

**HENRY
EDWARD
WARNER**

THAT HOUSE I BOUGHT

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That House I Bought / A little leaf from life:*

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DEDICATION

Why a dedication? Why a preface—a foreword? Why any comment, save the title and the price mark?

Simplicity itself! The preface, foreword, dedication—what you may term it—gives opportunity to apologize for the liberality with which the author betrays his egotism, in the thickly sprinkled perpendicular pronoun.

And yet this plain young tale of plain things could not be told in the third person, since it is a mere setting down of real experience, painfully truthful and laboriously pruned where imagination was tempted to stray into fields of fiction. There is but one confession of romantic mendacity—and it shall not be made, for it *might* have happened! Quien Sabe?

And now this little story is dedicated to all who have bought or intend to buy homes, who have lost or expect to lose them; to the bird of passage and to the homing, and to all who love their fellowmen—but very especially to you who read it.

H. E. W.

FIRST PERIOD

Thirty-three years ago I formed a box of blocks into a castle and then kicked it down in disgust because I didn't like the chimney. Mother said I displayed temper.

Birds build nests in tree-tops with horse-hair and straw, and odd bits of stuff; but my wife and I aren't birds. Far from it. And we've been going along for fifteen years without a regular nest. All that time I've been building a house with blocks and kicking it down.

The other day we went out to Mont Alto to take dinner with our friends, and on the way we saw a new house numbered "3313." The number stuck out in letters of silver, burnished into brilliancy by a noontday sun.

"That's an odd number," I remarked. "Anyway you look at it, it's unlucky—3313. And I'm not superstitious."

"Let's go in and examine it," she said.

That's where it all started. We bought the house after dinner. It took fifteen minutes to decide, and in that time, of course, we didn't notice the place on the dining-room ceiling where the plumbing—but let it pass. The Duke of Mont Alto would fix it up. We had great faith in the Duke. The point is, we owned a house at last. That is, we had started to own it. We were tickled to death—also scared to death. There are two emotions for you, both fatal!

Coming into possession of a castle with ten rooms and large open plumbing, fronting fifty feet and going back one hundred and fifty-three feet to the company's stable, is a thrilling experience. My first thrill was in connection with the initial terms of the contract, which called for certain financial daring. Up to this time I had laid to my soul the happy thought that a clean conscience is more than money; but believe me, friend, a silver quarter began to look like a gold eagle. Change that in other days went merrily across the table without thought for the morrow, I found myself wearing to a frazzle, counting the cracks in the milled edges affectionately, hopefully, and yet with certain misgivings.

Naturally, we first paced off our yard, to see whether it was 50 by 153 feet, more or less, as shown in the plot. Every man who buys a house paces off his yard. So does his wife. My wife made seventy-eight steps of it and I made fifty-one, on the length. By deducting for my long legs and adding for her confining skirt we came to the conclusion that mathematics was an inexact science, and decided to do it later with a tape measure.

But for the purpose of this narrative we must get inside the house and look about. We found a wide hall with a grand staircase; a roomy parlor connecting by folding door with a spacious dining-room, and off the dining-room a real conservatory, all glass and tiles. Opening into the pantry a swinging door, and another into the kitchen, and in the wall a

refrigerator. In the basement a furnace with a barometer and thermometer atop. On the second floor four big rooms and a centre hallway, and in the bathroom large, open plumbing and the addition of a shower and spray bath. On the third floor two cozy rooms and another hallway and bath. Item: Slate roof; item: water-heated, hot and cold water all the time sometimes; item: hardwood floor downstairs. Conveniences in every direction, gas and electric fittings throughout. And the whole sheltered by oak trees that leaned over to embrace us, wagging flirtatious branches through the big windows.

"Isn't this living!" I exclaimed.

My wife looked out through the window at the distant picture of the low-lying city against the bay, and held my hand. It was as though we had not been married fifteen years, but were beginning our honeymoon—a couple of birds just mated, fetching things for the nest and glorying in its construction—silent in a dream of contemplation, but just ready to burst into song, the song of achievement. She did not reply, but pressed my hand. When finally she spoke, what was in her heart broke its leash.

"I was just wondering," she said, "if we couldn't rent the second floor as a flat to pay the expenses, and then all we put in would be invested in the equity!"

I awoke with a start from my dreaming. Even a honeymoon has its practical side!

But all sad realities have their recompense in a happy mind.

Give me the optimist and a famine and I'll show you a famine licked to a standstill. The combination of confident, hopeful ego and material misfortune never yet met, but that material misfortune took the count in the first round. The man who stands hugging misfortune in his chest has something coming to him. When it arrives it will land right square under that point where, if he were a woman of twenty years ago, he might have worn earrings. Take the other chap, however—the fellow who not only shakes hands with Trouble, but slaps it on the back, invites it to have a drink, sleeps with it, jollies it until it wrinkles up into a gorgeous grin six miles long; take that chap and put him in the middle of the Sahara Desert with nothing but a glad smile in his pocket, and he'll find a way to coax a mint julep out of the blooming sand!

Do you know, the more I think about the fellow who starts out by howling that *things can't be done*, the more I'm convinced that the Creator got a lot of cracked forms into the outfit when Man was molded, and these little defects must really be charged up to accident. The Lord never intended any man made in His image to be afraid of anything that walks on hind legs or all fours, crawls or flies, or flops dismally over the Slough of Despond on a carrion-hunt. And just about the best way to mend this defect, I reckon, is to get married early and start right out buying a house and lot. If a fellow's an invertebrate he'll get past the first payment with a struggle. If he survives the second, it will put some starch into his hide.

You are asking what all this has to do with That House I Bought.

Why, bless your heart, Friend, it has all to do with it! The very first thing a man must do when he buys a house and lot is, get himself into the state of mind. Buying a house and lot is not so much a physical or financial transaction as a philosophical conclusion. You need the house and lot; you must argue yourself into a mental attitude toward that house and lot that simply knocks the props from under every obstacle. The man who is afraid to own his castle is a good citizen, perhaps, in every other respect. But the very best citizen is he who has the courage to own something and pay taxes on it, help support the community, and be useful to himself and to the world that holds him trustee of his possessions.

SECOND PERIOD

Heaven bless Murphy!

When my wife was a little girl with braids down her back, Murphy used to see her in the excited crowd in front of the neighbor's door, as he toted a grand piano to the waiting van. Many a time Murphy has started to give that little girl a penny because she was so cute. Many a time he has reconsidered and kept the penny himself!

It was Murphy who moved us. He is anywhere from seventy to ninety years old now—a stalwart, steel-muscled young fellow who runs his own wagon and lifts his end of the heaviest burden with a heart as light as his chest is deep and his back broad. His beard is long and white.

How we tore up our old rooms and saw our furniture hustled out, how we looked regretfully back at the den we had papered and fixtured ourselves, with its rich red base and green forest over that, and the light sky—that is all another story. It is another story, too, how mother-in-law bustled here and there helpfully and every now and then added something of her own to our belongings, and how Mamie telephoned every one she knew that we were moving to That House I Bought! These are things we think of, but do not write.

Murphy was indefatigable. We thought we had a load more than Murphy made it, what with shifting this and changing that,

and substituting something and stuffing small truck under tables and empty boxes that we wanted for our conservatory. My wife watched him in admiration.

"Mr. Murphy," she said, "you would be invaluable to the United Railways as a conductor on the Druid Hill avenue line!"

When the last load was about to leave my wife rushed to the door.

"Oh, Mr. Murphy, couldn't you take that couch upstairs and drop it off at—"

Murphy smiled and glanced at the wagon, with things tied on over the wheels, and the china closet swinging perilously far out on the tail piece.

"I can do it," he said, "if I carry the china closet on my lap."

Murphy intended that as a jest.

My wife hadn't thought of the possibilities of Murphy's lap. The instant he mentioned it, she darted back into the house, quickly to reappear with a double armful of odds and ends that she couldn't get into the suit cases and trunks.

"It's mighty kind of you," she said, with the sort of a smile that nailed me fifteen years ago. "If you can just carry these little things in your lap—"

Murphy is a game one.

When he drove away Murphy's lap looked like the market burden of a suburbanite. And because he was so cheerful about it, and so willing to do so much for so little, and because he is such a good citizen, again I say:

"Heaven bless Murphy!"

After Murphy had moved us in our real troubles began. I should have said our real joys, for, believe me, the infant troubles of owning your castle are so refined and glorified by the pride of possession that they appear only as strengthening alloy in the pure gold of content.

It was on Thursday and Friday that Murphy moved us. On Saturday I went to the house, and the lady who will hereafter listen for the tinkle of the door and telephone bells met me, brimming over with cheerfulness and almost as proud of herself as I was of the lord of the manor who strutted like a peacock, as for the first time he showed his feathers in his own front yard.

Never praise your wife too much, or she will dominate you.

But as this is to be a truthful chronicle, be it said that my wife is the most wonderful woman in the world. How on earth she ever got the chairs and tables, the china closet and dishes, the cooking hardware and beds and mattresses and my desk and revolving bookcase, and Heaven knows what, all in place in one day is beyond me.

There were pictures on the walls—old friends in new places, looking down to greet me. A foolish Billiken laughed out loud as I held up my hands in amazement.

"Step high and easy," said my wife. "You'll scratch the hardwood floor," and she rubbed my heelprint from the polish with the hem of her working skirt. Then we started around testing the push-buttons. We pushed every button there was, and pulled

down the curtains to try the effect in the parlor and dining-room. She hauled me around and showed me the marvelous gas range that she was going to do wonders with. That refrigerator, that was yet to have its first load of ice and provisions—it made me hungry just to look at it! We went upstairs and downstairs. I opened and closed every window and made wise-foolish observations on the proper care of a home.

A man can be a fearful idiot when his chest is out.

I chucked my coat and cuffs and collar and went to work on little odds and ends of chores about the place. Hasn't a fellow a right to whistle and sing when he comes home from foraging and finds the lady bird dancing around the new nest?

There was a thermometer on top of the furnace in the basement, and beside it a round thing to tell how much water we were catapulting into the radiators. When there is too much water it overflows from a tank upstairs; when there isn't enough you turn some in downstairs. So I started a march up and down stairs, first turning some on and then scooting skyward to listen to the overflow, and after making this trip about ten times I had an appetite like a typhoid convalescent.

O the tintinnabulation of the bells!

There are church bells and wedding bells, bells that cry the joy of a new birth or toll the sorrow of the huddled family, bells that ring victory in war and bells that scream the hilarity of la fiesta! But for the bell that speaks the common language of all men, I name the dinner bell! The first biscuits were piping hot

on the plate.

"Are they as good as your mother used to make?" asked my wife.

"My mother," I said, "was a piker at biscuit making!"

And she beamed with pleasure when I slandered my honored mother!

After the dinner we went out on the porch—the big, wide porch for which we had planned a swing on chains, and sat rocking and digesting, digesting and rocking, in a perfect picture of resident domesticity. In the house across the street there were lights. The people had just moved in—that is, they had moved in several days before and were just beginning to find the trouble with things and why the gas company could afford to pay considerable dividends on wind. I say, we were sitting there as cumfy as possible, when my wife caught my hand in a convulsive grip.

With the other hand she pointed across the street to the second parlor blind. I followed her, and felt like a Peeping Tom. There on the blind was a great picture in silhouette—a picture of two figures standing, and the tall, masculine figure was holding both shoulders of the other and looking square into her eyes.

"It's the daughter!" my wife almost whispered. "I know her by her hair ribbon; it's too young for the mother! Look, look, they are going to ki—"

She finished the word with a little gurgle, for they had done it! Not only that, but the kiss was followed by an embrace, and

another, and then the lights went out.

A confounded belt had slipped at the powerhouse, I learned afterward.

I think corporations should be heavily penalized for such breaks in the service. There should be some sort of appliance to keep belts from slipping. More than once the belt has slipped and left that whole residence district in darkness.

THIRD PERIOD

I had always regarded the humorous paragraphs about the price of coal as mere pleasantries. I now deny that they are pleasantries, and they are far from "mere."

There are several grades of coal. Our furnace takes No. 3, and it's \$6.60 a ton, April price. The man who dominates the situation told me by way of consolation that if it hadn't been for the big strike coal would be 50 cents a ton cheaper. I can't see how that sort of consolation helps a fellow.

Our house burns about ten or twelve tons, normal conditions. We figured that about eight tons now would be the proper caper, and we could pay the difference next winter if driven to it. From the way the furnace ate coal to take the chill off the house the first day, I could see the Board of Charities asking me my name, address, age, social condition and whether my parents ever went to jail.

Now \$6.60 times eight tons is \$52.80, and that's more than taxes, water rent and interest on a house and lot. So when the man backed up with a cartload and began to throw it in off-handedly, I was pained. A coal-heaver should treat \$52.80 with more respect. I have seen men throw high-grade ore out of the Independence mine with the same callous indifference, without myself being shocked; but here was a new situation. It was my \$52.80 he was throwing around like dirt, and I spoke to him about it.

"How," I said, "can you have the heart to dump \$52.80 into my cellar without ceremony? You should at least remove your hat."

Do you know, I don't believe he appreciated the situation.

William made the first fire. I instructed him to lay on the coal as scarcely as possible, and to go slow with the draughts. So he threw on six shovelful of my \$52.80, opened everything and ran it up to 204 degrees F. Any man who sat ten minutes in our house and then dared to expose himself in a Turkish steam room would freeze to death in ten seconds.

We had a fire in the furnace two or three days. I got interested in (a) a newly patented ash sifter (b) and a process for mixing ashes with some chemical solution that would restore a ton of coal for twenty-five cents. If you have never sifted ashes, you've missed something. You take a couple of shovelful of ashes and dump them in the sifter. Then you pick up the sifter and agitate it. If I were employing an ash sifter, I should get one addicted to chills and ague, or St. Vitus' dance, or something. Then I could be sure he wasn't loafing on the job! Well, after you've shivered the sifter, busted a suspender button, twisted your backbone into a pretzel, filled your eyes, ears, nose, and lungs with dust and cursed your patron saint, you've got the net result: One piece of half-burned coal, six clinkers, and the top of a tin can.

That chemical process to make coal out of ashes for a quarter a ton is a good thing—for the inventor. With childlike confidence I bought a bottle of it. After ruining a barrel of perfectly good ashes and backsliding from the church of Martin Luther I gave it

up. Hereafter we will burn our coal as long as it will burn, and the ashes may go hang! I could have earned \$50 at my profession in the time I was trying to beat an honest coal dealer out of \$6.60.

Well, when we finally got the furnace working I hopped into the shower bath.

May good fortune attend the man who thought of putting a shower bath in *That House I Bought!* The water comes from overhead for one thing, and shoots into the delighted legs of the languorous for another, from the sides. It invigorates, cleanses, and tickles.

Ballington Booth says man is regenerated by soup, soap, and salvation. But I would say, at first blush, that no man can get the full effect of regeneration on anything short of a shower bath in his house.

I began by reducing my costume to a pleasant frame of mind and doing a few acrobatic stunts, deep breathing, setting-up exercises, and various liver-limberings. A free and easy perspiration set in. That, say all the doctors, is good for the system. Then I stepped blithely into the shower, drew the rubber curtain close and, commending my soul to all the gods I could call to mind, took a long breath and turned her on.

At first the water was icy cold, but as soon as that in the pipes had run out I was violently assaulted by a steaming deluge straight from the bowels of Hades. Calmly removing the first layer of skin as it was boiled off, I reached for the spigot and turned as per directions, to the right. Instantly some one threw an iceberg

into the tank and at the first shower of Chilkootian damp I was converted into an icicle.

Boiled to a color that would excite the envy of an ambitious lobster, on one side, and frozen to a consistency that would inspire a Harlequin block on the other, my emotions ran correspondingly hot and cold to a delirium of despair, as I found that no matter how I turned I got either hot or cold, and never a happy medium. My wife, who was downstairs with the kitchen door shut, said she could hear my remarks distinctly, and added that she would have forever hung her head in shame had company been calling at the time.

Women are too sensitive.

It didn't occur to me, until I had been cooked and uncooked a dozen times that this thing might be done from the outside just as well. I stepped out and manipulated with a broom handle, poking it behind the curtain and jabbing, pushing, and pulling, hauling, twisting at those infernal mechanical devices with an energy born of insanity. Finally, by some accident or other, I got the water just right and stepped in again.

It was delicious. Never was there such a grateful sense of appreciation as that I felt as I recovered my temper and went back to my beneficent gods. The water was not too cold, not too hot.

Then it stopped altogether.

I looked up and around, tried all the valves, hammered on the wall, and then yelled to my wife:

"What's the matter with the water?"

She replied cheerily:

"The man has come to fix the pipes in the furnace, and it's turned off!"

With good things it were always thus. The minute a man really begins to enjoy life it's time to die. There is always a fly in the custard.

FOURTH PERIOD

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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