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Worker in Both

Gertrude Jekyll

Excerpt

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HOME AND GARDEN

CHAPTER I

HOW THE HOUSE WAS BUILT

DOES it often happen to people who have been in a new house only a year and a half, to feel as if they had never lived anywhere else? How it may be with others I know not, but my own little new-built house is so restful, so satisfying, so kindly sympathetic, that so it seems to me.

In some ways it is not exactly a new house, although no building ever before stood upon its site. But I had been thinking about it for so many years, and the main block of it and the whole sentiment of it were so familiar to my mind's eye, that when it came to be a reality I felt as if I had already been living in it a good long time. And then, from the way it is built it does not stare with newness; it is not new in any way that is disquieting to the eye; it is neither raw nor callow. On the contrary, it almost gives the impression of a comfortable maturity of something like a couple of hundred years. And yet

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there is nothing sham-old about it ; it is not trumped-up with any specious or fashionable devices of spurious antiquity ; there is no pretending to be anything that it is not—no affectation whatever.

But it is designed and built in the thorough and honest spirit of the good work of old days, and the body of it, so fashioned and reared, has, as it were, taken to itself the soul of a more ancient dwelling-place. The house is not in any way a copy of any old building, though it embodies the general characteristics of the older structures of its own district.

Everything about it is strong and serviceable, and looks and feels as if it would wear and endure for ever. All the lesser permanent fittings are so well thought out and so thoroughly made that there is hardly anything that can possibly get out of order ; the house is therefore free from the petty worry and dislocation of comfort so commonly caused by the weakness or inefficiency of its lesser parts, and from the frequent disturbance occasioned by workmen coming to do repairs.

Internal fittings that are constantly seen and handled, such as window-fastenings, hinges, bolts and door-latches, are specially designed and specially made, so that they are in perfect proportion, for size, weight, and strength, to the wood and iron-work to which they are related. There are no random choosings from the ironmonger's pattern-book ; no clashing of styles, no meretricious ornamentation, no impudence of cast-

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iron substitute for honest hand-work, no moral slothfulness in the providing of all these lesser finishings. It takes more time, more trouble; it may even take a good deal of time and trouble, but then it is just right, and to see and know that it is right is a daily reward and a never-ending source of satisfaction.

Some heavy oak timber-work forms a structural part of the inner main framing of the house. Posts, beams, braces, as well as doors and their frames, window-frames and mullions, stairs and some floors, are of good English oak, grown in the neighbourhood. I suppose a great London builder could not produce such work. He does not go into the woods and buy the standing timber, and season it slowly in a roomy yard for so many years, and then go round with the architect's drawing and choose the piece that exactly suits the purpose. The old country builder, when he has to get out a cambered beam or a curved brace, goes round his yard and looks out the log that grew in the actual shape, and taking off two outer slabs by handwork in the sawpit, chops it roughly to shape with his side-axe and works it to the finished face with the adze, so that the completed work shall for ever bear the evidence of his skill in the use of these grand old tools, and show a treatment absolutely in sympathy with the nature and quality of the material.

Though the work of the London builder is more technically perfect, it has none of the vigorous vitality and individual interest of that of the old countryman,

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and all ways of working according to local tradition are necessarily lost. The Londoner has to take the great baulks of foreign timber as they come from the merchants' stacks, and shape them with the pitiless steam-saw; the timber then passes through several hands, each working a different machine at every stage of its conversion. The very atmosphere of the crowded London yard, with its fussy puffings of steam, its rumble, roar, and scream of machinery, the many subdivisions of processes of manipulation, all seem calculated to destroy any sentiment of life and character in the thing made. And what have we in the end? A piece of work that, though it has the merit of mechanical precision, has lost all human interest; it follows the architect's drawing with absolute fidelity, but is lifeless and inert and totally unsympathetic.

I am far from wishing to disparage accuracy or technical perfection of workmanship, but in the case of structural timber that forms part of a house of the large cottage class such as mine, and in a district that still possesses the precious heritage of a traditional way of using and working it, such mechanical perfection is obviously out of place.

Then there is the actual living interest of knowing where the trees one's house is built of really grew. The three great beams, ten inches square, that stretch across the ceiling of the sitting-room, and do other work besides, and bear up a good part of the bedroom space above (they are twenty-eight feet long), were

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growing fifteen years ago a mile and a half away, on the outer edge of a fir wood just above a hazel-fringed hollow lane, whose steep sandy sides, here and there level enough to bear a patch of vegetation, grew tall Bracken and great Foxgloves, and the finest wild Canterbury Bells I ever saw. At the top of the western bank, their bases hidden in cool beds of tall Fern in summer, and clothed in its half-fallen warmth of rusty comfort in winter, and in spring-time standing on their carpet of blue wild Hyacinth, were these tall oaks; one or two of their fellows still remain. Often driving up the lane from early childhood I used to see these great grey trees, in twilight looking almost ghostly against the darkly-mysterious background of the sombre firs. And I remember always thinking how straight and tall they looked, for these sandy hills do not readily grow such great oaks as are found in the clay weald a few miles to the south and at the foot of our warm-soiled hills. But I am glad to know that my beams are these same old friends, and that the pleasure that I had in watching them green and growing is not destroyed but only changed as I see them stretching above me as grand beams of solid English oak.

The memory of a curious incident of many years ago that I am quite unable to account for, and never can forget, belongs to this same lane; only a few yards further down and within sight of the lowest of the oaks.

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I was riding a big and rather nervous horse down the lane, which, though not exactly steep, has a fairly sharp fall. There had been a sudden and heavy storm of summer rain, and I had just ridden out from the shelter of a thickly-leaved oak, when I heard a two-wheeled country cart driving rather fast down the narrow lane behind me. As it came near, I judged by the sound that it was a heavy tax-cart such as a farmer would drive to market with two or three pigs behind him under a strong pig-net. I could hear the chink and rattle of the harness and of the loose ends of the tail-board chains. As the man driving was just about to pass me, he slapped the reins down on the horse's back, as a rough driver does who has no whip, and I noticed the sodden sound of the wet leather; at the same moment he gave a "dehk" to urge the horse. I was in the act of drawing my horse close to the near side of the lane, when, hearing the man, he made an impatient sort of bucking jump, followed by a moderate kick. The passing cart was so close that I thought his heels must touch the wheel, but they did not, and again I drew him as near as I could to the bank. As the cart did not pass I looked round, and as I turned the sound ceased, and nothing was to be seen but some hundred yards or so of the empty space of the hollow roadway.

My house is approached by a footpath from a quiet, shady lane, entering by a close-paled hand-gate. There is no driving road to the front door. I like the

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approach to a house to be as quiet and modest as possible, and in this case I wanted it to tell its own story as the way in to a small dwelling standing in wooded ground. The path runs to an arch in the eastern wall of the house, leading into a kind of long porch, or rather a covered projection of lean-to shape. This serves as a dry approach to the main door, and also as a comfortable full-stop to the southern face of the house, returning forward square with that face. Its lower western side shows flat arches of heavy timber work which are tied and braced across to the higher eastern wall by more of the same. Any one entering looks through to the garden picture of lawn and trees and low broad steps, and dwarf dry wall crowned with the hedge of Scotch Briers. As the house is on ground that falls gently to the north, the lawn on this, the southern side, is on a higher level; and standing in front of the house and looking towards the porch, the illustration shows how it looks from the garden side in late summer when the tubs of *Hydrangea* are in full flower. The main door leads into a roomy entrance and then to a short passage, passing the small dining-room on the left, to the sitting-room.

The sitting-room is low and fairly large, measuring twenty-seven by twenty-one feet, and eight feet from floor to ceiling. A long low range of window lights it from the south, and in the afternoon a flood of western light streams in down the stairs from another long

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window on the middle landing. The stairs come straight into the room, and with the wide, hooded, stone-built fireplace take up the greater part of its western end. The windows, after the manner of the best old buildings of the country, are set with their oak mullions flush with the outer face of the wall, so that as the wall is of a good thickness, every window has a broad oak window-board, eighteen inches wide. The walls are twenty-two inches thick, and as the local stone is pervious to water for some years after being freshly used, they are built hollow, with an outer stone wall nearly fifteen inches thick, then a three-inch air-space, and an inner wall of brick, firmly bound to the outer with iron ties.

The steps of the stairs are low and broad. There are four short flights and three square landings; the first landing giving access to a small book-room, which has no door, but is entered by a curtained arch. It is a pleasant little room; a room good to work and read in. It always makes me think of St. Jerome's Study in the National Gallery; not that it has the least likeness in appearance, but because it has that precious feeling of repose that disposes the mind to study. The south wall is mostly window, the west wall is all books; northward is the entrance arch and an oak bureau, and on the fourth side is another book-case and the fireplace.

The stairs feel pleasantly firm and solid; the main posts at the angles go right down and rest on brick masonry. The longest measures thirteen feet, and it

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was a puzzle to the builder how to turn the finial out of the solid, for no such work in this house is stuck on, and no lathe that he had could turn so great a length; but as there is no problem in woodwork that a clever carpenter cannot solve, he just had it worked out by hand.

The oak gallery to which the stairs lead is sixty feet long and ten feet wide. One feels some hesitation about praising one's own possessions, but it is a part of the house that gives me so much pleasure, and it meets with so much approval from those whose knowledge and taste I most respect, that I venture to describe it in terms of admiration. Thanks to my good architect, who conceived the place in exactly such a form as I had desired, but could not have described, and to the fine old carpenter who worked to his drawings in an entirely sympathetic manner, I may say that it is a good example of how English oak should be used in an honest building, whose only pretension is to be of sound work done with the right intention, of material used according to the capability of its nature and the purpose intended, with due regard to beauty of proportion and simplicity of effect. And because the work has been planned and executed in this spirit, this gallery, and indeed the whole house, has that quality—the most valuable to my thinking that a house or any part of it can possess—of conducing to repose and serenity of mind. In some mysterious way it is imbued with an expression of

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cheerful, kindly welcome, of restfulness to mind and body, of abounding satisfaction to eye and brain.

It is just these desirable qualities that are most rarely to be found in a modern building, and that one so much appreciates in those examples that remain to us of the domestic architecture of our Tudor and Jacobean reigns, and still more frequently in foreign lands in the monastic buildings. Indeed, one of the wishes I expressed to the architect was that I should like a little of the feeling of a convent, and, how I know not, unless it be by virtue of solid structure and honest simplicity, he has certainly given it me.

The gallery is amply lighted from the left by a long range of north window looking to the garden court. On the right are deep cupboards with panelled oak doors, only broken by panelled recesses giving access to the doors of three bedrooms. One space of eight feet is a shallower cupboard with a glazed front of sliding sashes, in which are arranged all the little treasures of some kind of prettiness or of personal interest, such as are almost unconsciously gathered together by a person of an accumulative proclivity. These are arranged with an attempt at pictorial effect, and the place serves the double purpose of having all my small miscellaneous goods easily within sight, and also of assuring me that they are safe from the destructive gambols of kittens and from the well-meant but occasionally fatal flicks of the household duster.