

*How Wife and I Built  
a Home for \$4.90*

by  
**Stephen Leacock**

Illustrated by  
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# How Wife and I Built Our Home for \$4.90

By STEPHEN LEACOCK  
ILLUSTRATED BY C. W. JEFFERYS

I was leaning up against the mantelpiece in a lounge suit which I had made out of old ice bags, and Beryl, my wife, was seated at my feet on a low Louis Quinze tabouret which she had made out of a finnan-haddock fishbox, when the idea of a bungalow came to both of us at the same time.

“It would be just lovely if we could do it!” exclaimed Beryl, coiling herself around my knee.

“Why not?” I replied, lifting her up a little by the ear. “With your exquisite taste—”

“And with your knowledge of material,” added Beryl, giving me a tiny pinch on the leg—“Oh I am sure we could do it! One reads so much in all the illustrated papers about people making summer bungalows and furnishing them for next to nothing. Oh, do let us try, Dogyard!”

We talked over our project all night, and the next morning we sallied forth to try to find a site for our new home. As Beryl (who was brimming over with fun as the result of talking all night) put it, “The first thing is to get the ground.”

Here fortune favored us. We had hardly got to the edge of the town when Beryl suddenly exclaimed, “Oh, look, Dogyard, look; there’s exactly the site!” It was a piece of waste land on the edge of a gully with a brickyard on one side of it and a gravel pit on the other. It had no trees on it, and it was covered with ragged heaps of tin cans, old newspaper, stones and a litter of broken lumber.

An architect or builder would have passed the place by. Indeed, it is a matter of frequent remark that architects, builders and contractors have a way of overlooking the desirable sites.

But Beryl’s quick eye saw the possibilities of the situation at once. “Oh, Dogyard!” she exclaimed, “isn’t it just sweet? We can clear away all this litter and plant a catalpa tree to hide the brickyard and hedge of copernicia or nux vomica to hide the gravel pit, and some bright flowers to hide the hedge. Oh, can’t you just see it? I wish I had brought some catalpa seed. They grow so quickly.”

“We’d better wait,” I said, “till we have bought the ground.”

And here a sudden piece of good fortune awaited us. It so happened that the owner of the lot was on the spot at the time—he was seated on a stone whittling a stick while we were talking, and presented himself to us. After a short discussion he agreed to sell us the ground for one dollar in cash and fifty cents on a three years' mortgage. The deed of sale was written out on the spot and stamped with a two cent stamp, and the owner of the lot took his departure with every expression of good will.

I drew Beryl's attention to our good luck in dealing direct with the owner without having to pay fees to agents or lawyers or middlemen.

“Half the difficulty of the modern land system,” I explained to her, “arises from the difficulty of transfer and the belated survival of medieval technicalities which still accompany the change of ownership. With the Romans, on the contrary, the mere handing over, or *traditio simplex*—”

That evening Beryl, seated on her little stool at my feet, took a pencil and paper and set down triumphantly a statement of the cost of our bungalow up to date. I introduce it here as a help to readers who may hope to follow in our footsteps:

Ground site	\$1.50
Stamp for mortgage	.02
Car fare	.10
	----
Total	\$1.62

I checked over Beryl's arithmetic twice and found it strictly correct.

Next morning we commenced work in earnest. While Beryl cleared away the cans and litter, I set to work with spade and shovel excavating our cellar and digging out the foundations. And here I must admit that I had no light task. I can only warn those who wish to follow in our footsteps that they must be prepared to face hard work. Owing perhaps to my inexperience, it took me the whole of the morning to dig out a cellar forty feet long and twenty feet wide.



C.W. JEFFERYS

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Beryl, who had meantime cleaned up the lot, stacked the lumber, lifted away the stones and planted fifty yards of hedge, was inclined to be a little impatient. But I reminded her that a contractor working with a gang of men and two or three teams of horses would have taken a whole week to do what I did in one morning. I admitted that my work was not equal to the best records as related in the weekly home journals, where I have often computed that they move 100,000 cubic feet of earth in one paragraph, but at least I was doing my best.

After lunching on a bag of peanuts and a bottle of lithia water, we set to work again. That afternoon I gathered up all the big stones and built them into walls around the cellar with partition walls across it, dividing it into rooms and compartments. I leveled the floor and packed it tight with sand and gravel and dug a drain ten feet deep from the cellar to the gully about sixty feet away. There being still a good hour or so of daylight left, I dug a cistern four feet wide and twenty feet deep. I was looking round for something more to dig by moonlight, but Beryl put her foot down (on my

head while I was in the drain) and forbade me to work any more for fear I might be fatigued.

That evening Beryl again took out pencil and paper, and with the little look of perplexity which is always on her face when she is busy with arithmetic, set down our day's accounts.

Catalpa seed	\$0.02
Spade	.15
Shovel	.15
	----
Total	\$0.32

I looked over her figures while smoking an evening pipe and found them substantially correct, and was able to compute that the cost of our land, cellar and foundations had been \$1.62 plus thirty-two cents, or, approximately, one dollar and ninety-four cents, in other words less than two dollars. It was a record in which we both felt a certain pride.

Next morning we were able to begin our building in good earnest. On our way we stopped at the fifteen cent store for necessary supplies, and bought one hammer (fifteen cents), a saw (fifteen cents), half a gallon of nails (15 cents), a crane (fifteen cents), a derrick for hoisting (fifteen cents) and a needle and thread for sewing on the roof (fifteen cents). As an advice to young builders, I may say that I doubt if we were quite wise in all our purchases. The fifteen cent derrick is too light for the work, and the extra expenditure for the heavier kind (the twenty-five cent crane) would have been justified. The difference in cost is only (approximately) ten cents, and the efficiency of the big crane is far greater.

On arriving at our ground we were delighted to find that our masonry was well set and the walls firm and solid, while the catalpa trees were well above the ground and growing rapidly.

We set to work at once to build in earnest.

We had already decided to utilize for our bungalow the waste material which lay on our lot. I drew Beryl's attention to the fact that if a proper use were made of the material wasted in building there would be no need to buy any material at all. "The elimination of waste," I explained, "by the utilization of all by-products before they have time to go by, is the central principle of modern industrial organization." But observing that Beryl had

ceased to listen to me, I drew on my carpenter's apron which I had made out of a piece of tar paper, and set to work.

My first care was to gather up all the loose lumber that lay upon and around our ground site, and saw it up into neatly squared pieces about twenty feet long. Out of these I made the joists, the studding, the partitions, rafters, and so on, which formed the frame of the house. Putting up the house took practically the whole morning. Beryl, who had slipped on a potato bag over her dress, assisted me by holding up the side of the house while I nailed on the top.

Strenuous as the task was, it was by no means all hard work. We brought to it a spirit of light-heartedness and a merry camaraderie such as one does not observe in ordinary laborers. Beryl is far more roguish than the average hired carpenter, and I myself have a better sense of fun than the ordinary plasterer. Frequently Beryl would roar with laughter when I hit my thumb with the hammer, while I would presently retaliate by dropping a board on her. In this way a task that is ordinarily considered laborious was reduced to mere play.

By the end of the afternoon we had completed the sides of our house, which we made out of old newspapers soaked in glue and rolled flat. The next day we put on the roof, which was made of tin cans cut open and pounded out flat. For our hardwood floors, mantels, etc., we were fortunate in finding a pile of hardwood on a neighboring lot which had apparently been overlooked, and which we carried over proudly to our bungalow after dark. That same night we carried over jubilantly some rustic furniture which we had found, quite neglected, lying in a nearby cottage, the lock of which, oddly enough, was opened quite easily with the key of Beryl's suitcase. For the rest of our furniture—plain tables, dressers, etc.—I was able to make from ordinary pine lumber which I obtained by knocking down a board fence upon an adjacent lot.

In short, the reader is able to picture our bungalow after a week of labor, complete in every respect and only awaiting our occupation on the next day.

Seated that evening in our boarding house I calculated the entire cost of our enterprise, including ground site, lumber, derricks, cranes, glue, string, tin-tacks and other materials, as four dollars and ninety cents.

In return for it we had a pretty seven-roomed house, artistic in every respect, with living-room, bedrooms, a boudoir, a den, a snugger, a dogger —in short, the bungalow of which so many young people have dreamed.

Seated together that evening, Beryl and I were full of plans for the future. We both have a passionate love of animals and, like all country bred people, a longing for the life of a farm. So we had long since decided to keep poultry. We planned to begin in a small way, and had brought home that evening from the fifteen cent store a day-old chicken, such as are now so widely sold. We put him in a basket beside the radiator in a little flannel coat that Beryl made for him, and we fed him with a warm mash made of breakfast food and gravel. Our printed directions that we got with him told us that a fowl eats two ounces of grain per day and on that should lay five eggs in a week.

I was easily able to prove to Beryl by a little plain arithmetic that if we fed this fellow four ounces a day he would lay ten eggs in a week, or at eight ounces per day he would lay twenty eggs in a week. Beryl, who was seized at once with a characteristic fit of enthusiasm, suggested that we stick sixteen ounces a day into him and begin right now. I had to remind her laughingly that at eight ounces a day the fellow would probably be working up to capacity, and carrying what we call in business his peak load.

“The essential factor in modern business,” I told her, “is to load yourself up to the peak and stay there.”

Beryl meantime, who is passionately fond of honey, was already laying plans for keeping a bee, while I myself was wondering whether it would not be possible to keep a cow at our bungalow by pasturing him at night on some nearby golf course or boulevard, and letting him use the snuggerly in the daytime.

In short, there was no end to our rosy dreams. In our fancy we saw ourselves in our bungalow, surrounded by hens, bees, cows and dogs, with hogs and goats nestling against our feet.

It is a pity that I cannot leave our story at this point.

On arriving at our bungalow next day we found notices posted up forbidding all trespassers, and two sour-looking men in possession. We learned that our title to the ground site was worthless, as the man from whom we had bought it had been apparently a mere passer-by. It appeared also that a neighboring contractor was making serious difficulties about our use of his material. It was divulged further that we had been mistaken in thinking that we had taken our rustic furniture from an empty cottage. There were people living in it, but they happened to be asleep when Beryl moved the furniture.



As for our hen—there is no doubt that keeping fowls is enormously profitable. It must be so, when one considers the millions of eggs consumed every day. But it demands an unremitting attention and above all—memory. If you own a hen you must never forget it. You must keep on saying to yourself: “How is my hen?” This was our trouble. Beryl and I were so preoccupied that we left our one-day-old chick behind the radiator and never thought of him for three weeks. He was then gone. We prefer to think that he flew away.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *How Wife and I Built Our Home for \$4.90* by Stephen Leacock]