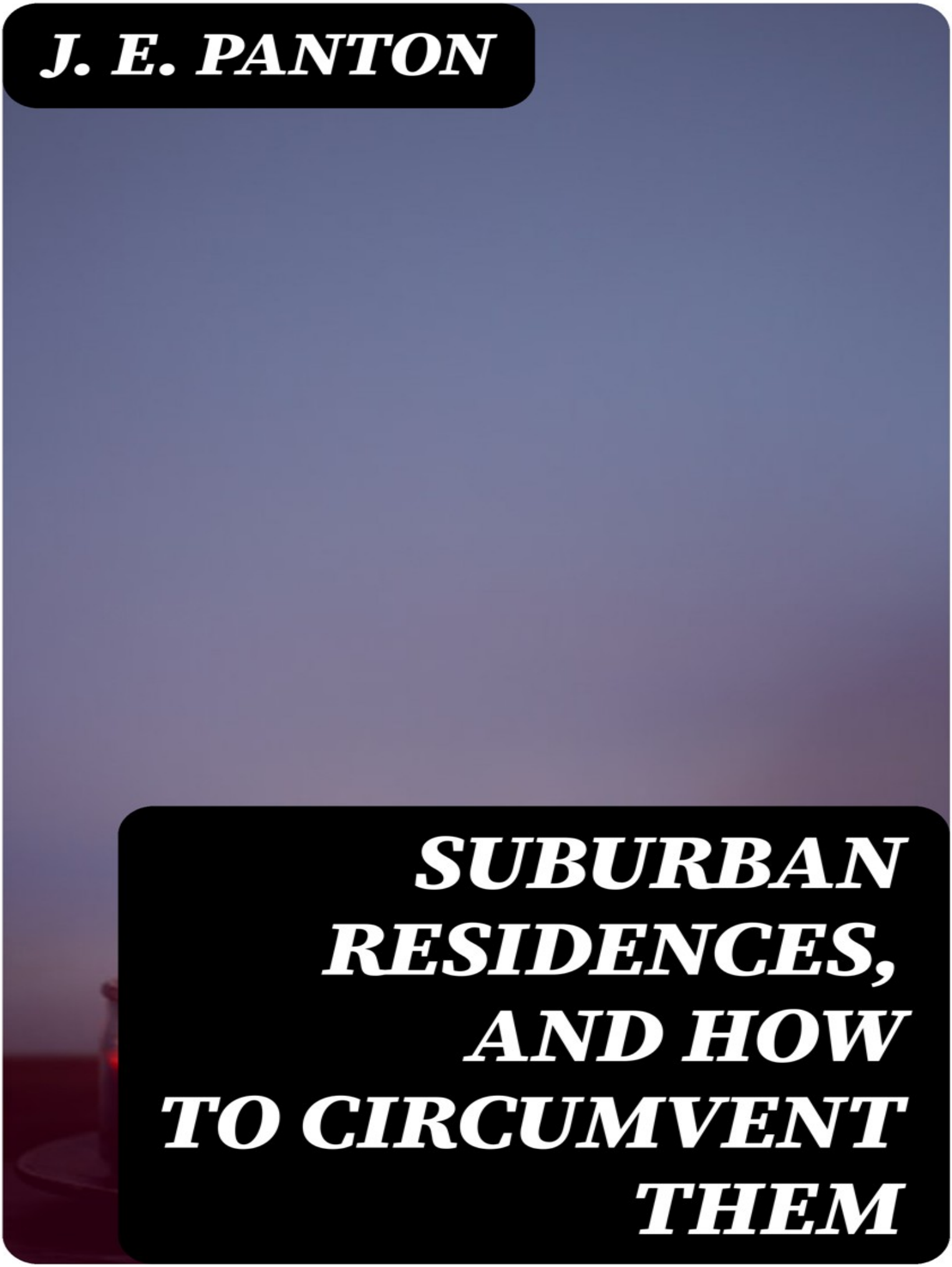
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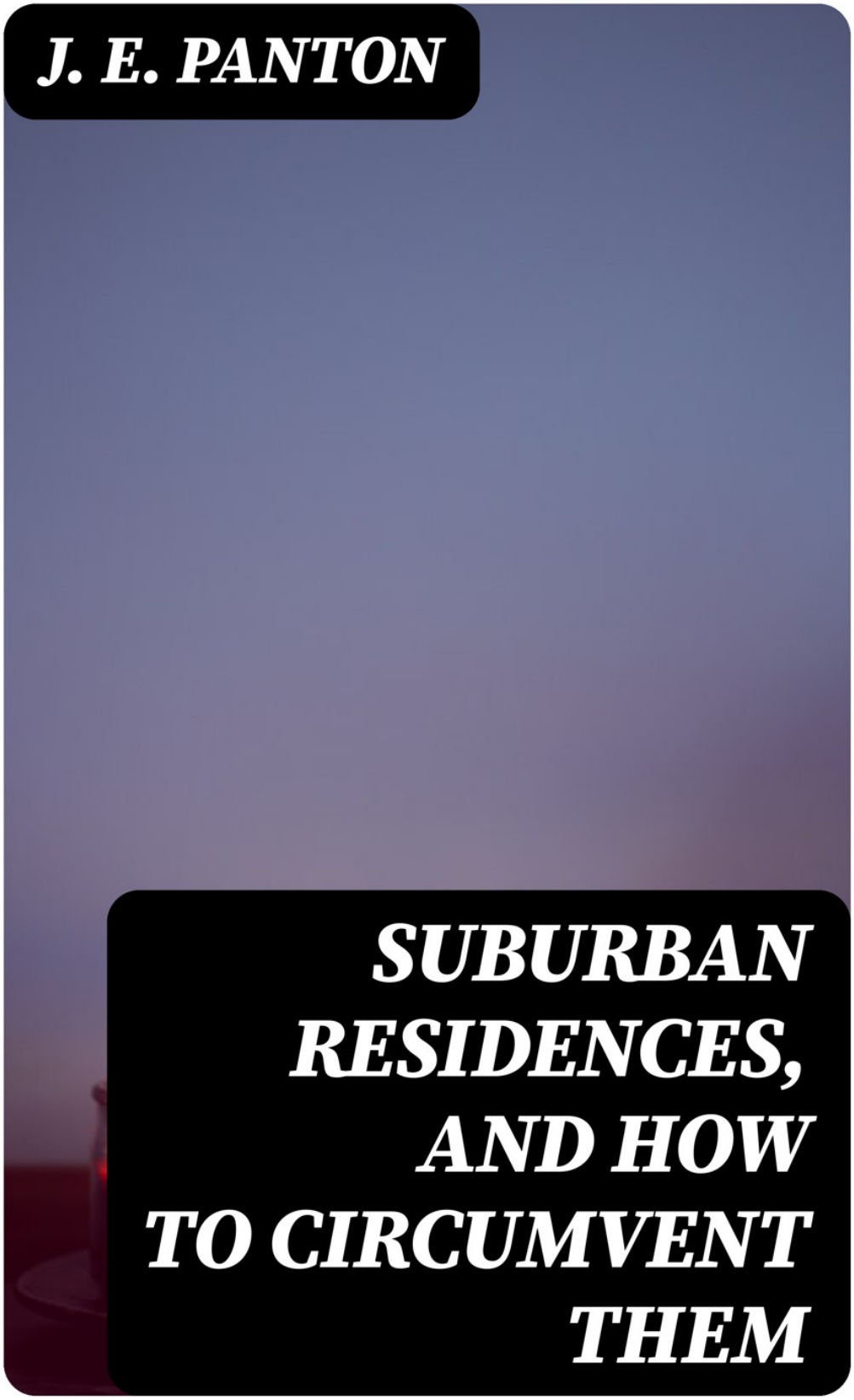
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CHAPTER I

FIRST STEPS

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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 necessary 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 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 judgment 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 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 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, 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 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.

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 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 never acclimatises, one only withers, and the husband, tired with that dreadful ‘catching of trains,’ has no mind for going out, while the wife may be done up by shopping in town, or be wearied out by mere dulness, and life will resolve itself into a procession of grey days and grimmer nights, and quickly, far too quickly, the *ménage* will become unbearable, and rupture, sooner or later, will ensue.

For, remember, if really intellectual or interesting people are found in the suburbs, they are, as I have just remarked, too tired from the day’s work to be available for society purposes. But the majority of suburban residents is made up from young married folk, and dreary, common-place, middle-aged ones, made dreary by their surroundings, and by their enforced severance from their more fortunate fellow-creatures. For unless they have real fondness for literature, or for helping among the charities and churches, and have tastes of their own which render them superior to their actual surroundings, there is literally nothing to keep them alert and alive.

Whatever suburb is selected, it should include amongst its residents some family in a good position, to whom the new-comer is known or is known of. If the fresh resident has no introductions, his fate is sealed; the best people don’t call, and should some years elapse before the acquaintance

is made that might have been so pleasant if made at first, the relationship can never be a cordial one. Rightly or wrongly, the feeling exists that such an out-of-date visit is not worth thinking of, and it rarely becomes what it might have been, had not the untoward delay slipped in between.

The suburbs could be so different, nay, in isolated cases are so different, that I long for the residents to realise all they are throwing away, all one learns too late to really profit by the lessons. In Shortlands people used to be exceptionally fortunate, for there existed in our day an intellectual headquarter, where the ‘hall-mark’ was or was not affixed, as might be. Don’t please think I mean myself; no one who knew Shortlands would think I could be such an idiot, and all will realise to whom I refer. Some years after we left, that pleasant house was broken up by the death of the founder; yet as long as it existed it was invaluable, because it acted like a fountain of living water and kept everything, as it were, fresh and young. In all suburbs there should be something of the same kind, someone of real and acknowledged tact and talent, who should know who is who and what is what, who could recognise pleasant, educated folk and give them a helping hand, and whose house should issue the ‘hall-mark’ which should make all these said pleasant, educated people able to feel they can be, an’ they choose, members of the circle that ought to exist everywhere as a means of keeping souls alive and happy. A harder task, by the way, than the equally necessary one of keeping bodies in a similar state, and quite as important. Indeed, the one depends very much upon the other, as doctors are among the very first to recognise nowadays. In

the olden times, and given a good man and a clever woman, the hall-mark used to be affixed by the rectory or vicarage, and whether the new-comers went to church or stayed away settled the question at once and for all time. But now matters are entirely changed, and the Church has little or nothing to do with the social standing of Brown and Jones and Smith. So if the suburb is to be successful, it must possess someone who, by right of brains and an assured position, can bring together the real folk and leave alone the dull, stupid ones who love gossip, and hate books and art and pictures, and so ensure an intellectual centre, which, once formed, would make any suburb as delightful as Shortlands was, in the days when I knew it well, and no doubt still is.

Given the suburbs then, the be-all and end-all of this little book is to teach the dwellers there, by choice or force, how best to avail themselves of the advantages which do exist, and which could be multiplied a thousandfold, did people know how to set to work. That I did not, makes me the best person in the world to teach others, because I have learned by experience and am therefore capable of imparting the knowledge I acquired too late to be able to use it myself. Therefore let me insist that the would-be suburban resident recognise first his duty to himself in the selection of his suburb, and then, secondly, his duty towards his neighbour. If he is close enough to him to be a nuisance he should consider him as much as he considers himself, while he bears in mind that there must be a social head to whom he will loyally give help, should he himself be anxious to wear the ‘hall-mark’ that will give all, rich and poor alike, the right

to be a members of society, where pleasantness and culture suffice to ensure a hearty welcome.

The suburban’s duty towards himself consists in selecting a suburb where the train shall land him nearest to his work in town; in selecting a good and reasonable house, and in finding out what amusements and occupations are available for his wife and daughters; and, if he has small children, what schools or teachers are likely to be useful in the matter of education. His duty to his neighbour may not be so briefly summed up, but consists in many little and worrying observances which are ridiculous indeed to the dwellers in London, and in more favoured and larger spots; but I, alas! can feelingly enumerate some of the items which go to make up a whole.

The first duty is undoubtedly to abstain from keeping a dog which must be tied up either day or night. The second is to bar crowing cocks and crooning pigeons; one can be quite happy without pigeons, and cocks can’t crow if they can’t get their heads up high enough to do so, neither are they necessary inhabitants of a small back-garden. Hanging out the clothes should be a penal offence, as should be the slamming of gates, an offensive dust-bin, ill-bred servants, and screaming children, while the utterer of long unchecked yells should be at once fined or punished as an offender against the community; for children can’t too soon be taught to know their duties towards their neighbours, the while they learn self-control and the undoubted fact that screams and cries are not necessary items in anyone’s bringing up. Then carpets and rugs should not be shaken and dusted after ten o’clock, and without some idea of the

way of the wind. The letters sent to ‘Ivy Dene,’ and delivered at ‘Deneside,’ should be at once given up at their real destination, and should not be detained until the postman is caught by chance on one of his hurried plunges down the ‘carriage approach,’ which, by the way, won’t exist in our model suburb. Moreover, when Jones gives a party and doesn’t ask Smith and Brown, it should be a matter of honour to both neighbours that they don’t disport themselves unduly, in their gardens at the same time making pointed remarks about Jones’s guests and entertainment which cannot fail to be heard all over the somewhat limited space at Jones’s disposal. Indeed the whole duty of a suburban resident is to treat his neighbour as himself in the matter of conduct, but not to know him personally if he can in any way and decently avoid doing so, for ‘beware to whom you give the key of your back door,’ says a wise old proverb, and one gives it away very freely when one is on the intimate terms one must be if one knows one’s real neighbour in the suburbs in the very smallest degree. Endless friction can be caused by the mere *va et vient* of tennis balls; or by ignoring the fact that no one wants the same people at all the small parties given in a locality, the size of which must govern in a measure at all times the amount of folks bidden to them. Servants who can chatter over the fences are also a fertile source of misunderstanding. So unless specially clever and sensible folks dwell beside one, it is best to know nothing of them in any shape or form if one wants the peace, without which Paradise itself would fail to charm, and deprived of which,

the suburban resident realises all too quickly what being in the antipodes of Paradise might very probably mean.

Then when these duties are fulfilled the next one is to discover of what manner of men is composed, and what is the record of, the new parish council or local board which may govern the special district; and another is to find if the ‘Infectious Diseases Notification Act’ has been adopted or not. These two things are most important, for given a good local authority one knows that while the rates don’t rise unduly, yet proper care is taken that all matters are up to date, which they can never be in a place where the ‘Infectious Diseases Act’ is not enforced; neither can health be found where jerry building reigns unchecked, bad meat is passed over casually as not too bad to eat (just as if all edibles should not resemble Caesar’s wife and be above the smallest suspicion), where the water is bitterly hard, and not either soft or softened, and where, in fact, everything is what ought not to be, and nothing is that should be to ensure a maximum of health with a careful regard to the spending of the ratepayers’ money. Then one very necessary hint to suburban residents is to see that in taking a new house the road by which it may stand, or by which it is reached, is properly ‘made up,’ and duly taken over by the authorities. Especially should this be the case if the house stands at a corner, albeit, for many reasons, a corner house should not be selected. Some feeble folk imagine such a situation means bad luck. Well! so it does in a measure; for being at a corner, one gets all the winds that blow on all sides, one’s front garden is filled with paper, straw and debris of all kinds, brought into it by these said

eddying winds; the dust fills our rooms and makes our curtains black before their time, and one gets a double assortment of noises both of vehicles and people; while, if we all too late discover the road has not been ‘made up,’ and ‘taken over,’ we have not only the front but a side piece to pay for, and in consequence have three times the money to disburse that is expected of our neighbours. Besides which, should snow fall there are the side walks to clear as well as the front one; we have more wall or fence to keep in order, and, being less protected from the weather are less warm than we should have been had we had houses on both sides of us instead of only one house and a wide expanse of road, where often enough, school children play in a maddening manner, and where we get all the side noises as well as those which are to be found along the front. The soil of the suburb is again a thing to be thoroughly acquainted with before the tent is pitched finally and for all time thereon. I do not believe clay is or ever can be fit for anyone to reside upon, and nothing anyone can say will cause me to alter my opinion. True I know that London, the healthiest city in the world, is nearly all on clay, but then it has the advantage not only of perfect drainage, but of every other thing which can mitigate this fundamental drawback to perfect health; yet the fogs and the chill and the gloom which distinguish it might all be different, or, indeed, non-existent, were the soil of another character. Dearly as I loved Shortlands the clay there was always to be reckoned with, and made a long reckoning too, when all was told, for though roses flourished magnificently, children didn’t, and coughs and colds were ‘the only wear’ once autumn began

to spread the leaves and winter came up to finish the little business, clad in the usual garments of fog and mist, changed at times to other more ‘seasonable’ ones of frost and snow. Chalk is to be avoided by all rheumatic souls, or by those to whom rheumatism may arrive by right of inheritance, water in which chalk exists largely being a great help to bringing such an inheritance within easy grasp of the heir; but gravel and, I think, a certain measure of sand, are all right, while many trees should be fled from. Trees bring rain and insects, and mean damp; albeit, if we can only find a suburb where the gracious pine tree flourishes, we can dwell there without alarm. The pine-tree spells health always, and should be sought for as carefully as a family of *nouveaux riches* searches for its coat of arms, or some one thing that will link it on to someone else’s noble ancestors in some way or another. Therefore should the seeker after a suburban residence arm himself with a geological map of the regions round London, and make many pilgrimages and inquiries before he finally chooses. He would be wise too if he could afford the time and money, to take rooms or a furnished house first in the locality which appeals to him most; but, if he can’t do that, he should take in the local newspaper, for at least a month, and see what manner of conduct is reported there; what are the doings of the local authorities, the species of ‘happenings’ in the way of amusements and entertainments, and if he is bent on church, he should attend one or two services; while, if golf attracts him, and tennis is his only joy, he should see that both are attainable, and that the clubs are get-into-able and

are not either beyond his pocket or whatever may be his special social status.

Once these items are all satisfactorily settled, and the suburb really selected, the tug of war may be fairly considered to have begun. The suburb is found, but how about the special house? Of course ‘eligible residences’ will abound, albeit in any good and favoured places they are not as plentiful by half as one could wish, so that nothing should be done in a hurry.

The local tradespeople, as well as the house-agents (generally very broken reeds these last too) should be taken into one’s confidence, and if a specially good house is to be let in a month or two it should be stalked as carefully as one stalks a stag of price, and with as much cunning. Too great eagerness means a large premium, and all the last tenant’s awful fixtures; too little means someone else slipping in before one, and bearing off the coveted prize under one’s very eyes.

Much as one likes the idea of a real new, clean house, where no one has ever died, or had scarlet fever, small-pox, or diphtheria, and where virgin walls and untouched rooms leave one a free hand as regards decoration and furniture, it is better, if possible, to take some place out of which a ‘good family’ has been obliged to move for some true and reasonable cause, such as a loss or increase of income, or an increase in the requirements of the family. If a new house is chosen, it is absolutely necessary that some honest and tried sanitary authority should be called in from a distance: a local man cannot possibly give an unbiassed opinion; and he should thoroughly examine the system of drains; all

pipes should be disconnected from the soil-pipes, and all sanitary arrangements should be placed on the outside of the house. I do not mean apart from the house itself, but built on at one side, so that drainage is simplified immensely and reduced to one area. One where the soil-pipe can be thoroughly ventilated and easily got at should it be necessary to examine the drains, to repair them, or to discover that they are all in good and working order. They should also be capable of being constantly and copiously flushed with a good stream of water, while all pipes connected with the water supply should be protected from the weather, and also easily reached, else will they burst at the least provocation, and cause frost and cold to be doubly cursed, because of their untoward action upon one's domestic arrangements. If the house has been lived in, confidential relations should be established with the outgoing tenant unless he has any interest in getting the house off his hands; in that case human nature being weak, one can but recollect he wants to part with it. But if he have ended his lease and be genuinely anxious to remain yet cannot for a reasonable cause, it were well to ask him frankly about the wants, requirements, and moods of the special abode, for houses want humouring just as do human beings, and very often one only finds out the virtues when the vices have caused one to throw up the sponge, and once more set out on our nomadic passing through this life.

If we select and take a new house before we attempt our decorations let us instal a caretaker. Ay! even with her grimy self and her still more grimy goods and bronchial family, heavy with the continual colds inseparable from living in