

***EUGENE
FIELD***



THE HOUSE

Eugene Field

The House

**An Episode in the Lives of Reuben Baker, Astronomer,
and of His Wife, Alice**

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CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

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INTRODUCTION

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The story that is told in this volume is as surely an autobiography as if that announcement were a part of the title: and it also has the peculiar and significant distinction of being in some sort the biography of every man and woman who enters seriously upon the business of life.

In its pages is to be found the history of the heart's desire of all who are disposed to take the partnership of man and woman seriously. The instinct—the desire—call it what you will—that is herein set forth with such gentle humor is as old as humanity, and all literature that contains germs of permanence teems with its influence. But never before has it had so painstaking a biographer—so deft and subtle an interpreter.

We are told, alas! that the story of Alice and Reuben Baker wanted but one chapter to complete it when Eugene Field died. That chapter was to have told how they reached

the fulfilment of their heart's desire. But even here the unities are preserved. The chapter that is unwritten in the book is also unwritten in the lives of perhaps the great majority of men and women.

The story that Mr. Field has told portrays his genius and his humor in a new light. We have seen him scattering the germs of his wit broadcast in the newspapers—we have seen him putting on the cap and bells, as it were, to lead old Horace through some modern paces—we have heard him singing his tender lullabies to children—we have wept with him over "Little Boy Blue," and all the rest of those quaint songs—we have listened to his wonderful stories—but only in the story of "The House" do we find his humor so gently turned, so deftly put, and so ripe for the purpose of literary expression. It lies deep here, and those who desire to enjoy it as it should be enjoyed must place their ears close to the heart of human nature. The wit and the rollicking drollery that were but the surface indications of Mr. Field's genius have here given place to the ripe humor that lies as close to tears as to laughter—the humor that is a part and a large part of almost every piece of English literature that has outlived the hand that wrote it.

JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS.

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THE HOUSE

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I

WE BUY A PLACE

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It was either Plato the Athenian, or Confucius the Chinese, or Andromachus the Cretan—or some other philosopher whose name I disremember—that remarked once upon a time, and the time was many centuries ago, that no woman was happy until she got herself a home. It really makes no difference who first uttered this truth, the truth itself is and always has been recognized as one possessing nearly all the virtues of an axiom.

I recall that one of the first wishes I heard Alice express during our honeymoon was that we should sometime be rich enough to be able to build a dear little house for ourselves. We were poor, of course; otherwise our air castle would not have been "a dear little house"; it would have been a palatial residence with a dance-hall at the top and a wine-cellar at the bottom thereof. I have always observed that when the money comes in the poetry flies out. Bread and cheese and kisses are all well enough for poverty-stricken romance, but as soon as a poor man receives a windfall his thoughts turn inevitably to a contemplation of the probability of terrapin and canvasbacks.

I encouraged Alice in her fond day-dreaming, and we decided between us that the dear little house should be a cottage, about which the roses and the honeysuckles should clamber in summer, and which in winter should be banked up with straw and leaves, for Alice and I were both of New England origin. I must confess that we had some reason for indulging these pleasing speculations, for at that time my Aunt Susan was living, and she was reputed as rich as mud (whatever that may mean), and this simile was by her neighbors coupled with another, which represented Aunt Susan as being as close as a clapboard on a house. Whatever her reputation was, I happened to be Aunt Susan's nearest of kin, and although I never so far lost my presence of mind as to intimate even indirectly that I had any expectations, I wrote regularly to Aunt Susan once a month, and every fall I sent her a box of game, which I told her I had shot in the woods near our boarding-house, but

which actually I had bought of a commission merchant in South Water Street.

With the legacy which we were to receive from Aunt Susan, Alice and I had it all fixed up that we should build a cottage like one which Alice had seen one time at Sweet Springs while convalescing at that fashionable Missouri watering-place from an attack of the jaundice. This cottage was, as I was informed, an ingenious combination of Gothic decadence and Norman renaissance architecture. Being somewhat of an antiquarian by nature, I was gratified by the promise of archaism which Alice's picture of our future home presented. We picked out a corner lot in,—well, no matter where; that delectable dream, with its Gothic and Norman features, came to an untimely end all too soon. At its very height Aunt Susan up and died, and a fortnight later we learned that, after bequeathing the bulk of her property to foreign missions, she had left me, whom she had condescended to refer to as her "beloved nephew," nine hundred dollars in cash and her favorite flower-piece in wax, a hideous thing which for thirty years had occupied the corner of honor in the front spare chamber.

I do not know what Alice did with the wax-flowers. As for the nine hundred dollars, I appropriated it to laudable purposes. Some of it went for a new silk dress for Alice; the rest I spent for books, and I recall my thrill of delight when I saw ensconced upon my shelves a splendid copy of Audubon's "Birds" with its life-size pictures of turkeys, buzzards, and other fowl done in impossible colors.

After that experience "our house" simmered and shrivelled down from the Norman-Gothic to plain, everyday,

fin-de-siècle architecture. We concluded that we could get along with five rooms (although six would be better), and we transferred our affections from that corner lot in the avenue which had engaged our attention during the decadent-renaissance phase of our enthusiasm to a modest point in Slocum's Addition, a locality originally known as Slocum's Slough, but now advertised and heralded by the press and rehabilitated in public opinion as Paradise Park. This pleasing mania lasted about two years. Then it was forever abated by the awful discovery that Paradise Park was the breeding spot of typhoid fever, and, furthermore, that old man Slocum's title to the property was defective in every essential particular.

Alice and I did not find it in our power either to overlook or to combat these trifling objections; with unabated optimism we cast our eyes elsewhere, and within a month we found another delectable biding place—this time some distance from the city—in fact, in one of the new and booming suburbs. Elmdale was then new to fame. I suppose they called it Elmdale because it had neither an elm nor a dale. It was fourteen miles from town, but its railroad transportation facilities were unique. The five-o'clock milk-train took passengers in to business every morning, and the eight-o'clock accommodation brought them home again every evening; moreover, the noon freight stopped at Elmdale to take up passengers every other Wednesday, and it was the practice of every other train to whistle and to slack up in speed to thirty miles an hour while passing through this promising suburb.

I did not care particularly for Elmdale, but Alice took a mighty fancy to it. Our twin boys (Galileo and Herschel, named after the astronomers of blessed memory!) were now three years old, and Alice insisted that they required the pure air and the wholesome freedom of rural life. Galileo had, in fact, never quite been himself since he swallowed the pincushion.

We did not go to Elmdale at once; we never went there. Elmdale was simply another one of those curious phases in which our dream of a home abounded. With the Elmdale phase "our house" underwent another change. But this was natural enough. You see that in none of our other plans had we contemplated the possibility of a growing family. Now we had two uproarious boys, and their coming had naturally put us into pleasing doubt as to what similar emergencies might transpire in the future. So our five-room cottage had acquired (in our minds) two more rooms—seven altogether—and numerous little changes in the plans and decorations of "our house" had gradually been evolved.

As I now remember, it was about this time that Alice made up her mind that the reception-room should be treated in blue. Her birth had occurred in December, and therefore turquoise was her birth-stone and the blue thereof was her favorite color. I am not much of a believer in such things—in fact, I discredit all superstitions except such as involve black cats and the rabbit's foot, and these exceptions are wholly reasonable, for my family lived for many years in Salem, Mass. But I have always conceded that Alice has as good a right to her superstitions as I to mine. I bought her the prettiest turquoise ring I could afford,

and I approved her determination to treat the reception-room in blue. I rather enjoyed the prospect of the luxury of a reception-room; it had ground the iron into my soul that, ever since we married and settled down, Alice and I had been compelled in winter months to entertain our callers in the same room where we ate our meals. In summer this humiliation did not afflict us, for then we always sat of an evening on the front porch.

The blue room met with a curious fate. One Christmas our beneficent friend, Colonel Mullaly, presented Alice and me with a beautiful and valuable lamp. Alice went to Burley's the next week and priced one (not half as handsome) and was told that it cost sixty dollars. It was a tall, shapely lamp, with an alabaster and Italian marble pedestal cunningly polished; a magnificent yellow silk shade served as the crowning glory to this superb creation.

For a week, perhaps, Alice was abstracted; then she told me that she had been thinking it all over and had about made up her mind that when we got our new house she would have the reception-room treated in a delicate canary shade.

"But why abandon the blue, my dear?" I asked. "I think it would be so pretty to have the decoration of the room match your turquoise ring."

"That 's just like a man!" said Alice. "Reuben, dear, could you possibly imagine anything else so perfectly horrid as a yellow lampshade in a blue room?"

"You are right, sweetheart," said I. "That is something I had never thought of before. You are right; canary color it shall be, and when we have moved in I 'll buy you a dear

little canary bird in a lovely gold cage, and we 'll hang it in the front window right over the lamp, so that everybody can see our treasures from the street and envy our happiness!"

"You dear, sweet boy!" cried Alice, and she reached up and pulled my head down and kissed her dear, sweet boy on his bald spot. Alice is an angel!

I fear I am wearying you with the prolixity of my narrative. So let me pass rapidly over the ten years that succeeded to the yellow-lamp epoch. Ten hard but sweet years! Years full of struggle and hopes, touched with bereavement and sorrow, but precious years, for troubles, like those we have had, sanctify human lives. Children came to us, and of these priceless treasures we lost two. If I thought Alice would ever see these lines I should not say to you now that from the two great sorrows of those years my heart has never been and never shall be weaned. I would not have Alice know this, for it would open afresh the wounds her dear, tender mother-heart has suffered.

Galileo and Herschel are strapping fellows. They have survived their juvenile ambitions to be milkmen, policemen, lamp-lighters, butchers, grocerymen, etc., respectively. Both are now in the manual-training school. Fanny, Josephine and Erasmus—I have not mentioned them before,—these are the children that are left to us of those that have come in the later years. And, my! how they are growing! What changes have taken place in them and all about us! My affairs have prospered; if it had n't been for the depression that set in two years ago I should have had one thousand dollars in bank by this time. My salary has increased steadily year by year; it has now reached a sum that enables me to hope for

speedy relief from those financial worries which encompass the head of a numerous household. By the practice of rigid economy in family expenses I have been able to accumulate a large number of black-letter books and a fine collection of curios, including some fifty pieces of mediaeval armor. We have lived in rented houses all these years, but at no time has Alice abandoned the hope and the ambition of having a home of her own. "Our house" has been the burthen of her song from one year's end to the other. I understand that this becomes a monomania with a woman who lives in a rented house.

And, gracious! what changes has "our house" undergone since first dear Alice pictured it as a possibility to me! It has passed through every character, form, and style of architecture conceivable. From five rooms it has grown to fourteen. The reception parlor, chameleon-like, has changed color eight times. There have duly loomed up bewildering visions of a library, a drawing-room, a butler's pantry, a nursery, a laundry—oh, it quite takes my breath away to recall and recount the possibilities which Alice's hopes and fancies conjured up.

But, just two months ago to-day Alice burst in upon me. I was in my study over the kitchen figuring upon the probable date of the conjunction of Venus and Saturn in the year 1963.

"Reuben, dear," cried Alice, "I 've done it! I 've bought a place!"

"Alice Fothergill Baker," says I, "what *do* you mean!"

She was all out of breath—so transported with delight was she that she could hardly speak. Yet presently she

found breath to say: "You know the old Schmitzheimer place—the house that sets back from the street and has lovely trees in the yard? You remember how often we 've gone by there and wished we had a home like it? Well, I 've bought it! Do you understand, Reuben dear? I 've bought it, and we 've got a home at last!"

"Have you *paid* for it, darling?" I asked.

"N-n-no, not yet," she answered, "but I 'm going to, and you 're going to help me, are n't you, Reuben?"

"Alice," says I, going to her and putting my arms about her, "I don't know what you 've done, but of course I 'll help you—yes, dearest, I 'll back you to the last breath of my life!"

Then she made me put on my boots and overcoat and hat and go with her to see her new purchase—"our house!"

II

OURSELVES AND OUR NEIGHBORS

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Everybody's house is better made by his neighbors. This philosophical utterance occurs in one of those black-letter volumes which I purchased with the money left me by my Aunt Susan (of blessed memory!). Even if Alice and I had not fully made up our minds, after nineteen years of planning and figuring, what kind of a house we wanted, we could have referred the important matter to our neighbors

in the confident assurance that these amiable folk were much more intimately acquainted with our needs and our desires than we ourselves were. The utter disinterestedness of a neighbor qualifies him to judge dispassionately of your requirements. When he tells you that you ought to do so and so or ought to have such and such a thing, his counsel should be heeded, because the probabilities are that he has made a careful study of you and he has unselfishly arrived at conclusions which intelligently contemplate your welfare. In planning for oneself one is too likely to be directed by narrow prejudices and selfish considerations.

Alice and I have always thought much of our neighbors. I suspect that my neighbors are my most salient weaknesses. I confess that I enjoy nothing else more than an informal call upon the Baylors, the Tiltmans, the Rushes, the Denslows and the other good people who constitute the best element in society in that part of the city where Alice and I and our interesting family have been living in rented quarters for the last six years. This informality of which I am so fond has often grieved and offended Alice. It is that gentle lady's opinion that a man at my time of life should have too much dignity to make a practice of "bolting into people's houses" (I quote her words exactly) when I know as well as I know anything that they are at dinner, and that a dessert in the shape of a rhubarb pie or a Strawberry shortcake is about to be served.

There was a time when Alice overlooked this idiosyncrasy upon my part; that was before I achieved what Alice terms a national reputation by my discovery of a satellite to the star Gamma in the tail of the constellation Leo. Alice does not

stop to consider that our neighbors have never read the royal octavo volume I wrote upon the subject of that discovery; Alice herself has never read that book. Alice simply knows that I wrote that book and paid a printer one thousand one hundred dollars to print it; this is sufficient to give me a high and broad status in her opinion, bless her loyal little heart!

But what do our neighbors know or care about that book? What, for that matter, do they know or care about the constellation Leo, to say nothing of its tail and the satellites to the stellar component parts thereof? I thank God that my hospitable neighbor, Mrs. Baylor, has never suffered a passion for astronomical research to lead her into a neglect of the noble art of compounding rhubarb pies, and I am equally grateful that no similar passion has stood in the way of good Mrs. Rush's enthusiastic and artistic construction of the most delicious shortcake ever put into the human mouth.

The Denslows, the Bayers, the Rushes, the Tiltmans and the rest have taken a great interest in us, and they have shared the enthusiasm (I had almost said rapture) with which Alice and I discoursed of "the house" which we were going to have "sometime." They did not, however, agree with us, nor did they agree with one another, as to the kind of house this particular house of ours ought to be. Each one had a house for sale, and each one insisted that his or her house was particularly suited to our requirements. The merits of each of these houses were eloquently paraded by the owners thereof, and the demerits were as eloquently