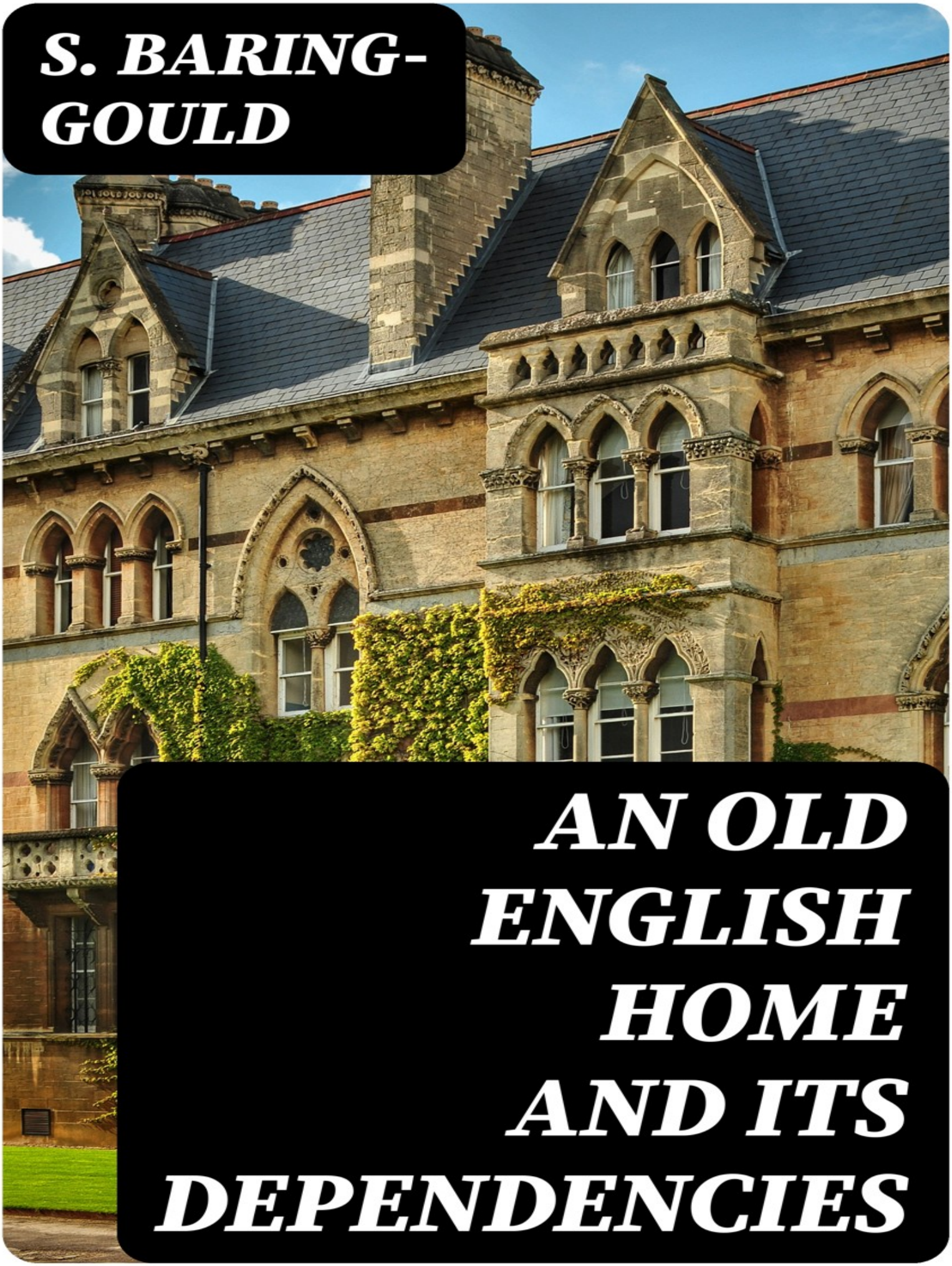
S. BARING-GOULD



AN OLD ENGLISH HOME AND ITS DEPENDENCIES

S. Baring-Gould

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The Domestic Hearth

CHAPTER III.

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In 1891 I was excavating a village at the edge of Trewortha Marsh, on the Bodmin Moors, in Cornwall. There were a number of oblong huts, but one seemed to have been occupied by more than one family, as it was divided into stalls, by great slabs of granite set up on edge, and in front of each stall was a hearth on the soil, and the soil burnt brick-red from heat.

The pottery found strewn about was all wheel-turned, but early and rude, and no trace of glass could be found. These habitations belonged to a period after the Roman invasion, and probably to Britons.

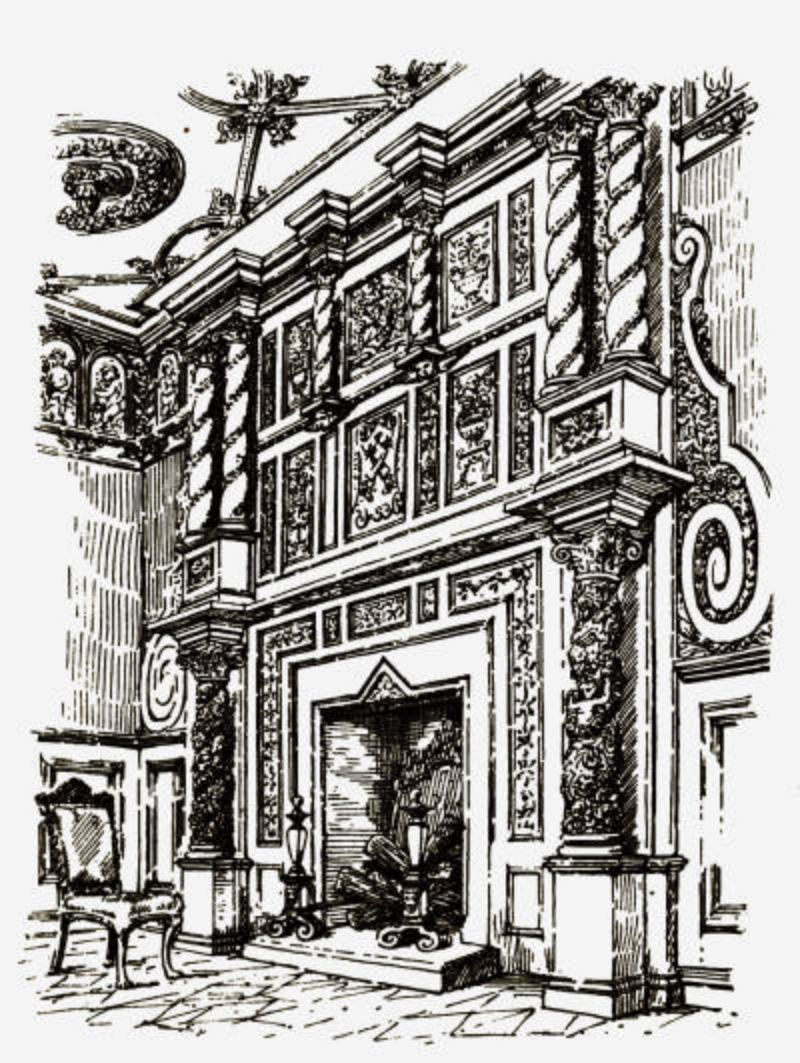
The hearth is the centre of family life, what the hall is to the manor. About it gather all who are bound together by community of blood and interest, and this is still recognized, for it is counted an unwarrantable presumption in a stranger to poke your fire.

But how small and degenerate is our fire from what it once was. Coal having taken the place of logs, the hearth has been reduced and the grate has supplanted the dogs or andirons, and the gaping fireplace is closed in.

I know an old Elizabethan mansion where the chimney-stack containing three flues descends into the hall and has in it three fireplaces, so that simultaneously three fires could burn in the same room, and the family circle could fold about the three hearths combined into one in an almost complete circle.

And what chimneys those were in old times! Bacon-sides were hung in them, so large were they, and not infrequently

a ladder could be put up them to communicate with a little door that gave access to a secret place.



A CHIMNEY-PIECE
End of Seventeenth Century

I was looking not long ago at the demolition of a good yeoman's dwelling in Cornwall. By the side of the hearth, opening into the kitchen-hall, was a walled-up door, against which usually a dresser or cupboard stood. This walled-up door communicated with a goodly chamber or cellar formed in the thickness of the chimney, and without an opening to the light outside. Access to this chamber could, however,

always be had by means of a hand-ladder placed when required in the chimney. This admitted through a door in the chimney to the receptacle for kegs—for that was the real purpose of the concealed place, it was the yeoman's cellar of spirits that had never paid customs. When a fresh supply was taken in, the door into the kitchen was unwalled and the cellar filled with kegs, then walled up again and plastered over. But as spirits were wanted they were got by means of the ladder—keg by keg.

It was in such a chamber in the wall, to which access was alone obtainable through the chimney, that Garnet and Oldcorne were concealed after the Gunpowder Plot. This is how Ainsworth describes the place of retreat: "Mrs. Abindon conducted the two priests to one of the large fireplaces. A raised stone about two feet high occupied the inside of the chimney, and upon it stood an immense pair of iron dogs. Obeying Mrs. Abindon's directions, Garnet got upon the stone, and setting his foot on the large iron knob on the left, found a few projections in the masonry on the side, up which he mounted, and opening a small door made of planks of wood, covered with bricks and coloured black, so as not to be distinguishable from the walls of the chimney, crept into a recess contrived in the thickness of the wall. This cell was about two feet wide and four high, and was connected with another chimney at the back by means of three or four small holes. Across its sides ran a narrow stone shelf, just wide enough to afford an uncomfortable seat."

But these wide chimneys, if they allowed ascent, also permitted descent, and many a house was entered and burgled by this means.

There was in my own neighbourhood, about a century ago, a man who lived in a cave above the Tamar, in Dunterton Wood, whose retreat was known to none, and who was a terror to the neighbourhood. He was wont during the night to visit well-to-do persons' houses within reach,

get over the roof to the chimney of the hall, and descend it. Once in the house he collected what he listed, unbarred the door, and walked away with his spoil.

So great was the terror inspired by this man in the neighbourhood that all householders who had anything to lose had spiked contrivances of iron put into their chimneys, so that the burglar in descending at a rapid pace stood a chance of being impaled. The other day, in repairing my hall chimney, I came on this contrivance.

The end of the man was this. Colonel Kelly, of Kelly, was out one day with his pack of foxhounds, when they made a set at the cave, and so it was discovered with the man in it and a great accumulation of plunder. I believe he was hung.

The same cave was employed as a place of refuge for an escaped convict some fifty years ago. After that, the late Mr. Kelly blew up the cave with gunpowder, and its place is now occupied by the ruins of the rock above. It can conceal no more lawbreakers.

There was something very pleasant in the old evening round the great fire. If one of wood, then, in a farmhouse, the grandfather in the ingle-corner was an indispensable feature. A wood fire requires constant attention, and it was his place to put the logs together as they burnt through; and he knew he was useful, and when the farmer's wife or his granddaughter came to the hearth for a bit of cooking she had always a pleasant word for the old man.

The settle was another feature.

There is a species much used formerly in Somersetshire and Devon, and perhaps elsewhere. It was a *multum-in-parvo*. The back opened and disclosed a place in which sides of bacon were hung. Above was a long narrow cupboard for the groceries. The seat lifted—for what think you? As a place where the baby could be placed in greatest security whilst the mother was engaged at the fire. I believe that dealers now call them monks' seats. Monks' seats! they

belonged to women and babies. But a dealer knows how to humbug his customers.

I was once in a certain county, I will not say which, and visited a gentleman who had bought and built a fine house, very modern, but very handsome. Then the fancy took him to be possessed of old oak, so he went to a dealer.

"My dear sir," said Lazarus, "I have the very thing for you—a superb antique oak mantelpiece and sideboard—the finest in England of the date of Henry VIII. But they are all in an ancient mansion, a black-timbered hall in Cheshire or Shropshire—I forget which. Would you care to go down and see it? The house is to be pulled down, and I must remove the contents."

Of course Mr. Greenhorn went, bought all at a fabulous price, and brought them to his mansion. Well, anyone with the smallest knowledge of old oak would see at a glance that this was all Belgian stuff, made up of bits from old churches, put together higgledy-piggledy without any unity

of design—stuff that no ancient would have designed, for there was no design in it. And the dealer kept this Cheshire or Shropshire black-timbered house regularly supplied with this detestable rubbish, and regularly took greenhorns to it to pay down heavy gold for what was worth nothing but a few Belgian francs.

At the risk of branching away from my topic, I must have another word relative to dealers.

There is still in England a good deal of good plain old oak; old cradles, old standing clock cases, old bureaus, etc., without any carving on them, but fine in their lines and in their simplicity. These wretches buy them up and give them into the hands of mechanical carvers to adorn in "Elizabethan style," and then they sell these good old articles of furniture—defaced and spoiled and rendered all but worthless.

"Good heavens!" said I to one of these gentry; "you have utterly, irrevocably ruined that noble wardrobe."

"Well, sir, I couldn't sell it for one-tenth of the price hadn't I done this. The buyers like this, and I have to suit their taste."

To return to the hearth and to the settle.

A friend one day saw a screen of carved oak in a cottage. He bought it for half a guinea, and then called me into consultation on it. With a little study it revealed itself to be the back of a settle of Henry VII.'s reign. The mortices for the arms and for the seat were there; also nail marks showing that stamped leather had been fastened to the back below the sculpture. There were pegs showing where had been the pilasters sustaining the canopy, and one scrap of canopy still extant. I show the restoration (p. 57).

Fine though this be, I know something better still—not in art, but for cosiness, and that is the curved settle, it is constructed in an arc. In a farmhouse I know well are two

such settles, and they are connected by a curved iron rod fastened to the ceiling, and there are green baize curtains depending from this rod.

On a winter evening, the farmer and his wife and the serving maidens and young men come into the kitchen, and the circle is completed with chairs or stools, the curtains are drawn, the fire is made up, and a very jolly evening is spent with cakes and cider, and tales and jokes and song.

I was at a sale one day—a very small farm but an old one. A farmer bid for the settle—a small one. One of his daughters was there. She turned to her sister and said: "I say, Nan, vaither he've gone and bought the settle, and it's lovely; it will hold only two."

"Well, Jane," said her sister, "I reckon—that depends. You must have the right one beside y'; then it's just large enough, and you don't want no more."

When I was a child, some sixty years ago, the mat before the fire was the line of demarcation, beyond which a youngster might not go.

"My dear," said my grandmother, "fires are made to be seen—not felt."

Oh, how we shivered beyond the mat! I used to look at a patent bacon-toaster, and resolve, when I was a man and independent, to have a curved settle formed of burnished tin, and to sit before a roaring fire in the focus of all the converging rays, and never stir therefrom from Michaelmas till Lady Day. But the curved settle answers the purpose.

Among the troubles and irritations of life, one of the worst is a smoky chimney, and among all the hideousness of modern contrivances nothing surpasses the cowl.

It is very curious that architects should set themselves to work to violate first principles, and so involve us in these troubles. In the first place, to ensure that a chimney shall not smoke, the flue must be made large enough to carry the

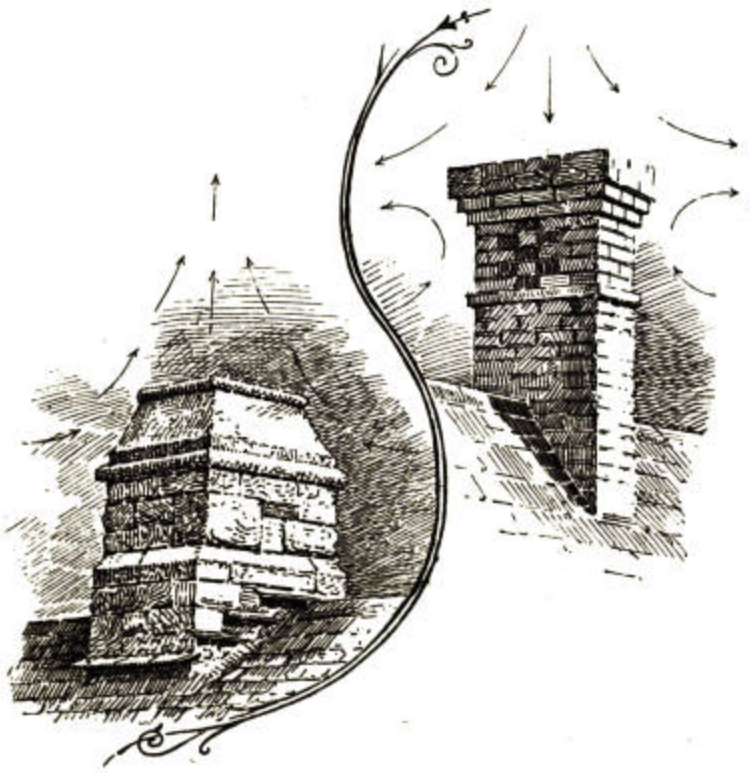
smoke. This is a principle very generally neglected. Next it is necessary that the chimney should not have a flat top, for then the wind beats against the broad surface, and, of course, prevents the smoke from rising, and much of it is deflected down the flue.

What our forefathers did was to reduce the top to a thin edge that could not arrest and drive the smoke down, but would, on the contrary, assist it in rising. Or else they covered over the orifice with a roof, open at the sides, that prevented the wind from descending, and enabled the smoke to get away whichever way the wind blew.

In order to illustrate what I mean, I have simply taken my pencil and gone outside my house, and have drawn an old and a new chimney-top.

The chimney-piece or overmantel is the reredos of the family altar, and should contain the arms of the family or the portraits of ancestors.

No portion of an old manor-house was so decorated and enriched as this; and the hall fireplace received pre-eminent attention.



THE CHIMNEY-TOP, ANCIENT AND MODERN

Happily we have in England numerous and splendid examples; but a vast number were sacrificed at the end of last century and the beginning of the present, when large looking-glasses came into fashion, and to make place for them the glorious old sculptured wood was ruthlessly torn down. If the reader is happy enough to possess a copy of Dr. Syntax's *Tours*, he will see the period of transition. In the second Tour is a plate representing the doctor visiting the Widow Hopefull at York. The room is panelled with oak, the ceiling is of plaster beautifully moulded, the chimney-piece is of oak carved, but painted over, and the large open hearth has been closed in, reduced, and a little grate inserted.

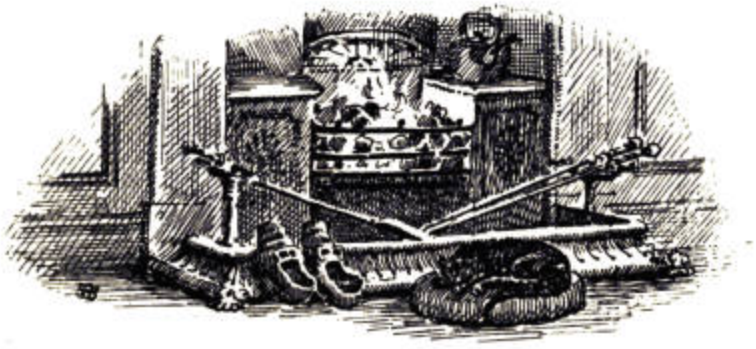
In the same volume is a picture of Dr. Syntax making his will. Here the large open fireplace remains, lined with Dutch tiles, and the fire is on dogs. All the lower portion of the

mantel decoration remains, but above the shelf everything has been removed to make way for the mirror.

In the same volume is Dr. Syntax painting a portrait, and here again is a lovely panelled room with plaster ceiling and a simple but charming chimney-piece of excellent design.

FIREPLACE AND CHIMNEY-PIECE, YORK

Now turn to the first Tour, and look at Dr. Syntax mistaking a gentleman's house for an inn. Here we have the chimney-piece supported on vulgar corbels, all of the period when Rowlandson drew; above the shelf is a painting in the worst description of frame. When Rowlandson made his drawings, he was absolutely incapable of appreciating Gothic design, and whenever he attempted this he failed egregiously, but the feeling for what was later, Elizabethan and Jacobean, was by no means dead in him, and he drew the details with a zest that shows he loved the style.



Old Furniture.

CHAPTER IV.

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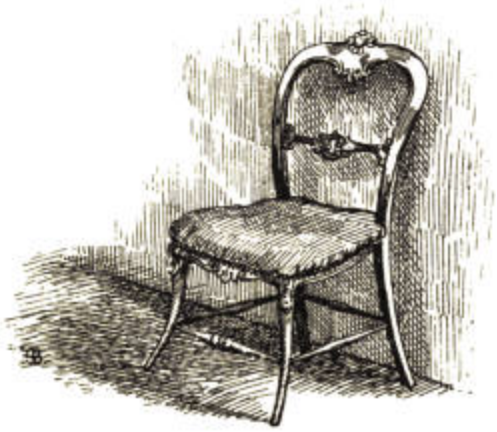
To my taste old furniture in a modern jerry-built villa residence is as out of place as modern gim-crack chairs and tables and cabinets in an ancient mansion. In the first instance you have solidly constructed furniture in a case that is thin, and not calculated to last a century. With regard to the second, happily we have now excellently designed furniture, well constructed on old models; and what I mean by gim-crack stuff is that which was turned out by upholsterers to within the last fifteen years.

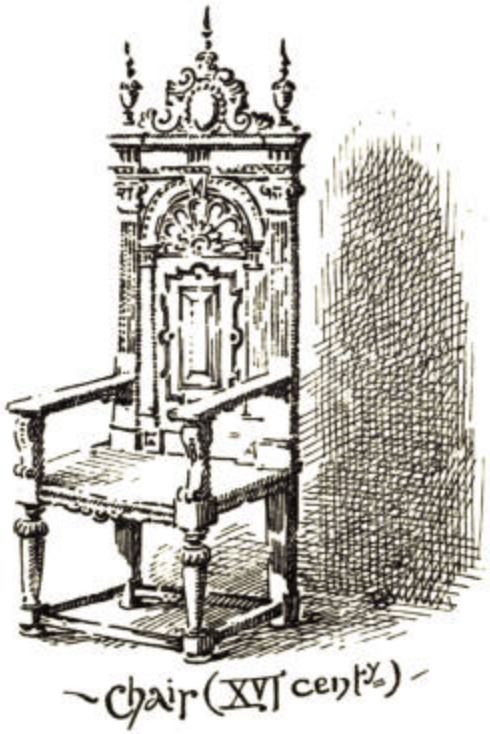
Look at the construction of a chair, and see what I mean.



CHAIR (1840)

Full well do I recall the introduction into my father's house of these chairs. Only a fragment of one now remains. Observe the legs; they curve out below, and are as uncalculated to resist the pressure downward of a heavy person sitting on them, as could well be contrived. Then again the braces—look at them; they are spindles with the ends let into holes drilled half-way through the legs. Old braces were braces, these are mere sources of weakness,

they do not brace; when weight is applied to the seat the tendency is to drive the legs apart, then out falls the brace. No mortice holds it, it has no function to fulfil. In the old chair how firm all the joints are made! Stout oak pegs are driven through every mortice, and every precaution is taken to prevent gaping at the joints, to resist strain put on them.

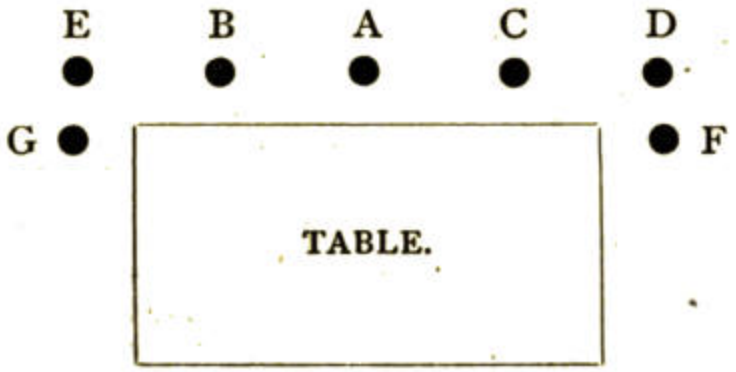


Mention has been made of the great looking-glass, which was the occasion of the destruction of so many carved chimney-pieces. There was another introduction, and that into the drawing-room, which produced a disfiguring effect, and that was the large circular rosewood table.

At the beginning of this century it entered our parlour, settled there, and made the room look uncomfortable. By no arrangement of the furniture could the drawing-room be given a cosy look. The table got in the way of visitors, it prevented the formation of pleasant groups; it was a very barrier to friendship, and a block to conversation.

One evening, in the South of France, I received intimation from a M. Dols, avocat, that he would be pleased to receive

me. I had sent word to him before that I should like to call on him and see some interesting flint swords and celts in his possession. He asked me to call in the evening at 8 p.m. Accordingly I went to his door, and was ushered into the *salon*. The centre was occupied by a table, of considerable size, and the family was seated beyond the table.



M. Dols occupied B; Mme. Dols occupied C; M. Dols' mother was planted at D; and the maiden sister of Mme. Dols at E. M. Gaston Dols, the son, was at G, and Mlle. Eulalie Dols, the daughter, at F. The chair A was left vacant for the visitor.

But conceive the situation! To be introduced like a criminal before six judges, then, when one had reached the seat allotted, to be planted one in a row, and to have to distribute remarks right and left; to address the ancestress at D across the shirtfront of M. Dols at B, and to say something pretty to the old maid at E athwart the swelling bosom of Mme. Dols at B!

If only that detestable table could have been got rid of, we would have gravitated together into a knot and been happy—but to be lively and chatty in espalier was impossible.

Well! it was almost as bad in the old days, when we had large round tables in our drawing-rooms; and one of the great achievements of modern—I mean quite recent—times has been the bundling of that old rosewood table out. That gone, the rest of the furniture gets together into comfortable groups, and everything finds its place. Before, all were overawed and sent to the wall in deference to the round table.

A word or two is due to the chest of drawers. This, I conceive, is a development of the old oak chest, in which the valuables, or the linen, or the sundry garments of the family were kept. Countless specimens of these oak chests remain; some very fine, some plain. There is, moreover, the spruce chest, made of cypress wood, that was thought to preserve silk and cloth from the moth. Oak chests are usually carved, more or less; cypress chests are sketched over with red-hot iron.

Now there was an inconvenience in the chest. A hasty and untidy person turned its contents upside down to find what he or she particularly wanted, and which was, of course, at the bottom. If the husband did this, he had words cast at him that made him miserable for the rest of the day.

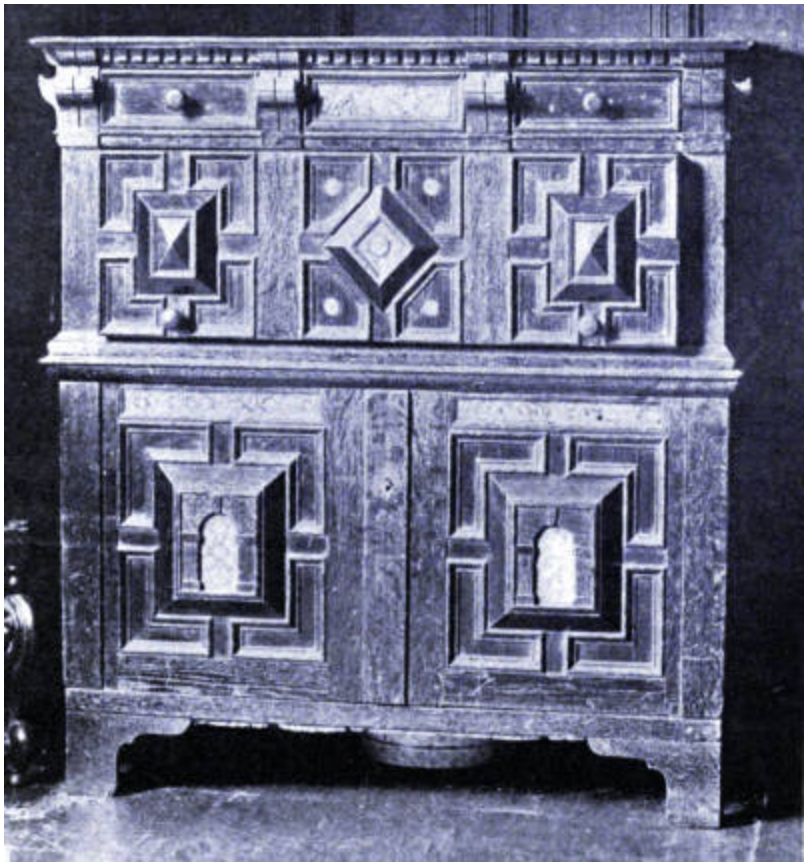
So it was clearly advisable that husband and wife and each child should have a separate chest. But that did not suffice; one was needed for bed linen, one for table linen, a third for personal linen. The result would have been an accumulation of chests, when, happily, the notion struck someone that drawers would solve the difficulty. Let the top of the chest remain immovable, and break up the front into parallel strips, each strip having a drawer behind it.

An old chest of drawers can be known by the way in which the drawers are made to run. They have a groove let into their sides corresponding with a strip of oak or runner on each side of the case; thus they do not rest the one on the other, but on their runners. When each drawer was

separately cased in, then the need for runners came to an end.

It is deserving of observation how slowly and cautiously our forefathers multiplied the drawers. At first, two were thought quite as many as could be ventured upon, but after about a century the makers grew bolder and multiplied them.

Does it chance that there be a reader of this chapter who possesses a cupboard, partly open in front, with small balustrades in the door between which the contents of the cupboard can be seen? If he or she has, ten to one but it has been converted into a receptacle for china, or glass, and then china and glass are not only imperfectly exhibited, but become rapidly covered with dust. The possessor of such a little cabinet or cupboard owns something now become very rare, the significance of which is understood by a few only.

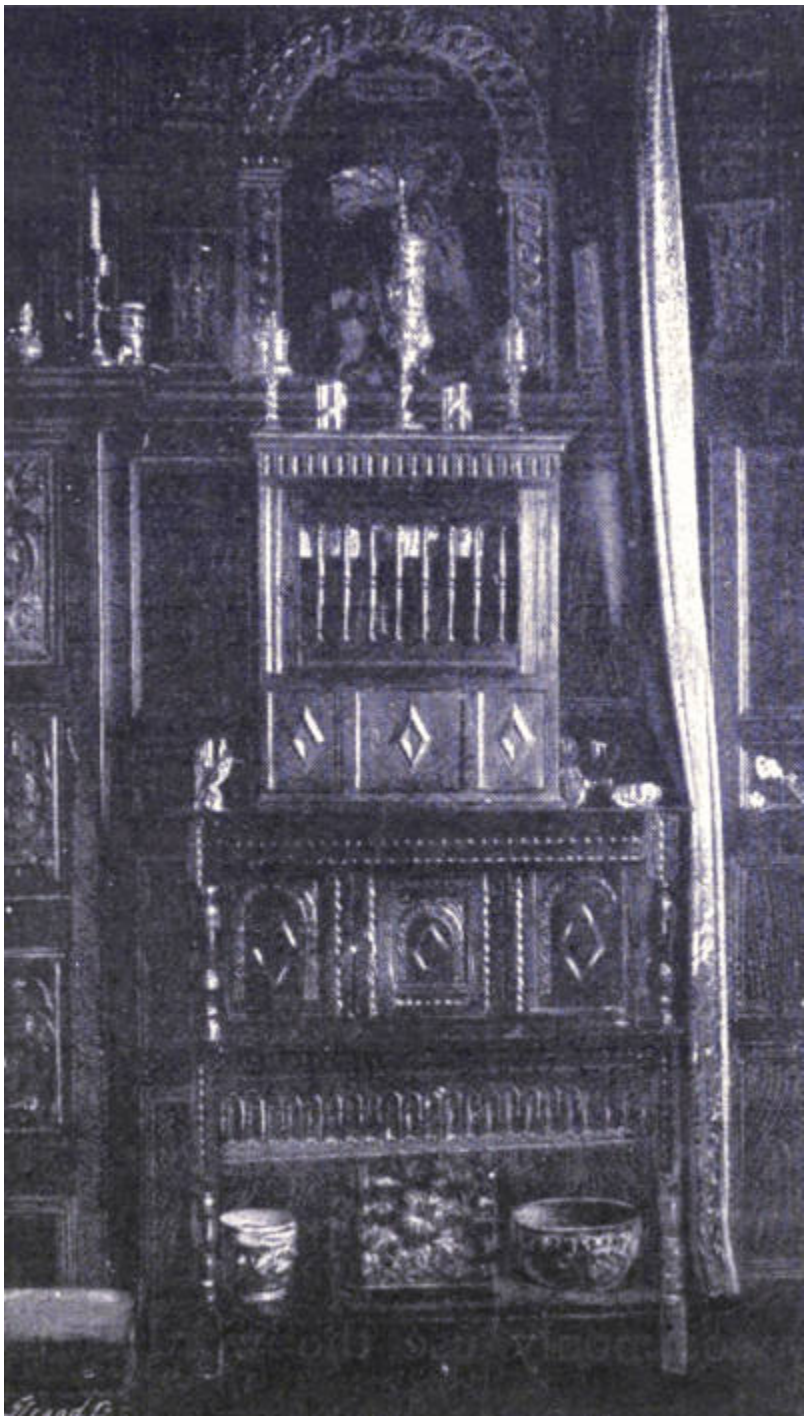


A CHEST OF DRAWERS (1652)

Let me describe one in my possession. The height is two feet eight inches, by two feet one inch, and the depth eight and a half inches. There are two doors in front: the upper is perforated and has eight little balustrades in it; the lower door is solid; but this lower door, instead of engrossing the entire front of the cabinet, is small, six inches square, and occupies one compartment of the three, into which the lower portion of the front is divided. Each door gives access to a separate compartment.

Now, what is this droll little article of furniture? What was its original use?

When I answer that it was a livery cupboard, I have little doubt that the majority of my readers will think, as did someone I know who asked about it and received this answer, that it was intended for livery badges—the metal plates with coats of arms engraved on them—worn anciently by servants upon their left arms in a nobleman's and gentleman's household.



THE LIVERY CUPBOARD

But no. A livery cupboard had not this signification. It was the cupboard in which was kept that portion of food and of wine or ale *delivered* over to each person in the household by the lady of the house for night consumption. Anciently—

in the days of Good Queen Bess and of James I.—there was no meal between supper at 7 p.m. and breakfast at 10 a.m., and when each person retired for the night he or she carried off a portion of food, served out, if not by the hands of the hostess, then under her eye; and this "delivery" was carried upstairs to the bedroom and was stowed away in the cupboard appropriated to its use, that on waking in the night, or early in the morning for a hunt or a hawking, or a journey, the food and refreshing draught might be handy, and stay the stomach till all met for the common meal served in the hall at ten o'clock.

We still speak of livery stables, but this does not mean that there coachmen and grooms who wear livery attend to horses, but that the horses themselves receive there their *livrée*—delivery of so many feeds of oats. This is made clear enough by a passage in Spenser's account of the state of Ireland, written in the middle of the sixteenth century. He says: "What *livery* is, we by common use in England know well enough, namely, that it is an allowance of horse-meat; as they commonly use the word stabling, as to keep horses at *livery*; the which word, I guess, is derived of *livering* or *delivering* forth their nightly food; so in great houses, the *livery* is said to be served up for all night—that is, their evening allowance for drink."

Another reference to the custom of serving liveries for all night is made by Cavendish in his *Life of Wolsey*, where, in giving a description of the Cardinal's Embassy to Charles V. at Bruges, he says: "Also the Emperor's officers every night went through the town, from house to house, where as many Englishmen lay or resorted, and there served their liveries for all night, which was done in this manner: first, the Emperor's officers brought into the house a cake of fine manchet bread, two great silver pots, with wine, and a pound of fine sugar; white lights and yellow; a bowl or