

ON LIVING IN A HOUSE

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THERE are other things beside houses for people to live in, and not everything that has four walls and a chimney can be called a house. Men may live in wagons, tents, and ships, in hotels and railway trains, in clubs and in apartments. There are those that stay in barracks, and those that wander homeless in the street. It will be remembered that little Gavroche and his protégés took shelter in the elephant. The great man who changes from mansion to mansion can scarcely be said to live in a house. Sick folk in their hospital beds and lunatics in their asylums, kings in their palaces and prisoners in their cells, do not come properly within the meaning of the phrase. Of the population that throngs the streets of a modern city, perhaps fewer than half can in any real sense be said to live in a house, and even on the farms the proportion would be difficult to ascertain.

A house is not a home, and a home is not a house, though one may naturally imply the other. Cliff-dwellers, either those whose abodes have been studied by archaeologists or those who now dwell in sky-scraping cities, may have had and have homes; they have no houses. Apartments are not houses; two rooms and a bath can by no means be called a house. Perhaps a single and unattached person can make a home in such a place, and there is here no intention to dispute the claim that a home is greater and better than a house. They are not the same thing; and there is much sentimental confusion in the words "They have bought a home", or "A fine suburban home for sale." Homes cannot be sold, though houses that form the raw material of homes can. But homes may be made in tents, wigwams, apartments, wherever the material fire will burn; on a mud hearth outdoors or in the vacuous imbecillity of a gas grate. A home is a spiritual thing, whereas a house is good solid material, and must acquire a sacramental value before it becomes a home. In almost any sort of place that will keep out the rain the bachelor man or woman may gather books, pictures, all the clinging impedimenta that become as necessary to us as our flesh and blood. Here are the physical ingredients with which one, though alone as far as relatives and family and friends are concerned, may furnish forth a home, a fitting and happy spot for one's spiritual activities, a place in which one's soul works as happily as a good craftsman with his favourite tools.

A house in the country and a house in the city are two different things, and only a person of bad judgment would try to make them alike. At the same time it should be remembered that their fundamental resemblance is much more important than their superficial difference. Any respectable farmhouse has intimate and friendly relations with the great barn and all those buildings that used to be referred to as "offices" in some good old novels. Sometimes these offices used to include even blacksmith shops and diminutive cooperages. In such an environment it is easy to understand the use of the word "town" as it occurs in *Old Mortality*. Any proper farmhouse is intimately associated with its own small world, and spatial contiguity is a fair test of that intimacy of association. The city house may be in a state of utter isolation from its nearest neighbour. There may be no conversation over the back fence, even when there is a back fence. One may be, perhaps often should be, ignorant of the name of the man next door. But the place of business, which may be miles distant, is known as the farmer knows his barn, and the invisible filaments of daily custom extend in erratic fashion over the geography of the city. In the country, too, the kitchen is the important room, and the regular avenue of approach to the rest of the house. If it is called a living room, and the rougher work relegated to a little place behind that may be called the back kitchen, the system is not essentially altered. Sometimes the parlour, as it used to be called, may have been—may even yet, in some severely Puritan houses, be—a little gloomy. One remembers the description and may have seen that front room. There the best carpet, often a gorgeous affair, reposed untroubled by the invading rays of the impertinent sun. There the family Bible and the family album lay in calm repose upon the dark and solid centre-table. There the stiff chairs stood with awkward and angular gesture beside the shadowy wall. There the portraits of departed ancestors gazed dolorously at each other through the dim light. At stated times the careful housewife softly looked within. At weddings and funerals the room was opened, and when the clergyman called, and on occasions of high festivity. But rooms of this sort have not been numerous within the memory of men now living. At its worst, the room represented an honourable idea. It was meant to be in the house what Sunday was in the week; but in never followed Sunday out of doors. And at its worst it was better than the frivolous stupidity of some modern drawing-rooms.

With all the differences, too, the city house and the country house agree in their essentials. They furnish the opportunity

for rest, and warmth, and food, and solitude, or the company that one likes best. In a northern climate, the fire is the essential thing, and provided it warms the house it performs its function, whether it be of blazing logs in the great kitchen fireplace or of honest anthracite in the furnace in the cellar. Food is essential; but it does not make much difference in its physical and spiritual value whether it be produced on the farm and brought up from the vegetable bin or meat barrel before it comes to the pot, or delivered in brown paper parcels by the kindly grocer or butcher. Sleep is essential; and here perhaps the country house has the advantage. The intense silence and darkness of a quiet night in the country can scarcely be produced amid the rumbling cars and glaring lights of the city. Solitude is essential; if one cannot provide for it in one's house, there is something wrong with the house. Company is perhaps not so essential; but it is often desirable, and it is largely a man's own fault if he does not find the company that he likes best when he comes in at night, even if it is only the company of his pipe. All these things, with the favour of Providence, may be found in the city and country; even in the suburbs.

One of the first questions that arises is whether or not the man who rents a house may be said to live in it. In this country the question cannot be said to exist in the case of a farmhouse. They are not seriously rented. In the city the answer must be in the affirmative. Any man who rents an entire house can be said, if he dwells therein, to live in it. At first sight it might appear that the monthly worry of rent would remove that sense of security that is necessary for properly living; but the buyer of a house, even though he be one of the blessed ones that pay cash and bear no mortgage, knows that security is merely relative, and that as far as regular and unavoidable charges go, no ultimate difference separates him who buys from him who rents. The tenant pays the landlord, presumably by the month, and is then free as long as his lease runs. He can torture the owner of his tenement whenever repairs are needed, and has no anxiety as to the ultimate fate of the house. The man who lives in his own house soon realizes that his tenure also is temporary, and that in a more imminent sense than the general certainty that his house, like all other earthly things, must soon fall into the ready hands of an heir. He is free from the monthly vexation of rent, but is obnoxious to the annual plague of taxes, under pain of seeing the harpies of the treasury dispose of his property for their own greedy ends. Nature meantime, with cynical impartiality and gleeful alacrity, wears out paint and wood; and no landlord can

be invoked to repair the loss. His plumbing is a small thing but his own, and marvellously uncertain. Those who wake from sleep to the music of a bursting pipe and the gentle gurgle of the stream that escapes into the ceiling below can never evade the bills of the workman, whether he be deft of hand and courteous of demeanour, or of raucous voice and leaden foot.

Yet there are, probably, upon the whole, facts that incline the scale in favour of the owner. It is something to own even a square foot of land:

*Est aliquid, quocunque loco, quocunque recessu,
Unius sese dominum fecisse lacertae,*

subject only to the general regulations of the community. The superficial area may be negligible. But the roots of it lie in the centre of the earth, and above, except for birds, and an occasional airplane, one's domain is little interrupted to the limits of the universe. One's neighbours on the right and on the left may be Mr. Chadband and Mr. Stiggins; above he is the man in the moon or the learned denizen of Mars. A man can take root in his own soil. In the country, of course, the house and all the other buildings constitute only a portion of the farm, and the relations between house and land are no immediate concern of this paper. In the city, on the other hand, the yard is, as it were, only another room of the house, an outdoor room that serves its purpose chiefly in fine weather. There is a fashion in some cities of doing away with boundary fences. A generation that lives so largely in cars has not much time for sitting in the yard. Yet the old fence still has its purpose. A man who is not interested in the *meum* and *tuum* of his property will have rather hazy ideas about the rights of his neighbour. A yard may contain a garage. It may also, if it is the yard of a house no longer new, contain a miniature barn or an ancient workshop. Trees may grow there. In summer one may swing a hammock. There one may invite a friend for a peaceful smoke. It is pleasant to share one's own property with the friend; it would be rather dull to have no other division from the neighbours than the invisible line of the deed in the strong box. Civilization is largely a matter of making distinctions, and a fence is a necessary distinction. Then, too, if properly treated, it may become a thing of beauty, supporting a wealth of green in summer and in autumn a glory of foliage.

House and yard must always have one master. It is better to rent the smallest and meanest cottage or the newest and most hideous bungalow and to hold it in undisturbed possession, even though one rent from a poor man and a mean man who cannot

spend for repairs and who can extract the most exorbitant rent, than to share the most spacious dwelling with the family of even an entire stranger, not to mention relatives and friends. Every house has an inside and an outside, and of two families one must keep always on one of these sides and one on the other.

The outside of the house is of great, though not of paramount, importance. Everyone goes in and out at times, and some people go through this routine three times *per diem*. It makes some difference even with one's dinner if the approach to it is unpleasant, and it is not a pleasant approach to one's dinner to come to a house that is glaring or obvious or unpleasantly discoloured or in grossly bad repair. It need not be graceful in architecture, or of a delicate taste in paint. Houses, especially in northern towns, are generally not beautiful. A peaceful, quiet ugliness that smiles unobtrusively into its bleak surroundings is about all that can be aimed at. A house, like a man, should excite no attention by outward appearance.

It takes time to get acquainted with a house. Each one has character, history, and antecedents; each one, at any rate, that has been for any appreciable time escaped from the hands of the builder. Its material structure has been there from the first, but it has to ripen for a time to become a genuine personality. That is why one may get as much satisfaction out of buying as out of building. There is in one's own building a possibility of procuring the location, structure, rooms, and convenience that one wants. It is, however, at least likely that lack of funds or some other trick of fortune may leave one depleted, dissatisfied, and ill-natured at the end. Even if the builder carries out all his promises and one has no technical fault to find, the thing may not suit. It is not hard to put down on paper certain specifications for a building; but only a genius can picture it as it will be when complete. Even if it does thoroughly suit, there is no mystery about it; merely a glow of pride as from a minor act of creation. But even this glow and the comfortable sense of self-approbation will disappear with the passage of time.

When one buys an old house, a used or second-hand house, one of course runs the risk of being imposed on by owner and agent; but it is not impossible that, unless one knows a great deal about building materials and workmen's habits and even the peculiarities of architects, one may find shoddy or careless work in the house that one has built. A new house must be brought up, and it is very hard to tell how it will turn out. The old house is a developed character, and one should be able to tell from the atmosphere

of it whether it is a character one can endure living with. It is of course a new acquaintance, even if one has passed it every day for years. It will surely offer a new revelation of itself when the time comes to move in. When it stands stripped of furniture and disguising draperies, there is little further opportunity for deceit. One sees its fundamental properties as never before, and one can tell whether the thing is honest and sane, or tricky and untrustworthy. If one has made a careful examination, there should be small chance for disappointment. The cellar wall should have been carefully observed, and the size and soundness of sills and timber. One knows that one must get fitted into it as into a new universe; but it will alter itself or allow itself to be altered more than any universe has been known to do.

Who that has moved into any unfurnished house, rented or bought, does not know the ghastly day when the old furniture is out and the new furniture is not in; when the windows are covered with some opaque substance, perhaps newspapers, to shut out the inquisitive gaze? The sun glares garishly in wherever the glass is unprotected, and the empty rooms resound with a sound of dreary menace to the tread of every foot. If one has occasion to visit the place during the hours of darkness, especially if one has taken a bed there in readiness for the morrow or because the family are away and one can thus avoid some charges, there may be a new experience. Little noises, little bare noises, uncovered by the stripping off of carpets and curtains, sound restless and quivering on the midnight air. A shower of rain rings on the roof like artillery. Lightning is vivid and desolating; between the crashes of thunder the ghosts gibber across the floors. If the storm passes and the moon comes out, the light shows cold, hostile, and unrelenting.

In the morning everything seems different. The house implores attention. If it is an honest house, it does not hide its foibles or impose on the new owner. Like a good ship or a good engine, it asks only decent treatment. Give it reasonable paint and repairs where necessary, and a reasonable suite of furniture, and it will begin to adapt itself to the nature and demands of its master and his family; and they must in turn be prepared in some measure to adapt themselves to it. Only an unenlightened heretic can deny the value and relevancy of material things to the human soul, and anyone can see the effect of furniture upon character if he will look into the *Spoils of Poynton* or commune with his own patient arm-chair. Everyone knows the awful piles of timber that represent furniture in some houses, the flimsy trash that does

duty in others. The furniture must be such as to express the personality of its owner, and that without outraging the convictions of the house that holds them both. It is all a form of expression; and house, furniture, and inhabitants should express themselves with no unpleasant discord.

The number of rooms is of some importance, the size of rooms is of some importance; but these things are in relation to the number, size, and occupations of the dwellers, and can be modified and altered by careful arrangement. In every house there should be at least one large room, or two rooms that can be thrown into one. Somewhere in every house that is to contain even a small family, one should be able to get at times a sense of room to spare, a little hint of spaciousness. It accords ill with mean and petty things. One must sit there now and then before a cheerful fire and through the windows watch the treetops standing against the sky. Thus to sit and see the changing hues of sunset and feel the brightening fire as twilight draws on is a necessary part of every person's education. Other rooms may be to taste. This room is the next essential after the fire itself.

Fire in its proper receptacle is the central point in any house, and does not seem likely to be dispossessed until absolute poverty or the final action of another ice age has ruined or abolished the race. Some can remember the old open fire-place when it was still a thing of utility, and not merely an aesthetic ornament. It was too large for coal, and there is not wood enough left in the world for it now. But there was something dishonourable in its taking off. The vast expanse was walled off, papered over; and some neat little prig of a stove stood in front of the place where it had been. In the country the great brick oven was sometimes left like an innocuous vermiform appendix. In towns and cities, when a furnace was put in, it often killed the cheerful little fire-place in order to make use of the chimney for its own purposes. In both instances the proportion of heat produced to fuel burnt was increased; in both instances charm was sacrificed to efficiency. But people will not live with too much efficiency nor without the charm of an open grate; and the kindly open fire comes back into our houses in despite of all utilitarian logic. Why has fire something of the deep and subtle attraction of blood?

The kitchen stove is a worthy creature, and that man is not to be envied who has not built a fire therein, if only for the purpose of warming water. The miracle is always the same even though one knows all the chemistry of the process. One puts paper that may be full of lies, and kindling wood and black stones

of coal in, applies friction to a little stick with a painted end, and shortly thereafter sees the cheerful flame, then hears the hum of the kettle or the subdued groan of the pipes. A gas stove is a convenient thing; it performs its own little miracle, but in this climate it has one drawback: it will not heat, and any proper kitchen should be equipped with both sorts. In the country kitchen the stove can glow with the coals of good maple or beech, woods that add a nameless and pleasant note to the atmosphere of the room or the flavour of the cooking.

In the cold of winter, the kitchen stove and the pleasant grate can at their best serve only as adjuncts to the great furnace below. Modern city houses seem naturally to run to the furnace, and even the dear old base-burner is seen only in a diminished and diminishing number of dwellings. The furnace postulates generally pipes filled with hot water, and there are few sounds more quietly pleasant than the subdued murmur of these pipes on a cold day. There are various furnaces,—the gluttonous eater of uncounted tons of soft coal, the skeleton furnace with the mysterious machinery connected, that with its spiteful satellite devours the deceitful oil, and, perhaps still the standard, the faithful public benefactor that glows with the hearty anthracite. One learns to work it after many trials, and at first the toil is hard and the way dirty. But the reward of faithful service is great and sure. On some zero-minus morning in January one finds the house so comfortable that one can learn the temperature outside only by looking through the window at the thermometer. Other more modern mechanical means have been devised to secure the same result, but there is no triumph for a man in that. Much modern machinery tends to make the world safe for robots. A healthy man should do some manual labour at home; and if Janus be now entrusted to the care of the maid, Vesta is in recompense under the guardianship of the master. Other fires are casual, it may be romantic; the furnace cheers the very bones of the house. It has its whims, it is influenced by wind, dull calm, moisture; but with a little care and skill one learns to understand them. It builds great clinkers, it sulks like a spoiled child, it needs correction administered with firm will and unrelenting poker. Treatment of it may be both artistic and educational. One does not want a civilization in which the ordinary citizen knows only how to lick a stamp, press a button, or pull a diminutive lever.

Among other necessities and conveniences of a house the next is a good cook. Cooks are born and made; some may be married and some may be hired. The ideal cook should be born,

taught, and hired. She (for of course the ordinary man who lives in the ordinary house cannot afford a male cook) should either not be permitted to waste her ability in matrimony, or should have graduated from the ordinary cares of that state and devoted all her talents to the art of making good things to eat. There are very few things in this present evil world better than good things to eat. Dr. Johnson was scholar, philosopher, wit, and Christian; upon the whole, the most notable Englishman of the century that produced Gibbon and the great Earl of Chatham. It is unnecessary to recall to any civilized reader his most famous remark upon the subject of food; but perhaps some may not remember the occasion upon which he said, "It was not a dinner to ask a man to." His attitude should be for ever before the eyes of any housewife careless of the daily stew; and if she will approach the question of engaging a cook with Johnsonian care, the dangers of the divorce court are never likely to loom along her path. One may buy good food in good hotels; what married man or householder can frequently afford such luxury? The only safe way to live well is to live well at home; which thought reminds one of another of Johnson's famous dicta.

At times a man may be allowed to tinker around the kitchen himself, and occasions arise when the cook is out, the family away, and he must get his own meal, starve, or pay away money. Then the constructive intellect runs at its swiftest, but is divided now this way and now that. Eggs are dear, should one cook as many as two? Is there some cold meat? Where is the jam? Why does tea get so hot while boiling? A man can do without his supper if he can have a couple of eggs, a little cold meat, some jam, a little toast and tea, a small mince pie. It is permissible to any man to be able to cook one or two things well; he may be forgiven in view of the temptation for something as radical and far-reaching as steak and onions. But only a professional has a right to cook many things. For a normal layman to be a really good cook postulates a subtle and unscrupulous intellect that can scarcely fail to seize and maintain any unfair advantage over the duller wits of the uncooking commonalty. But any man deserves the holiday that comes as he sits alone while the dishes gleam in the tall cupboard, the kettle boils pleasantly, and bells and telephones may be neglected with joyful impunity.

After the fire, the big room, the cook, and the kitchen, the next necessity in the present condition of society is probably the clock. It is true that our ancestors lived without many clocks, and it is still possible to pass one's time and carry on a reasonable

amount of work on the farm while one is in a clockless condition. There nature has provided a fairly satisfactory method for measuring out the day. It is perhaps because she is interested in the work of the farm, so much more important than most of the occupations that people pursue in the city. But even on the farm the clock may be a great convenience, and in urban regions where people do things after the fashion of automata at specified times, it is quite unavoidable. There are various sorts of clocks, and within limits one may pick the kind one wants. But regard must be had to the fitness of things. If the house is of sufficient dignity, and the hall is of sufficient size, a tall old grandfather clock is a desirable thing; in a small house or a mean hall it merely emphasizes the owner's lack of taste. For the usual sort of man in the usual sort of house nothing of the kind is to be expected. He may be well content with a good time-keeper in his dining or sitting room. There are some little clocks with little, quick, impatient notes. They are to be avoided. They mean well, no doubt; but they are like fussy little people in a hurry, a continual source of vexation to their neighbours. They keep the time after a fashion; but keeping the time is after all only the most obvious and vulgar use of a clock. The real clock in the house should be solid and not too light in colour, never pale or glaring; and it must above all have a deep, silvery note. During the day it may be unheeded except when one is driven to consult it for business reasons. But if it has a good voice, it is a friend and companion through the long nights. It is perhaps better if it strikes the quarters. Then when one wakes in the opaque darkness of an uninteresting night, or at one of those dull and vexatious times when the moon will not shine and will not get out of the way, one will know whether to lie waiting for the hour or to go to sleep again. If the third quarter strikes, it is safe to lie and wait for the hour; if it is the first quarter or the half, it is better to count one's sheep with a view to regaining unconsciousness. It is easy, or at any rate easier, to sleep with the rich, genial note ringing in one's ears. One feels instinctively that all is now well with the world, that it is now safe to rest in peace. It is odd that the measurement of a relative term should be of so much importance in the economy of a house. Its passage so often means to us only a summons to dinner or to work. If we begin to speculate as to its meaning, we find no end in mazes of strange possibilities. But the measurer of time, with the gleaming dark case, the smooth and cheerful tick, the clean white face across which the black hands move remorselessly on their pilgrimage through time and towards eternity, above all,

the full, rich chime, and the sonorous ring of the stroke that records the irrevocable change of the future into the past, these constitute a satisfying experience to idealist and utilitarian, a genuine if minor good in itself.

From this point onward the requirements are not so uniform. There must be chairs to sit on, beds to sleep in, brooms to sweep with; there must also in any sort of civilized house be books to read, and some sort of music-producing implement. The latter should be chosen with care, not as a thing to serve a merely passive and idle listener, but as something that requires for the production of melody the constant cooperation of hand and mind on the part of a human being present in the flesh. Everyone knows the virtues, real and putative, of the gramophone and radio. They bawl from every street corner and croak in every drawing room. Give them their due; they have their uses, and they afford entertainment for tired and lazy men and women. But there is more spiritual and aesthetic virtue in the ability to play *God Save the King* correctly on a jew's harp than in the capacity to listen with approving patience to Beethoven or Tschaikowsky stored up in a record or served up over the wireless. It is better to play the piano badly than not to play it at all, provided one does not play at one's friends.

It is not to be supposed that the ordinary house can have anything like a library, that is, if one has Augustine Birrell's notion of what a library is—not under two thousand books. But everyone can have something around him of what he likes to read. There must be a corner for reading, and if possible it is better that there should be two; a spot for solid stuff that means work, professional or other, and another place for ordinary fiction and all that takes the place of ordinary fiction for mere idle entertainment. The Janeites may quote their divinity at this point, but they would be mistaken; not perhaps technically, but certainly nevertheless. *Pride and Prejudice* is fiction, the *Agamemnon* is fiction, but neither is ordinary. But the state of the mind has something to do with the posture of the body, and vice versa. When one reads even the best book for pure entertainment, and it marks a finished education to be able to read good books for entertainment, one wants the body relaxed in an easy chair and a smoothly drawing pipe between the lips. He who can so read the *Agamemnon* is a greater and better man than one who toils over it with strenuous brow and unrelenting lexicon. But the latter must not be relaxed in an easy chair or anywhere else. He must sit on a hard chair and hold a pen in his fingers; and so with any serious desk work. The strange thing is that work is always fundamentally more inter-

esting than play, and some of the richest joys in life come to the dull fellow in the hard chair. In the house, however, the bow must not always be bent; and there is a place for even the blood-curdling detective story. Distrust the man who boasts of never reading trash. There is something inhuman about him. He who never on any occasion reads a poor book or a foolish book does not quite realize the goodness of a good book. Consider the various reading of Macaulay and Lord Balfour; and look with indulgent though envious eye on the man who retires from the cares of business and the joys of family life to his own quiet corner and the delights of Wallace or Oppenheim.

On the question of pets in the house, it is well to have an open mind. In the country there can scarcely be any question; a cat is a necessity in any well regulated farm house as an animated mousetrap if for no other reason. The utility of the dog may be questioned, but at any rate if he is of reasonable size and deep voice, he adds a note of dignity to even a small establishment. Dogs, like books, serve for ornaments and for pastimes; their abilities are subject to dispute. There is a further enquiry, not without interest: is one reason for the toleration of dogs in places where they are clearly an embarrassing superfluity that attitude of devout worship with which even the meanest man is regarded by even the noblest dog that is subject to him? Consider the tragic end of Bill Sikes's dog. He who has no other friend may always console himself with the pathetic affection of a pup. That is perhaps the cause for the excessive number and great variety of dogs in the cities. They do no work; they would for the most part run from a burglar; they have no cattle to drive out of the crop and no crop to drive the cattle from; they track mud over the floors and spread innumerable clinging hairs on the couches; and the whole firmament is hung with black when one of them is destroyed by an automobile or lured for the purpose of murder into a medical laboratory. It is useless to inveigh against the irrational. Causes are more powerful than reasons, and people want dogs. It is therefore perhaps best to provide a dog for the house, and one may have good ground for arguing against the admission of a canary or a pet rabbit.

When one returns at night from all the vexations of the daily round to meet whatever change is provided at the house, there is some pleasure in seeing the inevitable wagging of the dog's tail. The dog is a symbol of domesticity, a quite fitting concomitant of all the other animate and inanimate objects that collect around one who strives to learn the art of living in a house. The subject

has herein been merely opened up, as young debaters say; and every man has if not his own house at least his own experience of houses that he would not exchange for any other man's experience, since, like all his experience, it has become a part of him. The dog, too, is frequently associated with a far more important symbol of domesticity; for he is quite likely to run to the front door to meet his master even before the latch key sounds; and the consequent closing of that door is the most significant act of proprietorship: the moment when a man throws off the mask of a unit in the public street and becomes responsible master within his own domain.