

BARING-GOULD SABINE

**AN OLD ENGLISH
HOME AND ITS
DEPENDENCIES**

Sabine Baring-Gould
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S. Baring-Gould

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CHAPTER I.

Paternal Acres

There lives in my neighbourhood a venerable dame, in an old bacon box in a fallen cottage, whose condition will be best understood by the annexed illustration.

Fifteen years ago the house was in habitable condition, that is to say to such as are not particular. It was true that the thatched roof had given way in places; but the proprietress obtained shelter for her head by stuffing up the chimney of the bedroom fireplace with a sack filled with chaff, and pushing her bed to the hearth and sleeping with her head under the sack.

But access to this bedroom became difficult, as the stairs, exposed to rain, rotted, and she was compelled to ascend and descend by an improvised ladder.

After a while the ladder collapsed.

Then the old lady descended for good and all, and took up her abode on the ground floor – kitchen, and parlour, and dining-

room, and bedroom all in one.

"And terr'ble warm and comfortable it be," said she, when the roof fell in bodily, and covered the floor overhead.

But when the walls were exposed, rain and frost told on them, and also on the beam ends sustaining the floor, and the next stage was that one side of the floor gave way wholly.

"Tes best as it be," said the old woman; "now the rain runs off more suant."

But in falling the floor blocked the fireplace and the doorway. The consequences are – now we come to the present condition of affairs – that the old lady has had to do without a fire for certainly three winters, amongst others that bitter one of 1893-4, and her only means of egress and ingress is through the window. Of that not one half of the panes are whole; the gaps are stopped with rags.

And now the floor is rotted through overhead by the mouldering thatch that covers it in part, and the rain drips through.¹

Accordingly my lady has taken refuge in an old chest, and keeps the lid up with a brick.

"Tes terr'ble cosy," says she.

Last year, having a Scottish gentleman staying with me, I took him over to call on "Marianne." We had a long interview. As we left, he turned to me with a look of dismay and said, "Good

¹ In the illustration the place occupied by the old woman is beneath the heap on the right hand side.

heavens! in the wildest parts of the Highlands such a thing would be impossible – and in England!" – he did not finish the sentence.

I went back to Marianne and said, "Now, tell me why you will go on living in this ruin?"

"My dear," said she, "us landed proprietors must hold on to our houses and acres. Tes a thing o' principle."

There is perhaps a margin of exaggeration in this – in speaking of acres, as I believe the said estate spreads over hardly a quarter of an acre.

How was it, and how were similar little properties acquired?

By squatting.

Formerly there was a considerable amount of common land, on which the peasants turned out their asses and geese. Then some adventuresome man, who took a wife and had no house into which to put her, annexed a piece of the common, just enough for a cottage and a garden, and none said him Nay. There was still plenty for all, and so, in time, it became his own, and was lost to the rest of the parishioners. Little by little the commons were thus encroached upon. Then, again, formerly there was much open ground by the sides of the roads. Cattle were driven along the highways often for great distances, and the turf and open spaces by the sides of the roads were provision made for their needs.

But squatters took portions of this open ground, enclosed, and built on it. There was no one to object. The lord of the manor might have done so, but he was a little doubtful as to his right to forbid this annexation of ground on the side of the highway, and

he and the parishioners generally agreed to let be. It might save the man coming on the rates if he had a garden and house – no harm was done. There was still plenty of food for the flocks and herds driven along. So we find thousands and tens of thousands of these cottages thus planted by the roadsides, with their gardens – all appropriations by squatters.

A curious thing happened to me when I was Rector of East Mersey in Essex. At the edge of the Marshes were a couple of cottages near a copious spring of limpid water. They had been built, and a tract of garden enclosed, some two hundred years ago, and occupied, rent free, by the descendants of the original appropriator. During my tenure of the rectory, the last representatives left, in fact abandoned the tenements. The Rector was lord of the manor. Accordingly these cottages, in very bad repair, fell to me, and I suddenly found myself responsible for them. Should I leave I could be come upon for dilapidations, and it would have cost me something like three hundred pounds to put these houses to right, from which I had not received a penny. Moreover, when rebuilt, no one would have rented them, so aguish and unhealthy was the spot. Accordingly I had to obtain, at some cost, a faculty to enable me to pull them down.

Some years ago Mr. Greenwood drew attention to the "North Devon Savages." These were squatters, or rather descendants of squatters, who held a piece of land and occupied a ruinous habitation, and lived in a primitive condition as to clothing and matrimonial arrangements.

A lady, who was very kind to the family, wrote to me relative to them, in 1889: "Some fifteen or sixteen years ago there was a good deal of talk about the Cheritons, or Savages as they were called. The family had been long known as worthy of this latter name, by the manner in which they lived, and their violence and depredations, real and supposed, which caused them to be regarded with a great deal of dread and almost superstitious awe. The article in the newspaper, written by a correspondent, had called attention to them, and roused their bitter resentment, and some of my menservants said that on one occasion, when they tarried from curiosity on the confines of their little property, they were almost surrounded by the family, young and old, and some almost naked, with pitchforks and sticks, and that they had to continue on their way with haste. I do not know from what cause, but I think on account of some leniency he had showed them as a magistrate on one occasion, they had not as inimical a feeling towards my husband as towards the other landowners. One evening, on his return home from hunting, he told me he had heard a sad story of the head of the family, I suppose a man of thirty-eight or forty, having wounded himself badly in the foot, when shooting or poaching, and that he stoutly refused to see or have any help from clergyman or any other person; that the doctor declared it was necessary the foot should be amputated, but that the man had protested that he would sooner die as he was, and had bid him depart; that he was lying in a most miserable state. I then settled I would go to him, and if necessary stay the

night there, and supposing I could persuade him to permit the operation, that I would nurse him through it, and then obtain further help. As Lord – knew that this might be permitted by the savages, possibly, to one of his family, and as I was determined in the matter, I took a carriage and one of my little children, who could look after the horse (as it was deemed most inexpedient to have any servant with us); also all that we could think of for the comfort of an invalid; and I knew I could arrange to send back the child and trap with an escort, if I had to stay.

"When we reached that part of the road to Nymet Rowland where their field touched, we stopped, and in a moment some very angry, excited women and children rushed out. I bade them be quiet and hear what I had to say, and then told them that Lord – had asked me to bring these comforts to the sick man, and that I was come to offer him my services in his illness. They were instantly pacified and pleased, and begged me to come to what they called the farm – a place with half a roof and three walls. There were, I should think, three generations who lived in this place. An old woman, not altogether illiterate, the wounded man, his son, and his wife, and three or four children, and one or two sisters of his, children of the old woman.

"I did not see anything that answered to a bed there; the man was lying on two settles or sets of stools, with, I think, a blanket and something which might, or might not, have been a mattress under him.

"In order to get his head under some certain shelter, it was

resting on a settle in the chimney, side by side with a fire; his body and legs were on a settle in the room, if you could call a place with only three walls and half a roof by that name, and I think that the floor was in many places bare earth, and that the grass grew on it. The family were all pleasant enough – rough but grateful – and I found that though the doctor had thought amputation necessary, he now believed it might be avoided – that the man had decided against it, but allowed the doctor to continue to visit him. They were delighted with all I brought, and begged me to return soon to them, which I promised to do, and to send my children when I could not come. The old woman was a character, and quoted Scripture – certainly at random – but with some shrewdness.

"After that time I and mine were always welcome. One of the married sisters of the wounded Cheriton, who quite recovered, had bad bronchitis, and some of my family visited her continually, and on one occasion found her sitting on the thatched *bit* of roof, against the chimney, for 'change of air' in her convalescence. She was a big powerful woman, who had on one occasion knocked down a policeman who was taking her brother to Exeter gaol, and her mother, the old woman, told me with pride that they had had to send a cart and three men to take *her* away. She afterwards married a labourer. The rest of the family sold their property, and only the other day when I revisited the place for the first time after many years, I found a smart house erected in the place of the old 'Cheritons.' The women became great beggars till the death of the old mother, and the dispersion

on the sale of the property.

"I remember once meeting the man Cheriton in the lane. He had decorated the collar of his horse that he was driving with horrible entrails of a sheep or pig. This was just the kind of savage ornament that would suit them.

"In the case of the woman who married the labourer, this was brought about by the Rector of Nymet, but I fancy, according to any usually received ideas, that was the *one* marriage; and that my use of the words *wife*, etc., would not stand legal interpretation."

I remember these savages between forty and fifty years ago, and then their manner of life was the same; the only clothes they wore were what they could pick from hedges where they had been put out after a wash to dry. A policeman told me he had seen one of the women in a condition of absolute nudity sitting in a hedge of their garden, suckling a child. The curate of the parish incurred their resentment because he endeavoured to interfere with their primitive ways. One night, as he was riding up a lane in the dark, he thought he observed a shadow move in the darkness and steal into the hedge. Suspicious of evil, as he was near the habitation of the Cheritons, he dismounted and led his horse, and found that a gate had been taken off its hinges and laid across the way so as to throw his horse, and possibly break his neck. He at once made a dash to arrest the shadow that lurked in the hedge, but it made a bolt over the bank, and by its nakedness and fluttering rags, he was certain that the figure was that of one of the savages.

The old man, or one of the old men, finished his days – not on the paternal acres, but in a barrel littered with straw, chained to a post in an outhouse in an adjoining parish. I used him up in my story of "John Herring."

The usual end of these little holdings is that the proprietor either gets into some poaching affray, or quarrels with a neighbour, and so makes the acquaintanceship of a local lawyer, and this acquaintance leads to a loan of a little money, when the holder of the land is short of cash, on the security of the tenement. The sequel need not be further described than by saying that the property changes hands.

These are instances of paternal bits of acre rather than of acres, and such pieces are very liable to pass away, as not enough in themselves to support a family. But these are instances in small of the manner in which the manors were formed in ancient times. The manor was that estate which a man was able to get his hand upon and to hold and work through his serfs.

There is an idyllic old English home that belonged to an ancient family of the same name, the Penfound of Penfound, in the parish of Poundstock, on the north Cornish coast.

This coast is wind-swept, yet the winds from the sea are never cold, so that wherever there is shelter there trees, shrubs, and flowers luxuriate. In a dip in the land, at the source of a little stream, snuggling into the folds of the down, bedded in foliage, open to the sun, hummed about by bees, twinkled over by butterflies, lies this lovely old house. The neighbourhood has

been modernized and vulgarized distressingly, but as yet this dear old house has not been trodden out of existence. It remains on the verge of ruin, with its old hall, old garden, and stately granite doorway into the latter. A sad record belongs to this venerable manor. The family pedigree goes back to before the Wars of the Roses. The Penfoundts mated with the bluest blood of the west, the Trevillians, the Kelloways, the Darells, the Pollards, the Grenvilles, the Chamonds, the Pollexfens – and the last Penfoundt who sat on the paternal acres died in the poorhouse of his native parish, Poundstock, in 1847, leaving issue, now poor labouring people tilling the land at so much a week – where for centuries they were manorial lords.

In ancient British times the whole country belonged to tribes, and the tribes owned their several districts. At the head of each tribe was the chief. He claimed and was given right to free maintenance by the tribesmen, and he distributed the land among the householders of the tribe. These householders owed no allegiance to any other authority than the chief, on whom they depended for everything and to whom they owed implicit obedience.

Every man who was not a tribesman was an enemy. If the tribe increased beyond what the land could maintain, it fought another tribe and wrested from it the land and drove it away or exterminated it, with complete indifference to the fact that this dispossessed tribe spoke the same tongue, had the same social organism, was of the same blood.

The tribal system from which the Celt never freed himself entirely was the curse of the Celtic race, predooming it to ruin. The history of the Welsh, the Irish, the Highlanders, is just the same as that of the Gauls, one of internecine feud, no political cohesion, no capacity for merging private interests, forgetting private grudges for a patriotic cause.

And at the bottom of all this lay the absence among the clansmen of the principle of private property. The land was possessed by all in common, subject to allotment by the chief, and among the tribal chiefs there was no link; each coveted the lands of the other. This it was which made the Celt to be everywhere a prey to such races as knew how to put self-interest in the background.

When the Jutes, Angles, Saxons, came to Britain they brought with them another social system altogether. They were possessed with the sense of the importance of private property. So deficient had the Britons been in this that they had not other than the most elementary notions of house building. Timber and wattle sufficed for them, but the Saxon, and afterwards the Norman, had a higher conception of the home, and he began at once to fashion himself a permanent abode, and to make it not solid only but beautiful. And he did more than that, he brought the idea of hedges with him wherewith to enclose the land he chose to consider his own.

Saxon, Angle, or Jute put his hand down on the tribal territory, after having destroyed the tribal organization, leaving only a portion of wild moor and a tract of forest land, also a little arable

land, for the members of the community whom he converted into serfs. They tilled the land, kept flocks and herds, and supplied him with what meat, wool, yarn, and grain he required; they met under his presidency in the hall at his courts. The tenants were of various sorts; some were bordarii or cotters, rendering occasional service for the use of their houses and bits of land; others, the villains, in complete servitude.

At the Norman Invasion, the Saxon thanes were themselves humbled in turn; the manors were given a more legal character and transferred to favourites of William the Conqueror. But the old Saxon chiefs in each manor were probably very rarely turned out neck and crop, but were retained as holders of the estate subject to the new lords, managing them and rendering to their masters certain dues.

In Saxon times there were book-land and folk-land, the former the private property of thanes and churls, the latter common land of the community. But after the Norman Conquest most, if not all, of the latter fell under the hand of the lord of the manor. Here and there the village community still continued to exercise its right to grant tracts to be enclosed, but usually the manorial lord claimed and exercised this right. At the present time, in my own county, this is being done in a certain parish that possessed a vast tract of common land on the confines of Dartmoor Forest. The farmers and cottagers are enclosing at a rapid rate, paying the lord of the manor a trifling fine, and thus making the land their own for ever. There can be no question that originally the

fine would have gone into the parish cash-box; now it goes into the landlord's pocket.

"There is much that is primitive and simple to be met with, but nothing of barbarism in the land institutions of Saxon England, unless, indeed, an excessive love for it, and an almost exaggerated deference for its possession may be so classed. In an age when freedom was the exceptional condition, the ownership of land was the mark of a free man, and ample territory the inseparable appanage of rank. No amount of gold or chattel property conferred the franchise: land alone was recognized as the vehicle of all personal privilege, and the basis of civil rank. Centuries have not obliterated these features in their descendants to this day; the love of land, its estimation above all other forms of property, and its political preponderance."²

Reformers have roundly abused, and striven to break down our land system, especially the right of primogeniture, and to resolve the land into small holdings to be cultivated by small owners. There are, as in all social and political questions, two sides to this. I do not deny for a moment that much is to be said in favour of equal partition of land among all the children, and of the multiplication of peasant proprietors. But I venture to think that the system that has prevailed in England has produced results that could have been attained by no other. In this especially, that it has provided at once a stable core, with a body of fluid, migratory,

² Wren Hoskins, in *Systems of Land Tenure in Various Countries*, London, 1870, p. 100.

and energetic young people, who have not been bound to the clod.

A man, knowing that his land will descend to his son and son's son, will plant and improve, and spend his money most unselfishly on the land, for the family advantage. But if he thinks that it will go into other hands, will he for this purpose deny himself present luxuries and amusements?

I suppose such an alternative as this has presented itself to many a landowner. "I ought to spend from £150 to £200 in planting this autumn. Shall I do it, or run up to town, go to the opera, eat, drink, and enjoy myself, and spend the money on myself?"

There is, surely, something very beautiful and wholesome in the manner in which an Englishman of means lives for, and cares for the family, as a whole – the generations unborn, as well as his own children – and builds, plants, provides for the future, furnishing it with a lovable centre, from which it may radiate into all lands.

It was, unless I am greatly mistaken, the principle of equal subdivision, or of gavelkind, that existed among the Welsh, which ruined their cause. The Celt has more originality, genius, energy than the Saxon, but he was paralyzed in his attempts to resist the invader by the interminable break-up of power and of property at the death of every prince. The kinglet of Glamorgan had ten sons – one became a monk, and the rest parcelled up his lands and his authority over men. A great prince like Howel Dda was able to

consolidate the nation, but only for his lifetime; at his death it was torn into petty factions by his sons. It was this that maimed the Briton before the Saxon, not the superiority in genius, numbers, character in the latter; and it was this again which threw Wales at the feet of the Norman kings.

Now look at almost all the farm-buildings in France. Everything there is in ruin, all the outward tokens of decay are manifest. Why is this? Because no owner cares to spend money on putting the place to rights. Everything will be divided at his death, and he must hoard his money for division among those children who do not take the farm. So one gets a tumble-down tenement, and the rest the money that might make it habitable. Moreover, this continued to the next generation ends in the disappearance of the family from its paternal acres. In the Limousin there is hardly a family that retains its hold on its land over the third generation.

I know four delightful old ladies, all unmarried, inheriting a well-known and honoured name in Perigord. On the father's death everything was divided. One took the château, without having the money to repair it, and she lives under the ruins. The second took a farm and lives with the *paysan* and *paysanne*. The third took the family plate and china and family portraits, and lives over a *modiste* in small lodgings, and is obliged to sell her ancestral goods piecemeal to keep herself going. The fourth took some shares the father had in a *Pâté de Foix gras* factory; it failed, and she has to scramble on upon the alms of her sisters.

Among the peasants the tenure of small holdings is mischievous; they are chained to the soil, whereas, if set free, they might emigrate and become energetic colonists, or go into the towns and become intelligent, active artisans. It is just when a young man ought to be starting on a career that he acquires a few acres, and at once he is paralyzed. Those acres hold him, he cannot do justice to them, he has not the means. He does not like to part with them, and he spends his life bowed over them. Worse than this, unable to avert the further dismemberment of his estate on his death, he resolves in compact with his wife to have no more than one, or at the most two children. Now, with us, the younger son of a landed proprietor knows he must push his way in the world, and from the moment his intelligence begins to act he looks about him for openings. Our labourers also, unchained to the soil, go about wherever work may be had. Where there is a market for their abilities, thither they go, but go they would not, if they owned their little plot of land and house.

And, if I am not much mistaken, it is this early developed sense of independence that has been the making of Englishmen all over the world; but, then, it is the conservative element, the holding to the paternal acres, that has made of dear old England one great garden and park, the proprietor spending his money on the land, instead of on his pleasures or self, as elsewhere.

CHAPTER II.

The Manor House

As every circle has its centre, so had every manor its hall, the centre of its organization, the heart whence throbbed the vital force through the district, and to which it returned. The hall was not merely the place where the lord lived, for he did not always occupy it, but it was the gathering place of the courts leet and baron.

It is the fashion to hold that land was originally held in common, and that private proprietorship in land is an encroachment on the public rights.

That was, no doubt, the case with the Celt, and it has been fatal to his ever taking a lead among the nations; it has so eaten into his habits of mind as to have rendered him incapable of being other than a subject under the control of another people, which had happily got beyond such infantile notions.

It is the case with individuals, starting on the battle of life, that they sometimes, by chance, take a wrong direction, and then, once involved therein, have not the power or will or chance to turn back and take another. That is how some men make a botch of their lives, whereas others, perhaps their inferiors in ability, by mere accident strike on a course which leads to power, prosperity, and a name.

It is so among nations, races – and among these the highly-gifted Celt went wrong at the outstart, and that is it which has been his bane through centuries. Now the time for recovery is past. He is forced to take a lower room.

The French, that is to say the Gauls under Frank domination, were forcibly put right. I do not deny that feudalism led to gross abuses, and that it was well to have these swept away, but that which I think was fatal to France at the Revolution was reversion to the Celtic principle of subdivision. This is inevitably and inexorably killing France; it is reducing its population, extinguishing its life.

Between 1831 and 1840 there were in France but three departments in which the mortality exceeded the natality, now there are between forty-five to sixty departments in this condition.

"If we traverse France rapidly in train from the Channel to the Pyrenees, there is one observation that may be made from the carriage windows. Between the Loire and the Garonne, in departments where the soil is poor, there the houses are smiling and well kept – there is evidence of comfort. But, on the contrary, in the departments formerly the richest, there are crumbling walls and empty houses... The rich departments are being depopulated, and in the poor ones there the population remains stationary or only slowly decreases."³

The population in the rich departments is dwindling at the rate

³ Dumont, "La dépopulation," in *Revue de l'École d'Anthropologie*, Jan., 1897.

of 50 per cent. in half a century.

Why is this? Because all property is subdivided. In the poor districts, too, land will not support all those born, and therefore some take up trades or go as labourers and artisans.

The increase in population in France per thousand in the year is 18, whereas in Prussia it is 13.

I was much amused last summer with the remark of a little fellow of twelve, who was showing me the way across some fields, as a short cut. I remarked on the beauty of the place, and the fertility of the soil. "Yes," said he, "but I think it is time for me to be moving, and look out for some place for myself."

Such a thought, springing up in an English child's mind, would not occur to a French child. But it is just this which has made us successful colonists, and it is the absence of this which makes French colonies dead failures. Whereas we and the Germans pour forth tens of thousands of emigrants, France sends to her North African Settlements just over six hundred persons per annum – and they are nearly all officials.

The maker of pottery, after having tempered his clay, puts into it particles of grit, of sand, and about these the clay crystallizes, and it is the making these centres of crystallization that gives to pottery its cohesion. Without these particles it goes to pieces in burning, it breaks up with the least pressure. And our manor houses are these particles of grit, centres of crystallization to our people, that make us so tough and so cohesive a race – at least, I think it is one very important element in the manufacture.

If we desire to study the organization of a manor as set about by one of the branches of the great Scandinavian-Teutonic stock, we cannot do better than observe the conduct of the settlers in Iceland at the end of the ninth century.

When the Norsemen came to Iceland they brought with them their thralls, and they proceeded to make their claims to land, till they had portioned out all the soil worth having among the great heads of families. The land thus fell into shares, such as we should call manors, and each share was under a chief, who planted on the soil his kinsmen, and any others who applied to him for allotments. No freeman, if he could help it, would accept the land as a gift, for the reception of a gift entailed responsibility to the giver, a sort of dependence that the free spirit of the race greatly disliked.

"The period during which the settlement of Iceland was going on lasted about sixty years. At the end of that time the island was as fully peopled as it has ever been since. During all that period each chief, and his children after him, had lived on his holding, which proved a little kingdom of itself, allotting his land to new comers, whose kinship, turn of mind, or inferiority in rank allowed them to accept the gift, marrying and intermarrying with the families of neighbouring chiefs, setting up his children in abodes of their own, putting his freed men and thralls out in farms and holdings, fulfilling the duties of the priesthood in his temple, and otherwise exercising what we should call the legitimate influence on those around him, to which he was

entitled by his strength of arm, or birth, or wealth."⁴

This is just what took place in the conquest of Britain by the Saxons, Jutes, and Angles. They portioned out the land among them, and turned the original inhabitants into serfs; to some of these they gave tenements to hold subject to service: these are now represented by our tenant farmers; to others, kinsmen, they gave lands free of charge, but under their own lordship: such are the ancestors of our yeomen.

Now an Icelandic chief was magistrate and priest in one. He was called the Godi – the Good man. Hard by his hall was the sacred circular temple, and he offered sacrifice therein. In his hall were assembled the free householders, to consult relative to the affairs of the district. This was the husting, or house council. We had precisely the same condition of affairs in England. Where a manor is there is the hall, and in that hall were held the courts, which all free holders attended.

Very probably each Anglo-Saxon lord had his temple adjoining his hall, but when England became Christian, several manors, when small, combined to keep a priest between them; but when the church adjoins the manor house, then almost certainly it occupies the site of the old heathen Saxon temple; except in Wessex, which was subjugated by Christianised Saxons.

The hall was the social and political centre of each community. There the lord showed hospitality, administered justice, appointed his thralls their tasks, and received the dues

⁴ Dasent, *History of Brunt Nial*, 1861, vol. i. p. xiv.

of his tenants.

In the earliest period, in it he and his house-churls and family slept, as well as ate and worked. But the women had a separate apartment, which in time became the with-drawing room. Bedrooms, kitchens, parlours, were aftergrowths, as men sought more comfort or privacy, and these were grouped about the hall. Nevertheless, the custom of sleeping in the hall continued till Tudor times.

It is instructive to notice the difference between the residence of the feudal lord on the Continent and that occupied by him in England. In the former his place of abode is a castle, château, derived from *castellum*, schloss, from *schliesen*, a place into which the lord might lock himself in and from whence lock out all enemies. But the English terms – mansion, manor-house, hall, court, imply nothing military, give token of no exclusiveness, make no threat. The chronic warfare and petty disturbances that prevailed on the continent of Europe obliged the lords of the soil to perch their residences on inaccessible and barren rocks, whereas in England they are seated comfortably in valleys, in the midst of the richest land. In France, in Germany, in Italy, each feudal owner quarrelled with his neighbour, and made war on him when he listed. There was nothing of that kind in England. With the exception of the struggle between Stephen and Matilda, and the Wars of the Roses, we were spared serious internecine strife, and the hand of the king was strong enough to put down private feuds.

The castle was an importation into England, brought in by the Norman and Angevin kings, and it was only the foreign favourites to whom the king granted vast numbers of manors who had castles. But the castles never affected English domestic architecture; on the contrary, the English sense of comfort, peace, and goodwill prevailed over the fortress, broke holes in it for immense windows and for wide doorways; and nothing remained of menace and power except the towers and battlements.

On the Continent, however, till the eighteenth century, the type of fortress prevailed; the angle towers became turrets, but were indispensable wherever a gentleman had a *château*. As to the English noble or squire, his only tower was the dove-cot, and the holes in it not for muskets and crossbows, but for the peaceful pigeon to fly in and out.

The pedigree of a castle is this:

The stronghold in France in Merovingian days consisted of an adaptation of the Roman camp. It was an earthwork with a stockade on top, enclosing a level tract on the top of a hill, if a suitable hill could be found; within was a mound, a *motte*; on this stood a great round tower of woodwork, in which lived the chief. The earthwork surrounding the camp had mounds at intervals, and in the space within the stockade were similar constructions, a hall and storehouses.

Now the mediæval castle was precisely this, with the one exception – that stone took the place of wood, and the tower on

a mound became the keep.

When the Normans came to England they translated to our island the type of castle they had been accustomed to in France. They had to bring their architects, in some cases their material, from France. But, whereas this became the type of the château in France, it had nothing to do with the genesis of the manor-house in old England. Our manor-houses did not pass out of lordly castles, but out of halls. The very situation of our old manorial mansions shows that they were never thought of as fortresses.

The Anglo-Saxon did no building of domestic architecture save with wood. The English lord lived in his great wooden hall, with his tenants and bonders about him. If he squeezed them, it was gently, as a man milks his cow. Of the Norman it was said, *Quot domini castellorum, tot tyranni.*

In France the fortress of the peasant was the church, and the tower his keep, and in times of trouble he conveyed his goods to the church, and the entire building became to him a city of refuge. That is why wells, bake-houses, and other conveniences are found in connection with many foreign churches.

The battlements of our churches and their towers may perhaps point to these having been regarded in something the same light by the inhabitants of a parish in England, but more probably they came into use when the roofs were not steep, and instead of being slated or shingled, were covered with lead. To a lead roof, a parapet is necessary, or rather advisable; and the parapet not only finishes it off above the wall, but also serves to conceal

the ugliness of a low-pitched roof. And the parapet was broken into battlements to enable the gutter to be readily cleaned, by throwing over accumulations of snow and leaves.

The battlement became a mere ornament – almost a joke to English architects; they even battlemented the transoms of windows, and the caps of pillars. It would seem as though, in the sense of security in which the English were, they took a pleasure in laughing at the grave precautions employed on the Continent, where the battlement was something far too serious and important to be treated as an ornament.

The poor old hall has shrunk and been degraded into a mere lobby, in which to hang up great coats and hats and sticks and umbrellas. Originally it was the main feature of the manor-house, to which everything else was subsidiary; then it was ceiled over, a floor put across it, and it became a reception-room, and now a reception-room for overcoats only.

But let it be borne in mind where a real hall is in place and where it is not. It belongs to a manor and to a manor only; it is incongruous in a villa residence, and wholly out of place in a town dwelling. Many a modern gentleman's place in the country is designed to look very pretty and very mediæval or Tudor; but this is all so much ornament stuck on, and the organic structure agreeth not therewith.

The hall, so far from excluding people, was so open-doored as to invite not people only but all the winds of heaven to blow into and through it.

Very usually the front door of the house under the porch opened into it, and immediately opposite was the door out of the hall into the court. Naturally the wind marched through.

As a bit of shelter a screen was run up, but only of timber, and the passage boxed in. Above was the minstrels' gallery; and in the screen were, of course, doors into the hall, and a buttery hatch, as on the further side of the passage was either kitchen or cellar, or both.

To almost every hall was a slit or eye and earlet hole communicating with a lady's chamber. The tyrant Dionysius of Syracuse had a prison which was so constructed that every whisper in it from one prisoner to another was carried through a tube to his private apartment, where he sat and listened to what his captives said.

The slit above mentioned was the Dionysius's ear of that domestic tyrant, the lady of the house. She sat in her room, with her ear to this opening, when her good lord revelled and joked in the hall with his boon companions, and afterwards – behind the curtains – his words were commented on and his jokes submitted to searching criticism. Moreover, through this slit her eye raked the hall when the servants were there, and she could see if they attended to their work or romped with the men, or idled gossiping.

We have so far advanced that the ear is no longer employed – but the domestic tyrant is, I am credibly informed, still with us, advancing triumphant through ages, and like a snowball acquiring

force, consistency, and hardness in progress.

CHAPTER III.

The Domestic Hearth

In 1891 I was excavating a village at the edge of Trewortha Marsh, on the Bodmin Moors, in Cornwall. There were a number of oblong huts, but one seemed to have been occupied by more than one family, as it was divided into stalls, by great slabs of granite set up on edge, and in front of each stall was a hearth on the soil, and the soil burnt brick-red from heat.

The pottery found strewn about was all wheel-turned, but early and rude, and no trace of glass could be found. These habitations belonged to a period after the Roman invasion, and probably to Britons.

The hearth is the centre of family life, what the hall is to the manor. About it gather all who are bound together by community of blood and interest, and this is still recognized, for it is counted an unwarrantable presumption in a stranger to poke your fire.

But how small and degenerate is our fire from what it once was. Coal having taken the place of logs, the hearth has been reduced and the grate has supplanted the dogs or andirons, and the gaping fireplace is closed in.

I know an old Elizabethan mansion where the chimney-stack containing three flues descends into the hall and has in it three fireplaces, so that simultaneously three fires could burn in the

same room, and the family circle could fold about the three hearths combined into one in an almost complete circle.

And what chimneys those were in old times! Bacon-sides were hung in them, so large were they, and not infrequently a ladder could be put up them to communicate with a little door that gave access to a secret place.

I was looking not long ago at the demolition of a good yeoman's dwelling in Cornwall. By the side of the hearth, opening into the kitchen-hall, was a walled-up door, against which usually a dresser or cupboard stood. This walled-up door communicated with a goodly chamber or cellar formed in the thickness of the chimney, and without an opening to the light outside. Access to this chamber could, however, always be had by means of a hand-ladder placed when required in the chimney. This admitted through a door in the chimney to the receptacle for kegs – for that was the real purpose of the concealed place, it was the yeoman's cellar of spirits that had never paid customs. When a fresh supply was taken in, the door into the kitchen was unwallled and the cellar filled with kegs, then walled up again and plastered over. But as spirits were wanted they were got by means of the ladder – keg by keg.

It was in such a chamber in the wall, to which access was alone obtainable through the chimney, that Garnet and Oldcorne were concealed after the Gunpowder Plot. This is how Ainsworth describes the place of retreat: "Mrs. Abindon conducted the two priests to one of the large fireplaces. A raised stone about two

feet high occupied the inside of the chimney, and upon it stood an immense pair of iron dogs. Obeying Mrs. Abindon's directions, Garnet got upon the stone, and setting his foot on the large iron knob on the left, found a few projections in the masonry on the side, up which he mounted, and opening a small door made of planks of wood, covered with bricks and coloured black, so as not to be distinguishable from the walls of the chimney, crept into a recess contrived in the thickness of the wall. This cell was about two feet wide and four high, and was connected with another chimney at the back by means of three or four small holes. Across its sides ran a narrow stone shelf, just wide enough to afford an uncomfortable seat."

But these wide chimneys, if they allowed ascent, also permitted descent, and many a house was entered and burgled by this means.

There was in my own neighbourhood, about a century ago, a man who lived in a cave above the Tamar, in Dunterton Wood, whose retreat was known to none, and who was a terror to the neighbourhood. He was wont during the night to visit well-to-do persons' houses within reach, get over the roof to the chimney of the hall, and descend it. Once in the house he collected what he listed, unbarred the door, and walked away with his spoil.

So great was the terror inspired by this man in the neighbourhood that all householders who had anything to lose had spiked contrivances of iron put into their chimneys, so that the burglar in descending at a rapid pace stood a chance of being

impaled. The other day, in repairing my hall chimney, I came on this contrivance.

The end of the man was this. Colonel Kelly, of Kelly, was out one day with his pack of foxhounds, when they made a set at the cave, and so it was discovered with the man in it and a great accumulation of plunder. I believe he was hung.

The same cave was employed as a place of refuge for an escaped convict some fifty years ago. After that, the late Mr. Kelly blew up the cave with gunpowder, and its place is now occupied by the ruins of the rock above. It can conceal no more lawbreakers.

There was something very pleasant in the old evening round the great fire. If one of wood, then, in a farmhouse, the grandfather in the ingle-corner was an indispensable feature. A wood fire requires constant attention, and it was his place to put the logs together as they burnt through; and he knew he was useful, and when the farmer's wife or his granddaughter came to the hearth for a bit of cooking she had always a pleasant word for the old man.

The settle was another feature.

There is a species much used formerly in Somersetshire and Devon, and perhaps elsewhere. It was a *multum-in-parvo*. The back opened and disclosed a place in which sides of bacon were hung. Above was a long narrow cupboard for the groceries. The seat lifted – for what think you? As a place where the baby could be placed in greatest security whilst the mother was engaged at

the fire. I believe that dealers now call them monks' seats. Monks' seats! they belonged to women and babies. But a dealer knows how to humbug his customers.

I was once in a certain county, I will not say which, and visited a gentleman who had bought and built a fine house, very modern, but very handsome. Then the fancy took him to be possessed of old oak, so he went to a dealer.

"My dear sir," said Lazarus, "I have the very thing for you – a superb antique oak mantelpiece and sideboard – the finest in England of the date of Henry VIII. But they are all in an ancient mansion, a black-timbered hall in Cheshire or Shropshire – I forget which. Would you care to go down and see it? The house is to be pulled down, and I must remove the contents."

Of course Mr. Greenhorn went, bought all at a fabulous price, and brought them to his mansion. Well, anyone with the smallest knowledge of old oak would see at a glance that this was all Belgian stuff, made up of bits from old churches, put together higgledy-piggledy without any unity of design – stuff that no ancient would have designed, for there was no design in it. And the dealer kept this Cheshire or Shropshire black-timbered house regularly supplied with this detestable rubbish, and regularly took greenhorns to it to pay down heavy gold for what was worth nothing but a few Belgian francs.

At the risk of branching away from my topic, I must have another word relative to dealers.

There is still in England a good deal of good plain old oak; old

cradles, old standing clock cases, old bureaus, etc., without any carving on them, but fine in their lines and in their simplicity. These wretches buy them up and give them into the hands of mechanical carvers to adorn in "Elizabethan style," and then they sell these good old articles of furniture – defaced and spoiled and rendered all but worthless.

"Good heavens!" said I to one of these gentry; "you have utterly, irrevocably ruined that noble wardrobe."

"Well, sir, I couldn't sell it for one-tenth of the price hadn't I done this. The buyers like this, and I have to suit their taste."

To return to the hearth and to the settle.

A friend one day saw a screen of carved oak in a cottage. He bought it for half a guinea, and then called me into consultation on it. With a little study it revealed itself to be the back of a settle of Henry VII.'s reign. The mortices for the arms and for the seat were there; also nail marks showing that stamped leather had been fastened to the back below the sculpture. There were pegs showing where had been the pilasters sustaining the canopy, and one scrap of canopy still extant. I show the restoration (p. 57).

Fine though this be, I know something better still – not in art, but for cosiness, and that is the curved settle, it is constructed in an arc. In a farmhouse I know well are two such settles, and they are connected by a curved iron rod fastened to the ceiling, and there are green baize curtains depending from this rod.

On a winter evening, the farmer and his wife and the serving maidens and young men come into the kitchen, and the circle is

completed with chairs or stools, the curtains are drawn, the fire is made up, and a very jolly evening is spent with cakes and cider, and tales and jokes and song.

I was at a sale one day – a very small farm but an old one. A farmer bid for the settle – a small one. One of his daughters was there. She turned to her sister and said: "I say, Nan, vaither he've gone and bought the settle, and it's lovely; it will hold only two."

"Well, Jane," said her sister, "I reckon – that depends. You must have the right one beside y'; then it's just large enough, and you don't want no more."

When I was a child, some sixty years ago, the mat before the fire was the line of demarcation, beyond which a youngster might not go.

"My dear," said my grandmother, "fires are made to be seen – not felt."

Oh, how we shivered beyond the mat! I used to look at a patent bacon-toaster, and resolve, when I was a man and independent, to have a curved settle formed of burnished tin, and to sit before a roaring fire in the focus of all the converging rays, and never stir therefrom from Michaelmas till Lady Day. But the curved settle answers the purpose.

Among the troubles and irritations of life, one of the worst is a smoky chimney, and among all the hideousness of modern contrivances nothing surpasses the cowl.

It is very curious that architects should set themselves to work to violate first principles, and so involve us in these troubles. In

the first place, to ensure that a chimney shall not smoke, the flue must be made large enough to carry the smoke. This is a principle very generally neglected. Next it is necessary that the chimney should not have a flat top, for then the wind beats against the broad surface, and, of course, prevents the smoke from rising, and much of it is deflected down the flue.

What our forefathers did was to reduce the top to a thin edge that could not arrest and drive the smoke down, but would, on the contrary, assist it in rising. Or else they covered over the orifice with a roof, open at the sides, that prevented the wind from descending, and enabled the smoke to get away whichever way the wind blew.

In order to illustrate what I mean, I have simply taken my pencil and gone outside my house, and have drawn an old and a new chimney-top.

The chimney-piece or overmantel is the reredos of the family altar, and should contain the arms of the family or the portraits of ancestors.

No portion of an old manor-house was so decorated and enriched as this; and the hall fireplace received pre-eminent attention.

Happily we have in England numerous and splendid examples; but a vast number were sacrificed at the end of last century and the beginning of the present, when large looking-glasses came into fashion, and to make place for them the glorious old sculptured wood was ruthlessly torn down. If the reader is happy

enough to possess a copy of Dr. Syntax's *Tours*, he will see the period of transition. In the second Tour is a plate representing the doctor visiting the Widow Hopefull at York. The room is panelled with oak, the ceiling is of plaster beautifully moulded, the chimney-piece is of oak carved, but painted over, and the large open hearth has been closed in, reduced, and a little grate inserted.

In the same volume is a picture of Dr. Syntax making his will. Here the large open fireplace remains, lined with Dutch tiles, and the fire is on dogs. All the lower portion of the mantel decoration remains, but above the shelf everything has been removed to make way for the mirror.

In the same volume is Dr. Syntax painting a portrait, and here again is a lovely panelled room with plaster ceiling and a simple but charming chimney-piece of excellent design.

Now turn to the first Tour, and look at Dr. Syntax mistaking a gentleman's house for an inn. Here we have the chimney-piece supported on vulgar corbels, all of the period when Rowlandson drew; above the shelf is a painting in the worst description of frame. When Rowlandson made his drawings, he was absolutely incapable of appreciating Gothic design, and whenever he attempted this he failed egregiously, but the feeling for what was later, Elizabethan and Jacobean, was by no means dead in him, and he drew the details with a zest that shows he loved the style.

CHAPTER IV.

Old Furniture

To my taste old furniture in a modern jerry-built villa residence is as out of place as modern gim-crack chairs and tables and cabinets in an ancient mansion. In the first instance you have solidly constructed furniture in a case that is thin, and not calculated to last a century. With regard to the second, happily we have now excellently designed furniture, well constructed on old models; and what I mean by gim-crack stuff is that which was turned out by upholsterers to within the last fifteen years.

Look at the construction of a chair, and see what I mean.

Full well do I recall the introduction into my father's house of these chairs. Only a fragment of one now remains. Observe the legs; they curve out below, and are as uncalculated to resist the pressure downward of a heavy person sitting on them, as could well be contrived. Then again the braces – look at them; they are spindles with the ends let into holes drilled half-way through the legs. Old braces were braces, these are mere sources of weakness, they do not brace; when weight is applied to the seat the tendency is to drive the legs apart, then out falls the brace. No mortice holds it, it has no function to fulfil. In the old chair how firm all the joints are made! Stout oak pegs are driven through every mortice, and every precaution is taken to prevent gaping at

the joints, to resist strain put on them.

Mention has been made of the great looking-glass, which was the occasion of the destruction of so many carved chimney-pieces. There was another introduction, and that into the drawing-room, which produced a disfiguring effect, and that was the large circular rosewood table.

At the beginning of this century it entered our parlour, settled there, and made the room look uncomfortable. By no arrangement of the furniture could the drawing-room be given a cosy look. The table got in the way of visitors, it prevented the formation of pleasant groups; it was a very barrier to friendship, and a block to conversation.

One evening, in the South of France, I received intimation from a M. Dols, avocat, that he would be pleased to receive me. I had sent word to him before that I should like to call on him and see some interesting flint swords and celts in his possession. He asked me to call in the evening at 8 p.m. Accordingly I went to his door, and was ushered into the *salon*. The centre was occupied by a table, of considerable size, and the family was seated beyond the table.

M. Dols occupied B; Mme. Dols occupied C; M. Dols' mother was planted at D; and the maiden sister of Mme. Dols at E. M. Gaston Dols, the son, was at G, and Mlle. Eulalie Dols, the daughter, at F. The chair A was left vacant for the visitor.

But conceive the situation! To be introduced like a criminal before six judges, then, when one had reached the seat allotted,

to be planted one in a row, and to have to distribute remarks right and left; to address the ancestress at D across the shirtfront of M. Dols at B, and to say something pretty to the old maid at E athwart the swelling bosom of Mme. Dols at B!

If only that detestable table could have been got rid of, we would have gravitated together into a knot and been happy – but to be lively and chatty in espalier was impossible.

Well! it was almost as bad in the old days, when we had large round tables in our drawing-rooms; and one of the great achievements of modern – I mean quite recent – times has been the bundling of that old rosewood table out. That gone, the rest of the furniture gets together into comfortable groups, and everything finds its place. Before, all were overawed and sent to the wall in deference to the round table.

A word or two is due to the chest of drawers. This, I conceive, is a development of the old oak chest, in which the valuables, or the linen, or the sundry garments of the family were kept. Countless specimens of these oak chests remain; some very fine, some plain. There is, moreover, the spruce chest, made of cypress wood, that was thought to preserve silk and cloth from the moth. Oak chests are usually carved, more or less; cypress chests are sketched over with red-hot iron.

Now there was an inconvenience in the chest. A hasty and untidy person turned its contents upside down to find what he or she particularly wanted, and which was, of course, at the bottom. If the husband did this, he had words cast at him that made him

miserable for the rest of the day.

So it was clearly advisable that husband and wife and each child should have a separate chest. But that did not suffice; one was needed for bed linen, one for table linen, a third for personal linen. The result would have been an accumulation of chests, when, happily, the notion struck someone that drawers would solve the difficulty. Let the top of the chest remain immovable, and break up the front into parallel strips, each strip having a drawer behind it.

An old chest of drawers can be known by the way in which the drawers are made to run. They have a groove let into their sides corresponding with a strip of oak or runner on each side of the case; thus they do not rest the one on the other, but on their runners. When each drawer was separately cased in, then the need for runners came to an end.

It is deserving of observation how slowly and cautiously our forefathers multiplied the drawers. At first, two were thought quite as many as could be ventured upon, but after about a century the makers grew bolder and multiplied them.

Does it chance that there be a reader of this chapter who possesses a cupboard, partly open in front, with small balustrades in the door between which the contents of the cupboard can be seen? If he or she has, ten to one but it has been converted into a receptacle for china, or glass, and then china and glass are not only imperfectly exhibited, but become rapidly covered with dust. The possessor of such a little cabinet or cupboard owns

something now become very rare, the significance of which is understood by a few only.

Let me describe one in my possession. The height is two feet eight inches, by two feet one inch, and the depth eight and a half inches. There are two doors in front: the upper is perforated and has eight little balustrades in it; the lower door is solid; but this lower door, instead of engrossing the entire front of the cabinet, is small, six inches square, and occupies one compartment of the three, into which the lower portion of the front is divided. Each door gives access to a separate compartment.

Now, what is this droll little article of furniture? What was its original use?

When I answer that it was a livery cupboard, I have little doubt that the majority of my readers will think, as did someone I know who asked about it and received this answer, that it was intended for livery badges – the metal plates with coats of arms engraved on them – worn anciently by servants upon their left arms in a nobleman's and gentleman's household.

But no. A livery cupboard had not this signification. It was the cupboard in which was kept that portion of food and of wine or ale *delivered* over to each person in the household by the lady of the house for night consumption. Anciently – in the days of Good Queen Bess and of James I. – there was no meal between supper at 7 p.m. and breakfast at 10 a.m., and when each person retired for the night he or she carried off a portion of food, served out, if not by the hands of the hostess, then under her eye; and this

"delivery" was carried upstairs to the bedroom and was stowed away in the cupboard appropriated to its use, that on waking in the night, or early in the morning for a hunt or a hawking, or a journey, the food and refreshing draught might be handy, and stay the stomach till all met for the common meal served in the hall at ten o'clock.

We still speak of livery stables, but this does not mean that there coachmen and grooms who wear livery attend to horses, but that the horses themselves receive there their *livrée*— delivery of so many feeds of oats. This is made clear enough by a passage in Spenser's account of the state of Ireland, written in the middle of the sixteenth century. He says: "What *livery* is, we by common use in England know well enough, namely, that it is an allowance of horse-meat; as they commonly use the word stabling, as to keep horses at *livery*; the which word, I guess, is derived of *livering* or *delivering* forth their nightly food; so in great houses, the *livery* is said to be served up for all night – that is, their evening allowance for drink."

Another reference to the custom of serving liveries for all night is made by Cavendish in his *Life of Wolsey*, where, in giving a description of the Cardinal's Embassy to Charles V. at Bruges, he says: "Also the Emperor's officers every night went through the town, from house to house, where as many Englishmen lay or resorted, and there served their liveries for all night, which was done in this manner: first, the Emperor's officers brought into the house a cake of fine manchet bread, two great silver pots,

with wine, and a pound of fine sugar; white lights and yellow; a bowl or goblet of silver to drink in; and every night a staff torch. This was the order of their liveries."

These little livery cupboards usually stood on another, from which they were detached, and which was the "court-cupboard." In this the inmate of the room kept his valuables.

Now let me bid my readers keep a sharp eye on the furniture of cottages when they visit them, for these livery cupboards may still be occasionally found in them, and then they go by the name of "bread and cheese cupboards." I remember many years ago picking up one in a labourer's cottage, that was used for cheese, and it did not lose this smell for a long time afterwards.

But these livery cupboards may also be seen in some churches where doles of bread are given on certain days; and in them, under lock and key, the loaves remain on the day of distribution till given away.

As already intimated, these livery cupboards are now scarce, and it behoves anyone who has one such to treasure it, and anyone who can procure such a cupboard to get it.

There is another cupboard that should be valued – the dear old corner-cupboard. This also has a pedigree.

It was not always put in the corner. Its proper place was in the dining-room, and there it contained the conserves, the distilled waters, the home-made wines that testified to the skill of the housewife. It contained more than that – the nutmegs, the cinnamon, the mace, the pepper, all the precious spices that came

from the blessed islands over the sea, and were costly and highly esteemed. In most dining-rooms of the reign of Charles II. or Queen Anne, this cupboard will be found let into the wall, usually arched over above, a necessary adjunct to the room; and when the bowl of punch had to be brewed the lady of the house unlocked it, and at once the whole room was pervaded with fragrance as from the spice isles.

Who among us who are getting old do not recall the peculiar curranty savour of the ancient dining-room? I have a white-haired uncle – he will forgive my telling it – who, when I was a child, and he a young man from Oxford, invariably sought opportunities, and found them, for getting at such a cupboard, and filling his hand first, and then his mouth, with currants. To this day, I never see him without a waft of that old corner-cupboard coming over me.

And the stout and ruddy yeoman, as he dipped the whalebone and silver ladle into the steaming bowl, in which floated circles of lemon, sang:

"Behold the wealthy merchant, that trades on foreign seas,
And brings home gold and treasure, for such as live at ease,
With spices and with cinnamon, and oranges also,
They're brought us from the Indies, by the virtue of the
plough."

Then came the reign of the Georges, when men built for show rather than for comfort, and the walls were of thin brick overlaid

with composition to keep the rain out; and the composition was covered with oil-paint to keep the rain out of the cracks in the plaster and in the bricks. In such houses there were no deep walls in which cupboards could lurk. It was necessary to have cupboards and cabinets made as detached pieces of furniture, taking up room, giving us knocks when we inadvertently run against them; and these cupboards and cabinets were of veneered stuff, common wood underneath, with a thin film of mahogany or rosewood glued on, and every knock given struck off a bit of veneer, and a change of weather scaled off pieces, and gave the whole a shabby, measly look. Then to get her precious cupboard out of the way of being knocked, and thereby her bottles of liqueurs and syrups being knocked over, the lady of the house devised the corner-cupboard.

Also, as things Chinese and Japanese and Indian were much in fashion, these cupboards in the corner were very generally painted dark green or black, and were ornamented with raised gold figures – all in imitation of Oriental flowers and birds and men, and very generally were furnished with beautiful brass-work locks and hinges.

Nearly every old house has its secret cupboard – usually in the wall. Very often one may be found behind the panelling, and near the fire. In my own house is one cut in granite, the stone on all sides, and is the depth of my arm. I have little doubt that these warm, dry cupboards, so secured that no mouse can make its way in, were for the preservation of deeds. Others were for jewellery

and plate. The custom of having secret cupboards was continued after cupboards had become independent articles of furniture, standing out in the room; but then they took the form of secret compartments, not opened by keys, but by moving some part of the moulding, or by pressure on some ornamental plate or piece of inlaid wood or ivory.

It is said that everyone has his secret closet, and that in it everyone has his skeleton. I do not know much about the cupboards of nowadays folk, but when I think of those I knew in the olden times, it seems to me that they were full of nothing other than sweets and spices, of gold and gems; anyhow, such were the cupboards of our grandmothers, our maiden aunts, and our great-grandmothers. And when we chance in some secret compartment to light on a bundle of their letters, and look into them, then it is just like the opening of their corner-cupboards, out pours a sweet and spicy fragrance – that of the generous thoughts and kind wishes of their dear old honest and God-fearing hearts.

CHAPTER V.

Ceilings

When I was a small boy at King's College School, I boarded with one of the masters, at a corner house in Queen's Square. There was a long room in which we boarders – there were some five-and-twenty of us – had our meals, and prepared lessons for the morrow in the evening, under the supervision of an usher.

One day at tea, the usher having been summoned out of the room, we boys essayed who could throw up his piece of bread and butter highest. Mine went against the ceiling, and, the butter being unusually thick, adhered.

I was in great alarm; there was no getting it down: it stuck, and neither the usher nor the master, when he entered for prayers, observed it.

During preparation of lessons, during prayers, my eyes reverted to the piece of bread and butter. It remained unnoticed. That it was also unobserved by the servants, who were supposed to clean the room, is not perhaps matter of surprise.

The next day passed – still the bread and butter hung suspended – but on the third day, during prayers, flop! – down it came in front of the master, and left behind it a nasty, greasy stain on the ceiling.

"Whose piece of bread and butter is that?" asked the master,

when Amen had been said.

I had to confess, and was whipped.

That stain in the ceiling grew darker daily. The dust of the room adhered to the butter. It was not effaced all the while I remained a boarder, and I involuntarily every day, and frequently daily, looked at it, to see how much deeper the tinge was that the patch acquired.

Years after, when I was a man, and the old master was dead, and the house was in other hands, I ventured to ask the then tenants to be allowed to look at my old school-haunt. And – actually – the bread and butter stain was still there. Like murder – it could not be hid. The ceiling had been repeatedly whitewashed, but ever through the coverings that overlaid it, the butter mark reasserted itself.

I cannot say whether it was this which causes me always, on entering a room, to direct my eyes to the ceiling – but I do, and observe it always with much interest.

The ceiling of the world is not one blank space; it is sprinkled with stars at night, and strewn with clouds by day. Why then should the ceilings of our rooms be blank surfaces? We spread carpets of colour on our floors. We decorate richly our walls. Why should the ceiling alone be left in hideous baldness, in fact, absolutely plain? White ceilings were a product of that worst period of art – save the mark! that age of no art at all, the beginning of the present century.

The ceiling came in in the reign of Henry VIII., and reached

its greatest perfection in that of Elizabeth. At a later period the ornamentation became richer, but not so tasteful.

The mouldings were worked with "putty lime," lime finely sifted and mixed with some hair, the lines of the ornamentation were made with ribbons of copper or lead, and the pattern was fashioned by hand over this.

It is supposed that the drops one finds in Tudor ceilings, and which are not of plaster, or plaster only, but of carved wood, are a mere ornament, and purposeless.

This, however, is not the case. Such enriched ceilings are very heavy, and their weight has a tendency to break down the laths to which they adhere, but these pendants are bolted into the rafters, and serve to form so many supports for the entire ceiling, which without them might in time fall.

The Elizabethan ceiling was geometrical in design, but with bands of flower-work, conventional in character, introduced, and sometimes consisted in strap-work, studded with rosettes, wondrously interlacing.

Then came a simpler geometrical pattern, circles enclosing wreaths of flowers copied from nature, exquisitely delicate and beautiful; but the imitation was carried sometimes too far, as when the flower heads are suspended on fine stalks of copper wire.

In a little squirarchical mansion in Cornwall, of no architectural beauty, there was a marvellously beautiful ceiling of the date of Charles II., the flowers and fruit infinitely varied,

and wrought with exquisite delicacy. The room was low, and for that reason the artist had taken special pains in the modelling.

A "Brummagem" man bought up the land and the house – this latter was far too small to suit his ideas, and it was left unoccupied.

One day the rector said to him: "I want to have my school treat next Thursday – should rain fall, may I take the children into the old hall?"

"By all means," said the new squire; "but it will be stuffy: I will have it ventilated."

He at once went down with two carpenters and ripped strips through the lovely ceiling from one end of the room to the other, utterly destroying this incomparable work, that must have occupied the artist months of patient labour, and which had called forth the best efforts of his genius.

That is how mulish stupidity is every day destroying the achievements of genius. It is on a level with that of the chawbacon who, having got hold of a Stradella violin, broke it up to light his fire with the splinters.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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