of over-subservient politeness to him but such poor treatment of the servants that they left after a week. He has not one kind word to say about her.

She appeared in a story in Dickens's journal *Household Words*. It was the second part of 'Laid Up in Two Lodgings' which contrasted being unwell in rooms in Paris and then in London.¹ London came out much worse, largely because of Mrs Glutch.

The stories, which were published in June 1856, were based on Wilkie's own experience earlier that year. And we can now identify the real landlady who inspired the character of Mrs Glutch.

Paris

In October 1855 Dickens went to Paris for the winter and rented an apartment at 49 Avenue des Champs Elysées.² In January he invited Wilkie to join him and when Wilkie accepted Dickens replied

It is excessively pleasant to me to get your letter, as it opens a perspective of theatrical and other lounging evenings, and also of articles in *Household Words*. It will not be the first time that we shall have got on well in Paris, and I hope it will not be by many a time the last.³

Dickens's sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth rented a small *pavilion* for Wilkie to stay in at no.63.⁴ Wilkie described it to his mother shortly after he arrived on 28 February.

Here I am safe, sound, and already better – in the quaintest and prettiest bachelor lodging that ever was built. I have a bedroom, sitting-room, dressing-room, and kitchen, all comprised in one little building – like a cottage in a ballet. Opposite to me is another cottage like mine in which the "concierge" and his wife live⁵

¹ 'Laid up in Two Lodgings', *Household Words*, vol. XIII, 'My Paris Lodgings', 7 June 1856 pp. 481-486 and 'My London Lodgings', 14 June 1856 pp. 517-523.

² CD to Clarkson Stanfield, 19 October 1855, Pilgrim, VII, p. 722.

³ CD to Wilkie Collins, 19 January 1856, Pilgrim, VIII, p. 28.

⁴ CD to Georgina Hogarth 7 February 1856 Pilgrim, VIII, p. 48.

⁵[0231] to Harriet Collins, 28 February 1856.

He wrote in a letter to his friend Charles Ward

I have got a lodging that a man might live in for the rest of his life in comfort – and the heartiest pleasantest people in the world to wait on me.⁶

Wilkie had gone to Paris partly for a change of air as he had been feeling unwell but also because he had finished *After Dark*, his collection of linked stories published in two volumes in February 1856.⁷ He was beginning his next work *A Rogue's Life* which would be published in five parts in *Household Words* throughout March 1856.⁸ He wrote most of it while in Paris but became unwell, catching cold and then suffering from rheumatism.

My arms, legs, back, head, neck, and teeth were all rheumatic by turns. After relieving my mind by swearing and my body by sweating for four consecutive days, I came out victorious in the struggle. But it was rather trying while it lasted.⁹

If Wilkie hated Mrs Glutch, then he loved the woman who looked after him in Paris, the concierge's wife, whom he calls his 'portress' and only mentions with praise.

My portress sweetens my daily existence with so much compassion that she does me more good, I think, than my doctor or my drugs. She is a thin, rapid, cheerful, little woman, with a tiny face and bright brown eyes.

On 5 April he wrote to his mother

I shall come back about the middle of this month – having many reasons for not extending my stay here much beyond the six weeks I had originally allotted for it.... I can't quite shake off my cold still – and feel occasional rheumatic twinges, which I allay by a vapour bath – Probably the change of air back to London will set me quite right again.¹⁰

We can date his leaving with some precision by timing it backwards from a letter to him sent by Dickens from Paris on 13 April. It is clearly the answer to a letter from Collins which informed Dickens that he had arrived in London and gave him his new address. Collins's letter no longer exists – one of thousands which perished in Dickens's great bonfire of correspondence at Gad's Hill on 3 September 1860.¹¹

London

If Dickens wrote on Sunday 13th then Wilkie's letter arrived Saturday 12th. Letters to Paris at that time took two days¹² and it was therefore posted on Thursday 10th. So he left Paris on

⁶ [0236] to Charles Ward, 19 March 1856.

⁷ *After Dark*, 2 vols, Smith, Elder published around 15 February.

⁸ 'A Rogue's Life' *Household Words* vol. XIII, 1 to 29 March.

⁹ [0236] to Charles Ward, 19 March 1856.

¹⁰ [0237] to Harriet Collins, 5 April 1856.

¹¹ Paul Lewis 'Burning: The Evidence', *The Dickensian*, Winter 2004, No.464, pp. 197-208.

¹² For example Wilkie's letter to his mother dated 5 April – see note 8 – was in an envelope franked in London on 7 April. WC also said at the time that 'The Post is desperately irregular' ([0235] to Harriet Collins, 19 March 1856.

the morning of Wednesday 9th hitting a strong gale across the Channel when everyone – presumably bar Wilkie – was sick.¹³

This dating is slightly different from that given in Catherine Peters's biography

Wilkie returned to London on 12 April, crossing the channel in a half-gale and arriving, ill once more, with nowhere to live.¹⁴

But that is impossibly soon for Wilkie to have arrived, found lodgings, and sent a letter to Dickens which was replied to on 13th.

Wilkie's mother was moving from the family home at 17 Hanover Terrace and his letter of 5 April was in fact addressed to her c/o their neighbour at no. 16, Mrs Gibbons. Confusingly Wilkie wrote letters datelined from 17 Hanover Terrace in May and June.¹⁵ When he returned his mother was away in the country and Wilkie took the opportunity of renting his own lodgings near to his new lover Caroline Graves.

Howland Street

Peters also states that 'after one night in a hotel [he] took lodgings at 22 Howland Street' and this address is repeated in other biographies and in the Pilgrim edition of Dickens's letters.¹⁶ That address is wrong.

On the same day that Dickens replied to Wilkie's letter he also wrote to his sub-editor W. H. Wills to give him Wilkie's new address

I mentioned to you sometime ago, that a monthly commentary on the Trials at the Central Criminal Court, with reference to the State of Education, the State of the Law, and the Vices of Society, would make a very remarkable set of papers. I think Collins would do it extremely well. He is now (unwell, and his family moving), at 24 Howland St. Fitzroy Square.¹⁷ Will you see him, mention the subject to him just as I state it, and ask him if he would like to undertake it regularly. In that case, cut out the best Reports for him from day to day. The Central Criminal Court is sitting now.¹⁸

Wilkie did no such thing. He persuaded Dickens to let him write a serial story – which became *The Dead Secret* – to run in *Household Words* from January. Before that he wrote eight pieces for the periodical, including his famous detective story 'The Diary of Anne Rodway', two chapters of the Christmas number, and of course 'Laid up in Two Lodgings' for which he was

¹³ Wilkie's good 'sea legs' were notorious. See [0025] to Harriet Collins 9, 10 September 1845 and CD to Wilkie Collins, 13 April 1856 Pilgrim, VIII, p. 86.

¹⁴ Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors*, (London: 1991), p. 165.

¹⁵ [0239] to Townshend, 5 June 1856 where Wilkie gives his address as 17 Hanover Terrace until 24 June.

¹⁶ See to Wilkie Collins, 22 April 1856, note 1, Pilgrim, VIII, p.95. See also p. 105 to Collins 30 April 1856, note 2 which refers to '34 Howland Street'.

¹⁷ No. 24 was on the south side of Howland Street, five doors down from Cleveland Street towards Charlotte Street. It no longer exists.

¹⁸ CD to Wills, Pilgrim, VIII p. 88.

paid £12-12s (£12.60) on 18 June. In October he was taken on as a staff member for five guineas (£5.25) a week.¹⁹

We can be sure that Dickens was right about the address by looking at the Post Office Directory for 1856 and the surrounding years and at the Censuses of 1851 and 1861.

No. 22 Howland Street was not a lodging house; it was occupied throughout this time by an elderly sculptor, Christopher Moore, who was born in Ireland and lived with one servant. Yet it was rooms in a lodging house which Wilkie took. Here is his own account in *Household Words* of his journey and finding the lodgings.

Let it be imagined that I have got through the journey from Paris, greatly to my own surprise and satisfaction, without breaking down by the way; that I have slept one night at a London hotel for the first time in my life; and that I am now helplessly adrift in a cab, looking out for Furnished Apartments as near as may be to my doctor's place of abode.

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The cab is fusty, the driver is sulky, the morning is foggy—I feel that a dry dog-kennel would be a pleasant refuge for me by comparison with the miserable vehicle in which I am now jolting my way over the cruel London stones. On our road to my doctor's neighbourhood we pass through Smeary Street, a locality well-known to the inhabitants of Northern London. I feel that I can go no farther. I remember that some friends of mine live not far off, and I recklessly emancipate myself from the torment of the cab, by stopping the driver at the very first house in the windows of which I see a bill with the announcement that Apartments are to Let.²⁰

The Post Office Directory and the Census reveal that the house Dickens named, 24 Howland Street – Smeary Street in Wilkie's story – was indeed a lodging house. In the 1851 census Mary Ann Sibthorp, Annuitant and Lodging House keeper, lived there with her two sisters, a niece aged 20, two servants and just two lodgers – an artist called Thomas Smith and 40 year old Joseph Hoare, recently a 'supercargo' – a man in charge of loading and unloading ships. She is also found in contemporary directories at 24 Howland Street which is listed as a lodging house. But Mary died a year after the census and was buried on 22 May 1852 in Pentonville Chapel. So she was not Mrs Glutch.

The real Mrs Glutch

In 1852 the Post Office Directory shows 24 Howland Street empty. But by the 1853 Directory no. 24 was a lodging house once more, with Mrs Charlotte Harper as the proprietor. And there she remained until 1860. So we can conclude that Charlotte Harper was Mrs Glutch.

It was she who lay all night on the drawing room couch to ambush lodgers she feared would do a moonlight flit. It was she who stole the basins from Wilkie's friends when they sent in food for him as he could not tolerate hers. It was she who was

¹⁹ see CD to Wills, 16 September 1856, Pilgrim VIII, p. 188.

²⁰ *Household Words*, vol. XIII, p. 517 'Laid up in Two Lodgings. Second.—My London Lodging'.

The oppressively polite woman who cannot address me without begging my pardon, can find no hard words in the vocabulary hard enough for the maid-of-all-work.

Servants

The 32-year-old Wilkie's experience with servants at Howland Street was an epiphany for him. When he was twenty he had complained in a letter to his mother about their servants

Susan, of course looked very foolish and made a good many apologies the next morning. I was not surprised at the mess they had all got into, knowing, as I do, what a set of asses the lower orders are in this country.²¹

But he changed his view after witnessing Mrs Glutch's "persecutions" of her servants. One was wrongly suspected of taking a lace cuff and

being destitute, is consequently condemned without a trial, and dismissed without a character. She too wanders off forlorn into a world that has no haven of rest or voice of welcome for her—wanders off, without so much as a dirty bundle in her hand—wanders off, voiceless, with the unchanging grin on the smut-covered face.

After this and similar tales about the other servants, who come and go so rapidly that Mrs Glutch calls them all 'Mary' and Wilkie refers to them as Number One, Two, and Three, he concludes

I have witnessed some sad sights during my stay in Smeary Street, which have taught me to feel for my poor and forlorn fellow-creatures as I do not think I ever felt for them before, and which have inclined me to doubt for the first time whether worse calamities might not have overtaken me than the hardship of falling ill.

Was Charlotte Harper really as bad a landlady as Wilkie makes out? No records other than the Post Office Directory have securely been identified with her, though there she is recorded as proprietor at 24 Howland Street until 1860.²² In the 1861 Census there are five households at no.24 comprising 13 adults and 11 children. Charlotte Harper is not among them nor does she appear plausibly anywhere else. After that the house is listed in the directories for Mr William Turner.²³ And in the 1871 census it was still a house, as we say now, in multiple occupation.

Sources

'Laid up in Two Lodgings' in its original form is at www.djo.org.uk. It was reprinted with minor changes in *My Miscellanies*.²⁴ A transcript is in 'etexts' at www.wilkiecollins.com. Letters are taken from Baker, Gasson, Law, and Lewis, *The Collected Letters of Wilkie Collins*, Intelix (Charlottesville: 2018) where each has a unique number in square brackets.

²¹ [0019] to Harriet Collins, 30 July 1844. Misquoted in Clarke *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins* (London: 1988) p.84 as 'apes' not 'asses' and misdated as 30 July 1845 (p. 216 footnote 17).

²² Post Office Directory 1860 p. 418.

²³ Post Office Directory 1861 p. 384.

²⁴ Wilkie Collins, *My Miscellanies*, (London: 1863).

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