Walnut-Tree House

Chapter One

The New Owner  
  
Many years ago there stood at the corner of a street leading out of Upper Kennington Lane a great red brick house, covering a goodly area of ground, and surrounded by gardens magnificent in their proportions when considered in relation to the populous neighbourhood mentioned.  
  
Originally a place of considerable pretention; a gentleman's seat in the country probably when Lambeth Marsh had not a shop in the whole of it; when Vauxhall Gardens were still in nubilus; when no South-Western Railway was planned or thought of; when London was comparatively a very small place, and its present suburbs were mere country villages—hamlets lying quite remote from the heart of the city.  
  
Once, the house in question had been surrounded by a small park, and at that time there were fish-ponds in the grounds, and quite a stretch of meadow-land within the walls. Bit by bit, however, the park had been cut up into building ground and let off on building leases; the meadows were covered with bricks and mortar, shops were run up where cows once chewed the cud, and the roar and rumble of London traffic sounded about the old house and the deserted garden, formerly quiet and silent as though situated in some remote part of the country.  
  
Many a time in the course of the generations that had come and gone, been born and buried, since the old house was built, the freehold it covered changed hands. On most estates of this kind round London there generally is a residence, which passes like a horse from buyer to buyer. When it has served one man's need it is put up for sale and bid for by another. When rows and rows of houses, and line after line of streets, have obliterated all the familiar marks, it is impossible to cultivate a sentiment as regards property; and it is unlikely that the descendants of the first possessors of Walnut-Tree House who had grown to be country folk and lived in great state, oblivious of business people, and entertaining a great contempt for trade, knew that in a very undesirable part of London there still stood the residence where the first successful man of their family went home each day from his counting-house over against St. Mildred's Church, in The Poultry.  
  
One very wet evening, in an autumn the leaves of which have been dead and gone this many a year, Walnut-Tree House, standing grim and lonely in the mournful twilight, looked more than ordinarily desolate and deserted.  
  
There was not a sign of life about it; the shutters were closed—the rusty iron gates were fast locked—the approach was choked up with grass and weeds—through no chink did the light of a single candle flicker. For seven years it had been given over to rats and mice and blackbeetles; for seven years no one had been found to live in it; for seven years it had remained empty, while its owner wore out existence in fits of moody dejection or of wild frenzy in the madhouse close at hand; and now that owner was dead and buried and forgotten, and the new owner was returning to take possession. This new owner had written to his lawyers, or rather he had written to the lawyers of his late relative, begging them to request the person in charge of the house to have rooms prepared for his arrival; and, when the train drew into the station at Waterloo, he was met by one of the clerks in Messrs Timpson and Co.'s office, who, picking out Mr. Stainton, delivered to that gentleman a letter from the firm, and said he would wait and hear if there were any message in reply.  
  
Mr. Stainton read the letter—looked at the blank flyleaf—and then, turning back to the first words, read what his solicitors had to say all through once again, this time aloud.  
  
“The house has stood empty for more than seven years,” he said, half addressing the clerk and half speaking to himself. “Must be damp and uninhabitable; there is no one living on the premises. Under these circumstances we have been unable to comply with your directions, and can only recommend you to go to an hotel till we are able personally to discuss future arrangements.”  
  
“Humph,” said the new owner, after he had finished. “I'll go and take a look at the place, anyhow. Is it far from here, do you know?” he asked, turning to the young man from Timpsons'.  
  
“No, sir; not very far.”  
  
“Can you spare time to come over there with me?” continued Mr. Stainton. The young man believed that he could, adding, “If you want to go into the house we had better call for the key. It is at an estate agent's in the Westminster Bridge Road.”  
  
“I cannot say I have any great passion for hotels,” remarked the new owner, as he took his seat in the cab.  
  
“Indeed, sir?”  
  
“No; either they don't suit me, or I don't suit them. I have led a wild sort of life: not much civilisation in the bush, or at the goldfields, I can tell you. Rooms full of furniture, houses where a fellow must keep to the one little corner he has hired, seem to choke me. Then I have not been well, and I can't stand noise and the trampling of feet. I had enough of that on board ship; and I used to lie awake at nights and think how pleasant it would be to have a big house all to myself, to do as I liked in.”  
  
“Yes, sir,” agreed the clerk.  
  
“You see, I have been used to roughing it, and I can get along very well for a night without servants.”  
  
“No doubt, sir.”  
  
“I suppose the house is in substantial repair—roof tight, and all that sort of thing?”  
  
“I can't say, I am sure, sir.”  
  
“Well, if there is a dry corner where I can spread a rug, I shall sleep there to-night.”  
  
The clerk coughed. He looked out of the window, and then he looked at Messrs. Timpsons' client.  
  
“I do not think—” he began, apologetically, and then stopped.  
  
“You don't think what?” asked the other.  
  
“You'll excuse me, sir, but I don't think—I really do not think, if I were you, I'd go to that house to-night.”  
  
“Why not?”  
  
“Well, it has not been slept in for nearly seven years, and it must be blue mouldy with damp; and if you have been ill, that is all the more reason you should not run such a risk. And, besides—”  
  
“Besides?” suggested Mr. Stainton. “Out with it! Like a postscript, no doubt, that 'besides' holds the marrow of the argument.”  
  
“The house has stood empty for years, sir, because—there is no use in making any secret of it—the place has a bad name.”  
  
“What sort of a bad name—unhealthy?”  
  
“Oh, no!”  
  
“Haunted?”  
  
The clerk inclined his head. “You have hit it, sir,” he said.  
  
“And that is the reason no one has lived there?”  
  
“We have been quite unable to let the house on that account.”  
  
“The sooner it gets unhaunted, then, the better,” retorted Mr. Stainton. “I shall certainly stop there to-night. You are not disposed to stay and keep me company, I suppose?”  
  
With a little gesture of dismay the clerk drew back. Certainly, this was one of the most unconventional of clients. The young man from Timpsons' did not at all know what to make of him.  
  
“A rough sort of fellow,” he said afterwards, when describing the new owner; “boorish; never mixed with good society, that sort of thing.”  
  
He did not in the least understand this rich man, who treated him as an equal, who objected to hotels, who didn't mind taking up his abode in a house where not even a drunken charwoman could be induced to stop, and who calmly asked a stranger on whom he had never set eyes before—a clerk in the respectable office of Timpson and Co., a young fellow anxious to rise in the world, careful as to his associates, particular about the whiteness of his shirts and the sit of his collar and the cut of his coats—to “rough” things with him in that dreadful old dungeon, where, perhaps, he might even be expected to light a fire.  
  
Still, he did not wish to offend the new owner. Messrs. Timpson expected him to be a profitable client; and to that impartial firm the money of a boor would, he knew, seem as good as the money of a count.  
  
“I am very sorry,” he stammered; “should only have felt too much honoured; but the fact is—previous engagement—”  
  
Mr. Stainton laughed.  
  
“I understand,” he said. “Adventures are quite as much out of your line as ghosts. And now tell me about this apparition. Does the 'old man' walk?”  
  
“Not that I ever heard of,” answered the other.  
  
“Is it, then, the miserable beggar who tried to do for himself?”  
  
“It is not the late Mr. Stainton, I believe,” said the young man, in tone which mildly suggested that reference to a client of Timpsons' as a “miserable beggar” might be considered bad taste.  
  
“Then who on earth is it?” persisted Mr. Stainton.  
  
“If you must know, sir, it is a child—a child who has driven every tenant in succession out of the house.”  
  
The new owner burst into a hearty laugh—a laugh which gave serious offence to Timpsons' clerk.  
  
“That is too good a joke,” said Mr. Stainton. “I do not know when I heard anything so delicious.”  
  
“It is a fact, whether it be delicious or not,” retorted the young man, driven out of all his former propriety of voice and demeanour by the contemptuous ridicule this “digger” thought fit to cast on his story; “and I, for one, would not, after all I have heard about your house, pass a night in it—no, not if anybody offered me fifty pounds down.”  
  
“Make your mind easy, my friend,” said the new owner, quietly. “I am not going to bid for your company. The child and I can manage, I'll be bound, to get on very comfortably by ourselves.”