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A House to Let

Charles Dickens

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A HOUSE TO LET (FULL TEXT)
by Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Gaskell,
Adelaide Ann Procter

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OVER THE WAY

I had been living at Tunbridge Wells and nowhere else, going on for ten years, when my medical man—very clever in his profession, and the prettiest player I ever saw in my life of a hand at Long Whist, which was a noble and a princely game before Short was heard of—said to me, one day, as he sat feeling my pulse on the actual sofa which my poor dear sister Jane worked before her spine came on, and laid her on a board for fifteen months at a stretch—the most upright woman that ever lived—said to me, “What we want, ma’am, is a fillip.”

“Good gracious, goodness gracious, Doctor Towers!” says I, quite startled at the man, for he was so christened himself: “don’t talk as if you were alluding to people’s names; but say what you mean.”

“I mean, my dear ma’am, that we want a little change of air and scene.”

“Bless the man!” said I; “does he mean we or me!”

“I mean you, ma’am.”

“Then Lard forgive you, Doctor Towers,” I said; “why don’t you get into a habit of expressing yourself in a straightforward manner, like a loyal subject of our gracious Queen Victoria, and a member of the Church of England?”

Towers laughed, as he generally does when he has fidgetted me into any of my impatient ways—one of my states, as I call them—and then he began,—

“Tone, ma’am, Tone, is all you require!” He appealed to Trottle, who just then came in with the coal-scuttle, looking, in his nice black suit, like an amiable man putting on coals from motives of benevolence.

Trottle (whom I always call my right hand) has been in my service two-and-thirty years. He entered my service, far away from England. He is the best of creatures, and the most respectable of men; but, opinionated.

"What you want, ma'am," says Trottle, making up the fire in his quiet and skilful way, "is Tone."

"Lard forgive you both!" says I, bursting out a-laughing; "I see you are in a conspiracy against me, so I suppose you must do what you like with me, and take me to London for a change."

For some weeks Towers had hinted at London, and consequently I was prepared for him. When we had got to this point, we got on so expeditiously, that Trottle was packed off to London next day but one, to find some sort of place for me to lay my troublesome old head in.

Trottle came back to me at the Wells after two days' absence, with accounts of a charming place that could be taken for six months certain, with liberty to renew on the same terms for another six, and which really did afford every accommodation that I wanted.

"Could you really find no fault at all in the rooms, Trottle?" I asked him.

"Not a single one, ma'am. They are exactly suitable to you. There is not a fault in them. There is but one fault outside of them."

"And what's that?"

"They are opposite a House to Let."

"O!" I said, considering of it. "But is that such a very great objection?"

"I think it my duty to mention it, ma'am. It is a dull object to look at. Otherwise, I was so greatly pleased with the lodging that I should have closed with the terms at once, as I had your authority to do."

Trottle thinking so highly of the place, in my interest, I wished not to disappoint him. Consequently I said:

"The empty House may let, perhaps."

"O, dear no, ma'am," said Trottle, shaking his head with decision; "it won't let. It never does let, ma'am."

"Mercy me! Why not?"

"Nobody knows, ma'am. All I have to mention is, ma'am, that the House won't let!"

"How long has this unfortunate House been to let, in the name of Fortune?" said I.

"Ever so long," said Trottle. "Years."

"Is it in ruins?"

"It's a good deal out of repair, ma'am, but it's not in ruins."

The long and the short of this business was, that next day I had a pair of post-horses put to my chariot—for, I never travel by railway: not that I have anything to say against railways, except that they came in when I was too old to take to them; and that they made ducks and drakes of a few turnpike-bonds I had—and so I went up myself, with Trottle in the rumble, to look at the inside of this same lodging, and at the outside of this same House.

As I say, I went and saw for myself. The lodging was perfect. That, I was sure it would be; because Trottle is the best judge of comfort I know. The empty house was an eyesore; and that I was sure it would be too, for the same reason. However, setting the one thing against the other, the good against the bad, the lodging very soon got the victory over the House. My lawyer, Mr. Squares, of Crown Office Row; Temple, drew up an agreement; which his young man jabbered over so dreadfully when he read it to me, that I didn't understand one word of it except my own name; and hardly that, and I signed it, and the other party signed it, and, in three weeks' time, I moved my old bones, bag and baggage, up to London.

For the first month or so, I arranged to leave Trottle at the Wells. I made this arrangement, not only because there was a good deal to take care of in the way of my school-children and pensioners, and also of a new stove in the hall to air the house in my absence, which appeared to me calculated to blow up and burst; but, likewise because I suspect Trottle (though the steadiest of men, and a widower between sixty and seventy) to be what I call rather a Philanderer. I mean, that when any friend comes down to see me and brings a maid, Trottle is always remarkably ready to show that maid the Wells of an evening; and that I have more than once noticed the

shadow of his arm, outside the room door nearly opposite my chair, encircling that maid's waist on the landing, like a table-cloth brush.

Therefore, I thought it just as well, before any London Philandering took place, that I should have a little time to look round me, and to see what girls were in and about the place. So, nobody stayed with me in my new lodging at first after Trottle had established me there safe and sound, but Peggy Flobbins, my maid; a most affectionate and attached woman, who never was an object of Philandering since I have known her, and is not likely to begin to become so after nine-and-twenty years next March.

It was the fifth of November when I first breakfasted in my new rooms. The Guys were going about in the brown fog, like magnified monsters of insects in table-beer, and there was a Guy resting on the door-steps of the House to Let. I put on my glasses, partly to see how the boys were pleased with what I sent them out by Peggy, and partly to make sure that she didn't approach too near the ridiculous object, which of course was full of sky-rockets, and might go off into bangs at any moment. In this way it happened that the first time I ever looked at the House to Let, after I became its opposite neighbour, I had my glasses on. And this might not have happened once in fifty times, for my sight is uncommonly good for my time of life; and I wear glasses as little as I can, for fear of spoiling it.

I knew already that it was a ten-roomed house, very dirty, and much dilapidated; that the area-rails were rusty and peeling away, and that two or three of them were wanting, or half-wanting; that there were broken panes of glass in the windows, and blotches of mud on other panes, which the boys had thrown at them; that there was quite a collection of stones in the area, also proceeding from those Young Mischiefs; that there were games chalked on the pavement before the house, and likenesses of ghosts chalked on the street-door; that the windows were all darkened by rotting old blinds, or shutters, or both; that the bills "To Let," had curled up, as if the damp air of the place had given them cramps; or had dropped down into corners, as if they were no more. I had seen all this on my first visit, and I had remarked to Trottle, that the lower part of the black board about terms was split away; that the rest had become illegible, and that the very stone of the door-steps was broken

across. Notwithstanding, I sat at my breakfast table on that Please to Remember the fifth of November morning, staring at the House through my glasses, as if I had never looked at it before.

All at once—in the first-floor window on my right—down in a low corner, at a hole in a blind or a shutter—I found that I was looking at a secret Eye. The reflection of my fire may have touched it and made it shine; but, I saw it shine and vanish.

The eye might have seen me, or it might not have seen me, sitting there in the glow of my fire—you can take which probability you prefer, without offence—but something struck through my frame, as if the sparkle of this eye had been electric, and had flashed straight at me. It had such an effect upon me, that I could not remain by myself, and I rang for Flobbins, and invented some little jobs for her, to keep her in the room. After my breakfast was cleared away, I sat in the same place with my glasses on, moving my head, now so, and now so, trying whether, with the shining of my fire and the flaws in the window-glass, I could reproduce any sparkle seeming to be up there, that was like the sparkle of an eye. But no; I could make nothing like it. I could make ripples and crooked lines in the front of the House to Let, and I could even twist one window up and loop it into another; but, I could make no eye, nor anything like an eye. So I convinced myself that I really had seen an eye.

Well, to be sure I could not get rid of the impression of this eye, and it troubled me and troubled me, until it was almost a torment. I don't think I was previously inclined to concern my head much about the opposite House; but, after this eye, my head was full of the house; and I thought of little else than the house, and I watched the house, and I talked about the house, and I dreamed of the house. In all this, I fully believe now, there was a good Providence. But, you will judge for yourself about that, bye-and-bye.

My landlord was a butler, who had married a cook, and set up housekeeping. They had not kept house longer than a couple of years, and they knew no more about the House to Let than I did. Neither could I find out anything concerning it among the tradespeople or otherwise; further than what Trottle had told me at first. It had been empty, some said six years, some said eight, some said ten. It never did let, they all agreed, and it never would let.

I soon felt convinced that I should work myself into one of my states about the House; and I soon did. I lived for a whole month in a flurry, that was always getting worse. Towers's prescriptions, which I had brought to London with me, were of no more use than nothing. In the cold winter sunlight, in the thick winter fog, in the black winter rain, in the white winter snow, the House was equally on my mind. I have heard, as everybody else has, of a spirit's haunting a house; but I have had my own personal experience of a house's haunting a spirit; for that House haunted mine.

In all that month's time, I never saw anyone go into the House nor come out of the House. I supposed that such a thing must take place sometimes, in the dead of the night, or the glimmer of the morning; but, I never saw it done. I got no relief from having my curtains drawn when it came on dark, and shutting out the House. The Eye then began to shine in my fire.

I am a single old woman. I should say at once, without being at all afraid of the name, I am an old maid; only that I am older than the phrase would express. The time was when I had my love-trouble, but, it is long and long ago. He was killed at sea (Dear Heaven rest his blessed head!) when I was twenty-five. I have all my life, since ever I can remember, been deeply fond of children. I have always felt such a love for them, that I have had my sorrowful and sinful times when I have fancied something must have gone wrong in my life—something must have been turned aside from its original intention I mean—or I should have been the proud and happy mother of many children, and a fond old grandmother this day. I have soon known better in the cheerfulness and contentment that God has blessed me with and given me abundant reason for; and yet I have had to dry my eyes even then, when I have thought of my dear, brave, hopeful, handsome, bright-eyed Charley, and the trust meant to cheer me with. Charley was my youngest brother, and he went to India. He married there, and sent his gentle little wife home to me to be confined, and she was to go back to him, and the baby was to be left with me, and I was to bring it up. It never belonged to this life. It took its silent place among the other incidents in my story that might have been, but never were. I had hardly time to whisper to her "Dead my own!" or she to answer, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust! O lay it on my breast and comfort Charley!"

when she had gone to seek her baby at Our Saviour's feet. I went to Charley, and I told him there was nothing left but me, poor me; and I lived with Charley, out there, several years. He was a man of fifty, when he fell asleep in my arms. His face had changed to be almost old and a little stern; but, it softened, and softened when I laid it down that I might cry and pray beside it; and, when I looked at it for the last time, it was my dear, untroubled, handsome, youthful Charley of long ago.

—I was going on to tell that the loneliness of the House to Let brought back all these recollections, and that they had quite pierced my heart one evening, when Flobbins, opening the door, and looking very much as if she wanted to laugh but thought better of it, said:

“Mr. Jabez Jarber, ma'am!”

Upon which Mr. Jarber ambled in, in his usual absurd way, saying:

“Sophonisba!”

Which I am obliged to confess is my name. A pretty one and proper one enough when it was given to me: but, a good many years out of date now, and always sounding particularly high-flown and comical from his lips. So I said, sharply:

“Though it is Sophonisba, Jarber, you are not obliged to mention it, that *I* see.”

In reply to this observation, the ridiculous man put the tips of my five right-hand fingers to his lips, and said again, with an aggravating accent on the third syllable:

“Sophonisba!”

I don't burn lamps, because I can't abide the smell of oil, and wax candles belonged to my day. I hope the convenient situation of one of my tall old candlesticks on the table at my elbow will be my excuse for saying, that if he did that again, I would chop his toes with it. (I am sorry to add that when I told him so, I knew his toes to be tender.) But, really, at my time of life and at Jarber's, it is too much of a good thing. There is an orchestra still standing in the open air at the Wells, before which, in the presence of a throng of fine compa-

ny, I have walked a minuet with Jarber. But, there is a house still standing, in which I have worn a pinafore, and had a tooth drawn by fastening a thread to the tooth and the door-handle, and toddling away from the door. And how should I look now, at my years, in a pinafore, or having a door for my dentist?

Besides, Jarber always was more or less an absurd man. He was sweetly dressed, and beautifully perfumed, and many girls of my day would have given their ears for him; though I am bound to add that he never cared a fig for them, or their advances either, and that he was very constant to me. For, he not only proposed to me before my love-happiness ended in sorrow, but afterwards too: not once, nor yet twice: nor will we say how many times. However many they were, or however few they were, the last time he paid me that compliment was immediately after he had presented me with a digestive dinner-pill stuck on the point of a pin. And I said on that occasion, laughing heartily, "Now, Jarber, if you don't know that two people whose united ages would make about a hundred and fifty, have got to be old, I do; and I beg to swallow this nonsense in the form of this pill" (which I took on the spot), "and I request to, hear no more of it."

After that, he conducted himself pretty well. He was always a little squeezed man, was Jarber, in little sprigged waistcoats; and he had always little legs and a little smile, and a little voice, and little round-about ways. As long as I can remember him he was always going little errands for people, and carrying little gossip. At this present time when he called me "Sophonisba!" he had a little old-fashioned lodging in that new neighbourhood of mine. I had not seen him for two or three years, but I had heard that he still went out with a little perspective-glass and stood on door-steps in Saint James's Street, to see the nobility go to Court; and went in his little cloak and goloshes outside Willis's rooms to see them go to Almack's; and caught the frightfullest colds, and got himself trodden upon by coachmen and linkmen, until he went home to his landlady a mass of bruises, and had to be nursed for a month.

Jarber took off his little fur-collared cloak, and sat down opposite me, with his little cane and hat in his hand.

"Let us have no more Sophonisbaing, if *you* please, Jarber," I said. "Call me Sarah. How do you do? I hope you are pretty well."

"Thank you. And you?" said Jarber.

"I am as well as an old woman can expect to be."

Jarber was beginning:

"Say, not old, Sophon—" but I looked at the candlestick, and he left off; pretending not to have said anything.

"I am infirm, of course," I said, "and so are you. Let us both be thankful it's no worse."

"Is it possible that you look worried?" said Jarber.

"It is very possible. I have no doubt it is the fact."

"And what has worried my Soph-, soft-hearted friend," said Jarber.

"Something not easy, I suppose, to comprehend. I am worried to death by a House to Let, over the way."

Jarber went with his little tip-toe step to the window-curtains, peeped out, and looked round at me.

"Yes," said I, in answer: "that house."

After peeping out again, Jarber came back to his chair with a tender air, and asked: "How does it worry you, S-arah?"

"It is a mystery to me," said I. "Of course every house *is* a mystery, more or less; but, something that I don't care to mention" (for truly the Eye was so slight a thing to mention that I was more than half ashamed of it), "has made that House so mysterious to me, and has so fixed it in my mind, that I have had no peace for a month. I foresee that I shall have no peace, either, until Trottle comes to me, next Monday."

I might have mentioned before, that there is a lone-standing jealousy between Trottle and Jarber; and that there is never any love lost between those two.

"*Trottle*," petulantly repeated Jarber, with a little flourish of his cane; "how is *Trottle* to restore the lost peace of Sarah?"

"He will exert himself to find out something about the House. I have fallen into that state about it, that I really must discover by some means or other, good or bad, fair or foul, how and why it is that that House remains To Let."

"And why Trottle? Why not," putting his little hat to his heart; "why not, Jarber?"

"To tell you the truth, I have never thought of Jarber in the matter. And now I do think of Jarber, through your having the kindness to suggest him—for which I am really and truly obliged to you—I don't think he could do it."

"Sarah!"

"I think it would be too much for you, Jarber."

"Sarah!"

"There would be coming and going, and fetching and carrying, Jarber, and you might catch cold."

"Sarah! What can be done by Trottle, can be done by me. I am on terms of acquaintance with every person of responsibility in this parish. I am intimate at the Circulating Library. I converse daily with the Assessed Taxes. I lodge with the Water Rate. I know the Medical Man. I lounge habitually at the House Agent's. I dine with the Churchwardens. I move to the Guardians. Trottle! A person in the sphere of a domestic, and totally unknown to society!"

"Don't be warm, Jarber. In mentioning Trottle, I have naturally relied on my Right-Hand, who would take any trouble to gratify even a whim of his old mistress's. But, if you can find out anything to help to unravel the mystery of this House to Let, I shall be fully as much obliged to you as if there was never a Trottle in the land."

Jarber rose and put on his little cloak. A couple of fierce brass lions held it tight round his little throat; but a couple of the mildest Hares might have done that, I am sure. "Sarah," he said, "I go. Expect me on Monday evening, the Sixth, when perhaps you will give me a cup of tea;—may I ask for no Green? Adieu!"

This was on a Thursday, the second of December. When I reflected that Trottle would come back on Monday, too, I had My misgivings as to the difficulty of keeping the two powers from open war-

fare, and indeed I was more uneasy than I quite like to confess. However, the empty House swallowed up that thought next morning, as it swallowed up most other thoughts now, and the House quite preyed upon me all that day, and all the Saturday.

It was a very wet Sunday: raining and blowing from morning to night. When the bells rang for afternoon church, they seemed to ring in the commotion of the puddles as well as in the wind, and they sounded very loud and dismal indeed, and the street looked very dismal indeed, and the House looked dimmest of all.

I was reading my prayers near the light, and my fire was growing in the darkening window-glass, when, looking up, as I prayed for the fatherless children and widows and all who were desolate and oppressed,—I saw the Eye again. It passed in a moment, as it had done before; but, this time, I was inwardly more convinced that I had seen it.

Well to be sure, I *had* a night that night! Whenever I closed my own eyes, it was to see eyes. Next morning, at an unreasonably, and I should have said (but for that railroad) an impossibly early hour, comes Trottle. As soon as he had told me all about the Wells, I told him all about the House. He listened with as great interest and attention as I could possibly wish, until I came to Jabez Jarber, when he cooled in an instant, and became opinionated.

“Now, Trottle,” I said, pretending not to notice, “when Mr. Jarber comes back this evening, we must all lay our heads together.”

“I should hardly think that would be wanted, ma’am; Mr. Jarber’s head is surely equal to anything.”

Being determined not to notice, I said again, that we must all lay our heads together.

“Whatever you order, ma’am, shall be obeyed. Still, it cannot be doubted, I should think, that Mr. Jarber’s head is equal, if not superior, to any pressure that can be brought to bear upon it.”

This was provoking; and his way, when he came in and out all through the day, of pretending not to see the House to Let, was more provoking still. However, being quite resolved not to notice, I gave no sign whatever that I did notice. But, when evening came,

and he showed in Jarber, and, when Jarber wouldn't be helped off with his cloak, and poked his cane into cane chair-backs and china ornaments and his own eye, in trying to unclasp his brazen lions of himself (which he couldn't do, after all), I could have shaken them both.

As it was, I only shook the tea-pot, and made the tea. Jarber had brought from under his cloak, a roll of paper, with which he had triumphantly pointed over the way, like the Ghost of Hamlet's Father appearing to the late Mr. Kemble, and which he had laid on the table.

"A discovery?" said I, pointing to it, when he was seated, and had got his tea-cup.—"Don't go, Trottle."

"The first of a series of discoveries," answered Jarber. "Account of a former tenant, compiled from the Water Rate, and Medical Man."

"Don't go, Trottle," I repeated. For, I saw him making imperceptibly to the door.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, I might be in Mr. Jarber's way?"

Jarber looked that he decidedly thought he might be. I relieved myself with a good angry croak, and said—always determined not to notice:

"Have the goodness to sit down, if you please, Trottle. I wish you to hear this."

Trottle bowed in the stiffest manner, and took the remotest chair he could find. Even that, he moved close to the draught from the keyhole of the door.

"Firstly," Jarber began, after sipping his tea, "would my Sophon—"

"Begin again, Jarber," said I.

"Would you be much surprised, if this House to Let should turn out to be the property of a relation of your own?"

"I should indeed be very much surprised."

"Then it belongs to your first cousin (I learn, by the way, that he is ill at this time) George Forley."

"Then that is a bad beginning. I cannot deny that George Forley stands in the relation of first cousin to me; but I hold no communication with him. George Forley has been a hard, bitter, stony father to a child now dead. George Forley was most implacable and unrelenting to one of his two daughters who made a poor marriage. George Forley brought all the weight of his band to bear as heavily against that crushed thing, as he brought it to bear lightly, favouringly, and advantageously upon her sister, who made a rich marriage. I hope that, with the measure George Forley meted, it may not be measured out to him again. I will give George Forley no worse wish."

I was strong upon the subject, and I could not keep the tears out of my eyes; for, that young girl's was a cruel story, and I had dropped many a tear over it before.

"The house being George Forley's," said I, "is almost enough to account for there being a Fate upon it, if Fate there is. Is there anything about George Forley in those sheets of paper?"

"Not a word."

"I am glad to hear it. Please to read on. Trotter, why don't you come nearer? Why do you sit mortifying yourself in those arctic regions? Come nearer."

"Thank you, ma'am; I am quite near enough to Mr. Jarber."

Jarber rounded his chair, to get his back full to my opinionated friend and servant, and, beginning to read, tossed the words at him over his (Jabez Jarber's) own ear and shoulder.

He read what follows:

