

More Stately MANSIONS

WE'VE known the McClellans, Grace and George, for about two years now. They were the first neighbors to call on us and welcome us to the village.

I expected that initial conversation to lag uncomfortably after the first pleasantries, but not at all. Grace, her eyes quick and bright as a sparrow's, found subject matter enough to keep her talking brilliantly for two hours.

"You know," she said excitedly, "your living room could be a perfect dream! Couldn't it, George? Can't you see it?"

"Yup," said her husband. "Nice, all right."

"Just tear out all this white-painted woodwork," Grace said, her eyes narrowing. "Panel it all in knotty pine wiped with linseed oil with a little umber added. Cover the couch in lipstick red—red red. Know what I mean?"

"Red?" said Anne, my wife.

"Red! Don't be afraid of color."

"I'll try not to be," Anne said.

"And just cover the whole wall there, those two ugly little windows and all, with bottle-green curtains. Can't you see it? It'd be almost exactly like that problem living room in the February *Better House and Garden*. You remember that, of course."

"I must have missed that," said Anne. The month was August.

"Or was it *Good Homelife*, George?" Grace said.

"Don't remember offhand," said George.

"Well, I can look it up in my files and put my hand right on it." Grace stood up suddenly, and, uninvited, started a grand tour through the rest of the house.

Amazed, we followed her as she went from room to room, consigning a piece of furniture to the Salvation Army, detecting a fraudulent antique, shrugging partitions out of existence, and pacing off a chartreuse, wall-to-wall carpet we would have to order before we did another thing. "Start with the carpet," she said firmly, "and build from there. It'll pull your whole downstairs together if you build from the carpet."

"Um," said Anne.

"I hope you saw Nineteen Basic Carpet Errors in the June *Home Beautiful*."

"Oh yes, yes indeed," Anne said.

"Good. Then I don't have to tell you how wrong you can go, *not* building from the carpet. George— Oh, he's still in the living room."

I caught a glimpse of George on the living-room couch, lost in his own thoughts. He straightened up and smiled brightly.

I followed Grace and tried to change the subject. "Let's see, you are on our north side. Who's to our south?"

Grace held up her hands. "Oh! You haven't met them—the Jenkinses. George," she called, "they want to know about the Jenkinses." From her voice, I gathered that our southerly neighbors were sort of lovable beachcombers.

"Now, Grace, they're nice enough people," George said.

"Oooh, George," Grace said, "you know how the Jenkinses are. Yes, they're nice, but . . ." She laughed and shook her head.

"But what?" I said. The possibilities raced through my mind. Nudists? Heroin addicts? Anarchists? Hamster raisers?

"In 1945 they moved in," Grace said, "and right off the bat they bought two beautiful Hitchcock chairs, and . . ." This time she sighed and shrugged.

"And what?" I demanded. And spilled India ink on them? And found a bundle of thousand-dollar bills rolled up in a hollow leg?

"And that's all," Grace said. "They just stopped right there."

"How's that?" said Anne.

"Don't you see? They started out beautifully with those two chairs; then they just petered out."

"Oh," said Anne slowly. "I see—a flash in the pan. So *that's* what's wrong with the Jenkinses. Aha!"

"Fie on the Jenkinses," I said.

Grace didn't hear me. She was patrolling between the living room and dining room, and I noticed that every time she entered or left the living room, she made a jog in her course, always at exactly the same place. Curious, I went over to the spot she avoided, and bounced up and down a couple of times to see if the floor was unsound at that point, or what.

In she came again, and she looked at me with surprise. "Oh!"

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked.

"I just didn't expect to find *you* there."

"Sorry."

"That's where the cobbler's bench goes, you know."

I stepped aside, and watched uncomfortably as she bent over the phantom cobbler's bench. I think it was then that she first alarmed me, made me feel a little less like laughing.

"With one or two little nail drawers open, and ivy growing out of them," she explained. "Cute?" She stepped around it, being careful not to bark her shins, and went up the stairs to the second floor. "Do you mind if I have a look around up here?" she asked gaily.

"Go right ahead," said Anne.

George had gotten up off the sofa. He stood looking up the stairs for a minute; then he held up his empty highball glass. "Mind if I have another?"

"Say, I'm sorry, George. We haven't been taking very good care of you. You bet. Help yourself. The bottle's there in the dining room."

He went straight to it, and poured himself a good inch and a half of whisky in the bottom of the tumbler.

"The tile in this bathroom is all wrong for your towels, of course," Grace said from upstairs.

Anne, who had padded after her like a housemaid, agreed bleakly. "Of course."

George lifted his glass, winked, and drained it. "Don't let her throw you," he said. "Just her way of talking. Got a damn' nice house here. I like it, and so does she."

"Thanks, George. That's nice of you."

ANNE and Grace came downstairs again, Anne looking quite bushed. "Oh, you men!" Grace said. "You just think we're silly, don't you?" She smiled companionably at Anne. "They just don't understand what interests women. What were you two talking about while we were having such a good time?"

"I was telling him he ought to wallpaper his trees and make chintz curtains for his keyholes," George said playfully.

"Mmmmm," said Grace. "Well, time to go home, dear."

She paused outside the front door. "Nice basic lines to this door," she said. "That gingerbread will come right off, if you get a chisel under it. And you can lighten it by rubbing on white paint, then rubbing it off again right way. It'll look more like *you*."

"You've been awfully helpful," said Anne.

"Well, it's a dandy house the way it is," George said.

"I swear," Grace said, "I'll never understand

how so many artists are men. No man I ever met had a grain of artistic temperament in him."

"Bushwa," said George quietly. And then he surprised me. The glance he gave Grace was affectionate and possessive.

"It is a dull little dump, I guess," said Anne gloomily, after the McClellans had left.

"Oh, listen—it's a swell house."

"I guess. But it needs so much done to it. I didn't realize. Golly, their place must be something. They've been in it for five years, she said. You can imagine what she could do to a place in five years—everything right, right down to the last nailhead."

"It isn't much from the outside. Anyway, Anne, this isn't like you."

She shook her head, as though to wake herself up. "It isn't, is it? Never in my life have I had the slightest interest in keeping up with the neighbors. But there's something about that woman."

"To hell with her! Let's throw in our lot with the Jenkinses."

Anne started to laugh. Grace's spell was wearing off. "Are you mad? Be friends with those two-chair people, those quitters?"

"Well, we'd make our friendship contingent on their getting a new couch to go with the chairs."

"And not any couch, but the *right* couch."

"If they want to be friends of ours, they mustn't be afraid of color, and they'd better build from the carpet."

"That goes without saying," said Anne crisply.

BUT it was a long time before we found leisure for more than a nod at the Jenkinses. Grace McClellan spent most of her waking hours at our house. Almost every morning, as I was leaving for work, she would stagger in under the weight of a load of home magazines and insist that Anne pore over them with her in search of just the right solutions for our particular problem house.

"They must be awfully rich," Anne said at dinner one night.

"I don't think so," I said. "George has a little leather-goods store that you hardly ever see anybody in."

"Well, then every cent must go into the house."

"That I can believe. But what makes you think they're rich?"

"To hear that woman talk, you'd think money was nothing! Without batting an eyelash, she talks about ten-dollar-a-yard floor-to-ceiling draperies, says fixing up the kitchen shouldn't cost more than a lousy fifteen hundred dollars—with-out the fieldstone fireplace, of course."

"What's a kitchen without a fieldstone fireplace?"

"And a circular couch."

"Isn't there some way you can keep her away, Anne? She's wearing you out. Can't you just tell her you're too busy to see her?"

"I haven't the heart, she's so kind and friendly and lonely," said Anne helplessly. "Besides, there's no getting through to her. She doesn't hear what I say. Her head is just crammed full of blueprints, cloth, furniture, wallpaper and paint."

"Change the subject."

"Change the course of the Mississippi! Talk about politics, and she talks about remodeling the White House; talk about dogs, and she talks about doghouses."

(Continued on page 62)


She went upstairs to the second floor. "Do you mind if I have a look around up here?" she asked gaily. "Go right ahead," said Anne

*Now that we'd grown used to her fanatic interest in decorating, my wife
and I were really fond of Grace McClellan. We were sure her own house
must be lovely, and we wondered why she wouldn't ask us over to see it*

By KURT VONNEGUT, JR.



"Owner Must Sacrifice"



Lying on her day bed, Emily crushed the advertisement in her hands, and felt herself drowning in loneliness

By MARY JANE WALDO

He was amazed at how fast they were going—the shared possessions, the furnishings of their love. All but one room would soon be empty—the room with the locked door

IT WAS a big car. The two occupants were disturbed. The man was around thirty and on the edge of arrogance, while the woman, two or three years younger and so beautifully cared for that she seemed naturally beautiful, wore an expression of apologetic humility. She studied a clipping she held in her hand.

"It says Primrose Lane, Kent, and this is Primrose Street."

"I'll find it, Alice. Just relax."

Primrose Street came to an end, and they turned right on a rutted dirt road. They came to a little community of dwellings—you could scarcely have called them houses—built of unlikely combinations of linoleum, tar paper, packing boxes and scrap lumber. As the road grew narrower and the ruts deeper, Kent pulled the car to a stop and shouted to a man working in his front yard.

"We're looking for Primrose Lane. Can you help us?"

The man smiled. "Go back to the main road; there's a turnoff two-three miles down. Turn left, and you'll come to it soon enough." He returned to his work, and Kent turned the car around with some difficulty, coached by twenty-five or thirty children, who seemed to have sprung up out of the ground. Alice watched, fascinated, as a little girl of about four dragged her small brother out of the way and held him firmly between her thin knees.

"Where do you suppose they find that stuff their houses are made of?" Alice asked, when they were back on the main highway.

He shrugged. "Pick it up in junk yards, probably."

Alice was excited. "Did you see that trellis from

an old brass bedstead? Did you see the little girl's doll made out of a man's stocking? It must be rather fun, to figure and plan and manage some way—"

"You wouldn't find it fun," her husband assured her.

All those children, thought Alice. *All those children.* . . .

At 1041 Primrose Lane, where the houses were built of customary materials, Bill Teague paced around his living room, mentally reviewing the prices he had decided upon. I should have written everything down, he told himself, and put tags on all the stuff; when they ask me, I won't have the faintest idea how much—

Looking out of the window, Bill saw that the first customers had come. (Continued on page 36)