

# The House That Stephen Built

By Madeline Yale Wynne

Well! What did I tell you! Isn't this a pretty state of things? Stephen living in rooms, and Stephen's house just teeming with those Swedes. I declare! It makes me ill; I do believe that Stephen ought to be put under guardianship, I do really—you're laughing, Eugenia; I suppose it is all very amusing to any one that isn't anything in particular to Stephen; but I tell you, Eugenia, if he were anything to you you would see the utter ridiculousness of the whole thing, instead of standing there and laughing."

"That is why I laugh, it is so very ridiculous, and so like Stephen."

"I call Stephen odd, I don't say that he is ridiculous. He is a victim of circumstances, and it is these circumstances that are absurd and ridiculous."

The eyes of the two women met and they both laughed, one in irritation and one in a sympathetic manner which soon ended in a wistful silence, while the other wiped from her eyes the half-angry tears.

"Now, just look over there," said the irritated woman. "Isn't that house a beauty? It is a home from top to cellar, it isn't merely a house. Stephen planned every detail; he put his heart into it, it is a perfect home."

"It certainly seems to be a home," assented Eugenia, "that is if a lot of happy people living in it makes a home of it. I have seen enough mothers and aunts, and fathers and sisters and brothers and children over there to constitute a fair-sized Republic made up of families. For *my* part I like a full house."

"So do I, if they are the right people in the right place. When Stephen told me two years ago that he was going to build, I thought that he was doing the most sensible thing of his life. He just beamed when I said that, and intimated that he had expected me to object; I said that I never objected to his doing a sensible thing like this, but that it was the unexpectedly queer things that he was always doing that had made me acquire the objecting habit, and then as the Yankee said, 'He didn't say nothing and I didn't say nothing, and so one word led to another,' and then Stephen fell into one of his silent tempers, and for a week we were conspicuously polite to each other, but we didn't allude to the house. When he got over his miff he brought up the subject again, and I was perfectly amazed to find that he did not in the least mean to get married, as I had supposed of course he would, but that he was just going to build. 'A home,' he called it, 'a hollow mockery,' I said, and after that I systematically objected to every brick and every stone that went to the building of the house. I criticised everything that he planned to do, right along, till the house was done. He told my husband that it ought to be a thoroughly well-built house as it had had all the benefits of contractor and detractor. I know that I did my part well, anyway. I suppose I am somewhat to blame and that I really drove him into it. Opposition is always the best goad—for a man. Anyway, there it stands, 'Stephen's Folly.'"

There was stillness for a time, and then the older woman continued, as if driven to speak against a restraining, better judgment: "Sometimes in my heart of hearts I think of it as Stephen's and Eugenia's Folly. Perhaps I am wrong there."

Eugenia was not to be decoyed into admission or discussion. She stood surveying the opposite house with interest.

There was evidently some sort of gala doings over there: an awning was stretched from door to pavement; a man in livery was placing stones on the corners of the carpet that made an inviting line of red, running up the steps.

The wind flapped the striped and scalloped awning which gave to the scene a triumphal, flag-flying effect, while two strictly trimmed box trees in pots stood in formal promise of a function of importance within.

Showy, light costumes containing conscious.. looking women stepped from the carriages "which continually do come," chronicled Eugenia for the benefit of the other, whose interest was of too irritable a nature to allow of her watching for herself.

"They all come in carriages, I often walk," remarked Eugenia, meditatively.

"*You* can afford to walk."

"Yes, I suppose so. One would naturally have to ride to one's own wedding, and to one's own funeral, all the other rides are extra."

"I should say that those Swedes over there lived mostly on extras."

"Whose wedding is this, anyway?" asked Eugenia. "I suppose it is the pretty white-haired girl that is to be married, the one that watched us from the upper window when we got out of the carriage day before yesterday."

"I saw at least six heads at the various windows. It might be any one of the aunts or sisters or cousins or friends of the family, I am sure I don't know which one; don't ask me anything, my head is bursting with a racking headache, and it all comes from the idiocy of you two, it really does, Eugenia, and it is of no use for you to deny it, and to look so cool and remote, and so innocent."

As she said this Mrs. Ransome put her head on one side and surveyed Eugenia like an inquisitive robin, to see how she would receive the arrangement.

As Eugenia kept silence she added, "Did you know that when Stephen was eight years old he nearly had the honour of playing the leading part in a drama that they gave at his school, at the closing of the spring term?"

Eugenia smiled at the digression and said that she probably *had* heard of it but that she had forgotten it, as she had unfortunately forgotten many historical events of interest that ought to be remembered.

"Yes," went on Mrs. Ransome, not at all discouraged by her listener's small ironies. "Yes, he was appointed for a part and learned his lines, and got his make-up, and was as important as if he was to play Hamlet at Drury Lane, and then—are you listening, Eugenia?"

"Of course I am, I am very much interested to find out how you got switched off from the Swedish wedding to Stephen at school, in Hamlet did you say, at the age of eight? Well?"

"Well, it *has* a bearing on this and on many other things; the very day that the play was to come off Stephen came down with the measles, his face was as red as his hair, and one could not say more at that time. Maybe his hair is a trifle darker now. Yes, he took that very day of all others to begin on his measles."

"Poor little boy!" murmured Eugenia.

"Horrid little boy, I say. The fact is that Stephen never had in all his life the first glimmering of what we call social instinct; now if I am to have an honour or a pleasure do I

take that particular time to have any one of the regular diseases that could be had at any time, at one's own convenience, as it were? I tell you, Eugenia, these things are not accidental, they are temperamental. You don't find that any successful person, socially speaking, has disagreeable things at critical moments. A man, for instance, would not have a fit of sneezing just at the instant that he was going to propose to the woman he loved above anything on earth, that is, no one but Stephen would. Stephen might, I am not sure about anything's not happening to Stephen, he would be sure to have something frustrating anyway."

Eugenia smiled and the colour came slowly up till her ears burned. She recalled that in truth every event in the life of Mrs. Ransome had somehow fallen at the opportune moment, and at 'the same time she remembered guiltily in her own case how some indiscretions, some inopportunities, had frustrated or impeded her at moments of social importance, but her admiration for Mrs. Ransome's superior quality was mixed with a sneaking sympathy for the little red-headed boy that was devoid of the social instinct.

"And then," resumed Stephen's sister, rehearsing her grievances in a way that showed them to have been reduced to order and sequence in her mind, "and then again, when he was to be graduated from college at twenty, he had some part in the exercises—quite an honourable part, for Stephen in the long run is generally successful—what did he do but lie awake all the night before and then go off early in the morning for a long walk to clear his mind, and then he fell asleep in the woods and slept till the whole thing was over. That is the fact, he is subject to some fate, some malignant, obscuring fate that always succeeds in making him ineffective.

"It has been so his whole life," said she, taking fresh breath, for she felt that she was venturing on to thin ice and she went at it with a rush to have it over with, "and I haven't the slightest doubt in the world but that he would have been married long ago if some miserable, little, inconvenient, obstructing fate hadn't come in to frustrate it.

"You are laughing again, Eugenia, you really are! No? Then you are crying. Oh, don't cry, dear, I didn't think you cared. What? You don't care? Well! Why do you show tears, then? I wasn't blaming Stephen, I was just trying to explain to myself how it happens that Stephen is so ineffective, and how it happens that those Swedes have possession over there and Stephen is living all alone in some little cooped-up rooms, Heaven knows how or where.

"There, Eugenia, I know you don't care—you say you do care? Well, I thought so, at least I hoped so, I—"

"I mean," explained Eugenia, resolutely, "I mean that of course I do care about Stephen, only as a friend of course. But I can't help thinking about that little red-headed boy, he must have been so terribly disappointed, you know. I mean about the school, about Hamlet, you know."

"Yes, I think he was disappointed, Eugenia, and so far as I can make out he is just about as red-headed and as disappointed now as he was that day; and yet I can really and truly say that I am glad that you do not care for him, much as I love you both. I am very unselfish about it, and you know as well as I do that you are the only woman that Stephen ever cared a straw for, and yet if he ever tried to tell you so," said Mrs. Ransome in the perfectly measured and distinct manner that she always fell into when she was going to "bear testimony," "if Stephen ever tried to declare his love, some devilish thing would

happen to break him all up; it would be bound to happen. He never will try to tell you, that is one comfort, for Stephen knows his own limitations, his utter ineffectiveness.

"How can you say that!" blazed out Eugenia.

"Stephen has done splendid things, things that make you and me look like, like—"

"Like thirty cents," interjected Mrs. Ransome, helpfully.

"Yes, like thirty cents, if that is the smallest thing in the world."

"Stephen is fine," admitted his sister, "and he is brave; I suppose you are thinking of the little military episode in Cuba. That was a fine thing, we were all of us proud of him, but you must remember that he did not get the credit of even that. At a critical moment he just went in at the risk of his own life and did what belonged to another man to do, and though that other man was a coward, to save that other man from disgrace Stephen held his tongue, and the other man got not only the fame but he got his promotion. All this is very fine, no doubt, I admit that, but ineffective so far as Stephen is concerned! A case of suppressed measles, we might call it, he just missed the point as usual—of course. Stephen would give his life or any other little thing to any one in need, except just to himself the neediest one of all, in spite of his money. Oh, yes! Stephen is all right, it is only that fate of his."

"I think that Stephen is in some ways the finest man I ever knew," Eugenia announced with a candour that was outspoken but yet not entirely incriminating.

"Oh! we all think the world of Stephen, but for all that—" The conclusion was left to the imagination of any one interested enough to fill the blank.

The wedding march was heard from over the way.

"My nerves are all of a frazzle. I hate that march," added Mrs. Ransome, vindictively.

Eugenia still watched the house over the way; it seemed to have a fascination for her, the house that Stephen had built and in which he now had no part except to see that it always kept the look of the perfect home in every outside detail. She wondered how it was inside, and how much of his furnishings were still there, and if he was happy.

Mrs. Ransome, Stephen's only sister, had just run over to America for the summer. She was nowadays, as she said, never at home except by chance, for business kept her husband in London all the year round.

She had not known till her return that Stephen was not living in his own house, and it was this not knowing that made the affair seem doubly perplexing. Why had he not told her? Why had he left her to hear it from a chance acquaintance here in town (of near friends she had none, that is of the corresponding sort)? In these two days of waiting to see Stephen it had got on her nerves, and the little dynamic explosions of temper to which she had subjected Eugenia had not in the least diminished the potency of the reserved force.

Stephen, too, had always had what in his boyhood were called red-headed tantrums, and though his sister's temper had no particular colour scheme, it had an intensity quite noteworthy.

Two years before, just after Stephen's house had become an accomplished fact, Mrs. Ransome, as subjugated foe to the scheme, had made her peace offering in the form of many pincushions, one for every available room in the house; each pincushion bore on its capacious bosom various kinds of pins such as are in demand in a large and complex family, some of which were quite unknown by name or use to Stephen, but he was innocently charmed at the homelike quality they immediately imparted to the rooms. If

his sister had had her own peculiar satisfaction in thus stabbing the symbolic pincushions with descriptive pins, it really was no more than her due, for she had done her duty in combating the house. It was not that she had disapproved of a house, it was only a house without a wife and family that she so distinctly combated. It was the altar without the gods, the offerings that were so meaningless without a something to sacrifice to. To be sure the pincushions had served their purpose, and it was to be surmised that not a pin of any kind was left to-day; the geometric designs had been as fruitless as had been her wrath.

Stephen came at this moment, and the greetings were as warm between brother and sister as could be wished, although they were constitutional enemies. Eugenia, too, rose to meet him with an almost tender cordiality, which, however, stiffened into a formal greeting as she noted the scrutiny, involuntary as it was, on Mrs. Ransome's part. Her quickness saved her from any further intimate revelations and she said with genuine warmth, "I am so glad to see you and to have a chance to tell you how proud we all were of you in Cuba. We heard of your bravery and the best part of it all was the silent part."

Stephen's eyes were looking straight into Eugenia's and he saw nothing but friendship there—her friendship he had always been sure of.

Stephen sat down by the window. Mrs. Ransome moved her chair back farther into the room—she was going to be very strategical.

Stephen's sittings-down always reminded Eugenia of the dropping of a chain, link by link, and now into her memory came a picture of a day long ago, when Stephen had thus sat down, and certain things had been said and certain other things were almost said but—well! he hadn't exactly sneezed at a crucial moment, as his sister had prophesied that he would do, but—and Eugenia felt herself flushing. Then she heard Mrs. Ransome open the battle by asking abruptly, "Stephen, where in the world are you living? I see your house is rented."

"I am in lodgings down that way," he indicated the way vaguely with a motion of the head.

"Who lives in your new house?" Mrs. Ransome threw the "new house" at him like a missile.

"A family by the name of Hansen."

"I do not remember the name among the old families here, are they new people?"

"Well, no; or yes, you might call them new, it don't much matter what you call them, they are not what you would call in your set."

"Do you move in a set from which I am debarred for any reason?" This was asked with dignity.

"Of course not, I didn't mean that, I only meant that you would not be likely to meet them while you are here."

That "while you are here" was a mistake born of agitation, and his sister hastened to add:

"I shall be here all summer, you know."

"I meant to say that you would not meet them in the society you move in."

"Is there anything the matter with them?"

"Oh, come now! Frances, you needn't play dull. You understand what I mean, it is a matter of convention, of so-called social distinctions."

"I am not sure that I do understand. Will you call with me on these Hansens?"

“But I do not call on them myself, that is in a social way, our relations are of a purely business nature.”

“Dear me! are they so bad as that?”

“They are not bad at all, they are very nice people, honest, respectable, with a little bit of means, and altogether thoroughly nice.”

“What rent do they pay?”

“Rent? Why, let me see.” He looked over to the house as if he expected to get a memory-refreshing placard. Then he said quietly, “They do not pay any rent, that is not exactly in stated terms.”

“Not pay any rent! What do you mean? Why don’t you turn them out? It is bad enough to have that sort of people in your house, but to have them cheat you, it is monstrous.” His sister was out of breath with indignation—she was quite overwhelming.

“Now, Frances, you are away off, you must have been hearing all sorts of stuff about the house. Just let me tell you about the people, who are above blame in every way and only came to be in the house in the most natural course of events.

“I had meant to tell you all about it on our way out here, but my fate as usual made me miss connections and I couldn’t meet you at the wharf or anywhere else. It was too bad. I was ever so mortified, and then I had to stay over for that business of yours, you know, Frances.”

As he alluded to his fate, a glance flashed between the two women. Eugenia felt guilty to have been a party to this interchange and turned her face more directly toward Stephen.

“Oh, I understand, now,” said Mrs. Ransome with sympathy, “there was not time for you to write to me in London, telling me that you had rented the house; and your bad luck prevented your meeting me in New York, and then you missed us at the wharf, and at the Waldorf, and in fact everywhere, and my tiresome business kept you till now. It was too bad, because I have been worrying unnecessarily. I *did* get the wrong impression from some of these stupid people here. I understood them to say that you hadn’t lived in the house for a year or more; it is all too ridiculous. I ought not to have been such an idiot. I am glad it isn’t so at all.

“And these people have just moved in? And the terms of rent are still unsettled? And I suppose you are going abroad or something and want to have the house taken care of. I wish you hadn’t selected so big a family. However, I dare say it will be all right, it looks neat over there.”

All this was said in the sweetest and most helpful manner and she drew her chair nearer to his with sympathetic attention.

She also laid a detaining hand on Eugenia’s arm as she rose to leave the two alone together. “Don’t go, dear. You want to hear about the house, too, especially as I find I was all wrong in my criticisms.

“And now tell us all about it, Stephen.” Stephen crossed his long legs and looked obstinate.

The day was very still except for the laughter and the pervasive mandolins that were an accompaniment of the wedding breakfast over the way. The festivities seemed exuberantly in evidence. There had been several weddings over at the house, but it seemed to Stephen that never before had there been such aggressive hilarity; perhaps he was hearing with the ears of Mrs. Ransome and seeing with the eyes of Eugenia; though he could not make out to his own satisfaction exactly what Eugenia was seeing with her

grave eyes. She looked sympathetic, but then there was his sister; maybe she was sympathetic with *her* point of view.

In his perturbed state of mind he held firmly to one thing only, and that was that he must make it plain that the Swedes were not offenders, pushing themselves into a house where they were not wanted; they must come off scot free. And to do that he must not lose his temper, it was always so hard to find it again; he must keep cool, be explicit, and get away as soon as he could.

He felt terribly guilty, and as if his sister were an inimical judge and Eugenia an utterly noncommittal jury.

"After you went away, you know, Frances, I hired a housekeeper. I hired the one you recommended to me. You remember you told me about Sophie Johnson. You said she was a faithful and capable girl. You remember Sophie, don't you?"

Stephen smiled winningly at his sister, her recommending the housekeeper seemed somehow to bring them to a common meeting-ground and to involve Mrs. Ransome pleasantly in the future events.

"Yes, I remember." Mrs. Ransome did not seem to be so deeply involved as he had hoped.

"Well! Sophie married Hansen, she is Mrs. Hansen now."

"Oh!"

Stephen felt quite alone again. Then he explained at length that while Sophie had been his housekeeper, her sister Ada had come to do second work while Sophie officiated in the lower regions.

Mrs. Ransome did not seem to care for instructions as to the division of duties between cook and housemaid and was aggressively silent.

Eugenia, too, was silent, either because she had nothing to say or because she, too, saw that silence was a most discomfiting weapon.

"Things went very smoothly at first, indeed they have always gone smoothly, there hasn't been any trouble, everything is all right, I am perfectly contented. I am glad that I? built the house. I like living as I do, it is easier than housekeeping, though that was perfectly easy, too. Sophie managed splendidly. I liked that, too, of course.

"But all this seems so hard to express, to make you take my point of view, and last year— yes, even now, it seems the only point of view, or rather I can't see a better. It all seems very simple, only you seem, or the circumstances seen through your eyes seem, to make me guilty of something heinous. I *feel* guilty. Frankly, now, I began to feel guilty the minute that you wrote that you were coming home for the summer.

"I am not really guilty of anything, but for all that I feel like a criminal. I wish," said he, getting up and then sitting down again, "I wish someone would put the charge in words. You want to know how it comes that I am not living in the house that I built to live in, and when I try to tell you it all seems so very complicated, and it really is not complicated at all. I just don't live there and someone else does live there."

Here he glanced, by chance, at Eugenia, and suddenly to him the jury seemed to have melted into a friend, or rather the judge and the jury became from that moment merely lookers on, and he became his own judge and his own jury; he took himself before the bar of his own reason; he arraigned himself, was council, and made his own plea. He felt, too, that this time it was the final trial; the verdict would be for life.

“You see,” he said after a pause and quite easily now, “after a few weeks in my perfect house it dawned upon me that it was very empty, that brick remained brick and that plaster was just plaster, and that emptiness would be emptiness to the end.

“An old house is always full of memories, they may not be your own memories but they are there; they fill the spaces, they speak of the human beings that have flitted through the rooms. They are still potent though the people have gone away. The autographs of souls, they may be called, are written everywhere and these autographs are unfading.

“But a new house is an empty house. It was in an empty house that I took my solitary breakfast, in the window of the breakfast room where the sun shone in on June days like this, at just the right angle as I had so carefully planned. The coffee was good, the rolls superlative, and the room was empty.

“I noticed after a while that downstairs they had for breakfast coffee, ham, sausage, and other pleasantly odorous things, and, too, that there were voices of cheer at the breakfast table, sometimes many voices; I fancied that they had lots of friends, and sometimes I distinguished the voice of an old person. Fortunately I could listen without hearing what was said, the voices were pleasant in contrast to my silence and to my thoughts.

“I found after a time that the old Swedish mother had come over to join her daughters and that she was domiciled in the house. I was not consulted in any formal manner but I made it plain that I liked to have her there, it made the household arrangements seem more permanent.

“The old woman and I became quite friendly; she couldn’t speak a word of English and I don’t think she understood any, but it seemed to be enough for her that my smile was a welcome. It embarrassed me no end at first, because when we met she would curtsy and then gravely kiss my hand. I couldn’t have stood it from one so old, but that I knew, to her, it was only a custom of her country, a long-ago acquired habit, a thing of ancestry, not a personal thing as regarded me. Certainly there was dignity in the way she performed the act. She had perhaps a better acquaintance with her part than I had with mine. And so we smiled at each other and if she played the rôle of one in a humbler class upstairs, I am convinced that she was an autocrat below the salt. In fact, she was so arrogant to her daughters that I, in my mind, dubbed her the Queen Mother.

“Her children dressed her well and I very surely knew that her hands were never lifted in any work. She reigned in the idleness of the upper class on the lower floor.”

Eugenia had relaxed her attitude, and a little smile played round her mouth.

“Then the Queen Mother had a most tragic mishap; she fell and broke her hip. All her meals had to be carried up two flights of stairs, and on busy days she was left quite alone for hours. That troubled me somewhat, especially as I, a perfectly able-bodied man, had an entire floor to myself and a little ‘lift’ that communicated with the kitchen on which my meals could be sent up if I should be ill.

“I thought it all out one night. It was very simple, a proposition that a child would cope with more easily than I had done. Move myself up and move the Swedes down.

“I liked upper rooms. I frankly admit that it was not all generosity on my part, it was justice and self-indulgence.

“I had known the delights of an attic room in my boyhood at the old house in Salem. To be sure I was no longer a boy, nor were the upper rooms in any sense an attic, but they were high up and I liked them.



"A very few alterations made us all comfortable, they on the middle floor and I up higher with a little staircase for myself that led down to the first floor."

Mrs. Ransome sat in somewhat frigid silence. Eugenia laughed appreciatively. He glanced at her. "I suppose it does sound queer, but if I had a pencil, I could show you in a minute how cleverly the staircase was arranged so that I could go down without passing through their hail at all."

"You gave up the front stairs to them, of course," suggested Mrs. Ransome.

"Giving up sounds too self-denying. I ceased to use them, that is all. You see, I did not entertain after the first two months, for it is dreary work entertaining in bachelor fashion; entertaining people that had to be sorted out to fit the artificial standard of a bachelor home took away all the pleasure. It was a bore and I gave it up. In building the house, the entertaining of guests was a very pleasant anticipation, but next to the emptiness of the house, the filling of it with idle, curious, ill-assorted people was my most disappointing experience.

"As for putting the Swede family on the second floor, there seemed but one point of view, at least there seemed, at that time, but one sane point of view. To-day things seem less clear— something awakens echoes not quite in keeping. I dare say that I shall again see things simply, anyway I had built these rooms for living purposes, for health, and for sickness in case of need.

"The old Queen Mother seemed to supply the human element, here at hand was need, and here were the rooms; good! To be sure it was not *my* mother that was ill, it was not *my* wife, nor was it a child of mine that needed these things that I had provided, it was only a little old woman called the Queen Mother by a derisive whim.

"As I say, it seemed to me then that it was hers by right of need."

Eugenia moved restlessly.

"There were some evolutions in the new house that had a humorous side. I remember wondering at first with great amusement what male voice it was that I heard at increasingly short intervals below stairs. In time I began to believe that the voice had come permanently to stay. And I became conscious that a masculine form came in and out of the kitchen door with quite the air of residence.

"I am not sure that I should not have resented this had it not gradually dawned upon me that Sophie was married. I do not know that she ever told me so at any one stated time, but I finally learned that she had really been married quite a while before she came to live with me and that she had only gone out to service in order to get a little money to go to housekeeping with, and that the man expected shortly a small inheritance that would help them out in their plans.

"Of course with these new conditions downstairs the hospitalities were increased. And why not! I was not in the mood to entertain upstairs, Swedes are gregarious, I had the means to pay for the small expenditure, and Sophie was economical. Why should any one object to the fact that the dinners were laid and were eaten downstairs instead of upstairs? You don't know till you have tried how easy it is to do differently from what the world expects; the first thing is to *see* differently.

"There was, as I say, an occasional bit of humour brought into my life, and I assure you I stood in need of such small solace as fell to my lot, for I was lonely.

"For instance, the voice of an infant wailing was a moment of excitement and of humour I think that I blushed a little also, for I remembered having at various times

vaguely suggested to Ada that there must be a kitten in distress somewhere below. When I really accepted the voice as that of another human document added to my fast-accumulating collection (I had forgotten to say that at various times various sisters and a cousin or two had temporarily lived in what was now known to me as “our house”), it did not take me so long to discover that the infant needed lighter quarters than it had downstairs, though, to be sure, they had acquired by this time the use of the big dining room as an upstairs living room.”

“You may as well tell us how *that* happened, it is all so very interesting,” said Mrs. Ransome.

“Why! it was only that the Queen Mother was, all her remaining days, confined to her room, and I offered to take all my meals in the one dining room instead of having my breakfasts and luncheons in the breakfast room, which would make the care of one less room. And then Sophie herself suggested that the smaller room, the breakfast room, was the sunnier and pleasanter; Sophie always looked out for me. So I took that for dining room. At first the other room was shut up, but I was glad to see some time later that it was occupied in the evenings by the family, and I put extra chairs and things in there till it looked about the pleasantest room in the house. The baby lived there.”

By this time Stephen was telling his story entirely to Eugenia and she was wonderfully receptive, smiling or grave with his mood.

“The truth is that when I looked into that room in passing, I saw that human histories were being written. It was not to remain a phantom home, for I had discovered by this time that I, personally, could build the house but, I could not create the house soul—the home.

“But I had found a way to outwit fate. I could stand aside and let the life of others flow into the empty spaces, the haunting emptiness that depressed me.

“You see that at bottom it was selfishness, but it was not a preventive selfishness. Life had grown round the things that I had provided. Children have been born under the roof. Sisters and cousins have been married and gone out from there to build other homes, and in time the Queen Mother was carried out of the front door to her last resting place, and whether the door lent dignity to the clay that was carried out, or the clay lent a final dignity to the door, I have not been able to decide. I do not know. But the round of human life had been enacted under the roof and in time I, too, flitted. I went into lodgings quite large and dignified for one of my small possibilities. And now I am merely so-called owner of the house over the way. I hope it looks pleasant to you, Eugenia. I shall never let it go out of my hands, and externally I mean it to represent all that I tried to express in the building.”

“Which means,” broke in the sister, “that you pay taxes, you make repairs, you pay water rent, gas bills, and I have no doubt that you furnish fuel and—”

“Not all the fuel, only for the furnaces—be just, Frances.”

“Yes, and you keep the lawn and the shrubs trimmed, and you buy pretty, formal box and bay trees for the entrance, and you paint and repair the house and pay wages to the housekeeper—”

“No, not full wages, she is on half wages now.

At this Eugenia laughed, it was a laugh that was good to hear, and Stephen laughed with her.

Mrs. Ransome rose. The door shut on the retreating form of the diplomatic and joyfully retreating enemy. Then Eugenia rose and passing behind Stephen's chair she laid her hands over his eyes. Holding them there she said, "Guess whose hands these are."

And Stephen answered quite quickly and correctly, though with a rising inflection and much wonder in the tone, "Mine?"

"If you still want them," said Eugenia with a slight tremble in her tones, and holding his eyes very tightly shut.

And this was the house that Stephen built.