

The House of Cobwebs

George Gissing

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It was five o'clock on a June morning. The dirty-buff blind of the lodging-house bedroom shone like cloth of gold as the sun's unclouded rays poured through it, transforming all they illumined, so that things poor and mean seemed to share in the triumphant glory of new-born day. In the bed lay a young man who had already been awake for an hour. He kept stirring uneasily, but with no intention of trying to sleep again. His eyes followed the slow movement of the sunshine on the wall-paper, and noted, as they never had done before, the details of the flower pattern, which represented no flower wherewith botanists are acquainted, yet, in this summer light, turned the thoughts to garden and field and hedgerow. The young man had a troubled mind, and his thoughts ran thus:

'I must have three months at least, and how am I to live? . . . Fifteen shillings a week not quite that, if I spread my money out. Can one live on fifteen shillings a week rent, food, washing? . . . I shall have to leave these lodgings at once. They're not luxurious, but I can't live here under twenty-five, that's clear. . . . Three months to finish my book. It's good; I'm hanged if it isn't! This time I shall find a publisher. All I have to do is to stick at my work and keep my mind easy. . . . Lucky that it's summer; I don't need fires. Any corner would do for me where I can be quiet and see the sun. . . . Wonder whether some cottager in Surrey would house and feed me for fifteen shillings a week? . . . No use lying here. Better get up and see how things look after an hour's walk.'

So the young man arose and clad himself, and went out into the shining street. His name was Goldthorpe. His years were not yet three-and twenty. Since the age of legal independence he had been living alone in London, solitary and poor, very proud of a whole-hearted devotion to the career of authorship. As soon as he slipped out of the stuffy house, the live air, perfumed with freshness from meadows and hills afar, made his blood pulse joyously. He was at the age of hope, and something within him, which did not represent mere youthful illusion, supported his courage in the face of calculations such as would have damped sober experience. With boyish step, so light and springy that it seemed anxious to run and leap, he took his way through a suburb south of Thames, and pushed on towards the first rising of the Surrey hills. And as he walked resolve strengthened itself in his heart. Somehow or other he would live independently through the next three months. If the worst came to the worst, he could earn bread as clerk or labourer, but as long as his money lasted he would pursue his purpose, and that alone. He sang to himself in this gallant determination, happy as if some one had left him a fortune.

In an ascending road, quiet and tree-shadowed, where the dwellings on either side were for the most part old and small, though here and there a brand-new edifice on a larger scale showed that the neighbourhood was undergoing change such as in our time destroys the picturesque in all London suburbs, the cheery dreamer chanced to turn his eyes upon a spot of desolation which aroused his curiosity and set his fancy at work. Before him stood three deserted houses, a little row once tenanted by middle-class folk, but now for some time unoccupied and unrepaired. They were of brick, but the fronts had a stucco facing cut into imitation of ashlar, and weathered to the sombrest grey. The windows of the ground floor and of that above, and the fanlights above the doors, were boarded up, a guard against unlicensed intrusion; the top story had not been thought to stand in need of this protection, and a few panes were broken. On these dead frontages could be traced the marks of climbing plants, which once hung their leaves about each doorway; dry fragments of the old stem still adhered to the stucco. What had been the narrow strip of fore-garden, railed from the pavement, was now a little wilderness of coarse grass, docks, nettles, and degenerate shrubs. The paint on the doors had lost all colour, and much of it was blistered off; the three knockers had disappeared, leaving indications of rough removal, as if which was

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probably the case they had fallen a prey to marauders. Standing full in the brilliant sunshine, this spectacle of abandonment seemed sadder, yet less ugly, than it would have looked under a gloomy sky. Goldthorpe began to weave stories about its musty squalor. He crossed the road to make a nearer inspection; and as he stood gazing at the dishonoured thresholds, at the stained and cracked boarding of the blind windows, at the rusty paling and the broken gates, there sounded from somewhere near a thin, shaky strain of music, the notes of a concertina played with uncertain hand. The sound seemed to come from within the houses, yet how could that be? Assuredly no one lived under these crazy roofs. The musician was playing 'Home, Sweet Home,' and as Goldthorpe listened it seemed to him that the sound was not stationary. Indeed, it moved; it became more distant, then again the notes sounded more distinctly, and now as if the player were in the open air. Perhaps he was at the back of the houses?

On either side ran a narrow passage, which parted the spot of desolation from inhabited dwellings. Exploring one of these, Goldthorpe found that there lay in the rear a tract of gardens. Each of the three lifeless houses had its garden of about twenty yards long. The bordering wall along the passage allowed a man of average height to peer over it, and Goldthorpe searched with curious eye the piece of ground which was nearest to him. Many a year must have gone by since any gardening was done here. Once upon a time the useful and ornamental had both been represented in this! modest space; now, flowers and vegetables, such of them as survived in the struggle for existence, mingled together, and all alike were threatened by a wild, rank growth of grasses and weeds, which had obliterated the beds, hidden the paths, and made of the whole garden plot a green jungle. But Goldthorpe gave only a glance at this still life; his interest was engrossed by a human figure, seated on a campstool near the back wall of the house, and holding a concertina, whence, at this moment, in slow, melancholy strain, 'Home, Sweet Home' began to wheeze forth. The player was a middle-aged man, dressed like a decent clerk or shopkeeper, his head shaded with an old straw hat rather too large for him, and on his feet one of which swung as he sat with legs crossed a pair of still more ancient slippers, also too large. With head aside, and eyes looking upward, he seemed to listen in a mild ecstasy to the notes of his instrument. He had a round face of much simplicity and good-nature, semicircular eyebrows, pursed little mouth with abortive moustache, and short thin beard fringing the chinless lower jaw. Having observed this unimposing person for a minute or two, himself unseen, Goldthorpe surveyed the rear of the building, anxious to discover any sign of its still serving as human habitation; but nothing spoke of tenancy. The windows on this side were not boarded, and only a few panes were broken; but the chief point of contrast with the desolate front was made by a Virginia creeper, which grew luxuriantly up to the eaves, hiding every sign of decay save those dim, dusty apertures which seemed to deny all possibility of life within. And yet, on looking steadily, did he not discern something at one of the windows on the top story something like a curtain or a blind? And had not that same window the appearance of having been more recently cleaned than the others? He could not be sure; perhaps he only fancied these things. With neck aching from the strained position in which he had made his survey over the wall, the young man turned away. In the same moment 'Home, Sweet Home' came to an end, and, but for the cry of a milkman, the early-morning silence was undisturbed.

Goldthorpe pursued his walk, thinking of what he had seen, and wondering what it all meant. On his way back he made a point of again passing the deserted houses, and again he peered over the wall of the passage. The man was still there, but no longer seated with the concertina; wearing a round felt hat instead of the straw, he stood almost knee-deep in vegetation, and appeared to be examining the various growths about him. Presently he moved forward, and with head still bent, approached the lower end of the garden, where, in a wall higher than that over which Goldthorpe made his espial, there was a wooden door. This the man opened with a key, and, having passed out, could be heard to turn a lock behind him. A minute more, and this short, respectable figure came into sight at the end of the passage. Goldthorpe could not resist the opportunity thus offered. Affecting to turn a look of interest towards the nearest roof, he waited until the stranger was about to pass him, then, with civil greeting, ventured upon a question.

'Can you tell me how these houses come to be in this neglected state?'

The stranger smiled; a soft, modest, deferential smile such a became his countenance, and spoke in a corresponding voice, which had a vaguely provincial accent.

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'No wonder it surprises you, sir. I should be surprised myself. It comes of quarrels and lawsuits.'

'So I supposed. Do you know whom the property belongs to?'

'Well, yes, sir. The fact is it belongs to me.'

The avowal was made apologetically, and yet with a certain timid pride. Goldthorpe exhibited all the interest he felt. An idea had suddenly sprung up in his mind; he met the stranger's look, and spoke with the easy good-humour natural to him.

'It seems a great pity that houses should be standing empty like that. Are they quite uninhabitable? Couldn't one camp here during this fine summer weather? To tell you the truth, I'm looking for a room as cheap a room as I can get. Could you let me one for the next three months?'

The stranger was astonished. He regarded the young man with an uneasy smile.

'You are joking, sir.'

'Not a bit of it. Is the thing quite impossible? Are all the rooms in too bad a state?'

'I won't say that,' replied the other cautiously, still eyeing his interlocutor with surprised glances. 'The upper rooms are really not so bad that is to say, from a humble point of view. I have been looking at them just now. You really mean, sir?'

'I'm quite in earnest, I assure you,' cried Goldthorpe cheerily. 'You see I'm tolerably well dressed still, but I've precious little money, and I want to eke out the little I've got for about three months. I'm writing a book. I think I shall manage to sell it when it's done, but it'll take me about three months yet. I don't care what sort of place I live in, so long as it's quiet. Couldn't we come to terms?'

The listener's visage seemed to grow rounder in progressive astonishment; his eyes declared an emotion akin to awe; his little mouth shaped itself as if about to whistle.

'A book, sir? You are writing a book? You are a literary man?'

'Well, a beginner. I have poverty on my side, you see.'

'Why, it's like Dr. Johnson!' cried the other, his face glowing with interest. 'It's like Chatterton! though I'm sure I hope you won't end like him, sir. It's like Goldsmith indeed it is!'

'I've got half Oliver's name, at all events,' laughed the young man. 'Mine is Goldthorpe.'

'You don't say so, sir! What a strange coincidence! Mine, sir, is Spicer. I don't know whether you'd care to come into my garden? We might talk there.'

In a minute or two they were standing amid the green jungle, which Goldthorpe viewed with delight. He declared it the most picturesque garden he had ever seen.

'Why, there are potatoes growing there. And what are those things? Jerusalem artichokes? And look at that magnificent thistle; I never saw a finer thistle in my life! And poppies and marigolds and broad-beans and isn't that lettuce?'

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Mr. Spicer was red with gratification.

'I feel that something might be done with the garden, sir,' he said. 'The fact is, sir, I've only lately come into this property, and I'm sorry to say it'll only be mine for a little more than a year—a year from next midsummer day, sir. There's the explanation of what you see. It's leasehold property, and the lease is just coming to its end. Five years ago, sir, an uncle of mine inherited the property from his brother. The houses were then in a very bad state, and only one of them let, and there had been lawsuits going on for a long time between the leaseholder and the ground-landlord—I can't quite understand these matters, they're not at all in my line, sir; but at all events there were quarrels and lawsuits, and I'm told one of the tenants was somehow mixed up in it. The fact is, my uncle wasn't a very well-to-do man, and perhaps he didn't feel able to repair the houses, especially as the lease was drawing to its end. Would you like to go in and have a look round?'

They entered by the back door, which admitted them to a little wash-house. The window was overspun with cobwebs, thick, hoary; each corner of the ceiling was cobweb-packed; long, dusty filaments depended along the walls. Notwithstanding, Goldthorpe noticed that the house had a water-supply; the sink was wet, the tap above it looked new. This confirmed a suspicion in his mind, but he made no remark. They passed into the kitchen. Here again the work of the spider showed thick on every hand. The window, however, though uncleaned for years, had recently been opened; one knew that by the torn and ragged condition of the webs where the sashes joined. And lo! on the window-sill stood a plate, a cup and saucer, a knife, a fork, a spoon—all of them manifestly new-washed. Goldthorpe affected not to see these objects; he averted his face to hide an involuntary smile.

'I must light a candle,' said Mr. Spicer. 'The staircase is quite dark.'

A candle stood ready, with a box of matches, on the rusty cooking-stove. No fire had burned in the grate for many a long day; of that the visitor assured himself. Save the objects on the window-sill, no evidence of human occupation was discoverable. Having struck a light, Mr. Spicer advanced. In the front passage, on the stairs, on the landing, every angle and every projection had its drapery of cobwebs. The stuffy, musty air smelt of cobwebs; so, at all events, did Goldthorpe explain to himself a peculiar odour which he seemed never to have smelt. It was the same in the two rooms on the first floor. Through the boarded windows of that in front penetrated a few thin rays from the golden sky; they gleamed upon dust and web, on faded, torn wall-paper and a fireplace in ruins.

'I shouldn't recommend you to take either of these rooms,' said Mr. Spicer, looking nervously at his companion. 'They really can't be called attractive.'

'Those on the top are healthier, no doubt,' was the young man's reply. 'I noticed that some of the window-glass is broken. That must have been good for airing.'

Mr. Spicer grew more and more nervous. He opened his little round mouth, very much like a fish gasping, but seemed unable to speak. Silently he led the way to the top story, still amid cobwebs; the atmosphere was certainly purer up here, and when they entered the first room they found themselves all at once in such a flood of glorious sunshine that Goldthorpe shouted with delight.

'Ah, I could live here! Would it cost much to have panes put in? An old woman with a broom would do the rest.' He added in a moment. 'But the back windows are not broken, I think?'

'No—I think not—I no—'

Mr. Spicer gasped and stammered. He stood holding the candle (its light invisible) so that the grease dripped steadily on his trousers.

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'Let's have a look at the other,' cried Goldthorpe. 'It gets the afternoon sun, no doubt. And one would have a view of the garden.'

'Stop, sir!' broke from his companion, who was red and perspiring. 'There's something I should like to tell you before you go into that room. In fact, sir, that temporarily I am occupying it myself.'

'Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Spicer!'

'Not at all, sir! Don't mention it, sir. I have a reason—it seemed to me I've merely put in a bed and a table, sir, that's all—a temporary arrangement.'

'Yes, yes; I quite understand. What could be more sensible? If the house were mine, I should do the same. What's the good of owning a house, and making no use of it?'

Great was Mr. Spicer's satisfaction.

'See what it is, sir,' he exclaimed, 'to have to do with a literary man! You are large-minded, sir; you see things from an intellectual point of view. I can't tell you how it gratifies me, sir, to have made your acquaintance. Let us go into the back room.'

With nervous boldness he threw the door open. Goldthorpe, advancing respectfully, saw that Mr. Spicer had not exaggerated the simplicity of his arrangements. In a certain measure the room had been cleaned, but along the angle of walls and ceiling there still clung a good many cobwebs, and the state of the paper was deplorable. A blind hung at the window, but the floor had no carpet. In one corner stood a little camp bed, neatly made for the day; a table and a chair, of the cheapest species, occupied the middle of the floor, and on the hearth was an oil cooking-stove.

'It's wonderful how little one really wants,' remarked Mr. Spicer, 'at all events in weather such as this. I find that I get along here very well indeed. The only expense I had was for the water-supply. And really, sir, when one comes to think of it, the situation is pleasant. If one doesn't mind loneliness—and it happens that I don't. I have my books, sir—'

He opened the door of a cupboard containing several shelves. The first thing Goldthorpe's eye fell upon was the concertina; he saw also sundry articles of clothing, neatly disposed, a little crockery, and, ranged on the two top shelves, some thirty volumes, all of venerable aspect.

'Literature, sir,' pursued Mr. Spicer modestly, 'has always been my comfort. I haven't had very much time for reading, but my motto, sir, has been *null dies sine linea*.'

It appeared from his pronunciation that Mr. Spicer was no classical scholar, but he uttered the Latin words with infinite gusto, and timidly watched their effect upon the listener.

'This is delightful,' cried Mr. Goldthorpe. 'Will you let me have the front room? I could work here splendidly splendidly! What rent do you ask, Mr. Spicer?'

'Why really, sir, to tell you the truth I don't know what to say. Of course the windows must be seen to. The fact is, sir, if you felt disposed to do that at your own expense, and—and to have the room cleaned, and—and, let us say, to bear half the water-rate whilst you are here, why, really, I hardly feel justified in asking anything more.'

It was Goldthorpe's turn to be embarrassed, for, little as he was prepared to pay, he did not like to accept a stranger's generosity. They discussed the matter in detail, with the result that for the arrangement which Mr.

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Spicer had proposed there was substituted a weekly rent of two shillings, the lease extending over a period of three months. Goldthorpe was to live quite independently, asking nothing in the way of domestic service; moreover, he was requested to introduce no other person to the house, even as casual visitor. These conditions Mr. Spicer set forth, in a commercial hand, on a sheet of notepaper, and the agreement was solemnly signed by both contracting parties.

On the way home to breakfast Goldthorpe reviewed his position now that he had taken this decisive step. It was plain that he must furnish his room with the articles which Mr. Spicer found indispensable, and this outlay, be as economical as! he might, would tell upon the little capital which was to support him for three months. Indeed when all had been done, and he found himself, four days later, dwelling on the top story of the house of cobwebs, a simple computation informed him that his total expenditure, after payment of rent, must not exceed fifteenpence a day. What matter? He was in the highest spirits, full of energy and hope. His landlord had been kind and helpful in all sorts of ways, helping him to clean the room, to remove his property from the old lodgings, to make purchases at the lowest possible rate, to establish himself as comfortably as circumstances permitted. And when, on the first morning of his tenancy, he was awakened by a brilliant sun, the young man had a sensation of comfort and satisfaction quite new in his experience; for he was really at home; the bed he slept on, the table he ate at and wrote upon, were his own possessions; he thought with pity of his lodging-house life, and felt a joyous assurance that here he would do better work than ever before.

In less than a week Mr. Spicer and he were so friendly that they began to eat together, taking it in turns to prepare the meal. Now and then they walked in company, and every evening they sat smoking (very cheap tobacco) in the wild garden. Little by little Mr. Spicer revealed the facts of his history. He had begun life, in a midland town, as a chemist's errand-boy, and by steady perseverance, with a little pecuniary help from relatives, had at length risen to the position of chemist's assistant. For five-and-twenty years he practised such rigid economy that, having no one but himself to provide for, he began to foresee a possibility of passing his old age elsewhere than in the workhouse. Then befell the death of his uncle, which was to have important consequences for him. Mr. Spicer told the story of this exciting moment late one evening, when, kept indoors by rain, the companions sat together upstairs, one on each side of the rusty and empty fireplace.

'All my life, Mr. Goldthorpe, I've thought what a delightful thing it must be to have a house of one's own. I mean, really of one's own; not only a rented house, but one in which you could live and die, feeling that no one had a right to turn you out. Often and often I've dreamt of it, and tried to imagine what the feeling would be like. Not a large, fine house—oh dear, no! I didn't care how small it might be; indeed, the smaller the better for a man of my sort. Well, then, you can imagine how it came upon me when I heard—But let me tell you first that I hadn't seen my uncle for fifteen years or more. I had always thought him a well-to-do man, and I knew he wasn't married, but the truth is, it never came into my head that he might leave me something. Picture me, Mr. Goldthorpe—you have imagination, sir—standing behind the counter and thinking about nothing but business, when in comes a young gentleman—I see him now—and asks for Mr. Spicer. "Spicer is my name, sir," I said. "And you are the nephew," were his next words, "of the late Mr. Isaac Spicer, of Clapham, London?" That shook me, sir, I assure you it did, but I hope I behaved decently. The young gentleman went on to tell me that my uncle had left no will, and that I was believed to be his next-of-kin, and that if so, I inherited all his property, the principal part of which was three houses in London. Now try and think, Mr. Goldthorpe, what sort of state I was in after hearing that. You're an intellectual man and you can enter into another's mind. Three houses! Well, sir, you know what houses those were I came up to London at once (it was last autumn), and I saw my uncle's lawyer, and he told me all about the property, and I saw it for myself Ah, Mr. Goldthorpe! If ever a man suffered a bitter disappointment, sir!'

He ended on a little laugh, as if excusing himself for making so much of his story, and sat for a moment with head bowed.

'Fate played you a nasty trick there,' said Goldthorpe. 'A knavish trick.'

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'One felt almost justified in using strong language, sir though I always avoid it on principle. However, I must tell you that the houses weren't all Luckily there was a little money as well, and, putting it with my own savings, sir, I found it would yield me an income. When I say an income, I mean, of course, for a man in my position. Even when I have to go into lodgings, when my houses become the property of the ground-landlord to my mind, Mr. Goldthorpe, a very great injustice, but I don't set myself up against the law of the land I shall just be able to live. And that's no small blessing, sir, as I think you'll agree.'

'Rather! It's the height of human felicity, Mr. Spicer. I envy you vastly.'

'Well, sir, I'm rather disposed to look at it in that light myself. My nature is not discontented, Mr. Goldthorpe. But, sir, if you could have seen me when the lawyer began to explain about the houses! I was absolutely ignorant of the leasehold system; and at first I really couldn't understand. The lawyer thought me a fool, I fear, sir. And when I came down here and saw the houses themselves! I'm afraid, Mr. Goldthorpe, I'm really afraid, sir, I was weak enough to shed a tear.'

They were sitting by the light of a very small lamp, which did not tend to cheerfulness.

'Come,' cried Goldthorpe, 'after all, the houses are yours for a twelvemonth. Why shouldn't we both live on here all the time? It'll be a little breezy in winter, but we could have the fireplaces knocked into shape, and keep up good fires. When I've sold my book I'll pay a higher rent, Mr. Spicer. I like the old house, upon my word I; do! Come, let us have a tune before we go to bed.'

Smiling and happy, Mr. Spicer fetched from the cupboard his concertina, and after the usual apology for what he called his 'imperfect mastery of the instrument,' sat down to play 'Home, Sweet Home.' He had played it for years, and evidently would never improve in his execution. After 'Home, Sweet Home' came 'The Bluebells of Scotland,' after that 'Annie Laurie'; and Mr. Spicer's repertory was at an end. He talked of learning new pieces, but there was not the slightest hope of this achievement.

Mr. Spicer's mental development had ceased more than twenty years ago, when, after extreme efforts, he had attained the qualification of chemist's assistant. Since then the world had stood still with him. Though a true lover of books, he knew nothing of any that had been published during his own lifetime. His father, though very poor, had possessed a little collection of volumes, the very same which now stood in Mr. Spicer's cupboard. The authors represented in this library were either English classics or obscure writers of the early part of the nineteenth century. Knowing these books very thoroughly, Mr. Spicer sometimes indulged in a quotation which would have puzzled even the erudite. His favourite poet was Cowper, whose moral sentiments greatly soothed him. He spoke of Byron like some contemporary who, whilst admitting his lordship's genius, felt an abhorrence of his life. He judged literature solely from the moral point of view, and was incapable of understanding any other. Of fiction he had read very little indeed, for it was not regarded with favour by his parents. Scott was hardly more than a name to him. And though he avowed acquaintance with one or two works of Dickens, he spoke of them with an uneasy smile, as if in some doubt as to their tendency. With these intellectual characteristics, Mr. Spicer naturally found it difficult to appreciate the attitude of his literary friend, a young man whose brain thrilled in response to modern ideas, and who regarded himself as the destined leader of a new school of fiction. Not indiscreet, Goldthorpe soon became aware that he had better talk as little as possible of the work which absorbed his energies. He had enough liberality and sense of humour to understand and enjoy his landlord's conversation, and the simple goodness of the man inspired him with no little respect. Thus they got along together remarkably well. Mr. Spicer never ceased to feel himself honoured by the presence under his roof of one who as he was wont to say wielded the pen. The tradition of Grub Street was for him a living fact. He thought of all authors as struggling with poverty, and continued to cite eighteenth-century examples by way of encouraging Goldthorpe and animating his zeal. Whilst the young man was at work Mr. Spicer moved about the house with soundless footsteps. When invited into his tenant's room he had a reverential demeanour, and the sight of manuscript on the bare deal table caused him to subdue his voice.

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The weeks went by, and Goldthorpe's novel steadily progressed. In London he had only two or three acquaintances, and from them he held aloof, lest necessity or temptation should lead to his spending money which he could not spare. The few letters which he received were addressed to a post-office impossible to shock the nerves of a postman by requesting him to deliver correspondence at this dead house, of which the front door had not been opened for years. The weather was perfect; a great deal of sunshine, but as yet no oppressive heat, even in the chambers under the roof. Towards the end of June Mr. Spicer began to amuse himself with a little gardening. He had discovered in the coal-hole an ancient fork, with one prong broken and the others rusting away. This implement served him in his slow, meditative attack on that part of the jungle which seemed to offer least resistance. He would work for a quarter of an hour, then, resting on his fork, contemplate the tangled mass of vegetation which he had succeeded in tearing up.

'Our aim should be,' he said gravely, when Goldthorpe came to observe his progress, 'to clear the soil round about those vegetables and flowers which seem worth preserving. These broad-beans, for instance they seem to be a very fine sort. And the Jerusalem artichokes. I've been making inquiry about the artichokes, and I'm told they are not ready to eat till the autumn. The first frost is said to improve them. They're fine plants very fine plants.'

Already the garden had supplied them with occasional food, but they had to confess that, for the most part, these wild vegetables lacked savour. The artichokes, now shooting up into a leafy grove, were the great hope of the future. It would be deplorable to quit the house before this tuber came to maturity.

'The worst of it is,' remarked Mr. Spicer one day, when he was perspiring freely, 'that I can't help thinking of how different it would be if this garden was really my own. The fact is, Mr. Goldthorpe, I can't put much heart into the work; no, I can't. The more I reflect, the more indignant I become. Really now, Mr. Goldthorpe, speaking as an intellectual man, as a man of imagination, could anything be more cruelly unjust than this leasehold system? I assure you, it keeps me awake at night; it really does.'

The tenor of his conversation proved that Mr. Spicer had no intention of leaving the house until he was legally obliged to do so. More than once; he had an interview with his late uncle's solicitor, and each time he came back with melancholy brow. All the details of the story were now familiar to him; he knew all about the lawsuits which had ruined the property. Whenever he spoke of the ground-landlord, known to him only by name, it was with a severity such as he never permitted himself on any other subject. The ground-landlord was, to his mind, an embodiment of social injustice.

'Never in my life, Mr. Goldthorpe, did I grudge any payment of money as I grudge the ground-rent of these houses. I feel it as robbery, sir, as sheer robbery, though the sum is so small. When, in my ignorance, the matter was first explained to me, I wondered why my uncle had continued to pay this rent, the houses being of no profit to him. But now I understand, Mr. Goldthorpe; the sense of possession is very sweet. Property's property, even when it's leasehold and in ruins. I grudge the ground-rent bitterly, but I feel, sir, that I couldn't bear to lose my houses until the fatal moment, when lose them I must.'

In August the thermometer began to mark high degrees. Goldthorpe found it necessary to dispense with coat and waistcoat when he was working, and at times a treacherous languor whispered to him of the delights of idleness. After one particularly hot day, he and his landlord smoked together in the dusking garden, both unusually silent. Mr. Spicer's eye dwelt upon the great heap of weeds which was resulting from his labour; an odour somewhat too poignant arose from it upon the close air. Goldthorpe, who had been rather headachy all day, was trying to think into perfect clearness the last chapters of his book, and found it difficult.

'You know,' he said all at once, with an impatient movement, 'we ought to be at the seaside.'

'The seaside?' echoed his companion, in surprise. 'Ah, it's a long time since I saw the sea, Mr. Goldthorpe. Why, it must be yes, it is at least twenty years.'

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'Really? I've been there every year of my life till this. One gets into the way of thinking of luxuries as necessities. I tell you what it is. If I sell my book as soon as it's done, we'll have a few days somewhere on the south coast together.'

Mr. Spicer betrayed uneasiness.

'I should like it much,' he murmured, 'but I fear, Mr. Goldthorpe, I greatly fear I can't afford it.'

'Oh, but I mean that you shall go with me as my guest! But for you, Mr. Spicer, I might never have got my book written at all.'

'I feel it an honour, sir, I assure you, to have a literary man in my house,' was the genial reply. And you think the work will soon be finished, sir?'

Mr. Spicer always spoke of his tenant's novel as 'the work' which on his lips had a very large and respectful sound.

'About a fortnight more,' answered Goldthorpe with grave intensity.

The heat continued. As he lay awake before getting up, eager to finish his book, yet dreading the torrid temperature of his room, which made the brain sluggish and the hand slow, Goldthorpe saw how two or three energetic spiders had begun to spin webs once more at the corners of the ceiling; now and then he heard the long buzzing of a fly entangled in one of these webs. The same thing was happening in Mr. Spicer's chamber. It did not seem worth while to brush the new webs away.

'When you come to think of it, sir,' said the landlord, 'it's the spiders who are the real owners of these houses. When I go away, they'll be pulled down; they're not fit for human habitation. Only the spiders are really at home here, and the fact is, sir, I don't feel I have the right to disturb them. As a man of imagination, Mr. Goldthorpe, you'll understand my thoughts!'

Only with a great effort was the novel finished. Goldthorpe had lost his appetite (not, perhaps, altogether a disadvantage), and he could not sleep; a slight fever seemed to be constantly upon him. But this work was a question of life and death to him, and he brought it to an end only a few days after the term he had set himself. The complete manuscript was exhibited to Mr. Spicer, who expressed his profound sense of the privilege. Then, without delay, Goldthorpe took it to the publishing house in which he had most hope.

The young author could now do nothing but wait, and, under the circumstances, waiting meant torture. His money was all but exhausted; if he could not speedily sell the book, his position would be that of a mere pauper. Supported thus long by the artist's enthusiasm, he fell into despondency, saw the dark side of things. To be sure, his mother (a widow in narrow circumstances) had written pressing him to take a holiday 'at home,' but he dreaded the thought of going penniless to his mother's house, and there, perchance, receiving bad news about his book. An ugly feature of the situation was that he continued to feel anything but well; indeed, he felt sure that he was getting worse. At night he suffered severely; sleep had almost forsaken him. Hour after hour he lay listening to mysterious noises, strange crackings and creakings through the desolate house; sometimes he imagined the sound of footsteps in the bare rooms below; even hushed voices, from he knew not where, chilled his blood at midnight. Since crumbs had begun to lie about, mice were common; they scampered as if in revelry above the ceiling, and under the floor, and within the walls. Goldthorpe began to dislike this strange abode. He felt that under any circumstances it would be impossible for him to dwell here much longer.

When his last coin was spent, and he had no choice but to pawn or sell something for a few days' subsistence, the manuscript came back upon his hands. It had been judged declined.

The House of Cobwebs

That morning he felt seriously unwell. After making known the catastrophe to Mr. Spicer—who was stricken voiceless—he stood silent for a minute or two, then said with quiet resolve:

'It's all up. I've no money, and I feel as if I were going to have an illness. I must say good-bye to you, old friend.'

'Mr. Goldthorpe!' exclaimed the other solemnly; 'I entreat you, sir, to do nothing rash. Take heart, sir! Think of Samuel Johnson, think of Goldsmith.'

'The extent of my rashness, Mr. Spicer, will be to raise enough money on my watch to get down into Derbyshire. I must go home. If I don't, you'll have the pleasant job of taking me to a hospital.'

Mr. Spicer insisted on lending him the small sum he needed. An hour or two later they were at St. Pancras Station, and before sunset Goldthorpe had found harbourage under his mother's roof. There he lay ill for more than a month, and convalescent for as long again. His doctor declared that he must have been living in some very unhealthy place, but the young man preferred to explain his illness by overwork. It seemed to him sheer ingratitude to throw blame on Mr. Spicer's house, where he had been so contented and worked so well until the hot days of latter August. Mr. Spicer himself wrote kind and odd little letters, giving an account of the garden, and earnestly hoping that his literary friend would be back in London to taste the Jerusalem artichokes. But Christmas came and went, and Goldthorpe was still at his mother's house.

Meanwhile the manuscript had gone from publisher to publisher, and at length, on a day in January—date ever memorable in Goldthorpe's life—there arrived a short letter in which a certain firm dryly intimated their approval of the story offered them, and their willingness to purchase the copyright for a sum of fifty pounds. The next morning the triumphant author travelled to London. For two or three days a violent gale had been blowing, with much damage throughout the country; on his journey Goldthorpe saw many great trees lying prostrate, beaten, as though scornfully, by the cold rain which now descended in torrents. Arrived in town, he went to the house where he had lodged in the time of comparative prosperity, and there was lucky enough to find his old rooms vacant. On the morrow he called upon the gracious publishers, and after that, under a sky now become more gentle, he took his way towards the abode of Mr. Spicer.

Eager to communicate the joyous news, glad in the prospect of seeing his simple-hearted friend, he went at a great pace up the ascending road. There were the three houses, looking drearier than ever in a faint gleam of winter sunshine. There were his old windows. But—what had happened to the roof? He stood in astonishment and apprehension, for, just above the room where he had dwelt, the roof was an utter wreck, showing a great hole, as if something had fallen upon it with crushing weight. As indeed was the case; evidently the chimney-stack had come down, and doubtless in the recent gale. Seized with anxiety on Mr. Spicer's account, he ran round to the back of the garden and tried the door; but it was locked as usual. He strained to peer over the garden wall, but could discover nothing that threw light on his friend's fate; he noticed, however, a great grove of dead, brown artichoke stems, seven or eight feet high. Looking up at the back windows, he shouted Mr. Spicer's name; it was useless. Then, in serious alarm, he betook himself to the house on the other side of the passage, knocked at the door, and asked of the woman who presented herself whether anything was known of a man who dwelt where the chimney-stack had just fallen. News was at once forthcoming; the event had obviously caused no small local excitement. It was two days since the falling of the chimney, which happened towards evening, when the gale blew its hardest. Mr. Spicer was at that moment sitting before the fire, and only by a miracle had he escaped destruction, for an immense weight of material came down through the rotten roof, and even broke a good deal of the flooring. Had the occupant been anywhere but close by the fireplace, he must have been crushed to a mummy; as it was, only a few bricks struck him, inflicting severe bruises on back and arms. But the shock had been serious. When his shouts from the window at length attracted attention and brought help, the poor man had to be carried downstairs, and in a thoroughly helpless state was removed to the nearest hospital.

'Which room was he in?' inquired Goldthorpe. 'Back or front?'

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'In the front room. The back wasn't touched.'

Musing on Mr. Spicer's bad luck for it seemed as if he had changed from the back to the front room just in order that the chimney might fall on him Goldthorpe hastened away to the hospital. He could not be admitted to-day, but heard that his friend was doing very well; on the morrow he would be allowed to see him.

So at the visitors' hour Goldthorpe returned. Entering the long accident ward, he searched anxiously for the familiar face, and caught sight of it just as it began to beam recognition. Mr. Spicer was sitting up in bed; he looked pale and meagre, but not seriously ill; his voice quivered with delight as he greeted the young man.

'I heard of your inquiring for me yesterday, Mr. Goldthorpe, and I've hardly been able to live for impatience to see you. How are you, sir? How are you? And what news about the work, sir?'

'We'll talk about that presently, Mr. Spicer. Tell me all about your accident. How came you to be in the front room?'

'Ah, sir,' replied the patient, with a little shake of the head, 'that indeed was singular. Only a few days before, I had made a removal from my room into yours. I call it yours, sir, for I always thought of it as yours; but thank heaven you were not there. Only a few days before, I took that step, Mr. Goldthorpe, for two reasons: first, because water was coming through the roof at the back in rather unpleasant quantities, and secondly, because I hoped to get a little morning sun in the front. The fact is, sir, my room had been just a little depressing. Ah, Mr. Goldthorpe, if you knew how I have missed you, sir! But the work what news of the work?'

Smiling as though carelessly, the author made known his good fortune. For a quarter of an hour Mr. Spicer could talk of nothing else.

'This has completed my cure!' he kept repeating. 'The work was composed under my roof, my own roof, sir! Did I not tell you to take heart?'

'And where are you going to live?' asked Goldthorpe presently. 'You can't go back to the old house.'

'Alas! no, sir. All my life I have dreamt of the joy of owning a house. You know how the dream was realised, Mr. Goldthorpe, and you see what has come of it at last. Probably it is a chastisement for overweening desires, sir. I should have remembered my position, and kept my wishes within bounds. But, Mr. Goldthorpe, I shall continue to cultivate the garden, sir. I shall put in spring lettuces, and radishes, and mustard and cress. The property is mine till midsummer day. You shall eat a lettuce of my growing, Mr. Goldthorpe; I am bent on that. And how I grieve that you were not with me at the time of the artichokes just at the moment when they were touched by the first frost!'

'Ah! They were really good, Mr. Spicer?'

'Sir, they seemed good to me, very good. Just at the moment of the first frost!'