

HOUSE-HUNTING AS AN OUTDOOR AMUSEMENT

Since Adam and Eve went hand in hand out of the gates of Paradise, the world has travailed under an infinite succession of house-hunts. To-day in every eligible suburb you may see New Adams and New Eves by the score, with rusty keys and pink order-forms in hand, wandering still, in search of the ideal home. To them it is anything but an amusement. Most of these poor pilgrims look simply tired, some are argumentative in addition, but all are disappointed, anxious, and unhappy, their hands dirty with prying among cisterns, and their garments soiled from cellar walls. All, in the exaltation of the wooing days, saw at least the indistinct reflection of the perfect house, but now the Quest is irrevocably in hand they seek and do not find. And such a momentous question it is to them. Are they not choosing the background, the air and the colour, as it were, of the next three or four years, the cardinal years, too! of their lives?

Perhaps the exquisite exasperation of the business for the man who hunts among empty houses for a home is, that it is so entirely a choice of second-hand, or at least ready-made goods. To me, at least, there is a decided suggestion of the dead body in your empty house that has once been occupied. Here, like pale ghosts upon the wall paper, are outlined

the pictures of the departed tenant; here are the nails of the invisible curtains, this dent in the wall is all that is sensible of a vanished piano. I could fancy all these things creeping back to visibility as the light grew dim. Someone was irritable in the house, perhaps, and a haunting fragrance of departed quarrels is to be found in the loose door-handles, and the broken bell-pull. Then the blind in the bedroom has a broken string. He was a beer-drinker, for the drip of the tap has left its mark in the cellar; a careless man, for this wall is a record of burst water-pipes; and rough in his methods, as his emendation of the garden gate--a remedy rather worse than the disease--shows. The mark of this prepotent previous man is left on the house from cellar to attic. It is his house really, not mine. And against these haunting individualities set the horrible wholesale flavour, the obvious dexterous builder's economies of a new house. Yet, whatever your repulsion may be, the end is always the same. After you have asked for your ideal house a hundred times or so you begin to see you do not get it. You go the way of your kind. All houses are taken in despair.

But such disgusts as this are for the man who really aims at taking a house. The artist house-hunter knows better than that. He hunts for the hunt's sake, and does not mar his work with a purpose. Then house-hunting becomes a really delightful employment, and one strangely neglected in this country. I have heard, indeed, of old ladies who enlivened the intervals of their devotions in this manner, but to the general run of people the thing is unknown. Yet a more entertaining way of spending a half-holiday--having regard to current taste--it should be

difficult to imagine. An empty house is realistic literature in the concrete, full of hints and allusions if a little wanting in tangible humanity, and it outdoes the modern story in its own line, by beginning as well as ending in a note of interrogation. That it is not more extensively followed I can only explain by supposing that its merits are generally unsuspected. In which case this book should set a fashion.

One singular thing the house-hunter very speedily discovers is, that the greater portion of the houses in this country are owned by old gentlemen or old ladies who live next door. After a certain age, and especially upon retired tradespeople, house property, either alone or in common with gardening, exercises an irresistible fascination. You always know you are going to meet a landlord or landlady of this type when you read on your order to view, "Key next door but one." Calling next door but one, you are joined after the lapse of a few minutes by a bald, stout gentleman, or a lady of immemorial years, who offers to go over "the property" with you. Apparently the intervals between visits to view are spent in slumber, and these old people come out refreshed and keen to scrutinise their possible new neighbours. They will tell you all about the last tenant, and about the present tenants on either side, and about themselves, and how all the other houses in the neighbourhood are damp, and how they remember when the site of the house was a cornfield, and what they do for their rheumatism. As one hears them giving a most delightful vent to their loquacity, the artistic house-hunter feels all the righteous self-applause of a kindly deed. Sometimes they get extremely friendly. One old gentleman--to whom anyone under forty must

have seemed puerile--presented the gentle writer with three fine large green apples as a kind of earnest of his treatment: apples, no doubt, of some little value, since they excited the audible envy of several little boys before they were disposed of.

Sometimes the landlord has even superintended the building of the house himself, and then it often has peculiar distinctions--no coal cellar, or a tower with turrets, or pillars of ornamental marble investing the portico with disproportionate dignity. One old gentleman, young as old gentlemen go, short of stature, of an agreeable red colour, and with short iron-grey hair, had a niche over the front door containing a piece of statuary. It gave one the impression of the Venus of Milo in chocolate pyjamas. "It was nood at first," said the landlord, "but the neighbourhood is hardly educated up to art, and objected. So I gave it that brown paint."

On one expedition the artistic house-hunter was accompanied by Euphemia. Then it was he found Hill Crest, a vast edifice at the incredible rent of £40 a year, with which a Megatherial key was identified. It took the two of them, not to mention an umbrella, to turn this key. The rent was a mystery, and while they were in the house--a thunderstorm kept them there some time--they tried to imagine the murder. From the top windows they could see the roofs of the opposite houses in plan.

"I wonder how long it would take to get to the top of the house from the bottom?" said Euphemia.

"Certainly longer than we could manage every day," said the artistic house-hunter. "Fancy looking for my pipe in all these rooms. Starting from the top bedroom at the usual time, I suppose one would arrive downstairs to breakfast about eleven, and then we should have to be getting upstairs again by eight o'clock if we wanted any night's rest worth having. Or we might double or treble existence, live a Gargantuan life to match the house, make our day of forty-eight hours instead of twenty-four. By doubling everything we should not notice the hole it made in our time getting about the place. Perhaps by making dinner last twice as long, eating twice as much, and doing everything on the scale of two to one, we might adapt ourselves to our environment in time, grow twice as big."

"Then we might be very comfortable here," said Euphemia.

They went downstairs again. By that time it was thundering and raining heavily. The rooms were dark and gloomy. The big side door, which would not shut unless locked from the outside, swayed and banged as the gusts of wind swept round the house. But they had a good time in the front kitchen, playing cricket with an umbrella and the agent's order crumpled into a ball. Presently the artistic house-hunter lifted Euphemia on to the tall dresser, and they sat there swinging their feet patiently until the storm should leave off and release them.

"I should feel in this kitchen," said Euphemia, "like one of my little

dolls must have felt in the dolls'-house kitchen I had once. The top of her head just reached the level of the table. There were only four plates on the dresser, but each was about half her height across----"

"Your reminiscences are always entertaining," said the artistic house-hunter; "still they fail to explain the absorbing mystery of this house being to let at £40 a year." The problem raised his curiosity, but though he made inquiries he found no reason for the remarkably low rent or the continued emptiness of the house. It was a specimen puzzle for the house-hunter. A large house with a garden of about half an acre, and with accommodation for about six families, going begging for £40 a year. Would it let at eighty? Some such problem, however, turns up in every house-hunt, and it is these surprises that give the sport its particular interest and delight. Always provided the mind is not unsettled by any ulterior notion of settling down.