



AN IMAGINATIVE WOMAN  
SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF THOMAS HARDY

Beauty lay not in the thing, but in what the thing  
symbolized.

—Thomas Hardy

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## How I Built Myself a House

My wife Sophia, myself, and the beginning of a happy line, formerly lived in the suburbs of London, in the sort of house called a Highly Desirable Semi-detached Villa. But in reality our residence was the very opposite of what we wished it to be. We had no room for our friends when they visited us, and we were obliged to keep our coats out of doors in a heap against the back-wall. If we managed to squeeze a few acquaintances round our table to dinner, there was very great difficulty in serving it; and on such occasions the maid, for want of sideboard room, would take to putting the dishes in the staircase, or on stools and chairs in the passage, so that if anybody else came after we had sat down, he usually went away again, disgusted at seeing the remains of what we had already got through standing in these places, and perhaps the celery waiting in a corner hard by. It was therefore only natural that on wet days, chimney-sweepings, and those cleaning times when chairs may be seen with their legs upwards, a tub blocking a doorway, and yourself walking about edgeways among the things, we called the villa hard names, and that we resolved to escape from it as soon as it would be politic, in a monetary sense, to carry out a notion which had long been in our minds.

This notion was to build a house of our own a little further out of town than where we had hitherto lived. The new residence was to be right and proper in every respect. It was to be of some mysterious size and proportion, which would make us both peculiarly happy ever afterwards—that had always been a settled thing. It was neither to cost too much nor too little, but just enough to fitly inaugurate the new happiness. Its situation was to be in a healthy spot, on a stratum of dry gravel, about ninety feet above the springs. There were to be trees to the north, and a pretty view to the south. It was also to be easily accessible by rail.

Eighteen months ago, a third baby being our latest blessing, we

began to put the above-mentioned ideas into practice. As the house itself, rather than its position, is what I wish particularly to speak of, I will not dwell upon the innumerable difficulties that were to be overcome before a suitable spot could be found. Maps marked out in little pink and green oblongs clinging to a winding road, became as familiar to my eyes as my own hand. I learned, too, all about the coloured plans of Land to be Let for Building Purposes, which are exhibited at railway stations and in agents' windows—that sketches of cabbages in rows, or artistically irregular, meant large trees that would afford a cooling shade when they had been planted and had grown up—that patches of blue showed fishponds and fountains; and that a wide straight road to the edge of the map was the way to the station, a corner of which was occasionally shown, as if it would come within a convenient distance, disguise the fact as the owners might.

After a considerable time had been spent in these studies, I began to see that some of our intentions in the matter of site must be given up. The trees to the north went first. After a short struggle, they were followed by the ninety feet above the springs. Sophia, with all wifely tenacity, stuck to the pretty view long after I was beaten about the gravel subsoil. In the end, we decided upon a place imagined to be rather convenient, and rather healthy, but possessing no other advantage worth mentioning. I took it on a lease for the established period, ninety-nine years.

We next thought about an architect. A friend of mine, who sometimes sends a paper on art and science to the magazines, strongly recommended a Mr. Penny, a gentleman whom he considered to have architectural talent of every kind, but if he was a trifle more skilful in any one branch of his profession than in another, it was in designing excellent houses for families of moderate means. I at once proposed to Sophia that we should think over some arrangement of rooms which would be likely to suit us, and then call upon the architect, that he might put our plan into proper shape.

I made my sketch, and my wife made hers. Her drawing and dining rooms were very large, nearly twice the size of mine, though her doors and windows showed sound judgment. We soon found that there was no such

thing as fitting our ideas together, do what we would. When we had come to no conclusion at all, we called at Mr. Penny's office. I began telling him my business, upon which he took a sheet of foolscap, and made numerous imposing notes, with large brackets and dashes to them. Sitting there with him in his office, surrounded by rolls of paper, circles, squares, triangles, compasses, and many other of the inventions which have been sought out by men from time to time, and perceiving that all these were the realities which had been faintly shadowed forth to me by Euclid some years before, it is no wonder that I became a puppet in his hands. He settled everything in a miraculous way. We were told the only possible size we could have the rooms, the only way we should be allowed to go upstairs, and the exact quantity of wine we might order at once, so as to fit the wine cellar he had in his head. His professional opinions, propelled by his facts, seemed to float into my mind whether I wished to receive them or not. I thought at the time that Sophia, from her silence, was in the same helpless state; but she has since told me it was quite otherwise, and that she was only a little tired.

I had been very anxious all along that the stipulated cost, eighteen hundred pounds, should not be exceeded, and I impressed this again upon Mr. Penny.

"I will give you an approximate estimate for the sort of thing we are thinking of," he said. "Linem." (This was the clerk.)

"Did you speak, sir?"

"Forty-nine by fifty-four by twenty-eight, twice fourteen by thirty-one by eleven, and several small items which we will call one hundred and sixty."

"Eighty-two thousand four hundred—"

"But eighteen hundred at the very outside," I began, "is what—"

"Feet, my dear sir—feet, cubic feet," said Mr. Penny. "Put it down at sixpence a foot, Linem, remainders not an object."

"Two thousand two hundred pounds." This was too much.

"Well, try it at something less, leaving out all below hundreds, Linem."

"About eighteen hundred and seventy pounds."

"Very satisfactory, in my opinion," said Mr. Penny turning to me. "What do you think?"

"You are so particular, John," interrupted my wife. "I am sure it is exceedingly moderate: elegance and extreme cheapness never do go together."

(It may be here remarked that Sophia never calls me "my dear" before strangers. She considers that, like the ancient practice in besieged cities of throwing loaves over the walls, it really denotes a want rather than an abundance of them within.)

I did not trouble the architect any further, and we rose to leave.

"Be sure you make a nice conservatory, Mr. Penny," said my wife; "something that has character about it. If it could only be in the Chinese style, with beautiful ornaments at the corners, like Mrs. Smith's, only better," she continued, turning to me with a glance in which a broken tenth commandment might have been seen.

"Some sketches shall be forwarded, which I think will suit you," answered Mr. Penny pleasantly, looking as if he had possessed for some years a complete guide to the minds of all people who intended to build.

It is needless to go through the whole history of the plan-making. A builder had been chosen, and the house marked out, when we went down to the place one morning to see how the foundations looked.

It is a strange fact, that a person's new house drawn in outline on the ground where it is to stand, looks ridiculously and inconveniently small. The notion it gives one is, that any portion of one's after-life spent within such boundaries must of necessity be rendered wretched on account of bruises daily received by running against the partitions, door posts, and fireplaces. In my case, the lines showing sitting-rooms seemed to denote cells; the kitchen looked as if it might develop into a large box; whilst the study appeared to consist chiefly of a fireplace and a door. We were told that houses always looked so; but Sophia's disgust at the sight of such a diminutive drawing-room was not to be lessened by any scientific reasoning. Six feet longer—four feet then—three it must be, she argued, and the room was accordingly lengthened. I felt rather relieved when at last I got her off the ground, and on the road home.



The building gradually crept upwards, and put forth chimneys. We were standing beside it one day, looking at the men at work on the top, when the builder's foreman came towards us.

"Being your own house, sir, and as we are finishing the last chimney, you would perhaps like to go up," he said.

"I am sure I should much, if I were a man," was my wife's observation to me. "The landscape must appear so lovely from that height."

This remark placed me in something of a dilemma, for it must be confessed that I am not given to climbing. The sight of cliffs, roofs, scaffoldings, and elevated places in general, which have no sides to keep people from slipping off, always causes me to feel how infinitely preferable a position at the bottom is to a position at the top of them. But as my house was by no means lofty, and it was but for once, I said I would go up.

My knees felt a good deal in the way as I ascended the ladder; but that was not so disagreeable as the thrill which passed through me as I followed my guide along two narrow planks, one bending beneath each foot. However, having once started, I kept on, and next climbed another ladder, thin and weak-looking, and not tied at the top. I could not help thinking, as I viewed the horizon between the steps, what a shocking thing it would be if any part should break; and to get rid of the thought, I adopted the device of mentally criticising the leading articles in that morning's *Times*; but as the plan did not answer, I tried to fancy that, though strangely enough it seemed otherwise, I was only four feet from the ground. This was a failure too; and just as I had commenced upon an idea that great quantities of feather-beds were spread below, I reached the top scaffold.

"Rather high," I said to the foreman, trying, but failing to appear unconcerned.

"Well, no," he answered; "nothing to what it is sometimes (I'll just trouble you not to step upon the end of that plank there, as it will turnover); though you may as well fall from here as from the top of the Monument for the matter of life being quite extinct when they pick you

up," he continued, looking around at the weather and the crops, as it were.

Then a workman, with a load of bricks, stamped along the boards, and overturned them at my feet, causing me to shake up and down like the little servant-men behind private cabs. I asked, in trepidation, if the bricks were not dangerously heavy, thinking of a newspaper paragraph headed "Frightful Accident from an Overloaded Scaffold."

"Just what I was going to say. Dan has certainly too many there," answered the man. "But it won't break down if we walk without springing, and don't sneeze, though the mortar-boy's hooping-cough was strong enough in my poor brother Jim's case," he continued abstractedly, as if he himself possessed several necks, and could afford to break one or two.

My wife was picking daisies a little distance off, apparently in a state of complete indifference as to whether I was on the scaffold, at the foot of it, or in St George's Hospital; so I roused myself for a descent, and tried the small ladder. I cannot accurately say how I did get down; but during that performance, my body seemed perforated by holes, through which breezes blew in all directions. As I got nearer the earth, they went away. It may be supposed that my wife's notion of the height differed considerably from my own, and she inquired particularly for the landscape, which I had quite forgotten; but the discovery of that fact did not cause me to break a resolution not to trouble my chimneys again.

Beyond a continual anxiety and frequent journeyings along the sides of a triangle, of which the old house, the new house, and the architect's office were the corners, nothing worth mentioning happened till the building was nearly finished. Sophia's ardour in the business, which at the beginning was so intense, had nearly burned itself out, so I was left pretty much to myself in getting over the later difficulties. Amongst them was the question of a porch. I had often been annoyed whilst waiting outside a door on a wet day at being exposed to the wind and rain, and it was my favourite notion that I would have a model porch whenever I should build a house. Thus it was very vexing to recollect, just as the workmen were finishing off, that I had never mentioned the subject to Mr. Penny, and that he had not suggested anything about one to me.

“A porch or no porch is entirely a matter of personal feeling and taste,” was his remark, in answer to a complaint from me; “so, of course, I did not put one without its being mentioned. But it happens that in this case it would be an improvements feature, in fact. There is this objection, that the roof will close up the window of the little place on the landing; but we may get ventilation by making an opening higher up, if you don’t mind a trifling darkness, or rather gloom.”

My first thought was that this might tend to reduce myself and family to a state of chronic melancholy; but remembering there were reflectors advertised to throw sunlight into any nook almost, I agreed to the inconvenience, for the sake of the porch, though I found afterwards that the gloom was for all time, the patent reflector, naturally enough, sending its spot of light against the opposite wall, where it was not wanted, and leaving none about the landing, where it was.

In getting a house built for a specified sum by contract with a builder, there is a certain pit-fall into which unwary people are sure to step—this accident is technically termed “getting into extras.” It is evident that the only way to get out again without making a town-talk about yourself, is to pay the builder a large sum of money over and above the contract amount—the value of course of the extras. In the present case, I knew very well that the perceptible additions would have to be paid for. Commonsense, and Mr. Penny himself perhaps, should have told me a little more distinctly that I must pay if I said “yes” to questions whether I preferred one window a trifle larger than it was originally intended, another a trifle smaller, second thoughts as to where a doorway should be, and so on. Then came a host of things “not included”—a sink in the scullery, a rain-water tank and a pump, a trap-door into the roof, a scraper, a weather-cock and four letters, ventilators in the nursery, same in the kitchen, all of which worked vigorously enough, but the wrong way; patent remarkable bell-pulls; a royal letters extraordinary kitchen-range, which it would cost exactly three pence three—farthings to keep a fire in for twelve hours, and yet cook any joint in any way, warm up what was left yesterday, boil the vegetables, and do the ironing. But not keeping a strict account of all these expenses, and thinking myself safe in Mr.

Penny's hands from any enormous increase, I was astounded to find that the additions altogether came to some hundreds of pounds. I could almost go through the worry of building another house, to show how carefully I would avoid getting into extras again.

Then they have to be wound up. A surveyor is called in from somewhere, and, by a fiction, his heart's desire is supposed to be that you shall not be overcharged one halfpenny by the builder for the additions. The builder names a certain sum as the value of a portion—say double its worth, the surveyor then names a sum, about half its true value. They then fight it out by word of mouth, and gradually bringing their valuations nearer and nearer together, at last meet in the middle. All my accounts underwent this operation.

Families-removing van carried our furniture and effects to the new building without giving us much trouble; but a number of vexing little incidents occurred on our settling down, which I should have felt more deeply had not a sort of Martinmas summer of Sophia's interest in the affair now set in, and lightened them considerably. Smoke was one of our nuisances. On lighting the study-fire, every particle of smoke came curling into the room. In our trouble, we sent for the architect, who immediately asked if we had tried the plan of opening the register to cure it. We had not, but we did so, and the smoke ascended at once. The last thing I remember was Sophia jumping up one night and frightening me out of my senses with the exclamation: "O, that builder! Not a single bar of any sort is there to the nursery-windows. John, some day those poor little children will tumble out in their innocence—how should they know better?—and be dashed to pieces. Why did you put the nursery on the second floor?" And you may be sure that some bars were put up the very next morning.

1865

## The Thieves Who Couldn't Help Sneezing

Many years ago, when oak-trees now past their prime were about as large as elderly gentlemen's walking-sticks, there lived in Wessex a yeoman's son, whose name was Hubert. He was about fourteen years of age, and was as remarkable for his candour and lightness of heart as for his physical courage, of which, indeed, he was a little vain.

One cold Christmas Eve his father, having no other help at hand, sent him on an important errand to a small town several miles from home. He travelled on horseback, and was detained by the business till a late hour of the evening. At last, however, it was completed; he returned to the inn, the horse was saddled, and he started on his way. His journey homeward lay through the Vale of Blackmore, a fertile but somewhat lonely district, with heavy clay roads and crooked lanes. In those days, too, a great part of it was thickly wooded.

It must have been about nine o'clock when, riding along amid the overhanging trees upon his stout-legged cob Jerry, and singing a Christmas carol, to be in harmony with the season, Hubert fancied that he heard a noise among the boughs. This recalled to his mind that the spot he was traversing bore an evil name. Men had been waylaid there. He looked at Jerry, and wished he had been of any other colour than light grey; for on this account the docile animal's form was visible even here in the dense shade. "What do I care?" he said aloud, after a few minutes of reflection. "Jerry's legs are too nimble to allow any highwayman to come near me."

"Ha! ha! indeed," was said in a deep voice; and the next moment a man darted from the thicket on his right hand, another man from the thicket on his left hand, and another from a tree-trunk a few yards ahead. Hubert's bridle was seized, he was pulled from his horse, and although he struck out with all his might, as a brave boy would naturally do, he was overpowered. His arms were tied behind him, his legs bound tightly

together, and he was thrown into the ditch. The robbers, whose faces he could now dimly perceive to be artificially blackened, at once departed, leading off the horse.

As soon as Hubert had a little recovered himself, he found that by great exertion he was able to extricate his legs from the cord; but, in spite of every endeavour, his arms remained bound as fast as before. All, therefore, that he could do was to rise to his feet and proceed on his way with his arms behind him, and trust to chance for getting them unfastened. He knew that it would be impossible to reach home on foot that night, and in such a condition; but he walked on. Owing to the confusion which this attack caused in his brain, he lost his way and would have been inclined to lie down and rest till morning among the dead leaves had he not known the danger of sleeping without wrappers in a frost so severe. So he wandered further onwards, his arms wrung and numbed by the cord which pinioned him, and his heart aching for the loss of poor Jerry, who never had been known to kick, or bite, or show a single vicious habit. He was not a little glad when he discerned through the trees a distant light. Towards this he made his way, and presently found himself in front of a large mansion with flanking wings, gables, and towers, the battlements and chimneys showing their shapes against the stars.

All was silent; but the door stood wide open, it being from this door that the light shone which had attracted him. On entering he found himself in a vast apartment arranged as a dining-hall, and brilliantly illuminated. The walls were covered with a great deal of dark wainscoting, formed into moulded panels, carvings, closet-doors, and the usual fittings of a house of that kind. But what drew his attention most was the large table in the midst of the hall, upon which was spread a sumptuous supper, as yet untouched. Chairs were placed around, and it appeared as if something had occurred to interrupt the meal just at the time when all were ready to begin.

Even had Hubert been so inclined, he could not have eaten in his helpless state, unless by dipping his mouth into the dishes, like a pig or cow. He wished first to obtain assistance; and was about to penetrate further into the house for that purpose when he heard hasty footsteps in

the porch and the words, "Be quick!" uttered in the deep voice which had reached him when he was dragged from the horse. There was only just time for him to dart under the table before three men entered the dining-hall. Peeping from beneath the hanging edges of the tablecloth, he perceived that their faces, too, were blackened, which at once removed any remaining doubts he may have felt that these were the same thieves.

"Now, then," said the first—the man with the deep voice—"let us hide ourselves. They will all be back again in a minute. That was a good trick to get them out of the house—eh?"

"Yes. You well imitated the cries of a man in distress," said the second.

"Excellently," said the third.

"But they will soon find out that it was a false alarm. Come, where shall we hide? It must be some place we can stay in for two or three hours, till all are in bed and asleep. Ah! I have it. Come this way! I have learnt that the further closet is not opened once in a twelvemonth; it will serve our purpose exactly."

The speaker advanced into a corridor which led from the hall. Creeping a little farther forward, Hubert could discern that the closet stood at the end, facing the dining-hall. The thieves entered it, and closed the door. Hardly breathing, Hubert glided forward, to learn a little more of their intention, if possible; and, coming close, he could hear the robbers whispering about the different rooms where the jewels, plate, and other valuables of the house were kept, which they plainly meant to steal.

They had not been long in hiding when a gay chattering of ladies and gentlemen was audible on the terrace without. Hubert felt that it would not do to be caught prowling about the house, unless he wished to be taken for a robber himself; and he slipped softly back to the hall, out at the door, and stood in a dark corner of the porch, where he could see everything without being himself seen. In a moment or two a whole troop of personages came gliding past him into the house. There were an elderly gentleman and lady, eight or nine young ladies, as many young men, besides half-a-dozen men-servants and maids. The mansion had apparently been quite emptied of its occupants.

"Now, children and young people, we will resume our meal," said the old gentleman. "What the noise could have been I cannot understand. I have ever felt so certain in my life that there was a person being murdered outside my door."

Then the ladies began saying how frightened they had been, and how they had expected an adventure, and how it had ended in nothing after all.

"Wait a while," said Hubert to himself. "You'll have adventure enough by-and-by, ladies."

It appeared that the young men and women were married sons and daughters of the old couple, who had come that day to spend Christmas with their parents.

The door was then closed, Hubert being left outside in the porch. He thought this a proper moment for asking their assistance; and, since he was unable to knock with his hands, began boldly to kick the door.

"Hullo! What disturbance are you making here?" said a footman who opened it; and, seizing Hubert by the shoulder, he pulled him into the dining-hall. "Here's a strange boy I have found making a noise in the porch, Sir Simon."

Everybody turned.

"Bring him forward," said Sir Simon, the old gentleman before mentioned. "What were you doing there, my boy?"

"Why, his arms are tied!" said one of the ladies.

"Poor fellow!" said another.

Hubert at once began to explain that he had been waylaid on his journey home, robbed of his horse, and mercilessly left in this condition by the thieves.

"Only to think of it!" exclaimed Sir Simon.

"That's a likely story," said one of the gentleman-guests, incredulously.

"Doubtful, hey?" asked Sir Simon.

"Perhaps he's a robber himself," suggested a lady.

"There is a curiously wild wicked look about him certainly, now that I examine him closely," said the old mother.

Hubert blushed with shame; and, instead of continuing his story, and



relating that robbers were concealed in the house, he doggedly held his tongue, and half resolved to let them find out their danger for themselves.

"Well, untie him," said Sir Simon. "Come, since it is Christmas Eve, we'll treat him well. Here, my lad; sit down in that empty seat at the bottom of the table, and make as good a meal as you can. When you have had your fill we will listen to more particulars of your story."

The feast then proceeded; and Hubert, now at liberty, was not at all sorry to join in. The more they ate and drank the merrier did the company become; the wine flowed freely, the logs flared up the chimney, the ladies laughed at the gentlemen's stories; in short, all went as noisily and as happily as a Christmas gathering in old times possibly could do.

Hubert, in spite of his hurt feelings at their doubts of his honesty, could not help being warmed both in mind and in body by the good cheer, the scene, and the example of hilarity set by his neighbours. At last he laughed as heartily at their stories and repartees as the old Baronet, Sir Simon, himself. When the meal was almost over one of the sons, who had drunk a little too much wine, after the manner of men in that century, said to Hubert, "Well, my boy, how are you? Can you take a pinch of snuff?" He held out one of the snuff-boxes which were then becoming common among young and old throughout the country.

"Thank you," said Hubert, accepting a pinch.

"Tell the ladies who you are, what you are made of, and what you can do," the young man continued, slapping Hubert upon the shoulder.

"Certainly," said our hero, drawing himself up, and thinking it best to put a bold face on the matter. "I am a travelling magician."

"Indeed!"

"What shall we hear next?"

"Can you call up spirits from the vasty deep, young wizard?"

"I can conjure up a tempest in a cupboard," Hubert replied.

"Ha-ha!" said the old Baronet, pleasantly rubbing his hands.

"We must see this performance. Girls, don't go away; here's something to be seen."

"Not dangerous, I hope?" said the old lady.

Hubert rose from the table. "Hand me your snuff-box, please,"