

THE BELOVED HOUSE

By Doris E. Abramson

"Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past."

T.S.Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

Each spring I make a pilgrimage. I go from Amherst to Hadley center, turn right, and walk about two miles. Set back on the left-hand side of the road is a large old house, connected to a smaller one (once the chaise house) by a series of sheds. Behind the house are broad fields and beyond them, the Connecticut River. The old house stands just as it did in 1799, surrounded by elm trees, gnarled lilac bushes and sweet-smelling lawns. This is Forty Acres, the Bishop Huntington house, now owned by Dr. James Huntington, the bishop's grandson.

But Forty Acres belongs to many people. It belongs to all those who loved it in the past, all those who love it now, and even those, yet unborn, for whom we wish to leave some part of beauty. This old house, its furniture, its grounds, are a symbol of the past which nudges the present, telling it to be mindful of what a great and beautiful thing man's spirit can be. The men and women who lived here have left tangible and intangible proof of their strength. They have left books, chests, mirrors, canopied beds, swords, tables, land--and they have left their spirits. It is a haunted house.

Stories have been told, books have been written about this house. My title is taken from a poem of the same name by Catharine Huntington. But I am writing not as a Huntington, not as a member of a family which can claim this house as home, but as a stranger who, nevertheless, made of it a home. For two summers I lived here. If to love is to own, in a special way, I own a large share of Forty Acres.

I came here in the summer of 1945 to be a very privileged sort of gardener. During the day I weeded the flower beds, mowed the lawns, clipped hedges -- but at night I slept in a canopied bed. And at night I listened to the grandfather clock downstairs as it warned me how many hours 'til midnight, when I must try to be asleep or suffer the consequences. If you laugh when I speak of ghosts, you have never lived in an old, old house. You have never counted the strokes of an old, old clock as you lay in a high bed, the canopy of which cast long shadows on the moonlit ceiling. I soon discovered that even an adopted member of a household, even a gardener, can be visited by spirits.

In the middle of one restless night, I heard heard footsteps running lightly down the stairs. I felt a presence in my room; someone was there who belonged there more than I. I heard him in the hallway and wondered which one of the family he was. From which portrait had he stepped down? And why had he come this night? It was a he as surely as it was a she I had startled one night in the dining room. That night I had heard the rustle of her skirts as she left the room. I had come in from the Long Room, calling out, "Who's there?" Only my own image greeted me in the mirror, but another had been there a few minutes before. I heard her leave.

It is not surprising to me that there are ghosts at Forty Acres. There is a room called "The Prophet's Chamber", which dates from 1752 and is unchanged since then. The bed I slept in dates from about 1750. One room is called Aunt Arriah's room, another is Aunt Molly's. Both of these ladies died several decades ago. But their spirits are kept alive by reference, by the homage we pay them when we say: "I am going to close the windows in Aunt Arriah's room before the storm comes." "Let a little air into Aunt Molly's room now that spring is here."

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Forty Acres is that it is always

alive. It is a mistake to think that a house haunted by the people who lived in it is a dead house. Not at all. It is alive, because it breathes through so many generations. I used to sit and write or read in the office of Squire Phelps, a tiny room with a tiny desk, one window, and many bookshelves full of books. Sitting in the twentieth century with my twentieth century thoughts, I could borrow from the wisdom recorded in these books. At my right hand, Shakespeare in many volumes. In front of me, geography books published in 1800; a novel called Margaret Graham or The Reverses of Fortune published in 1847; Franklin's letters and history books long out of date. On other shelves are many sermons written by Bishop Huntington and the men he studied and admired. These are not dead books. In the twentieth century I am confronted with the same questions about the spirit of man, which puzzled these authors. Science has not given me so many answers that I can disregard their attempts to clarify the confusion that confronts us all while we are living.

In a book, New Helps to a Holy Lent, published in 1898, Bishop Huntington wrote: "Miseducation, corrupting of misleading examples, the circumstances of early youth unknown to you, domestic irritation or neglect, positive instruction taking the child's mind on its weakest side, may have secretly prepared the way for that immorality which now defaces a fair name or distresses a household. One person has been continually baffled and goaded by disappointment; one has been soured by an uncongenial home; one has never known the sunshine of a cheering, encouraging accent or look; one has been imitative, and has seen none but base or ridiculous patterns. How suddenly and completely many of our most unhesitating and unqualified condemnations would be silenced, if the whole early history of the wretched subject of them could be laid open to us!" The bishop calls out for charity, for human understanding. The twentieth century answers him with psychology and its attempts to lay bare

"the early history of the wretched subject".

I shake hands with the bishop as I read his book. He, the book, I--
we are all alive. We have all met at Forty Acres. When I used to shut
each door, turn out all the lights, and climb the stairs at night, I was
aware of being a part of a very important household, one which is preserved
as a reminder that our time is a part of all time.