
THE HOUSE

by Janet Lewis

THE HOUSE and barn were painted yellow with white trim. The house was large, three stories high, with a many-gabled roof. On each ridge-pole stood a white wood fence in arabesques. A large covered porch ran from the front of the house half-way around the south side, a white portecochère opened on the north to the gravelled drive, and there were various small balconies and bay windows which enlarged the simple shape of the building. The barn was big enough for a carriage room, stalls, a manger and an apartment for the gardener and his family. The barn and the house were surrounded by low bushes, snowball, syringa, yellow spicebush. At the end of the smooth lawn was a small maple grove. Near the barn were the rose garden and the strawberry beds. To the north of the house two or three clumps of purple lilac had made themselves into a small forest. The trees about the house were elm, box-elder, pine. When the house was first built, the lawn smoothed, the rose-garden planted, the two empty blocks across the street had been corn-fields, and the blocks to the north nothing but prairie, where violets and wild strawberries grew in the long grass.

Little by little, as the suburb became popular, the vacant lots filled with homes, and the Wilkey estate was left rather like some old English hunting-ground in the middle of a city. The children in the neighborhood thought of it so. It provided vistas, ambushes

and retreats. No one ever told them not to climb in the maple trees, or chased them off the roof of the barn. At the end of the block was a pasture where the old cow grazed. It was surrounded by a board fence, and a cluster of mulberry trees grew near the fence. The trees were too frail to climb, and Frances Donalson and the red-headed Niles boy used to sit on top of the fence, picking berries from the lacy boughs, and watching the cow wade through deep clover stems. Frances Donalson's grandmother lived in the yellow house. Her father was Jesse Donalson, a gentle-faced young man with graying hair and skin. He taught chemistry in the high school, and a slight acid odor from the laboratory clung always to his clothing. Her mother was Mary Wilkey. Her Aunt Roberta and her Aunt Kate lived in the big house with her grandmother along with her Uncle Archibald and her cousins and second cousins, the children and grandchildren of Aunt Kate and Uncle Archie. The second cousins were near her own age, slightly older, however, and more advanced in their amusements. They didn't think much of sliding down the barn roof. The first cousins were old enough to be her aunts. There were five of them. Three of them were married, and had homes of their own, but since they were always dropping in for supper, for lunch, and to use the sewing machine, to visit Grandma, to visit each other, to plan parties and expeditions, they might as well

have lived there as far as it concerned the imagination of the little cousin or the labors of Annie.

Annie lived on the top floor. The top floor was attic except for Annie's room, which was plastered and ceiled. Frances sometimes went upstairs to visit her, shutting the stairway door behind her carefully, and climbing the steep dark way toward the dusty sunlight. The attic smelled of warm wood, mice, and old boxes. It was like a front yard to Annie's room, which smelled of soap and prayer books.

In her Aunt Roberta's room, which was on the first floor, were a porcelain mandarin who nodded his head, a rose jar smelling of cinnamon, and a snowstorm in a globe. When you held the glass ball still in your hand the snow settled gently upon the roof of the tiny mill and on the small green bushes. When you shook it, the snow rose again into the air and it stormed. Under the bed were many boxes full of carefully tied packages. A few of these were letters, but most of them were old theatre programs, church programs, rolls of wrapping paper, brown paper bags, smoothed and folded carefully. There were a great many of the little gay paper fans, advertising summer drinks, which the drugstores give away in hot weather. Aunt Roberta saved things without knowing why she was saving them. No one was allowed to touch them. When she went out walking she carried her pocketbook, an extra wrap, and a brown paper parcel. Sometimes she had forgotten what was in the parcel, but she carried it because she would not have felt properly equipped without it. Once she had suffered from a disease of the skin, and her legs had been heavily bandaged. Over the bandages she wore a pair of white stockings, and over the white stockings a dark pair. After her skin was healed she was persuaded to give up the bandages, but she never gave up the white stockings. Frances was very fond of her Aunt Roberta. They went walking together, and Roberta bought

paper dolls, whole regiments by the sheet, and sticks of sweet paraffin gum, done up in colored wrappers with fringed ends. Sitting on the hassock by her Aunt Roberta's armchair, Frances cut out the regiments and arranged them in military fashion on the floor, and her aunt leaned over her, watching in admiration.

Roberta was the oldest of Mrs. Wilkey's daughters. Her hair, once brown, had turned an even iron gray and became wiry and crisp. It looked frowzy, no matter how often it was combed. Her skin was brown, and her eyes short-sighted. She refused to wear glasses, and scowled, even when she smiled. One day Mary, entering by the front door, had found Frances and Roberta in the hall, weeping and clinging to each other. As far as she could find out from their answers, Kate had scolded Roberta for making Frances cry, Roberta had cried, and Frances had wept for Roberta. They were joined together against Kate, the old child and the young child comforting each other.

James Wilkey left no large oil portrait of himself to gaze down upon his grandchildren from the parlor wall. There were a few daguerreotypes in velvet cases in Mrs. Wilkey's top bureau drawer, but the house itself was a more accurate portrait. The height of the doors, the largeness and uprightness of the furniture, the spaciousness of the rooms, seemed to indicate an erect, gray-coated figure moving among them. Mrs. Wilkey's plump short person passing with rapid step from dining room to living room, from living room to hall, oversaw these rooms for someone else. As she grew older she went about the house less and sat more in her large sunny bedroom on the second floor. Kate also kept to her own room a great deal, being a semi-invalid, a heavy, white-haired woman, lying in bed with a faded pink bed-jacket about her shoulders. Kate's children filled the house.

They were a gay lot. They never had enough money to dress as they would have

liked to, but what money they had they spent on clothes, and they were endlessly revising old clothes to be a little more smart, a little more fresh. They left their scissors and tape-measures on the parlor chairs, along with scraps of ribbons, basting threads and faded bunches of cloth flowers. They made their own hats, beginning sometimes fifteen minutes before the hour when they wanted to wear them. They had many beaux, but when beaux were short they commandeered their father, calling him Archie, and tweaking his necktie. They would take off his gray felt hat and put it back on his head at a rakish angle, and kiss him behind the ears. They liked classy shows, but liked cheap shows better than no shows at all, and on a sultry summer afternoon they would take Archie by the arm and march him off to Forest Park, to the roller-coasters and scenic railways. They would ride out in an open car, watching the dust and the torn papers fly up from the street at the rush of the wheels, and after the fun in the Park was over they would cross the street to a cheap German restaurant, and have beer and cheese sandwiches with rye bread.

Archibald Martin had a way of getting jobs easily, but he had a way of losing them, too. When he was working he contributed his share to the expenses of the house, and when he was out of work, he didn't. When he was out of work he spent most of his time at home, which pleased the girls and made things merrier. They said, "After all, Gran's rich". He made a few investments. Some of them were successful, but several times he was obliged to apply to his mother-in-law for help when luck had been against him. Then he had a famous chance to make good money and pay back all he owed, if Gran would only lend him a little capital to start things off.

The old lady objected. Martin sat with hurt, surprised eyes, his fingers fidgeting with the ends of his sandy beard. He said, "You have always been so generous. I thought I

could surely count on you, and it's all for your good. In fact it's mainly for the sake of paying back what I owe you. I don't like to owe you money".

Mrs. Wilkey said dryly, "I don't object to your owing me money, Archibald, or to giving it to you, either. In a way, all that I have given you has been yours, or would have been yours sooner or later. It's simply that, if this goes on, there will presently be nothing at all to give you. I don't know that it's exactly fair to your daughters, either. You are spending their inheritance".

"But Gran," he said, "I am going to restore their inheritance."

Mrs. Wilkey deliberately clipped the end of a thread from a sock she was mending. "Very well," she said at length. "If the girls consent to your investing this money, I will let you have it, but I want it plainly understood that you are, all of you, receiving your share of the inheritance now."

She began to hunt for a fresh needle in the red cotton tomato, and as she said nothing more, and did not look up from her search, Martin rose and went awkwardly and silently out of the room.

The girls were delighted at the prospect of rehabilitating the family fortunes, and Gran drew the check that Archibald required.

He bought a bunch of sweet peas for Gran on his way home from the city that night, and Gran was pleased with them. He bought them at the second-hand flower stand on the lower bridge of the elevated station and they withered quickly, but that did not matter.

When Sue, Kate's oldest daughter, divorced her husband, there had been nothing else to do but come home to the yellow house, bringing the two children, Leo and Sophia. Sue got herself a job in a firm of interior decorators, and paid her share of the expenses of the house. Gran gave her the barn for an office and workshop, and she set up business for herself, moving her work-tables into the carriage room, and wheeling the

antique surrey and barouche into the corner. It was too late to sell them. Nobody wanted a barouche. Nobody wanted a low green cutter with pictures painted on its sides. Will, the divorced husband, came regularly to see her, preferring to bring the monthly check in person. "Alimony night," Sue would call, running upstairs. "I must get into my chauncy ear-rings." Will had been divorced for drinking, and he lived in hopes of conquering himself and being reinstated in his family, but Sue liked him better as a lover than as a husband. He was a slender dark-eyed man with a silky black moustache. He drew marvellous pictures for the children, and always had a pocketful of finely pointed pencils.

"Come now," Mary heard Sophia saying to Frances. "My father's here, and your father's coming over, and you're going to stay for supper. Come and tell Annie and hear her say with the help of God and a couple of policemen." Mary stood in the hall, holding the telephone, waiting for her husband to answer. Presently she heard the children in the kitchen.

"Can you get supper for four extra tonight?" said Sophia, and Annie answered, "With the help of God and a couple of policemen I can. Get out of here now, the two of you".

The children tiptoed past her, very pleased, and went into the parlor to beg for pictures.

It was the middle of February, a week before Gran's eightieth birthday. The house was sheeted in a sticky, sleety rain, and the afternoon was dark. In Sue's room, Sophia, Frances and Roberta were making paper roses by gaslight. Sue looked in occasionally to see how things were going. Marianne Martin came in once or twice but did not stay. She was spending the afternoon with Mrs. Wilkey to keep the old lady busy.

Frances and Sophia were curling the edges of petals on a hatpin. They stretched the centers a little with their thumbs, making them hollowed and flowerlike, and dropped

them into a box. Sometimes Frances shook the box and raked the pink shells about lightly with the tips of her fingers, thinking of her Aunt Roberta's rose jar. She liked the paper petals as well as the real ones. By and by Cousin Sue and Cousin Marianne would build them up into flowers, fastening them to a stem, binding the stem with green and attaching green leaves. There were already big boxes of flowers in the closet and under the bed. Her Aunt Roberta was cutting out petals from a pattern, breathing heavily as she worked, and stopping often to watch the little girls. The house was full of conspiracy. When it came time for Frances to go home to supper, Cousin Sue brushed her off with a whisk broom.

"It would never do to have you running in to kiss Gran all covered with pink scraps. She'd smell a mouse. Yes, ma'am, smell a mouse and see it brewing in the air."

When the birthday came, a long table made of boards and saw-horses was set up in the big rep-curtained dining-room and decorated with pink and green. The room was festooned with roses and lighted with candles, and there were pink and green baskets full of nuts at every one's place. There was a big white mint candy, the size of a cooky, for everyone, too, marked in pink sugar with "Eighty". The birthday cake was in the kitchen, waiting to be lighted, but Frances and Sophia had seen it before Annie chased them out. It had eighty little pink candles around it in a ring.

The children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and the sons- and grandsons-in-law gathered in Mrs. Wilkey's room, upstairs, and descended to the dining-room in a grand march. Mrs. Wilkey headed the procession on the arm of Archibald Martin, and Frances and Roberta brought up the rear, quivering with excitement. Annie stood at the door in a fresh white apron to usher them in.

There were eighteen of them at the table. They jostled each other and talked all at

once, resembling each other, if taken in the proper order, like the progressive chords in a harmony which lead from one key to another.

Annie brought in the cake with its circle of little flames, and Marianne pounded on the table and cried, "Speech, Grandma, speech". Mrs. Wilkey stood up, the candles making funny upward shadows on her face, and everyone cheered. Sue said, "Don't cry, Gran". Mrs. Wilkey looked down the long table. The tears shone on her cheeks; she made her speech, and cut the cake. Frances did not eat her white candy with the pink letters, but saved it to look at.

One morning in the autumn after Gran's eightieth birthday, Mary sat with her mother in the upstairs room. The elms were turning brown. The trolley cars in Lake Street, a block away, sounded muffled and far, as if the haze in the air had enveloped sound as well as form. Both women were sewing. Mrs. Wilkey seemed to put off what she had to say as long as she could. When she had folded her work and laid it aside, she made her announcement in a voice from which old age had gradually withdrawn the timbre.

"I've sold the house, Mary."

"Oh, Mother!"

"I have not told your sister Kate. The agreement allows me the use of it as long as I shall live, and the money is to be paid to the estate after my death. The Martin tribe will have to shift for itself. I am very sorry, but it had to be done." She looked about the room with affection and some regret, and said humorously, "I don't intend to die for some time. . . ."

"For Roberta I have set aside twenty thousand. I should like to leave you as much. If, after Roberta's twenty thousand and twenty for you, there is anything left, it goes to the Martins. That's all in my will. But I will not saddle you with Roberta. You will be her guardian, but she will not have to live with you. She will be happier if she doesn't, and it will be more fair to you and Jesse."

Mary moved her lips to form a protest, but did not speak it.

"The Martins have already had their share. I have been very weak with 'em. I love them too much, but while my head's clear I'm arranging not to be weak with 'em after my death."

She finished up the conversation in much the same manner in which she finished and folded up her work, and Mary was not invited to discuss the subject with her.

Early that winter Mrs. Wilkey died. Kate and Mary were alone in the house with her. Kate was dazed and made stupid by the event. She sat in an armchair in her mother's room, staring at the floor or the foot of the bed, her face dull with unrealized sorrow. Mary had to meet the girls and Roberta and tell them of the death of someone who, in that moment it seemed to her, belonged almost more to them than to herself.

On the morning of the funeral she stood at the house door, leaning her head against the cold wood of the jamb. Flowers, tied with a purple ribbon, hung there above the bell, close to her face. They had a coolness which seemed apart from the coolness of the morning, either less or more cool, Mary could not think. It was snowing a little from a cloudy sky, the flakes falling upon the crust of snow already fallen, and masking the brown of the sidewalk that had been cleaned. A few flakes rose now and then from the ground, joining the hesitant turmoil in the air, and falling again. Mrs. Wilkey lay in the parlor, surrounded by flowers. Sue and Marianne had filled the coffin with pink roses. Now that she lay still, the small hands, the large head and strong throat, all the compact old body assumed a great dignity. Roberta had spent the morning near her, refusing to leave the room. When the guests began to arrive, Mary went into the parlor and put her arm about Roberta, who wept again at the touch of affection. Then they went upstairs hand in hand, exiled from the dead.

When the will was read, some days later, and the estate gone over, there was found to be the twenty thousand for Roberta and eighteen thousand for Mary. The expenses of the funeral had to be charged to the estate, as well as all the flowers the Martins had ordered, for they themselves had no money.

They said to Jesse Donalson, "We wanted Gran to have a real funeral, and we thought that part of the estate, at last, was ours".

Mary had not been present at the reading of the will. The doctor had ordered her to stay in bed and rest for a month. Marianne came to see her, sitting in a chair at the foot of the bed, looking across the stretch of white counterpane at Mary's wan face. Marianne was very pretty and the emotion of the ten days had made her features more mobile and alive. She drew the fingers of her glove slowly through her closed hand, hesitating. "Aunt Mary," she said, "I'm sorry you're sick, but I came to talk about the will. It doesn't seem to be the way Gran meant it to be, and we feel—all of us—that Gran would be disappointed that we weren't remembered. Bitterly disappointed. Gran said that she meant each of us to have two thousand dol-

lars—that is, outside of what father and mother were to have." She stopped. Her lip quivered a little. "I don't really mind for myself so much. I don't need it—much—but it is hard on Eleanor and Katrina. Sue has her business, and Debby has Tim, who is well enough off."

She stopped again, and Mary looked at the ceiling which seemed sallow and grimy. Her body felt cold under the warmth of the blanket. She said, "I guess Jesse and I can spare you something—something for you and Eleanor and Katrina, your two thousand each, if Gran wanted that".

Marianne stood up, looking curiously regretful. She said, "Well, goodby, Aunt Mary. You always were a dear". She went toward the door. As she went out she turned and blew a kiss from the palm of her hand.

Mary did not see her again. Marianne and her husband went west to live. Eleanor went to New York, to go on the stage, if she could. Katrina went with her. Mary never heard if they managed it or not. Even Sue moved to New York finally, and none of them wrote to Mary. They were none of them any good at letters.

THE HISTORY OF THEIR BOOKS

XIII. GERTRUDE ATHERTON

by Arthur Bartlett Maurice

WHEN, many years ago, the term literary anarchy was first applied to the work of Gertrude Atherton, it was not so much intentional disparagement as it was the critics' way of expressing their puzzled surprise at her rebellious departure from the conventional and expected fields and methods of writing. For from the days of *Patience Sparhawk and Her Times* she has always been a pioneer; always a little ahead of her time. That is illustrated by a particular cult of the present hour. The little army of practitioners of the craft of the romantic biography, which has already winnowed history, might with justice echo the traditional boast associated with the aristocracy of England: "We date from the Conqueror". For Mrs. Atherton's *The Conqueror*, the life story of Alexander Hamilton, written almost thirty years ago, was the first conspicuous modern example of a biography in the form of a novel.

The Conqueror was suggested by a line in Bryce's *American Commonwealth*, which Mrs. Atherton was reading as a background for *Senator North*. Bryce expressed his astonishment that the most delightful and gifted of American statesmen should have been so neglected. The line fired Mrs. Atherton. She was in Bruges at the time. She took the next available ship for the United States. The question of how she should treat the subject long puzzled her. Since she was not a poet she could not write an epic, and the novel at

that time was more or less a pivotal thing. Then it suddenly occurred to her to write a fictionized, or dramatized, biography; in other words to keep strictly to facts, but to light them up with the methods of fiction. Her first idea was to call the book "Alexander Hamilton", but her publisher objected; so she sent him a list of half a dozen titles and from them he chose *The Conqueror*.

In preparation for the writing a vast amount of reading and research was required. She was helped by the Hamilton Association, by Hamilton enthusiasts, and by the Hamilton family. The family placed at her disposal documents that had hitherto been inaccessible. Having absorbed this data, she went to the Danish West Indies, first to Nevis, to endeavor to clear away the mystery of Hamilton's birth, then to St. Croix, where Hamilton spent his youth and then to St. Vincent and St. Christopher (St. Kitts).

The new form that Mrs. Atherton invented for *The Conqueror* has ever since been closest to her heart. She is never keenly interested in any of her books except the historical or semi-historical, for she finds a stronger appeal in the past and more exercise for the imagination. Also it is a tremendous release from the present, which she has never found greatly interesting. So after *The Conqueror* she read all sorts of histories and biographies but was attracted by no other character until she remembered Rezanov. Although it belonged in the atmosphere of "the