**618 Pearl Street**

**as Remembered by Charles Minor Blackford, III**

It is difficult to say when my memories of the old house begin. For a marker, I will take the day my grandfather died. My mother and I had come suddenly from Washington and my memory begins with us sitting in the rear corner room known as the study. There were other persons in there. I remember them as strangers -- all silent, all motionless. Things were not as they had been previously; there was no grandmother there to welcome me and gather me into her arms. Old George had met us at the station in the surry, but he and mother talked in low tones and he paid me little mind. Everything was disturbingly strange. I sat on a bentwood chair looking up at the owl atop the bookcase, which was filled with leatherbound volumes of law books, and waited with the passiveness of a small child for what would happen next.

Someone came into the room and spoke to mother. We got up, went upstairs into grandpa's bedroom with its massive iron bed and canopy of mosquito netting, which was hooked back out of the way. I was surprised to see grandfather in it, partly supported by pillows. Someone raised me up and I scrambled delightedly into his arms. He gave me a hug and said something; then I was plucked away and hurried out of the room. I understand he died minutes later.

**DOWNSTAIRS ROOMS**

The house, on my summer visits to it, slowly grew into my consciousness. We will enter into the wide hallway with the hatrack on the right and, on the left, behind the door, were stacked in the corner the firearms of the household -- from .22 caliber, single-shot rifles to large, double-barrelled shotguns. From about seven, there was no restriction on my buying ammunition for the .22s and shooting at birds or a target drawn on the side of the stable. It was considered as normal for boys to shoot guns as to shoot marbles.

The floor of the hall was covered with padded straw matting from wall to wall, and in the other rooms also. About halfway up the hall, there was some kind of framework across the ceiling with a curtain of wooden spools strung on cords. I suppose it was a sort of Moorish motif that must have been popular when the house was "modernized". The matting might have been part of it.

One found oneself between two doors. The one on the right led into Sam Wither's bedroom. He was the widower husband of Nannie Blackford, my father's sister, who died before I was born. Mr. Withers shot himself in that room when he discovered he had cancer. The door on the left led into what was called the music room, although the walls between it and the living room behind it had been removed, leaving only the back-to-back fireplaces between the two parts. The only story I remember about this room is in connection with the Civil War. A young woman, a refugee from the fighting, was staying at the house and one day was playing the piano when a wounded soldier came in through the open front door and seated himself in a chair in the corner of the room unperceived. When the woman finished playing and turned to leave, she saw him there. He had died while she was playing. The tradition was that if one played a certain piece on the piano, one could see him sitting there.

That room, and its continuation, were lined with tall bookcases rising so high that one needed a stepladder to reach the upper shelf. Directly across from the entrance door were French windows leading out to the side porch, which was built in 1876 as a surprise for grandmother while they were at the Centennial at Philadelphia.

Grandmother used to receive her visitors in that room. It meant that if I were anywhere near, I had to be present also -- seen but not heard. The chair would get awfully hard and I would get mighty miserable. I only remember part of one conversation. A couple of women, a generation younger than grandmother, were talking about the drinking habits of some man and deploring them. Grandmother listened silently for awhile, then burst out, "Poppycock! None on you know what real drinking is:" She pointed to one of the women, "Your father, now, I never saw him leave a hall or a party on his own two feet. What do you think they had footmen for? They were to carry their master to his coach and to put him to bed when they got home." She turned to the other, "And your grandfather! The way he behaved after a few drinks kept your grandmother's face red for the rest of the evening. Why do you think we had to have chaperones? It was to get us home after our escorts had slid under the table dead drunk. You talk about drinking! Poppycock!" It was the only interesting thing I remember hearing.

Grandmother, as I remember her, was a thin, frail thing -- always dressed in black from her shoes to the white lace about her neck, no matter what the weather. They say she was pretty husky in her prime and a holy terror to both the social world and her servants. In fact, the servants claimed that she remained in the house after her death and kept watch on them. One woman fell down the stairs and broke her arm, then sued my uncle, saying that Mis' Sue had pushed her, causing her to fall.

I do not remember whether she had any Scots blood or not, but she ran a tight house. After my uncle's death, I discovered in the cellar account books from the time she was married until she was old, accounting for every cent she spent, down to the 1/2 cent in the 1850's, and another set of accounts listing everything she issued from the storeroom down to the last ounce and balancing the quantity she bought with the quantity she served out. But mother said that in later years she would carefully measure everything out at eight o'clock; then, if the cook needed something, she would just hand her the key to the storeroom and let her help herself. Grandmother carried the keys to the house on a ring clipped to her outside belt.

Returning to the hallway ... before one reached the next pair of doors one reached the telephones, two systems in the earlier years, the Keystone and the Bell. The bells had the same pitch, so one had to get close and listen for the next ring to discover which phone was ringing. In the early days, few bothered with numbers; one just asked for "Mr. Sawtell's house on Washington St." or some other address. One did a lot of thinking before calling anyone, as one had to pay five cents for each call.

Beyond the phones was the second pair of doors and the foot of the staircase. The living room was to the left and the dining room to the right. Bookcases lined the walls of the living room also. I remember someone telling me that there were 5,000 books in the house, many of them uniformly bound volumes of even then forgotten writers. Scattered amoung them were a number of truly valuable books, most of which were eventually stolen.

In this room my grandmother spent most of her time, sitting in a rocking chair beside a square table, below the one electric light in the room. In each room, there was but one light. The wiring throughout the house ran naked across the ceilings to the center of each room and from there a cord dropped down until the light was within reaching distance s~ the light could be turned on and off. There she sat most of the time -- reading or knitting -- and, for all I know, she still sits there.

Grandmother's thrifty mind would not let the empty rooms upstairs go unused; so she had boarders. There was, of course, Sam Withers, her son-in-law, a Mrs. Jones who was one of the first women in town to enter business, and a mousy, quiet couple. The man was a pharmacist in the drug store. I do not remember seeing either one of them except at meals. Except for breakfast, all meals were formal. At fifteen minutes before the meal George, the butler-gardner-coachman-houseboy, would pull the chain on a gong by the dining room door, sending its sound throughout the house. It was a signal for everyone to assemble in the living room where they would wait, generally silently, until the gong struck again. Everyone paired off and grandmother and I, with her hand on my arm, would lead the procession across the hall into the dining room. I would pullout grandmother's chair (but George would push it in), then go to my chair and sit, as did the rest, with my hands folded in my lap until grandmother said a short Grace.

Lunch was the main meal of the day. It began with soup and was followed by the choice of two meats and whatever vegetables were in season. Being on a "seen but not heard" status, I finished before the others but had to sit there, hands in lap, until grandmother gave the signal that the meal was over. Old George would pull her chair out for her. We would all follow her into the hallway, then disperse -- the women to their rooms and the men back downtown to their work. Dinner was about the same, but without the soup.

The dining room was large. Grandfather had extended it all the way to the sidewalk of Harrison Street, and the dinners he gave in it were famous. The menu of one was printed in a Lynchburg paper a few years ago. It was as follows:

* First course: appitizers, Yarmouth bloaters on toast, anchovies and crackers, claret.
* Second course: raw oysters on the half shell, Saddle Rocks, lemon Sautine.
* Third course: fresh salmon, St. Croix River, creamed potatoes, capers, Maderia.
* Fourth course: terrapin stew, salted almonds, sherry.
* Fifth course: quail barbecued, dressed with nuts, Saratoga chips, Burgandy.
* Sixth course: roast turkey, dressed with truffles and oysters, cranberry sauce, celery, canvasbacked ducks, currant jelly, asparagas, olives, champagne.
* Seventh course: sweetbread coquettes and green peas, cole slaw, pickles, fried oysters, salads, lobster, chicken, waters, champagne.
* Eighth course: fruit, oranges, grapes, bananas, ect., champagne.
* Ninth course: coffee, cheese roguefort, cheddar and edam, kavisbader, oblaten, vanilla crackers, toasted almonds, olives, Apollinaris and brandy, cigars, Marischino cordial.

The spelling is as given on the menu.

The dining room dined many famous guests and a number with international fame in years to come. I heard that the Emperor of Brazil dined there on his visit to Lynchburg and many prominent politicians of that day. Lady Astor, when she was just Cousin Nancy Langhorne, was a frequent visitor. It seems that Claude Swanson's political career began at that table. He was grandfather's law partner at that time and very much in love with another of the guests at the dinner. A seat in Congress had become vacant, whether the Senate or the House I do not remember, and the speculation was about who would run for it. My grandfather suggested that Claude try for it, but he refused until the woman he wished to marry leaned forward and said, "Claude, if you run and win I will marry you." He ran, he won, and married the girl.

Crossing the hall again and going through a doorway in the rear wall of the living room, we come into the study. It contained a roll-top desk, a leather couch, more books and some chairs and, of course, the cast iron owl. Its rear window had a view down the valley and the side of the next hill. If one stuck one's head partly out of the window, one had a glimpse of the James River. The view always reminded me of a song the cook used to sing. I can remember only the first two lines:

"The white folk live on the top of the hill, The black folk down in the vallee ... "

Speaking of the James River, grandmother was an ardent Virginian. She made me memorize the names of all the counties and a poem that ended something like this: "And when I die just let me lie Close where the James goes rolling by Down in Virginia."

I used to make her very angry by saying, "Close where the muddy James goes rolling by." I used to spend long times looking out of that window. In the still, hot summer air sound carried clearly for some distance. It would amuse me to watch a man chopping wood on the opposite hill and hear the axe go "chop" as he held it above his head for the next blow. I would listen to the cocks in the barnyards and enclosures relay messages around the valley. I got to recognize the slurring call when a hawk was sighted, then watch our roosters herd the hens close to shelter until the "all clear" came drifting in.

Between the study and the hall was a bathroom, used by Sam Withers and Uncle Colston. It had a tin tub with wooden sides. One door led into the study, another into the hallway. There, under the stairs, was a closet in which was kept a chest containing thousands of Confederate dollars that was in there from the end of the Civil War to 1931 when it was auctioned off.

The door across the hall led into the pantry, which was almost as large as the dining room, but the back third was the storeroom in which, when I was very young, were barrels of flour and corn meal, bags of rice, salt and beans, etc. Behind that, connected by an outside porch, was the kitchen, also of ample proportions.

Grandmother never had any trouble keeping cooks. The kitchen window was right beside the sidewalk on Harrison Street and about shoulder high from it. The kitchen table was there and when Martha was working at it she could converse with everyone going to or coming from the valley. She knew more about what was going on about town than anyone else. I used to slip in sometimes and listen, she completely forgetting I was there. One story I remember was about a black girl who set herself up as being very dainty, and in company would just peck at her food. The evening before I heard this, she had been to a wedding supper and the lights had suddenly gone out. When they came back on, they exposed her with half a chicken in her two hands, gnawing on it as fast as she could.

**UPSTAIRS ROOMS**

Upstairs, starting from the rear end and the left side, one came to the second floor bathroom and grandmother's dressing room. It was the same size as the pantry below and held most of the antiques left in the house, thriftily kept by grandmother for her own use when the house was done over in early Victorian.

The bathroom has its story. It, too, had its tin bathtub with wooden sides, and above it a gas hot water heater, no longer used as I was growing up, as they had added a hot water system. My father told me that the house was one of the first to have indoor plumbing. When it was installed, Nanny gave a bathtub party. She invited her feminine friends to the house and they took turns taking a bath in the bathtub.

The Master bedroom was as large as the dining room below it and, like it, had one window at the far end. The large ironwork bed had a canopy of mosquito netting, as did all the beds in the house.

Flies and mosquitoes beset us at all times. The mosquitoes came from the rain barrels set under the drain spouts in the back to catch soft water for washing hair and other things, the horse trough and other containers. The flies were the unwelcome visitors at all meals. The doors and windows were unscreened, horse-drawn vehicles for many years of my childhood were the only vehicles used in town because of the hills. The flies collected in the dining room by the thousands, making a constant hum. The flypaper, spread on tables and sideboards between meals, made little impression on their numbers. All dishes were kept covered, except in the actual process of serving. Grandmother had two fanlike affairs on the dining room table run by clockwork which were supposed to shoo away the flies while eating, but they did a poor job of it .

When I was small, I slept on a cot against the wall in about the middle of the room. I remember one night being awakened by the churchbells of the town announcing the death of Senator Daniels. Grandmother got up and, in her nightgown, went to the windowsill and knelt there praying.

Next forward was Colston's room and, across the hall from it, was the principal guest room. It was haunted by a girl of, seemingly, about twenty who would come in through the door and cross to the dresser between the two windows on the far wall, fuss with her hair a bit and fade away. Those who could see her said she was dressed for a party and, although she would stand before the dresser mirror for nearly a minute, one could not see a reflection of her face. I never saw her, but I felt her pass twice, as such things get their energy by absorbing all the heat in their vicinity, leaving a cold breath of air where they have passed. Behind that room were two rooms used by the boarders which I never entered, and a small back room over the study which I used when older.

The hall was lined with bookcases and trunks. Most of the shelves in the bookcases held old magazines and such things that are placed on shelves and forgotten. The front of the hall had two doors that opened onto the front porch roof and these doors were kept open most of the summer. Just inside was the sewing machine and sewing table and the womenfolk would gather there to sew and to talk. On hot days, they hitched their dresses over their knees to take advantage of the draft through the breezeway, to be lowered when they heard someone coming up the stairs.

There was one strange thing: each summer when I came to visit, the house always seemed a little smaller. Things long above my reach became reachable; the yard, with its arbor, greenhouse, stable and stableyard, shrunken. Then I realized I was growing larger, not the house smaller.

When I was fifteen, I made my last annual visit to grandmother. When it was time to go, we both seemed to sense that it was the last parting. We both wept as I gave her a last hug and kiss. Tears were still in my eyes when I joined old George on the front seat of the surry.

Old George talked, as if he realized it was the last time we would be together. He told me that he was born a slave on some distant plantation and, when Hunter came through, burning and looting and destroying all food supplies, he and the other slaves had to follow the army to keep from starving. He was taken into the employ of an Army Officer as a servant and learned enough to be hired as a houseboy when the war was over. At the station he stayed with me until the train left, giving me the first and final handshake as I started to board.

That winter grandmother died, and all my close ties with the house were broken.

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