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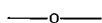
Jane Ellen Panton

Excerpt

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# SUBURBAN RESIDENCES

## *AND HOW TO CIRCUMVENT THEM*



### CHAPTER I

#### FIRST STEPS

THE first step to take is undoubtedly to find your suburb ; the second, to discover an adaptable house ; and then the third and greatest is to circumvent the many death-traps, cold-givers and misery-makers which are included in the lease ; although most certainly they are not apparent in it when it is carefully brought for you to sign.

The suburbs, take them how you will, are not Paradise and can never now be made so ; yet for people with middle-sized incomes and aspirations after fresh air, they are undoubtedly most neces-

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sary evils. If one is in the least susceptible to noise or not strong, London, or any other of our great cities, is an impossible place of residence. Perhaps I should have put the 'not strong' first, for suburban noises are worse, really, than any others; and one can be amused on far less money in London than one can elsewhere. For there a garden and a carriage are not in the least essential, while some kind of 'pleasaunce' and some sort of vehicle are almost indispensable out of town, unless one wants to spend one's money on flies, and one's time in catching trains, and is content to risk the ruin of one's clothes and run up doctors' bills, should one be caught in the many storms which distinguish our delightful climate, and which always descend on unprotected folk on their way to and from the station. Moreover, if one has the smallest desire for peace, one must be a certain distance from the rail, or most undoubtedly madness will ensue. I have often noticed delusive advertisements of suburban paradises where nearness to the rail is held out as an inducement to the would-be tenant, and I have

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often longed to 'go for' the advertiser and tell him to what a fearful end he might lead some confiding young couple, for I am perfectly sure that no one who has not tried it can have the smallest idea of what nearness to the train means—at anyrate, if one selects a suburb on one of the main lines. I know, alas! for had I not four long and maddening years in a house which was about as close to the rail as it well could be without forming part and parcel of the same? I must own, when I went into the house and, looking out of the first window I came to, beheld the demon, I at once fled from the place, and flatly refused even to look at another room, and oh! how wise I should have been had I held to my own determination. But, in those days, houses were scarce. We were obliged to be in that special locality. Everyone said one got accustomed to the trains in a week, and never heard them at all after the first night or two. The garden was charming. The last tenant had lived there for years and years, and had not left it for a lunatic asylum, and so I allowed my own judg-

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ment to give way before a storm of talk and unsought advice, and entered upon a period of misery which has shortened my days and made it impossible for me to look upon that house save as a misery-maker of the first water. For indeed, far from becoming accustomed to trains, the more one lives near them the more one hears them. I used to find I regularly expected each separate train. I waited for the fall of the signal as one expects a clap of thunder in the middle of a storm, and as there was no escape, either in the house or grounds, I felt that unless I got out of the place itself entirely, I should be found in my morning-room, seated on the floor, with straws in my hair, *à l'Ophelia*, a willing and ready candidate for a place in any lunatic asylum which was far enough away from the haunts of men to ensure a certain amount of peace, at least, from the raving, roaring, rattling rail. There are other suburban terrors which are to be dreaded, and which should certainly be looked out for before one settles down, if one is in the least susceptible to noise, as

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no one knows what torture can be given one by apparently innocent means. In delightful Shortlands, where I think the suburbs are as near perfection as a clay soil will allow, everyone in my day used to keep dogs as necessary protections from the ubiquitous tramp, and should one dog feel called upon to assert himself, all followed suit with the most exemplary precision. Then our next-door neighbour not only kept crowing and blatant cocks, but a flock of ever-increasing pigeons, and these dear creatures used to spend their happiest hours among my chimney-pots, moaning, cooing and groaning in the melancholy way they affect until they nearly drove me wild, and I had to appeal to the owner, who, with unprecedented goodness, got rid of them and so saved me from an untimely fate. But that was Shortlands. What shall I say for another suburb, where toy houses stand on quarter acres of ground, enclosed by breast-high fences, and where the fact of being a neighbour seems to ensure you as much annoyance as can be given in a short space of time? Where the ridiculous gates

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to the far more ridiculous ‘carriage approaches’ (see house agents’ advertisements) are slammed one after another by the tradespeople, tramps, postmen and other fashionable folk who use these approaches. There, ensconced in a tub, close to each side of each fence, reposes an enormous dog, with a bark to match, who could protect all the silver and diamonds in the world—which are *not* to be found in what I call ‘Pooter Parade’ (for the origin of which name please read ‘Nobody’s Diary’ in *Punch*)—where the servants hang out the clothes and themselves at the same time, if they can make investigations into their next-door neighbours’ affairs; and which said suburb is finally and liberally furnished with children whose shrieks of pleasure or pain rend the air from dewy morn until late eve and sometimes later still. There when one tries to sleep it is between the barks of the vigilant hounds, the slamming of the gate by an irate tramp sent empty away, or else disappointed by a useless visit to the unprotected garden; for, raked fore and aft as it is by the populace, a lock seems a farce,

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especially when it would mean sending a maid down to the gates every time someone wanted to come in. Indeed the gates are so easily climbed, that any amount of locks would be no protection, and where one exists, protected yet unprotected in a childish degree which would be laughable were it not so disagreeable. For anyone could 'burgle' any of those villa residences had he an ounce of pluck, or did he not know quite well that the entire contents of the whole row would not pay him for his trouble, and would certainly not be worth the risk he ran from an irate householder and his dog roused from their uneasy slumbers to the protection of *Lares et Penates*.

I have tried life, more or less, for about twelve years in the suburbs of London, both north and south, and I have come to the conclusion that if we have a carriage and can therefore live a certain distance from the rail, and if we can put at least three acres of ground round our house, and pass moreover a series of regulations, *viâ* the new Parish Councils perhaps, for suburban etiquette, or better still, if rules

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for the behaviour of one neighbour towards another could be drawn up, the southern and south - western suburbs of London are the best places in the world to be in, for ordinary middle-class folk whose best days are over and who yet must be within touch of town for business purposes. These, therefore, should be ransacked by the house-hunter before he allows his eye to wander further afield. Though it must be remembered that the trains to such parts of the globe are maddening,—the only difference between an express and an ordinary train being that one waits outside a station and the other inside,—and the smallest amount of snow or fog will disorganise the traffic altogether, yet they do go to civilized parts of London, while those from the northern portions do not. The southern trains too, kindly drop one, say at Holborn, London Bridge, Charing Cross, or Victoria, and do not insist on one's returning by precisely the same station one arrived at: an immense advantage that one has only to be deprived of to comprehend instantly all it means.



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If one goes to the northern suburbs of London, one is dropped at Euston, King's Cross, or, worse still, Liverpool Street, valuable stations for some men, but utterly useless for women ; at least I never found them any good to me. True, one has the delightful trains and perfect manners of the Euston officials and I daresay the other northerners are as good, but I don't know much about them. Still, the punctuality and good service are all one has to set against the other drawbacks, which are, to my mind, more than a set off for the fact that the trains are good and punctual. These other drawbacks are that some of the northern suburbs are at least twenty years behind the south in conveniences and comforts ; that the people who live there are not to be compared with the southrons, and that there is an almost unbroken surface of clay from London to beyond Harrow and Bushey ; and that above all, unless one has a really large place, one must be so close to one's neighbours owing to the way the ground is arranged for building, that one nearly dies of them, and that it is almost, if not quite, impossible to keep out of the reach of the

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railway, which is far more ubiquitous there than it is in other parts of the regions round London. Then too there are no advantages in the way of amusement, while the distance of the stations available in London from the theatres makes the matinee question much more serious than it is from a more reachable spot.

If young married people think of settling in the suburbs, they should weigh the *pros* and *cons* thereof most seriously before determining their course. There is very little actual society in the suburbs, but what there is, is perhaps more real than the rush and hurry of London; and if a woman wants to do positive, helpful work, and to live a really healthy, morally and mentally healthy life, and a man cares for his home his garden and his games, the couple will be much better off there than elsewhere. But if they love London, as Londoners do love their native city, if they are strong, 'in the swim,' 'smart,' or whatever is the proper designation for those who are really given over to society, let them stay where they are. For them a back attic in Belgravia is sweeter than a palace in the suburbs; for one