

THE HOUSE THAT JERRY BUILT.

by
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I VIEWED the house for the first time in the happiest and most hopeful circumstances. The sun shone and the birds twittered, and the clinker-strewn road with the broken fence on the other side seemed rather picturesque than otherwise. My wife was greatly pleased with everything. Far be it from me to call my wife fickle, but it is a fact that she has since changed her mind.

But on this occasion, when first my villa burst upon our gaze (if only it had never burst again in more surprising ways!), everything was seen at its best advantage. True, the "five minutes from the station" of the advertisement seemed a very modest estimate after we had floundered a mile through the mud of roads that were not yet there; but we told each other that our natural eagerness had made the way seem longer than it was. In this we did an injustice to the advertiser's imagination: a faculty which had leaped far beyond the present possibilities of a raging motor-car on a smooth road; an imagination that pierced the veil of years and contemplated the distant future when villa-tenants shall reach their railway-stations in flying-

machines every morning. Five minutes may not be out of the question then.

The style of my villa's architecture was a style I have observed in many new suburbs. It has no very definite name, and I believe each speculative builder gives it a name in accordance with his own taste and fancy. As often as not he does not hesitate to call it the style of the late Queen Anne. The speculative builder is a prudent man, not desirous of getting into trouble, and he has probably ascertained that Queen Anne is dead.

It is a gallant and tempestuous style of art, in which every detail does its best most valorously to outstare all the others. It is clever, too. You may fancy that the doorstep is stone; but, no—it is an ingenious sort of composition which crumbles steadily and quietly, and no doubt has the advantage of being softer for tender feet. A rash observer would tell you that the gable was half-timbered; but in reality the "timbers" are just streaks of brown paint over the plaster—much more easy to renew than timber, and handier to carry up a ladder. There are columns stuck about here and there, too, that you might suppose to be stone at least

as solid as the doorstep; but you are sold again—they are not even that; they are wooden cylinders with iron bars up the centres, and no doubt there is some great advantage in this device if only I had time to think it out. As to the thin coat of plaster which makes the wall angles look also like stone, that has one very great advantage over the genuine material—from the speculative builder's point of view. It is an advantage shared by all the other substitutions I have named; but if you ask the speculative builder what this advantage is he will not tell you, though you may observe a twinkle in his eye. It is a trade secret. Every speculative builder is sworn not to betray trade secrets—sworn over a shovelful of *real* mortar, kept for the purpose. It is the only shovelful in the trade.

The builder of my villa is the landlord, though at first he tried his utmost to induce me to take that honourable title on myself. He expressed himself amazed to hear that I had no higher ambition than to be a mere tenant. A man of my eminence, he said—he had made up his mind about my eminence before he heard my name—a man of my eminence, distinction, wealth, and—I am sure he meant to have added—personal loveliness, owed it to his own dignity and self-respect to be landlord of his own house. Indeed, to do the thing properly and establish his credit beyond question, he ought also to be landlord of the house next door. And, by a singular coincidence, the house next door was for sale, too, the pair having been built together.

We "went over" the house in company with the builder; and here I must record a circumstance that fills me with admiration for that remarkable man. It is a fact that he opened every door in the house (including cup-

board doors) and two of the windows, without breaking a single thing. Not one. Not a lock, a handle, a hinge, a frame, or a panel broke under the strain. In my foolish inexperience I thought little of this at the time, but now I marvel how he did it. It must be another trade secret.

I did *not* buy the house, nor the one next door. But I took my villa on a lease—a repairing lease. The builder thought it would be almost an insult to offer me any humbler tenancy than a repairing lease. And as to the liability—what repairs could a new house possibly require? So I escaped the insult and had the repairs instead.

The first repair was required the day we moved. The key broke in the front-door lock, and a man had to climb in at a window and unscrew the lock from the door. He unscrewed the lock, but first he nearly cut himself in two; for the sash-line chose the moment when he was climbing in at the window to break, and drop the sash on him. He said he was quite sure that several of his ribs were broken, and he strongly suspected that his spine was dislocated, at least; and he hinted that the remedy instantly needed was beer.

I am afraid that none of the removal-men understood the

builder's trade secrets; they were not sufficiently gentle with my villa. They pulled all the handles off the doors and some of the fasteners off the windows through rashness in opening and shutting them. And they did not think out possibilities beforehand. There was a wardrobe, for instance, for which my villa had a constitutional antipathy, and the ensuing warfare between the two objects was what first brought home to me the full responsibility of a repairing lease; for the villa had altogether the worst of the



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battle, and got seriously wounded in every encounter.

The wardrobe would go in at the front door well enough, but that was tactical deception—a sort of strategic retreat on the part of the villa to draw its enemy into a disastrous position. The real line of defence was the stairs. They had been constructed most skilfully with a single view to the exclusion of that wardrobe. Wherever the way looked so plain and simple that there was a temptation to take the position with a rush, there some corner or projection was lying in wait to attack the invader in flank and wedge it fast. The wardrobe didn't seem to mind a bit, and at every fresh assault it took a piece out of its adversary somewhere; but it got "no forrarder," and at last it was taken prisoner altogether, with three of its corners jammed into three different holes in the plaster, and its under edge gripped by a splintery gash in the handrail.

So it remained for several minutes; and then the balusters gave way. The removal-man who was dragged from under the *débris* assured me that his skull was fractured, and that it would take quite a lot of beer to save his life.

We abandoned the stairs and tried other points of attack. But my villa seemed invulnerable to this wardrobe, notwithstanding that the wardrobe was by far the stronger article of the two. It left its mark on the

house at every onslaught, and retired unharmed and, I fancied, smiling—but it retired; whereas the villa, sadly mauled, and accumulating a horrible repair bill with every skirmish, still gallantly kept the assailant at bay. Till at last I began madly to wonder if it would not be cheaper, on the whole, to take the house down and build it up again round the wardrobe.

I was considering this appalling alternative when the foreman suggested that we might try the bedroom window. If only the men's

constitutions could be built up first—beer being recommended for the purpose—he thought they could manage to hoist the wardrobe up the slope of a ladder, and so shove it obliquely through the window, the sash having been first removed.

I received the proposition with joy, and proceeded at once to build up the men's constitutions, which seemed to have run down very low indeed. We sent up a man, who had no difficulty in getting out

the sash; indeed, it came out much sooner than he expected, bringing an assortment of fittings and fastenings with it, and subsiding on his head with a clamorous tinkle of broken glass; so that his constitution had to be taken in hand again and built up afresh. But the foreman's suggestion succeeded in the end, though, indeed, the wardrobe was a tight fit. It was shoved and hauled up the ladder with much labour and constitutional disturbance (beer again), and, hastening upstairs to meet



"THE BALUSTERS GAVE WAY."

it, I had the felicity of observing the victorious object coming triumphantly into the bedroom, bringing the whole of the window-frame with it, like a collar.

The wardrobe was all right, and there was a quiet twinkle about its keyholes that betokened complacent triumph. Fortunately it seemed a good-humoured piece of furniture; if it had lost its temper in the course of hostilities nothing could have saved my villa from total destruction.

The wardrobe had hit the house pretty hard, but the effect of the carpets was alarming, too; or, rather, not so much of the carpets

as of the tacking of them down. For with the concussion the ceilings below began first to crack and then to sag gracefully like stretched curtains; so I had to stop the tacking and persuade the removal-men to put down the furniture very carefully and lightly. The nervous delicacy required to carry out these instructions was obtained by the administration of more beer; and by the exercise on my own part of great care in walking about the rooms, and the use of list slippers, I was able to keep the ceilings at the original curve for several days. Then I rashly started to knock nails in the walls to hang pictures on, and as I knocked the ceiling dropped on my head in uneasy instalments. More, the jar shook other things loose, such as mantel-pieces and cupboard frames; and there was

no balance of advantage after all, for the nails all came out when they felt the weight of the pictures, and brought down pieces of the wall with them. So I tried replacing them with longer nails, which made a considerable difference; the difference being that larger instalments of the ceiling fell more frequently on my head as I drove the nails in, and much bigger pieces of the wall

accompanied them when they fell out again. I decided that the pictures would look better on the floor.

The wear and tear of moving in had mellowed my villa considerably, and given it in most places a venerable air of antique dilapidation that compared favourably with that exhibited by the most genuinely ancient baronial hall I know. I tried to get as much consolation out of this reflection as I could, for I had a sort of presentiment that I should want some consolation when the bill came in.

I found out many curious things, and altogether generally improved my education,

in the first few days of my tenancy; and before long I was a deal wiser, and poorer, and wetter, and dustier, and angrier, and generally deteriorated than before I came to my villa, and had several entirely new experiences in rheumatism, as well as an improved form of bronchitis. It was not the bath that caused the bronchitis, however. I do not know the scientific name of what I suffered from that, but if you have ever sat down in a new bath full of hot water, and shortly afterward discovered that the hot water has made the enamel stick better than the most expensive sort of glue, you will understand what I mean. I cannot say precisely whether I tore more enamel off the bath or the bath tore more skin off me, but I think we averaged it out fairly even, and honours were easy.

But it was a long time before I was.

For a long while the joinery saved us the cost of a cheap barometer. It bulged up and stuck and burst itself in wet weather, and shrunk and gaped wide in dry. I can just remember a little toy villa that stood in my grandmother's breakfast-room, with two doors in it and two inhabitants, one of whom kept indoors in dry weather and the other in



"AS I KNOCKED THE CEILING DROPPED ON MY HEAD."

wet. My villa had a somewhat similar property, with the important difference that everybody stayed in when the weather was inclined to dampness, because none of the doors would open to let us out. After a time, however, these violent changes in the woodwork abated, and it settled down to a more or less permanent shrinkage and gaping, which had the advantage of enabling one to inspect the adjoining room without opening the door, and entirely freed our servants from that troublesome backache and cold in the eye that are prevalent in households where observation is restricted to keyholes.

The floor-boards shrunk, too, and let up such steady hurricanes from some subterraneous cave of winds that the carpets rose and fell like the property sea in a theatre, and the lighter articles of furniture were blown out of window or up the chimneys, while persons of less than eighteen-stone weight—but, there, I must be careful to avoid any statement that unbelievers might be tempted to misrepresent as exaggerated. Let it suffice to say that the articles lost though the cracks — when the hurricanes were in abeyance — grew steadily in size day by day, beginning with such things as studs and cuff-links, and going on to property of a larger gauge each day, till, what with the windows and chimneys on the windy days and the floor-chasms on the others, the household was gradually impoverished of everything smaller than a coal-scuttle. I bore it for long without taking up the boards, until at last the baby, unobserved for a moment,

ventured too near an unusually large crack, and—but, steady again; there are people so ignorant of the possibilities of a speculative builder's villa that they would not believe even *that*.

At any rate, I took up the boards *then* and recovered most of my missing property—to say nothing of the baby. Also I discovered that whatever ill-wishers might say of my landlord they could not justly liken him to the foolish man that built his house upon the sand; for I saw nothing anywhere distantly approaching the appearance of sand, but more than one sense bore witness that my villa was established on a foundation of beef-tins and defunct cats. This striking fact no doubt accounted in some degree for the diversifications of the architecture of Queen Anne, which surprised me on mornings when I surveyed my villa from the road. Oblique zigzags and other lines of less definable shapes appeared upon the brickwork, and the windows began to

change places. This, the landlord assured me, was nothing but “a little settlement”—a statement that relieved me a great deal, for I had suspected a large earthquake. “A little settlement,” it appeared, was a sort of architectural thrush, measles, teething, whooping-cough, or what-not, that every respectable house went through in its infancy. I was glad to find it was nothing worse than that; but even an architectural whooping-cough can be disconcerting when it lets in a fresh expanse of landscape almost daily into one room after another.



“A LITTLE SETTLEMENT.”

But landscape was not the only thing that passed freely through the walls, inward and outward. Rain, hail, fog, wind, sleet, snow, smoke, and gas went to and fro regardless of bricks and mortar; the gas also went regardless of pipes; and cats and dogs will not surprise me soon. As to ghosts—well, if I saw a weird human figure coming through the wall of my villa, I should know at once that the settlement was getting worse, and this was a burglar. A real ghost would disdain to pass through such a wall as mine; the job would do him no credit at all.

I hear that settlement making extensions and improvements in the dead silence of night. A quiet, intermittent clicking and grinding is the sound, as a rule, only noticeable when the household is deep in slumber. But occasionally something particular happens—some fundamental beef-tin buckles or some dead cat turns in its grave—and there is a sharp crack, and I know that in the morning I shall find an extra window somewhere, or another and a wider laceration across the fair face of Queen Anne. I am continually strengthening that front wall, too, with fresh thicknesses of wall-paper.

I think it must be on such occasions as these that my chimneys grow crooked. They were not very straight in the beginning; but now their sinuosities would break an eel's back. Sweeps' brooms get lost in them and have to be paid for and left there. And then they catch fire and attract fire-engines—which also have to be paid for. When I look back upon my tenancy—not a long one, either—it often seems to me that it would have been really cheaper on the whole to have adopted the builder's suggestion, bought my villa—and instantly pulled it down.

There is a sort of democratic quality about the house—an equal distribution of advantages among the deserving rooms, so to speak. Thus, when onions are being cooked, the drawing-room gets as much of the smell as the kitchen; and when the dining-room fire is lit the smoke comes out of the wrong ends of all the other chimneys. When the water-pipes burst, too—and they often do things of that sort—there is a very general and impartial distribution of the water; and as to gas, while the leaks and explosions take their turns very systematically in the different rooms, the smell is always so generally diffused that it has become indissolubly associated with the tenderest ties of home life; and never again can I experience the

full flavour of domestic felicity without a good gas escape close under my nose.

Now, I wonder why it is that the mere mention of my nose should instantly remind me of the drains at my villa? Extraordinary, isn't it? Well, the drains were most conveniently laid, nice and close to the surface, and rising gradually as they led away from the house. There was never any difficulty about finding them. The gardener often finds them still with a spade or a rake—once he found one with a broom. No difficulty about knowing where to put them back, either, if you happened to fetch any up in digging—anywhere would do. It wasn't as though they'd been cemented at the joints, or led anywhere in particular. They had been put in in compliance with the prevalent superstition in favour of having drains of some sort, and such was the perfection of the system that if you pulled up a drain-pipe here and there and used it for a chimney-pot or anything of that sort it made no difference whatever.

I have left off having dinner-parties, not being a lawyer, and having some doubts as to the precise legal liability attaching to a tenant with a repairing lease whose guest gets killed in carrying out a dinner engagement. I had a little dinner once, by way of house-warming, soon after we came in, but I am not persevering. I was not so much disturbed by the tile that shot off the roof and laid a friend low in the front garden—not so much as he was, at any rate—because that is a thing that might happen to anybody, and people ought to look out for things like that, and, after all, he had not actually arrived. And although it was a little inconvenient to have the drawing-room hearth suddenly sink at the front and pitch the fireplace, with the fire in it, face downward on the hearth-rug, still that is the sort of thing that does happen when a young house catches a settlement; and, we were going into the dining-room presently, in any case. But I had made a rather serious mistake in the dining-room. For fear of accidents I had knocked down the looser parts of the sagging ceiling with a broom, ignorant that I was weakening the main support of the floor above; for in my house the floors and ceilings were devised and constructed on a new and ingenious principle: the floor held up the ceiling from above, while the ceiling supported the floor from below. So that when the well-meaning but incautious nurse walked across the bedroom floor to inspect the sleeping baby, first a large piece of ceiling fell

into the soup, and then the nurse followed it, in a tempestuous tangle of legs and arms and boards and plaster. And somehow I sort of got discouraged at last.

We went to bed somewhat discontented that night, and we took our umbrellas with us; for the tile that had cancelled the invi-

tation of one of our guests was not the only one gone from the roof.

I am now having the house painted all over just to hold it together temporarily till I have had an interview with the builder. I am, in fact, anticipating another settlement—a final one. I have bought a large pole-axe.



"THEN THE NURSE FOLLOWED."