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Dickens's London

Wolfreys, Julian

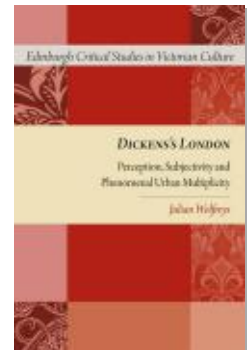
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Exteriors • Golden Square, Portland Place, Bryanstone Square

Nicholas Nickleby / Dombey and Son

Although a few members of the graver professions live about Golden Square, it is not exactly in anybody's way to or from anywhere. It is one of the squares that have been; a quarter of the town that has gone down in the world, and taken to letting lodgings. Many of its first and second floors are let, furnished, to single gentlemen; and it takes boarders besides. It is a great resort of foreigners. The dark-complexioned men who wear large rings, and heavy watch-guards, and bushy whiskers, and who congregate under the Opera Colonnade, and about the box-office in the season, between four and five in the afternoon, when they give away the orders,—all live in Golden Square, or within a street of it. Two or three violins and a wind instrument from the Opera band reside within its precincts. Its boarding-houses are musical, and the notes of pianos and harps float in the evening time round the head of the mournful statue, the guardian genius of a little wilderness of shrubs, in the centre of the square. On a summer's night, windows are thrown open, and groups of swarthy moustached men are seen by the passer-by, lounging at the casements, and smoking fearfully. Sounds of gruff voices practising vocal music invade the evening's silence; and the fumes of choice tobacco scent the air. There, snuff and cigars, and German pipes and flutes, and violins and violoncellos, divide the supremacy between them. It is the region of song and smoke. Street bands are on their mettle in Golden Square; and itinerant glee-singers quaver involuntarily as they raise their voices within its boundaries. (NN 65)

In that quarter of London in which Golden Square is situated, there is a bygone, faded, tumbledown street, with two irregular rows of tall meagre houses, which seem to have stared each other out of countenance years ago. The very chimneys appear to have grown dismal and melancholy, from having had nothing better to look at than the chimneys over the way. Their tops are battered, and broken, and blackened with smoke; and here and there some taller stack than the rest, inclining heavily to one side, and toppling over the roof, seems to meditate taking revenge for half a century's neglect, by crushing the inhabitants of the garrets beneath.

The fowls who peck about the kennels, jerking their bodies hither and thither with a gait which none but town fowls are ever seen to adopt,

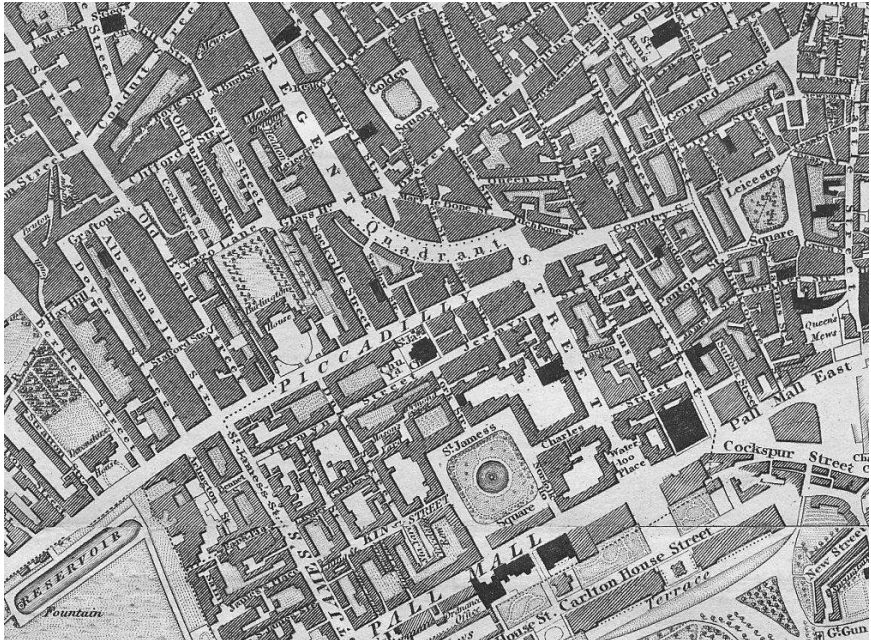
and which any country cock or hen would be puzzled to understand, are perfectly in keeping with the crazy habitations of their owners. Dingy, ill-plumed, drowsy flutterers, sent, like many of the neighbouring children, to get a livelihood in the streets, they hop from stone to stone in forlorn search of some hidden eatable in the mud, and can scarcely raise a crow among them . . .

To judge from the size of the houses, they have been at one time tenanted by persons of better condition than their present occupants, but they are now let off by the week in floors or rooms, and every door has almost as many plates or bell-handles as there are apartments within. The windows are for the same reason sufficiently diversified in appearance, being ornamented with every variety of common blind and curtain that can easily be imagined, while every doorway is blocked up and rendered nearly impassable by a motley collection of children and porter pots of all sizes, from the baby in arms and the half-pint pot, to the full-grown girl and half-gallon can.

In the parlour of one of these houses, which was perhaps a thought dirtier than any of its neighbours; which exhibited more bell-handles, children and porter pots, and caught in all its freshness the first gust of the thick black smoke that poured forth night and day from a large brewery hard by, hung a bill announcing that there was yet one room to let within its walls, although on what storey the vacant room would be—regard being had to the outward tokens of many lodgers which the whole front displayed, from the mangle in the kitchen window to the flower-pots on the parapet—it would have been beyond the power of a calculating boy to discover.

The common stairs of this mansion were bare and carpetless; but a curious visitor who had to climb his way to the top, might have observed that there were not wanting indications of the progressive poverty of the inmates, although their rooms were shut. Thus the first-floor lodgers, being flush of furniture, kept an old mahogany table—real mahogany—on the landing place outside, which was only taken in when occasion required. On the second storey the spare furniture dwindled down to a couple of old deal chairs, of which one, belonging to the back room, was shorn of a leg and bottomless. The storey above boasted no greater excess than a worm-eaten wash-tub: and the garret landing-place displayed no costlier articles than two crippled pitchers, and some broken blacking-bottles. (NN 227–8)

Mr Dombey's house was a large one, on the shady side of a tall, dark, dreadfully genteel street in the region between Portland Place and Bryanstone Square. It was a corner house, with great wide areas containing cellars frowned upon by barred windows, and leered at by crooked-eyed doors leading to dustbins. It was a house of dismal state, with a circular back to it, containing a whole suite of drawing-rooms looking upon a gravelled yard, where two gaunt trees, with blackened trunks and branches, rattled rather than rustled, their leaves were so smoked-dried. The summer sun was never on the street, but in the morning about breakfast-time, when it came with the water-carts and the old clothes men, and the people with geraniums, and the umbrella-mender, and the man who trilled the little bell of the Dutch clock as he went along. It was soon gone again to return no more that day; and the bands of music and the straggling Punch's shows going after it, left



Golden Square, Gerrard Street, Soho

it a prey to the most dismal of organs, and white mice; with now and then a porcupine, to vary the entertainments; until the butlers whose families were dining out, began to stand at the house-doors in the twilight, and the lamp-lighter made his nightly failure in attempting to brighten up the street with gas. (DS 74–5)