

The Autobiography of a House

By Norval Richardson

I WAS a one-story house, built of rough stones, with wide, overhanging eaves and quaint leaded glass windows. The largest part of me was the hall, where a huge fireplace of rough bricks, and a floor of red tiles, and a ceiling of low weathered rafters gave me full opportunity to express the spirit of cordiality. From this hall two steps led down into the dining-room, and beyond was the enclosed veranda, where one could look out upon the gently sloping hills and quiet, beautiful country.

Towards the back of the house was a wing which formed a cozy library and bedrooms. But what I loved best was my side which faced the garden, where in the early spring I could see the crocus peeping out amid the still brown grass; then would come the jonquils, afterward the spirea and roses; then the hollyhocks and poppies and larkspur, followed by the August golden glow, and, last of all, chrysanthemums.

My acquaintance with them began when I was just commencing to grow and lift myself up enough to take notice. They would come out in the late afternoons, when he had finished his work, and stand side by side, praising each of my parts, and rectifying any mistake.

What first gained my love for them was the strong foundation upon which they placed me, for when it stormed and the wind blew and the thunder made me tremble, I could settle myself down upon the strong underground walls, and brace myself just as a man does in a heavy pair of boots. This is a great comfort to a house that stands on the crest of a hill, exposed to all kinds of weather and strong winds, as I did.

It was in the early autumn when I was entirely completed, and they came to live with me. How well I remember it! It was one of those blue-gray afternoons when the smoke hangs low and everything seems mellowed by indistinctness. All day furniture and packages had been coming out, so that when they came there was much to do to get me into a semblance of order. They ran from room to room, admiring and patting my white enameled doors, treading softly upon my hardwood floors.

"Look, dear, how beautiful this old settle is, beside the fireplace. It looks as if it had already been here an hundred years," she would say to him, and he would answer, "But have you seen the sunset from the library window?" and together they would walk, hand in hand, from one room to another, then back again, as if it were always new.

The clock had chimed twelve that night before they could settle down to a moment of quiet and rest. He had thrown some logs into my huge fireplace, and when I drew the blaze up the chimney with a roar she clapped her hands together and laughed, and then suddenly became very quiet, and I saw two tears roll down her cheeks.



—AND WALKED AWAY, THE CHILD BETWEEN THEM.

"What is it, dear?" he asked, gently drawing her down on the settle beside him.

"Oh, nothing—only, I am so happy in that it is just you and I and our home."

And they sat there together a long time, her head resting in the hollow of his shoulder, and he smoking an old briar pipe, happy and contented. The minutes sped along until her head slipped lower, and she fell asleep, while he drifted into the fairy realm of futures that blended, finally, with her dreams.

Those were very happy days for us, I in the full regalia of fresh paint, with not a joint to give me the

least uneasiness, not even a crack in my plaster to mar my perfection. A vain house was I, must admit, but it was the vanity that comes with the satisfaction of knowing that I made them happy, for it seemed to me that that was all for which I was built. Then, they were so young, and full of life and joy; how could I do otherwise than reflect their happiness?

The days were too short that winter; even the long evenings, that began at five and ended at eleven, seemed hardly long enough for us to do and say all that we desired. It was when they sat upon the settle before the glowing logs, gradually falling under the spell of the warmth and glow, that I found out that I could talk to them and make them understand.

It was she who first heard my voice: "Listen, listen quick, dear; can't you hear the fire roaring up the chimney? It is talking to us. It is saying: 'East or West, Home's best.' Listen, it is singing now. Now, it is telling us that it is a haven, the place of peace and rest, the port from all storms. That is what we shall call it, dear—'Haven'."

So it was that I was named. Afterwards, they would listen to me every evening as I talked to them, and always it was she who understood me best . . .

The winter fled and spring came gently on. It was then that they began the garden which was to be my pleasure. He would work there, spading and digging, while she planted and watered the flowers.

How impatiently we watched for the plants to spring up into life! I recall one night she awakened, and, remembering the roses had not been watered, she went out into the moonlit garden and sprinkled them, most carefully.

As summer came on, she grew into the habit of sitting for the greater part of the day under the shadow of an old tree, one that was there long before I was even thought of. She would go there directly after breakfast, sewing all the time upon the tiniest garments, for which I could make out no real use. Yet she kept on diligently until a very large basket was completely filled with these funny little doll clothes. Then, one morning, I found him climbing up the steps which led into my garret, and calling back to a white-gowned nurse that a baby must always be carried up first to give it luck. . . .

Those were quite the happiest days that I was to know. The baby grew into a beautiful boy, and he played with me as I had never known how to play before. Rainy days he spent the hours in my attic, ransacking every corner and finding out all my secrets—secrets I was very willing for him to know, for it strengthened the bond between us and made me feel that my claim upon him would last as long as I lived.

With these treasures in my care, my confidence in myself grew until I began to think that I was the only

back in a grove of trees. It looked very aged and sadly in need of paint, yet about it was an air of comfort and solidity.

"Vain boaster," it called to me, "it is all very well to be proud of your beauty. You are young now; you talk of the spirit of love and beauty, but that is only the beginning. I have had that, too, and something still greater, for I have seen the depths of suffering, and know that the only real nobility comes when one has passed through these shadows, and can still hold himself erect and smiling."

At this I only laughed, for I knew that old houses always grumbled.

It was in midsummer when one evening he was late in returning home. She was waiting for him in the garden. When he came I read in his face that a great trouble had fallen upon them. He whispered the words to her gently, and afterward she wept through that long, miserable night. A week later they locked the door and walked away, the child between them.

At the crest of the hill she stopped and looked back at me longingly; her eyes embraced me in their great love, and I heard her murmur, "Don't forget us, dear, dear Haven. We are coming back—some day."

Then was I alone, so utterly alone, with my blinds closed tight, and my rooms darkened so that the walls began to mold, and the smooth, glassy floors were deep with dust. But this was as nothing to me in my grief over their departure. I felt that I was deserted and left to the mercy of those who thought me worthy to be bought.

Each morning as I bathed my gables in the early sun, I would glow with the hope that perhaps that day they might return, but as the lonely shadows of the twilight clustered about me, I knew it was not to be.

In my grief and loneliness I believe I aged more in those few months that I was empty than in the many years spent with them. At the end of three dreary months, I was awakened from my lethargy by the sound of a heavy carriage rolling up to my gate. The jangling of the chains, the restless prancing of the horses, the smart glitter of the carriage—all told me that the newcomers were rich. They were accompanied by the heartless man who had bought me, and as he unlocked the door and showed the strangers in, one ray of happiness passed over me—the hope that I might pass from his hands forever.

The two women—they were mother and daughter, I learned, when I had come to know them—held their dainty gowns high as they stepped lightly over my dusty floors and criticized me—detail by detail.

"A brick floor—how absurd, mama! We must have a wood floor laid here at once. And how plain the walls are! They will have to be papered. And all this white woodwork is so tiresome, but we can have it stained mahogany. Yes, I believe we can make it presentable by spending money. Papa, do send for a decorator at once!"

Finally they took possession of me, and with them came a horde of workmen. I reverberated with hammering, my walls were hung with heavy, dust-catching cloths; massive, unsuitable furniture was crammed all over me, until I felt that I was myself no longer—that another house stood in my place. When all this was done, I rang with the sound of music, of laughter, of endless frivolities. There was no peace nor quiet self-communion left me any longer. All was hubbub and careless merriment.

Thus I lived for a decade. There were alternate periods of rest when the daughter and mother would leave on their tours and visits. At such times I felt almost happy again—and the old man, the husband and father, almost won his way into my heart by his loneliness and homelessness. In a way he represented something similar to myself, for at heart he craved a real home, and yet was continually forced to live in what was nothing but a thin imitation. But the friendship between us never grew, for he did not know how to begin to love me, and, before he learned, the daughter was married, and they moved away. Again I found myself alone.

Years and years of solitude—stretching out into an eternity of dreariness. An endless changing of faces and forms, some remaining with me for several years, others only a few months. Some of them were sweet children, one particularly—a little girl with soft, brown hair and gentle eyes, who sat in my garden on summer afternoons, reading fairy tales and naming the flowers after her many dream friends. She seemed to feel my presence in such moments, and the only happy experience in the desert of my years—and even that moment was the happiness of sorrow—was when they took her away. The others were calling her to follow them and she slipped out into the garden before leaving, and laid her head against the big door, kissing the broad panel which the weather had blistered and cracked.

"Good-bye, old house," she said very softly—a whisper.

per just for me—"I love you very much. You are so big, and quiet and peaceful."

There were other children, many of them, but they were thoughtless and treated me badly. My doors were slammed until I was sadly in need of new hinges, and my nice smooth paint was scratched and mutilated, and my fine hardwood floors, which had been the pride of my youth, were beyond recognition. Each year marked the decay of some part, until I reached the indignity of becoming a rented house.

My decrepitude brought only the poorer classes—people with no thoughtfulness or thrift. They believed in

jamble into their faces and smote them with a musty odor.

"Tell the coachman to bring us one of his lamps," I heard the woman say, and she waited silently in the darkness until the man returned with the light. It was then that my ruin and desolation became evident to them.

I saw her put her hands up to her face and cover her eyes as if some deep pain had suddenly taken possession of her. But he moved about with a firm tread and made the staring coachman bring some old, rotted palings from the fence, and start a feeble blaze in my old, cracked chimney. Soon the fire crackled and a bright



"DON'T YOU REMEMBER, WE CALLED IT 'HAVEN'?"

treating me with contempt, using each part of me as suited their purposes best, defacing me, ruining me.

An old hollyhock in the garden was my timekeeper. Despite all changes, each spring would see it struggle up through the rampant grass, lifting its stalks of pure white blossoms high; then gradually wilting and dying—thus did I know another year had been added to my age. Thirty-seven years had I counted in this way since they left me—thirty-seven years without the sound of their voices, without the look of their affectionate eyes.

At last the end was near at hand—I felt it in every part of me. My strong uprights would tremble now when the wind blew; I felt certain that I could not resist another long winter.

I had been alone for months—even the poorest would not consider me any longer, and oftentimes people would go by in the late night and shudder when they looked at me, saying that I was haunted; that ghosts lived within my walls. And they were right—ghosts did live within me—the ghosts and memories of that long procession which had marched through me with the passing years.

And then there came a calm, cold night. The wind had died down into the golden December mist, and the clouds hurried across the sky, only half obscuring the moon. It was a lonely night, and I felt a great passionate need for lights and fire within me. I whispered over and over to myself; I was to die alone, forgotten and unloved.

The night stillness was suddenly broken by the rumbling of a carriage that stopped before the garden gate. Two people came toward me, a man and a woman. I heard the man jangle some keys, and as he fumbled with the lock the woman held the lighted match until the door swung open and they entered. The chilling

warmth beamed into the room, making it a little less cheerless. I almost felt the glow of youth pass over my shivering body once more.

When the fire blazed he pushed the one rough chair in the hall forward into its glow, and led the woman to it. She sank into it, clasping her hands before her and letting her head droop forward ever so little till the firelight gleamed on her snow-white hair. Her eyes looked straight out before her into the blazing timbers. He stood with his hand resting affectionately upon her shoulder, a little back of her, where the light shone on his strong, rugged features, so lined and furrowed with the signs of age and disappointment.

An hour raced by and yet no word had broken the stillness. Finally, he spoke:

"We must be going now, dear. We shall return in the morning." She started and looked at him in surprise.

"Leave here? You surely cannot mean it. I shall never leave here again."

"But only for to-night. We can return to-morrow for good. It is not safe to stay here to-night."

Again her eyes rebuked him.

"No harm can come to us here. We are safer here than any place in the world. Don't you remember, we called it 'Haven'?" That means rest and safety. Tell the coachman to go back. We shall stay here forever now."

He left her alone—just she and I, and it was then that I knew her. A great tremor passed over me so that one of the loose stones in my chimney was shaken from its fastenings and fell down into the fire, making it blaze up suddenly into a gorgeous glow that rumbled far up my chimney. And in its noise my voice rose into a passionate cry. "Beloved! Beloved!"

Suddenly she leaned forward on her knees before the hearth and listened and heard me. When he returned, and threw down a great armful of holly on the hearth, she pulled him down beside her so that their arms were about each other and their faces close together.

"Listen, listen," she whispered, "it is the house talking to us. It has not forgotten. It is calling 'Beloved! Beloved!'"