

they have the merit of being always green and refreshing to the eyes. Let an intending planter visit Kew, or one of our large nurseries, before he bids his gardener "buy trees and plant them as soon as he can." A little trouble is well laid out in a work which is to last so long.

Anglers this month are busy taking the grayling and the pike, whenever the weather admits. The former is a curiously local fish, around which have crystallised many monastic stories more wonderful than true. Modern science points out that it is a survivor of the Glacial Age. When you have first caught your pike, a recipe of amusing particularity for cooking it is to be found in Walton's immortal work, he being, like Barker (another celebrated seventeenth-century angler), as enthusiastic in cooking as in catching fish. He adds, "This dish of meat is too good for any but anglers or very honest men." The pike is fond of sluggish lakes and rivers, and therefore is little known in Devon-

shire. "Lincolnshire" (once more to quote Walton) "boasteth to have the biggest."

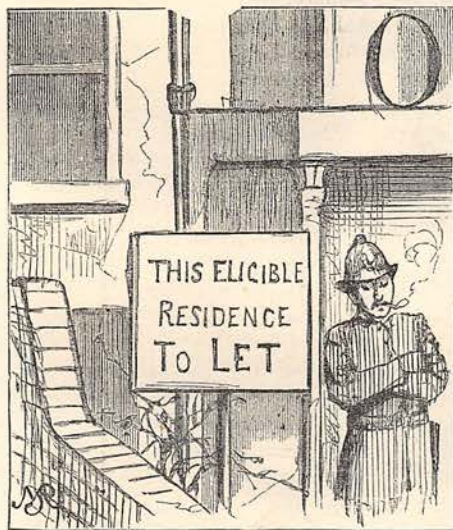
The taste for this fish, as for many other of our fresh-water fishes, has almost died out, owing to the extreme facility with which sea-fish may now be procured almost everywhere.

Having now finished a year's observations on the natural history of the months, we cannot refrain from recommending a taste for the plants and creatures of the country to all who are obliged to pass much of their time there. Admirable text-books on every province of British natural history can now be obtained; but, after all, careful observation and loving familiarity with the beasts and birds of the country is the way to derive enjoyment. If these papers have induced any to resort to the quiet pleasures of the naturalist, and to find occupation where once all seemed a desert, they will not have been written in vain.

M. G. WATKINS, M.A.

IN AN EMPTY HOUSE.

A SKETCH WITH A MORAL.



H dear, no, sir! not at all damp."

"The gentleman has not seen the cellar. There's a shoot outside, where they put down the coal, sir, and it saves so much dirt."

"There's another house over the way, sir, as we've got the letting of; a nice cheerful house, too. It's been occupied, but the gentleman as took it only lived three months."

Now the house I was in had struck a cold chill to my very spirit, as I descended to its lower regions, so I felt very little desire to inspect the place opposite, where "the gentleman as took it only lived three months."

The two speakers were an elderly man and his wife—two stooping, worn-out old folks, who came up together to answer the front door bell on this particular day, when I was what the French call *à la chasse*—in other words, house-hunting. They came up together, and evidently tugged together at the front door to get it open. They both said it stuck, which was self-

evident; and during my stay, they either kept up a duet or else alternately one played echo to the other's words.

With all respect to them and their troubles, they would suggest to me, on first seeing them, potatoes that had sprouted and withered in a cellar. They were so colourless, so wanting in tone, that, as they stood blinking before me, each with a pair of old spectacles in hand, they seemed as if they had passed all their days underground, and rarely stirred abroad.

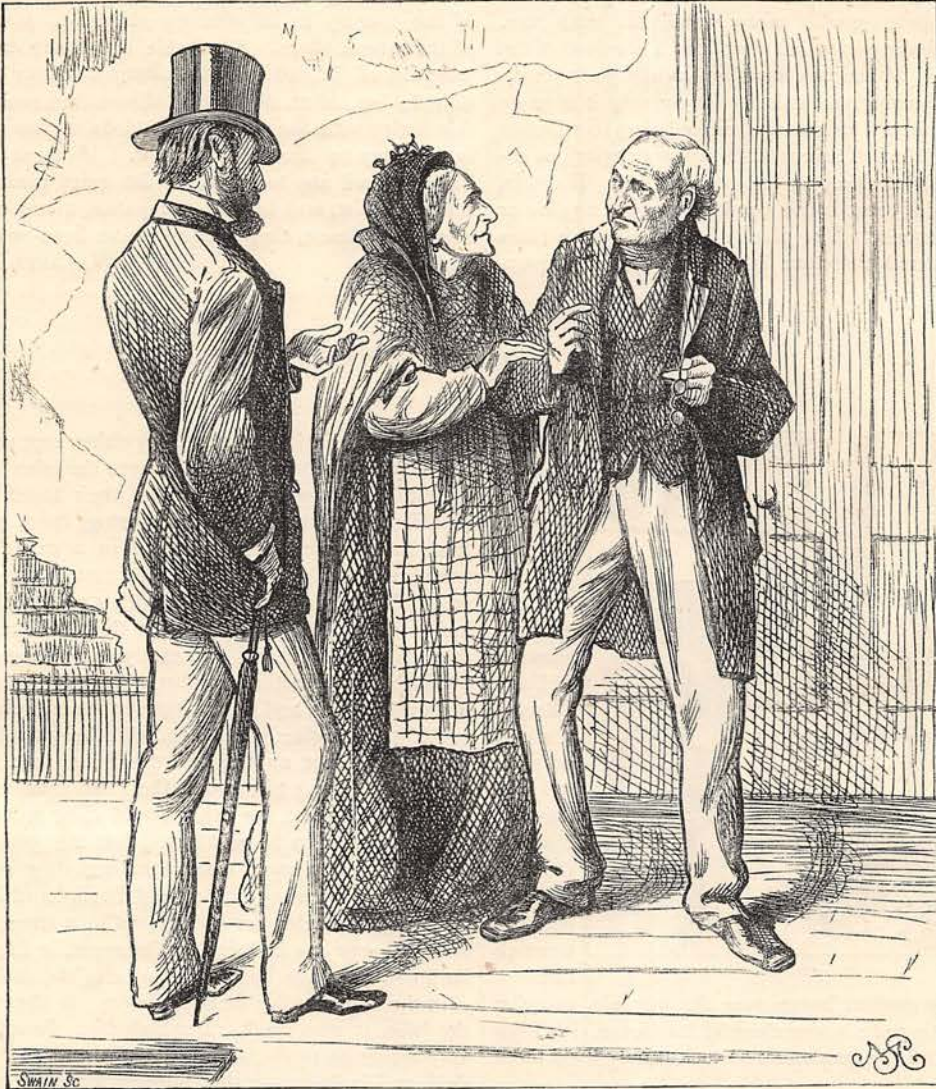
There was something pathetic, though, in the quiet, staid old visages, and so much patience and forbearance exhibited on either side when, with the garrulousness of age, one kept up the ball too long, that I could not help thinking that when the cold hand of death was laid upon one, the other would cling so tightly to the companion to be reft away, that the grisly shade would in mercy say, "Come too," and they would go on their long journey as they had lived, hand in hand.

Strange thoughts on a doorstep in a street of new houses, every one declared by the agent, in big letters, on board or bill, to be substantial, eligible, and capital—in the one case the lie being white; in the other, on the bills, it was black. But somehow thoughts flow very freely at times, and I thought and saw a good deal, as I looked over that eligible mansion to be let on such moderate terms. The old people closed the door after me very carefully—it was a hot September day—and thus I had the full benefit of the close, heavy, oppressive atmosphere, the smell of old and worn-out air, that has been shut up for weeks—the odour to be obtained to such perfection in the hermetically sealed galleries of the British Museum. Then we went on from room to room, the old people talking away all the time, and pointing out the beauties of the place.

It was the old story: the regular new suburban house, with a showy exterior, plenty of stucco, and a pretentious interior; but all to a good substantial place,

what electro or veneer is to the precious metal or solid wood. There were plate-glass windows, but the frames had warped; handsome balustrades to green shrunken stairs; the floor-boards had shrunk one from another and curled up; the ceilings had cracked; and where the rain had found its way in, through defective spouts at the side, or bad slating and plumbing

the row of houses in the next street. Over the wall next door an attempt had been made to brighten the prospect, but the plants looked melancholy, and a Virginia creeper that ought to have been displaying its gorgeous autumnal tints was evidently suffering from a severe bilious attack, due to low spirits, bad drainage, and a clay soil. The very sparrows on the ledges



"DON'T BOTHER THE GENTLEMAN ABOUT THAT, MARY" (p. 729).

of the roof, the walls told tales, in the unpleasant-smelling efflorescence of microscopic fungi, that, in place of good honest sand-mixed mortar, the house had been built, by a scamping contractor, with burnt clay ground up with a dash of lime stuff, that is good for two or three years, and then crumbles away.

From room to room of the desolate place we went, to find every window closely shut. There was the pleasant prospect, beyond the tiny square of grass-grown earth called a garden, of the blank end wall of

were moulting, and appeared depressed; and on going higher up, there was a blank hideous cistern in one of the attics, that looked so much like a sarcophagus on a humid principle, and suggested such horrors of some day finding a suicidal servant-maid within, that any lingering ideas of becoming the tenant of the house vanished like dirty snow-crystals before a pelting rain.

"It's a very convenient house," said the old gentleman.

"And will let some day at a far higher rent," piped the old lady.

"You'd better come down to the breakfast-room now, sir," said the old gentleman.

"And see the kitchen too, sir," echoed the old lady.

So I went down—to find, as I expected, the breakfast-room showing a cloudy mountainous line of damp on the paper for about two feet above the wainscot; and here again the window was closely shut, and the strange mephitic odour of damp and exhausted air stronger than ever.

This apartment was the one utilised by the old couple for bed and sitting-room combined, and their spare furniture was spread neatly over it, according to the homely old rule of "making the most of things."

I finished my inspection, with the old folks most eager in their praise of all, and when I pointed to the damp the old gentleman exclaimed—

"Oh! you'll find that in all the houses about here, sir. It rises up the wall, you see."

"Yes, from bad building," I answered.

"But it's much worse at the house opposite, sir," said the old lady.

"Where the tenant died?" I said.

"Yes, sir," she answered innocently enough.

"Why, you seem anxious to let the house," I said smiling.

"Well, yes, sir," said the old gentleman, counting his few hairs with one end of his spectacles. "You see the agents like us to let the houses; and if we're in one very long—"

"He don't like it, sir," said the old lady.

"Then you often have to change?"

"It all depends, sir; sometimes we've been in houses where they've been let in a week."

"Not in new neighbourhoods, sir," said the old lady; "people's shy of coming to the very new places. You see, they're only just run up, and the roads ain't made."

"Ah!" said the old gentleman, "sometimes the roads ain't made till the houses are all let."

"And people often won't take the houses till the roads are made," said the old lady.

"So sometimes we're a year or two in a place. People's so particular about damp, you see," said the old gentleman.

"And many of the houses are damp?" I asked inquiringly.

"Well, sir, what can you expect," he replied confidentially, "seeing how things goes? Here's, say, a field here to-day, and they marks it out into roads. Then one speculative builder runs up a lot of carcasses on it, and fails. Then another buys the carcasses, and finishes 'em in a showy, flashy way; and then they put them at very low rents, to tempt people to take 'em."

"And raises the rents as soon as one or two tenants have been in them," said the old lady.

"It tempts people like, sir," continued the old gentleman; "they see nice showy-looking houses in an open place, and they think they're healthy."

"And they're not?" I said.

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"Healthy? No!" cried the old lady. "How can they be healthy, with the mortar and bricks all wet, and the rain perhaps been streaming into them for months before they were finished? Why, if you go and look in some of those big half-finished houses, sir, just two streets off, you see the water lying in the kitchens and breakfast-rooms a foot deep. That's how he got his rheumatics." Here she nodded at her husband.

"Don't bother the gentleman about that, Mary," said the old man mildly.

"You've lived in some of these very new damp places, then?"

"Well, sir," said the old gentleman smiling, "beggars mustn't be choosers, you see. We have to take the house the agent has on hand."

"You take charge of a house, then, on condition of living rent-free?"

"Yes, sir, that's it," said the old lady smiling.

"And how long have you lived in this way?"

"Oh! close upon fifteen years, sir," replied the old gentleman; "but things are not so good as they were. More than once I've nearly had to take a place—much building as there is going on."

"Yes, sir, and pay rent," said the old lady.

"You see it's the police, sir," the old gentleman went on.

"The police?"

"Yes, sir, the police," said the old lady. "The boys do so much mischief."

"Boys, you see, sir, from the thick parts of London," said the old gentleman explaining. "Rough lads on Sundays. They get amongst the empty and unfinished houses, troops of them, to play pitch-and-toss, and they throw stones and break windows and slates."

"And knock down the plaster and bricks," added the old lady.

"Ah! they most levelled one wall close by," said the old gentleman.

"They're so fond of making seesaws of the wood, too, sir," said the old lady.

"And splashing about in the pools of water," said the old gentleman.

"And the agents, on account of this, have took to having the police," said the old lady.

"To keep the boys away?" I asked.

"Yes, sir; you see, it's the married police and their wives take charge of the houses, and when the boys know that there's policemen about, why, of course they stay away."

"But it makes it very bad for such as we, sir," said the old lady.

"Fifteen years is a long time to live rent-free," I said smiling.

"Yes, sir, it is, and you see we have a deal to do for it. We have lots of people come to look at the houses before one's let."

"Specially women," chimed in the old gentleman. "There's some as come regular, and do it, I s'pose, because they likes it. They look at all the houses in

the neighbourhood, same as some other ladies always go to sales. They never buy anything; and *they* never mean to take a house; but they come and look at 'em, all the same."

"But we always know them, sir," said the old lady.

"Yes, they're easy enough to tell," chuckled the old man. And then, seeing me look inquiringly at him, he went on, "They finds fault with everything, sir. The hall's too narrow, or else too broad, and the staircase isn't the right shape. Then they want folding doors to the dining-room; or they don't want folding doors. Sometimes six bed-rooms is too many; sometimes eight ain't enough. And they always finds fault with the kitchen."

"And they always want a fresh paper in the dining-room, sir," said the old lady chiming in; "and the drawing-room paper's too light; and we don't mind them a bit."

"No, sir," chuckled the old gentleman; "we're used to them. We know, bless you!"

"And I suppose you felt that I did not want a house, eh?"

"No, sir, that we didn't," said the old lady; "you see, you came with an order from the agent; while people as don't want houses never takes the trouble to get that, but drops in promiskus where they see the bills up."

"One gets to understand people in fifteen years, sir," said the old gentleman, in a quiet subdued way; "and we don't mind. We say all we can for a house, as in dooty bound, for the agent; but it goes against one, same time."

"You could not conscientiously recommend this house, then, for a family?" I asked.

The old gentleman tightened his lips, and looked at his wife; and the old lady tightened hers, and looked at her husband; but neither spoke.

"I see," I said; then, turning the conversation, "You have been at this for years?"

"Fifteen, sir," said the old lady. "You see, sir, when our poor—"

"Don't trouble the gentleman about that," said the old man, with appeal in his voice; but the old lady liked to talk, and went on—

"When our poor Mary died—aged nineteen, sir, and as beautiful a girl as ever you saw, and used to help us in the business, keeping the books and writing letters—all seemed to go wrong, and at last we sold out for the best we could make of it, and that just paid our debts—"

"All but Tompkins' wood bill," said the old man correcting.

"Yes, all but Tompkins' wood bill," said the old lady; "but that we paid afterwards. My 'usband being in the building line, sir, and knowing a deal about houses, built them too good, sir, or we might have made a fortune. Then we said we'd start fair, and my 'usband took a commission in wine, but no one ever gave any orders, and we should have had to go to the parish, only an aunt of mine died and left us a bit of property that brings us in ten shillings a week; which is enough for us so long as we don't pay rent and taxes."

"That's how we came to be here, sir," said the old gentleman, smiling sadly at his wife, "and we've seen some strange changes since; living in houses where people died of fevers; in old houses; in new houses that ought to be knocked down by Act of Parliament, they're so bad; in houses where the people's been extravagant, and gone to ruin. But there, it does for us while we're here."

He looked at his wife here, and the old lady placed her thin veiny hand on his arm, telling, by that one action, of trust, love, and faith in her old companion over a very stony path; and I left them together trying very hard to close the front door, the old man's last words being—

"It sticks so, sir, on account of the house tottering, and that great crack"—the said crack being one from the first to the second floor.

Those were truly his last words to me, for about six months after I saw that the eligible and substantial residence had been let, while half-a-dozen winter-rain-soaked carcasses had been plastered up, and in one of the most damp I saw my old friends.

At the end of a few days, I found that the damp place and the cold spring had been too much for one of them.

The old man had died of pleurisy; and from the policeman's wife in charge of a house in the next street, I heard how prophetic had been my thoughts upon that doorstep; and I recalled that last simple act which I had seen—how the poor old woman had laid her hand upon her husband's arm—as this woman said—

"They found her kneeling down, sir, with her cheek resting on his dead hand—dead and cold too, sir; and no wonder either—the place would have killed a horse."

