

"Our New House"

by

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We spoke of it as our New House simply because we thought of it as such and not from any claim to the title, for it was just about as old and as rickety as a house supposed to be habitable could well be. It was only new to us. Indeed with the exception of the house there was nothing new about us. Neither my wife nor myself was, in any sense of the word, old, and we were still, comparatively speaking, new to each other.

It had been my habit, for the few years I had been in Somerset House, to take my holidays at Littlehampton, partly because I liked the place, and partly - and chiefly, because it was cheap. I used to have lodgings in the house of a widow, Mrs. Compton, in a quiet street off the sea frontage. I had this year, on my summer holiday, met there my fate in the person of Mrs. Compton's daughter Mary, just home from school. I returned to

London engaged. There was no reason why we should wait, for I had few friends and no near relatives living, and Mary had the consent of her mother. I was told that her father, who was a merchant captain, had gone to sea shortly after her birth, but had never been heard of since, and had consequently been long ago reckoned as "with the majority." I never met any of my new relatives; indeed, there was not the family opportunity afforded by marriage under conventional social conditions. We were married in the early morning at the church at Littlehampton, and, without any formal wedding breakfast, came straight away in the train. As I had to attend to my duties at Somerset House, the preliminaries were all arranged by Mrs. Compton at Littlehampton, and Mary gave the required notice of residency. We were all in a hurry to be off, as we feared missing the train; indeed, whilst Mary was signing the registry I was settling the fees and tipping the verger.

When we began to look about for a house, we settled on one which was vacant in a small street near Sloane Square. There was absolutely nothing to recommend the place except the smallness of the rent - but this was everything to us. The landlord, Mr. Gradder, was the very hardest man I ever came across. He did not even go through the form of civility in his dealing.

"There is the house," he said, "and you can either take it or leave it. I have painted the outside, and you must paint the inside. Or, if you like it as it is, you can have it so; only you must paint and paper it before you give it up to me again - be it in one year or more."

I was pretty much of a handy man, and felt equal to doing the work myself; so, having looked over the place carefully, we determined to take it. It was, however, in such a terribly neglected condition that I could not help asking my ironclad lessor as to who had been the former tenant, and what kind of person he had been to have been content with such a dwelling.

His answer was vague. "Who he was I don't know. I never knew more than his name. He was a regular oddity. Had this house and another of mine near here, and used to live in them both, and all by himself. Think he was afraid of being murdered or robbed. Never knew which he was in. Dead lately. Had to bury him - worse luck. Expenses swallowed up value of all he'd got."

We signed an agreement to take out a lease, and when, in a few days, I had put in order two rooms and a kitchen, my wife and I moved in. I worked hard every morning before I went to my office, and every evening after I got home, so I got the place in a couple of weeks in a state of comparative order. We had, in fact, arrived so far on our way to perfection that we had seriously begun to consider dispensing with the services of our charwoman and getting a regular servant.

One evening my landlord called on me. It was about nine o'clock, and, as our temporary servant had gone home, I opened the door myself. I was somewhat astonished at recognising my visitor, and not a little alarmed, for he was so brutally simple in dealing with me that I rather dreaded any kind of interview. To my astonishment he began to speak in what he evidently meant for a hearty manner.

"Well, how are you getting on with your touching up?"

"Pretty well," I answered, "but 'touching up' is rather a queer name for it. Why, the place was like an old ash heap. The very walls seemed pulled about."

"Indeed !" he said quickly.

I went on, "It is getting into something like order, however. There is only one more room to do, and then we shall be all right."

"Do you know," he said, "that I have been thinking it is hardly fair that you should have to do all this yourself."

I must say that I was astonished as well as pleased, and found myself forming a resolution not to condemn ever again anyone for hardness until I had come to know something about his real nature. I felt somewhat guilty as I answered, "You are very kind, Mr. Gradder. I shall let you know what it all costs me, and then you can repay me a part as you think fair."

"Oh, I don't mean that at all." This was said very quickly.

"Then what do you mean," I asked.

"That I should do some of it in my own way, at my own cost."

I did not feel at all inclined to have either Mr. Gradder or strange workmen in the house. Moreover, my pride rebelled at the thought that I should be seen by real workmen doing labourers' work - I suppose there is something of the spirit of snobbery in all of us. So I told him I could not think of such a thing; that all was going on very well; and more to the same effect. He seemed more irritated than the occasion warranted. Indeed, it struck me as odd that a man should be annoyed at his generous impulse being thwarted. He tried, with a struggle for calmness, to persuade me, but I did not like the controversy, and stood to my refusal of assistance. He went away in a positive fury of suppressed rage.

The next evening he called in to see me. Mary had, after he had gone, asked me not to allow him to assist, as she did not like him; so when he came in I refused again with what urbanity I could. Mary kept nudging me to be firm, and he could not help noticing it. He said: "Of course, if your wife objects" - and stopped. He spoke the words very rudely, and Mary spoke out:

"She does object, Mr. Gradder. We are all right, thank you, and do not want help from any one."

For reply Mr. Gradder put on his hat, knocked it down on his head firmly and viciously, and walked out, banging the door behind him.

"There is a nice specimen of a philanthropist," said Mary, and we both laughed.

The next day, while I was in my office, Mr. Gradder called to see me. He was in a very amiable mood, and commenced by apologising for what he called "his unruly exit." "I am afraid you must have thought me rude," he said.

As the nearest approach to mendacity I could allow myself, was the suppressio veri, I was silent.

"You see," he went on, "your wife dislikes me, and that annoys me; so I just called to see you alone, and try if we could arrange this matter - we men alone."

"What matter?" I asked.

"You know - about the doing up those rooms."

I began to get annoyed myself, for there was evidently some underlying motive of advantage to himself in his persistence. Any shadowy belief I had ever entertained as to a benevolent idea had long ago vanished and left not a wrack behind. I told him promptly and briefly that I would not do as he desired, and that I did not care to enter any further upon the matter. He again made an "unruly exit." This time he nearly swept away in his violence a young man who was entering through the swing door, to get some papers stamped. The youth remonstrated with that satirical force which is characteristic of the lawyer's clerk. Mr. Gradder was too enraged to stop to listen, and the young man entered the room grumbling and looking back at him.

"Old brute!" he said. "I know him. Next time I see him I'll advise him to buy some manners with his new fortune."

"His new fortune?" I asked, naturally interested about him. "How do you mean, Wigley?"

"Lucky old brute! I wish I had a share of it. I heard all about it at Doctors Commons yesterday."

"Why, is it anything strange?"

"Strange! Why, it's no name for it. What do you think of an old flint like that having a miser for a tenant who goes and dies and leaves him all he's got - £40,000 or £50,000 - in a will, providing a child of his own doesn't turn up to claim it.

"He died recently, then?"

"About three or four weeks ago. Old Gradder only found the will a few days since. He had been finding pots of gold and bundles of notes all over the house, and it was like

drawing a tooth from him to make an inventory, as he had to do under a clause of the will. The old thief would have pocketed all the coin without a word, only for the will, and he was afraid he'd risk everything if he did not do it legally.

"You know all about it," I remarked, wishing to hear more.

"I should think I did. I asked Cripps, of Bogg and Snagleys, about it this morning. They're working for him, and Cripps says that if they had not threatened him with the Public Prosecutor, he would not have given even a list of the money he found."

I began now to understand the motive of Mr. Gradder's anxiety to aid in working at my house. I said to Wigley:

"This is very interesting. Do you know that he is my landlord?"

"Your landlord! Well, I wish you joy of him. I must be off now. I have to go down to Doctors Commons before one o'clock. Would you mind getting these stamped for me, and keeping them till I come back?"

"With pleasure," I said, "and look here! Would you mind looking out that will of Gradder's, and make a mem. of it for me, if it isn't too long? I'll go a shilling on it." And I handed him the coin.

Later in the day he came back and handed me a paper.

"It isn't long," he said. "We might put up the shutters if men made wills like that. That is an exact copy. It is duly witnessed, and all regular."

I took the paper and put it in my pocket, for I was very busy at the time.

After supper that evening I got a note from Gradder, saying that he had got an offer from another person who had been in treaty with him before I had taken the house, wanting to have it, and offering to pay a premium. "He is an old friend," wrote Gradder, "and I would like to oblige him; so if you choose I will take back the lease and hand you over what he offers to pay." This was £25, altered from £20.

I then told Mary of his having called on me at the office, and of the subsequent revelation of the will. She was much impressed.

"Oh, Bob," she said, "it is a real romance."

With a woman's quickness of perception, she guessed at once our landlord's reason for wishing to help us.

"Why, he thinks the old miser has hidden money here, and wants to look for it. Bob," this excitedly, "this house may be full of money; the walls round us may hold a fortune. Let us begin to look at once!"

I was as much excited as she was, but I felt that someone must keep cool, so I said:

"Mary, dear, there may be nothing; but even if there is, it does not belong to us."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because it is all arranged in the will," I answered; "and, by the bye, I have a mem. of it here," and I took from my pocket the paper which Wigley had given me.

With intense interest we read it together, Mary holding me tightly by the arm. It certainly was short. It ran as follows:

"7, Little Butler Street, S.W., London. - I hereby leave to my child or children, if I have any living, all I own, and in default of such everything is to go to John Gradder, my landlord, who is to make an inventory of all he can find in the two houses occupied by me, this house and 2, Lampeter Street, S.W. London, and to lodge all money and securities in Coutts's Bank. If my children or any of them do not claim in writing by an application before a Justice of the Peace within one calendar month from my decease, they are to forfeit all rights. Ignorance of my death or their relationship to be no reason for noncompliance. Lest there be any doubt of my intentions, I hereby declare that I wish in such default of my natural heirs John Gradder aforesaid to have my property, because he is the hardest-hearted man I ever knew, and will not fool it away in charities or otherwise, but keep it together. If any fooling is to be done, it will be by my own.

(Signed) GILES ARMER, Master Mariner,
Formerly of Whitby."

When I came near the end, Mary, who had been looking down the paper in advance of my reading, cried out; "Giles Armer! Why, that was my father!"

"Good God!" I cried out, as I jumped to my feet.

"Yes," she said, excitedly; "didn't you see me sign Mary Armer at the registry? We never spoke of the name because he had a quarrel with mother and deserted her, and after seven years she married my step-father, and I was always called by his name."

"And was he from Whitby?" I asked. I was nearly wild with excitement.

"Yes," said Mary. "Mother was married there, and I was born there."

I was reading over the will again. My hands were trembling so that I could hardly read. An awful thought struck me. What day did he die? Perhaps it was too late - it was now

the thirtieth of October. However, we were determined to be on the safe side, and then and there Mary and I put on our hats and wraps and went to the nearest police-station.

There we learned the address of a magistrate, after we had explained to the inspector the urgency of the case.

We went to the address given, and after some delay were admitted to an interview.

The Magistrate was at first somewhat crusty at being disturbed at such an hour, for by this time it was pretty late in the evening. However, when we had explained matters to him he was greatly interested, and we went through the necessary formalities. When it was done he ordered in cake and wine, and wished us both luck. "But remember," he said to Mary, "that as yet your possible fortune is a long way off. There may be more Giles Armers than one, and moreover there may be some difficulty in proving legally that the dead man was the same person as your father. Then you will also have to prove, in a formal way, your mother's marriage and your own birth. This will probably involve heavy expenses, for lawyers fight hard when they are well paid. However, I do not wish to discourage you, but only to prevent false hopes; at any rate, you have done well in making your Declaration at once. So far you are on the high road to success." So he sent us away filled with hopes as well as fears.

When we got home we set to work to look for hidden treasures in the unfinished room. I knew too well that there was nothing hidden in the rooms which were finished, for I had done the work myself, and had even stripped the walls and uncovered the floors.

It took us a couple of hours to make an accurate search, but there was absolutely no result. The late Master Mariner had made his treasury in the other house.

Next morning I went to find out from the parish registry the date of the death of Giles Armer, and to my intense relief and joy learned that it had occurred on the 30th of September, so that by our prompt action in going at once to the magistrate's, we had, if not secured a fortune, at least, not forfeited our rights or allowed them to lapse.

The incident was a sort of good omen, and cheered us up; and we needed a little cheering, for, despite the possible good fortune, we feared we might have to contest a lawsuit, a luxury which we could not afford.

We determined to keep our own counsel for a little, and did not mention the matter to a soul.

That evening Mr. Gradder called again, and renewed his offer of taking the house off my hands. I still refused, for I did not wish him to see any difference in my demeanour. He evidently came determined to effect a surrender of the lease, and kept bidding higher and higher, till at last I thought it best to let him have his way; and so we agreed for no less a sum than a hundred pounds that I should give him immediate possession and cancel

the agreement. I told him we would clear out within one hour after the money was handed to me.

Next morning at half-past nine o'clock he came with the money. I had all our effects - they were not many - packed up and taken to a new lodging, and before ten o'clock Mr. Gradder was in possession of the premises.

Whilst he was tearing down my new wall papers, and pulling out the grates, and sticking his head up the chimneys and down the water tanks in the search for more treasures, Mary and I were consulting the eminent solicitor, Mr. George, as to our method of procedure. He said he would not lose an hour, but go by the first train to Littlehampton himself to examine Mrs. Compton as to dates and places.

Mary and I went with him. In the course of the next twenty-four hours he had, by various documents and the recollections of my mother-in-law, made out a clear case, the details of which only wanted formal verification.

We all came back to London jubilant, and were engaged on a high tea when there came a loud knocking at the door. There was a noise and scuffle in the passage, and into the room rushed Mr. Gradder, covered with soot and lime dust, with hair dishevelled and eyes wild with anger, and haggard with want of sleep. He burst out at me in a torrent of invective.

"Give me back my money, you thief! You ransacked the house yourself, and have taken it all away! My money, do you hear? my money!" He grew positively speechless with rage, and almost foamed at the mouth.

I took Mary by the hand and led her up to him.

"Mr. Gradder," I said, "let us both thank you. Only for your hurry and persistency we might have let the time lapse, and have omitted the declaration which, on the evening before last, we, or rather, she, made.

He started as though struck.

"What declaration? What do you mean?"

"The declaration made by my wife, only daughter of Giles Armer, Master Mariner, late of Whitby."