



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, WELLINGTON.

A WOODEN CITY.

BY ONE OF ITS INHABITANTS.

ICAN'T say I had never seen a wooden house before—although I was a “new chum,” and it was not three months since I had left the shores of old England. For instance, I had noticed, in travelling along some of the railways at home, a trim little hut of painted deal, in which a pointsman or signalman lived, moved, and had his being. I had been to Yarmouth, and had seen still remaining some of the houses made out of up-turned boats, like that immortalised by Dickens as the home of Peggotty.

It was a new sensation, however, to me to see a whole city of wooden houses, all looking like a box of toy dwellings just fresh from Nuremberg.

It is possible that in times gone by (after a good supper) I might have “dreamt” that I dwelt in “marble halls,” although I could not recall it at that moment, but it had certainly never entered into my wildest flights of imagination that I should one day live in a wooden city. Consequently, to find myself in such an exceedingly ligneous locality—if I may use the expression—was a little bewildering. Possibly I should not have been so very much surprised if there had been wooden hams and wooden nutmegs in the shops, nor even if the inhabitants themselves had been of wood, like the lady and gentleman who dwell in those ingenious little weather-houses, and alternately appear at the door according as the weather is likely to be fine or wet. I was spared this additional source of perplexity, however, although I noticed that even the footpaths were bordered with wooden kerbing, and that there were wooden crossings in the streets.

I don't like keeping indulgent readers in suspense longer than necessary, and therefore I may as well at once tell them that the place herein described is not a figment of the imagination, but is to be found in a British possession which is becoming better known every day. I refer to Wellington, the capital of New Zealand. Its inhabitants, naturally very proud of their town, are fond of calling it “The Empire City,” but among its envious detractors it goes by the name of “The City of Packing-cases”; or when they are inclined to be more malicious than usual, “The City of Match-boxes.”

Both these epithets are a little unjust, however, since it is amply demonstrated in Wellington that buildings constructed entirely of wood may be ornamental and even imposing in the highest degree.

Take the Government buildings, for example, said to be “the largest wooden structure in the world.” This block is four storeys high, and occupies an area of nearly two acres. One cannot help thinking, on looking at it, what a fine blaze it would make if it ever caught fire, and it is not a matter for surprise to learn that watchmen patrol the building the whole night to guard as much as possible against such a catastrophe.

The Houses of Parliament are of a mediæval style of architecture, and exhibit a good deal more of ornamentation than the Government buildings, which are square and solid-looking, and evidently intended for work. There is, however, one thing to be said about the New Zealand shrine of that all-powerful deity—that it is very prettily situated, standing as it does on a knoll, and surrounded by willows, pines, and other graceful-looking English trees. When seen by moonlight, its

turrets peeping out of the dark green foliage, and standing in solemn relief against the sky, it is not difficult to fancy oneself back in England, gazing on some of the fine old ancestral homes which are the pride and glory of our fatherland. And then, *such* moonlight nights as Wellington rejoices in! I do not believe they are to be surpassed in any part of the world.

"No mist obscures, nor cloud, nor speck, nor stain;
In full-orbed glory, yonder moon divine
Rolls through the dark blue depths."

What Sir Walter Scott wrote of Melrose may be said with great appropriateness of Wellington. Such glorious sheen transforms the meanest building into a magician's palace, and all nature into fairyland. In spite of this, I have to confess that even the most silvery moonbeams would have a difficulty in making anything picturesque out of the Governor's residence, which is situated within a stone's-throw of the Parliamentary buildings. It is a very square, uninteresting building, and is, if I may be pardoned the expression, about the most *wooden-looking* structure in Wellington.

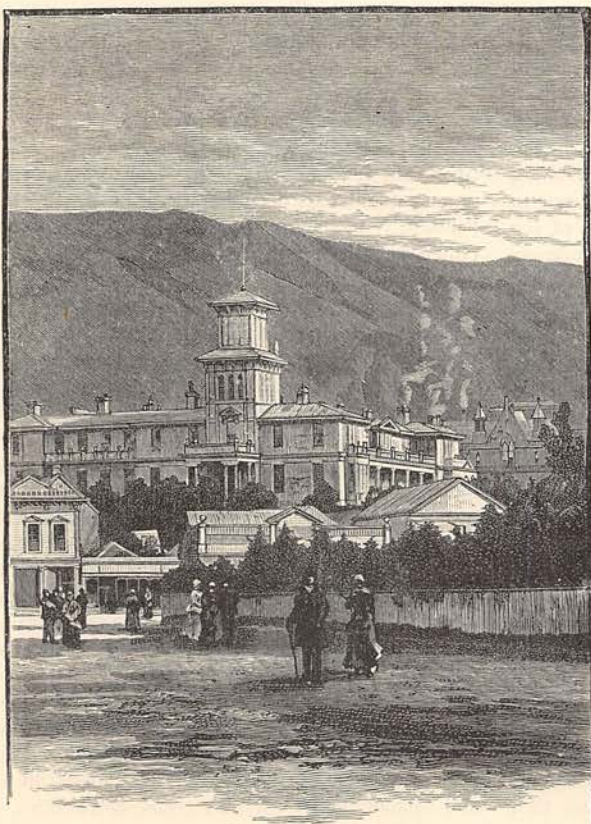
Now, most of the other buildings of importance seem ashamed of the fact that they are constructed in such humble and unsubstantial material, and endeavour to hide it as much as possible. So cleverly are they decorated with Corinthian columns, entablatures, and so

forth, and so artfully covered with a kind of cement powder to make them represent stone, that the closest inspection fails to reveal their real character. This especially applies to the banks, many of them very handsome buildings.

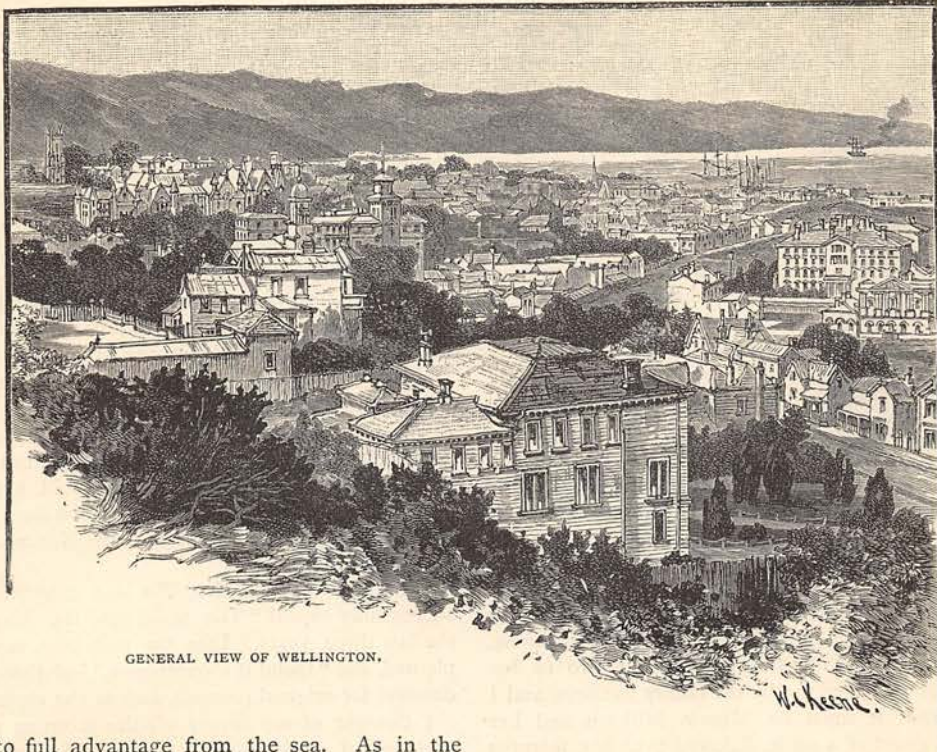
I have seen new arrivals, when told of the material actually used, smile incredulously, and forthwith proceed to give the building a succession of taps, as if they were percussing a patient suspected of lung-disease, or gauging the quantity of liquid in a barrel. This little peculiarity of strangers, in fact, gives Wellingtonians an infallible means of detecting a "new chum," in addition to the clues afforded by the fashion of his hat and boots, and his general habit of gazing at the shop-windows as if he were surprised, first, that there were any shops in an out-of-the-way place like New Zealand; secondly, that they possessed such luxuries as plate-glass windows; and thirdly, that he should see precisely the same class of goods displayed in them that he had seen offered for sale in the English town he had left possibly less than six weeks before.

A strict regard for accuracy, however, compels me to add that Wellington is rapidly losing its distinguishing characteristics.

The wooden buildings are a legacy left by the panic following on the earthquake shocks, which caused so much alarm to the early settlers, and the most severe of which was attended by some slight loss of life. Of late years, however, the earth disturbances have been so trifling (with the exception of the recent appalling catastrophe) that the rising generation are getting to despise the early settlers as a lot of timid old fogies, and are beginning boldly to go in for bricks and mortar. Bye-laws have been passed by the city council compelling the use of these or kindred materials in the construction of all new buildings in the central part of the city. One large warehouse which has been constructed in brick in the principal thoroughfare (Lambton Quay) is five storeys in height, and would do no discredit either to Melbourne or Sydney. Even to the Parliamentary buildings a considerable addition in brick has lately been made, and when the representatives of the people are found to venture even their valuable lives in this manner, it may readily be imagined that the peril is not generally believed to be *very* imminent. The boldest experiment in this way has been made in the erection of the new post and telegraph offices, just opposite the Queen's Wharf, where the traveller first lands. This building, which has recently been completed at a cost of about £24,000, is undoubtedly one of the finest edifices in the colony, and its imposing front



GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, WELLINGTON.



GENERAL VIEW OF WELLINGTON.

is seen to full advantage from the sea. As in the case of other brick buildings in the town, it is strengthened by interweaving thin bands of iron between the courses of bricks, and other measures are adopted to make it "earthquake-proof." One or two sharp shocks have been experienced since its completion—sufficient to set the bells in the clock-tower ringing—but no damage was done beyond dislodging a little plaster from the ceiling in one of the rooms. Needless to say, the "old inhabitants" buy their stamps in fear and trembling, and hasten out of the building again as soon as possible. Such a tempting of Providence they regard as absolutely impious, and they look forward with cheerful resignation to the time when the splendid pile shall be laid in ruins, as a striking exemplification of the truth of their Cassandra-like prophecies.

"Earthquakes don't send no warning when they're a-coming," said one worthy old settler to me the other day, "and because we haven't had a big shake lately, it's no reason why we shan't have one some of these days, when we're not expecting of it." In saying this, my friend expressed what is unquestionably the feeling of many of those who came to Port Nicholson in 1841 to found the settlement, when what is now a busy

little city, with tramway, telephones, electric light, and all the luxuries of civilisation, was a straggling Maori village, situate at the foot of wooded hills, on the shores of a harbour lake-like in its beauty. Younger and more venturesome spirits—venturesome now, though hardly more so than these same timid old folks were when they came with their lives in their hands, to make a prosperous English town in a place then peopled only by rude savages—of course, laugh at these fears, and have even begun in a small way to construct their dwelling-houses in brick. At present, however, this has only been done to a very slight extent, and a brick cottage is still an architectural phenomenon of great rarity.

However, I must not allow myself to gossip too long upon earthquakes. I will only add that unless some very severe shock occurs in Wellington, the invasion of wood and galvanised iron by bricks and cement, followed by the triumphal advance of the latter, is likely to continue, and in the course of another generation the title at the head of this article may become quite a misnomer, as applied to the city in which, and on which, I am now writing.

