

“SCATTERED TO THE FOUR WINDS”:
THE LOST DAYS OF CLARA VAUGHAN MORGAN
AND CHARLES AUGUSTUS HOWELL

Allan and Page Life

While researching their *Life of James McNeill Whistler* (1908), Joseph and Elizabeth Pennell had frequent access to the master himself, and their journals preserve his conversation. No crony of Whistler figures in these entries more prominently than Charles Augustus Howell (1840?-1890): “The wonderful man,” rhapsodized Whistler, “the genius, the superb liar, the Gil-Blas, Robinson-Crusoe hero out of his proper time, the creature of top-boots and plumes – splendidly flamboyant” (Pennell 58). Whistler embroidered Howell’s criminality, spicing reconstructions of his frauds with innuendo about the women in his life: “he was like a great Portuguese cock of the poultry yard: hens were always clucking about him – his wife ‘Kitty,’ and Miss Alice Chambers, and Rosa Corder.” Even in Howell’s house in Fulham, Whistler recalled, “the hens [were] all there clucking, and a child – no one knew who was its mother” (59; 61).

More soberly, Betty Elzea observes that Howell’s marriage to his cousin, Frances Kate Howell, “seems not to have been entirely successful, and he appears to have had three mistresses.... The first was a woman named Clara Vaughan of whom little is known. In about 1873 he began a relationship with a talented young woman aspiring to be a professional artist: Rosa Corder (1853-1893)” (331). The third companion, Alice Chambers, a clergyman’s daughter born two years later than Rosa Corder, was also a painter; she survived into the twentieth century and remained Howell’s staunchest defender.

Alice Chambers’s sentiments were echoed by her friends. The Pennells record a visit on 8 February 1907 to “Mrs [afterwards Lady] Donkin,” where they met a Mrs. Jenner,¹ who spoke of “her oldest friend, Miss Chambers”:

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