

# The Old Bullock Mansion and Its Successor, the Commonwealth Club

BY ALICE M. TYLER.



COLONEL GEORGE S. PALMER.

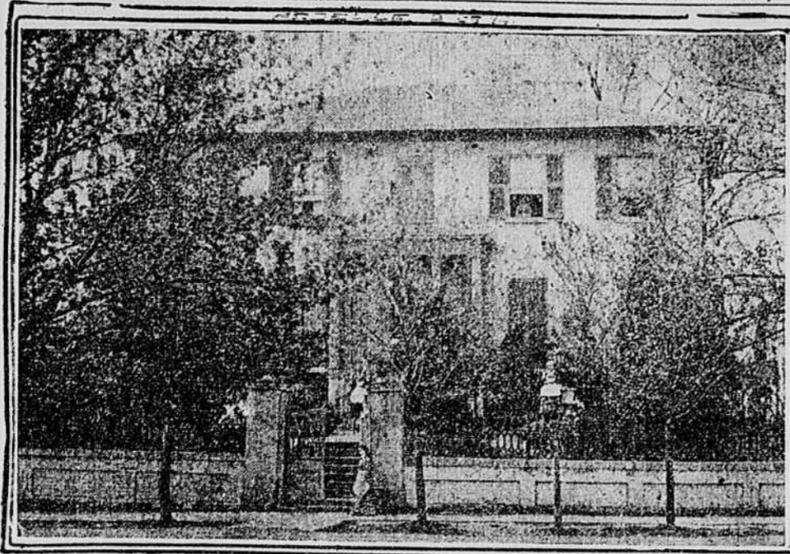
Some years ago, on a lovely June evening, the Coburn Shakespeare players gave an ideal presentation of "As You Like It" on the lawn of the Commonwealth Club. The setting and the play were alike romantically beautiful. The silencing of the emerald turf of the lawn by the moon, the costumes of the players, who entered thoroughly into the spirit of the play, the presence of the audience—each and all contributed to banish realities and transport fancy to a forest of Arden, with its lovers and its sylvan glades.

Except for the House, the centre of all, darkly glowing from within like a jewel, window and doors thrown open to the sweet summer air, parvosa and dining hall promising much graceful hospitality to follow the ending of the play. Except for the Spirit of the House, redolent of past days and of the year 1814, when the present home of the Commonwealth Club was the former home of a well-known merchant-citizen of Richmond, by name Peyton Drew, the then builder of the House, and because of that a pioneer Richmond suburbanite.

"Per," said the Spirit of the House, a shadowy, impalpable figure, a whispering part of the general victory of the hour, "many years have passed since I came to be a presence in it. When I first knew it, it stood alone upon a wooded eminence, and between it and other dwellings in its neighborhood was a deep ravine, along which poured a stream with ferns and wild violets on its banks. This stream was spanned by an arched stone bridge, and Franklin Street, a road from the West, came down beyond so steep and rugged a hill that careful indeed had the coachman to be who guided his horses aright in its descent."

"But, Spirit of the House, where have the ravine and the hill gone? There is nothing more left of them to-day than the terraced swell which raises the House stately above the street. And the street itself is a highly decorated and well-ordered thoroughfare. Who brought it from wilderness to order and conventionality? Tell me that, Spirit."

"Ask the Passing Years," said the Spirit. "The frost turned from green to autumn-gold the leaves upon the trees in the open fields beyond the hill and upon its brook. Down the winding road, where now fashionable Franklin Street promenades, rumbled the mountain wagons with their great six-horse teams, flanking their bells and tossing their heads, bearing into town their goodly stores of ready-checked apples, their fresh butter and eggs, and other market wares of kindred value. They passed in autumn. With the spring the men came and began cutting down the great hill and the giant trees. They choked the purring brook and buried the arched stone bridge deep beneath the piled-up earth, and, at last, they substituted the leveled driveway which you see here, which you came hither to-night. But I look out from the windows of the House sometimes and remember that opposite to it and underneath what is now the street are buried the arch that spanned the dangerous ravine,



Front view of the Commonwealth Club

building as the residence of the late Colonel George S. Palmer's family.

and the stream, whose voice I sometimes think still murmurs in my ears on clear autumn nights as of yore, when the horses and the bells made their procession to and from the market place of the city."

"Has the House always looked as it does to-night, Spirit?" Has it always been from the beginning so stately, with so many spacious and handsome apartments?"

"I first remember sitting beside its fires and sharing in its pleasures and joys, it was a much smaller place, and Peyton Drew was master of the household. That was in the days when sheepskin and slender grasses covered the fields beyond the hills, and the cows went following their leader's music in the morning, to be driven home at milking-time in the pleasant dusk of evening. That was when Peyton Drew's brother, Thomas, was deputy marshal and was sent to escort Aaron Burr to Richmond for his trial in the Capitol. Thomas brought him to the House and he sat at its table, sullenly defiant with a sneer on his handsome lips. But the sneer turned to tremble when gentle Theodosia, his daughter, wept on his breast and he turned stroking her bright hair and trying to comfort her."

"I have seen many, many changes," said the Spirit of the House. "When Peyton Drew's ownership was past John Muttter, a brother merchant, came to take his place and build more rooms and lay out the gardens surrounding the House, planting the arbor vitae, the box hedge, the rose arbor, the pavilions, the yellow jessamine and coral honeysuckle and the multiflora rose. Beyond the flowers were the vegetables in orderly rows, and around the high stone and brick wall which bounded the whole were fruit trees, peaches and pears and lucasias. To be sent to table when John Muttter's son, the great surgeon who stood at the head of his department in the Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia, came to visit his parents and his old home and drive beside his father into the business quarters of Richmond, where the buying and selling kept the older man busy and wide awake."

"But," the Spirit of the House went on, "vigilance does not always mean success. John Muttter's face was downcast enough when the ebbing tide of fortune forced him to say good-by to his gardens and his dwelling, beginning already to be known for their beauty of situation and their wealth of bloom and fruitage. During brief periods after him the House passed by purchase into the hands of John Allen and Thomas Richardson. But a friend of theirs, a worthy gentleman from the upper counties, who wore his hair in a queue, carried a jeweled snuff box and walked with a gold-headed cane, so greatly desired the House and its gardens for his winter residence that, in consideration of the sum of \$5,000, he made good his right and title to it. Therefore, it was then the year 1830, Colonel David Bullock



MRS. CLAY CHAMBLIN.

and his good lady, who had no children of their own, but who were fond enough of gathering the young people of the city around and about them, kept alive the sound of fresh young voices about the House and along its terraced walks.

"Nevertheless," and the voice of the Spirit of the House sank lower, "poor together as happy a life as she should have had. The colonel, who was a lawyer, kept an East Indian servant, who wore a turban, dyed his nails with henna and glided about with stealthy motions that frightened the mistress, a worthy woman busy at her roses, occupied in giving orders to her cook and in discussing the latest modes with her friends who lived near her. Her steps always quickened into a run, and her heart never ceased to palpitate when she came opposite the door next to Colonel David's library. It was kept locked, and the mistress was very much in the plight of Bluebeard's wife, for she longed to know the secret hidden behind it. Well, at last she knew. One afternoon, when the shadows had begun to lengthen, she came walking down the hall, and stopped, amazed. There stood the closed door, slightly ajar. The temptation was irresistible. The mistress pushed softly on the sliding panel and then entered. The next moment a wild shriek rang out and was followed by a heavy fall. The East Indian came quickly out of the room at the foot of the stairs bearing the unconscious form of the mistress in his arms. He gave her into the care of her maid, and, pausing to lock the door of the secret chamber, summoned the master to the bedside of his wife."

"But, tut, my dear woman," said the colonel an hour later when a liberal use of sal volatile had somewhat restored Mistress Bullock's senses,

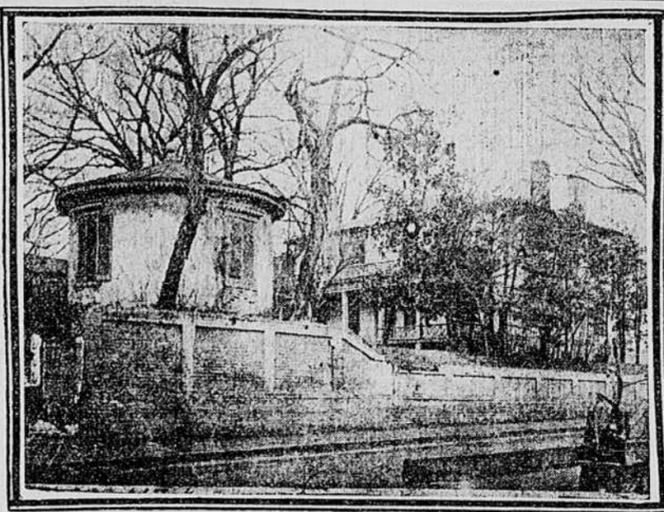


MRS. GEORGE S. PALMER.

"you were simply nervous and imaginative, that is all. A coffin, say you, and a man reciting incantations above it! Now, my dear Nancy, that is childish. What you really saw was Mahmood packing some books in a case that I had made for them. So think no more about such rubbish as coffins, and make ready with your prettiest gown to-morrow night, for our friends are coming to play a rubber of whist, you know." And he smiled so reassuringly that the mistress was fain to think she had had a bad dream instead of a fainting fit, a conclusion to which she was assisted by a piece of gold which her husband put into the maid's hand when he laid his parting injunction upon the latter.

"But Colonel David already belonged to a past generation, being by twenty years his wife's senior. And when he had had a decade of peaceful years in the House, a day came when he was called away. He left a letter behind for the mistress, telling her that to save her care and trouble he had already actually bought the casket in which he was to be buried some years before, and that she would find it in the locked chamber, together with his will and other valuable papers. And then, like a man who grieved not over speaking farewell, begged her pardon for having frightened her by provision for his end, wished her good fortune and more happy years, notwithstanding his departure from the House."

"In especial," he wrote, "unlock the door of the room where some trifling mysteries of my life have been hidden from vulgar gaze. Let it stand wide hereafter, with the sunshine on its walls and the breath of the flowers from the garden to sweeten it. Let the memory of my shadow no longer render it grim and forbidding. A word more and I am done. Let Mahmood go his own way, and return to his own



Side view of the old Bullock mansion, corner of Franklin and Monroe streets.



GEORGE S. PALMER, JR.

people."

"How long has the circular brick building, the small one in the corner of the lawn, to the left of the front entrance, been there, Spirit of the House? Did it stand where it does in Colonel Bullock's day, and to what use did he put it?"

"In Colonel Bullock's day, the House had the usual complement of outbuildings, and that about which you are curious was an icehouse. In it milk, butter and fresh meats for the table were kept. It supplied, indeed, the place of the modern refrigerator, which had not then come into use. But the utilitarian purpose of the little building was concealed by a luxuriant growth of periwinkle and bluish cluster roses, which, climbing from foundation to eaves, gave it a rather picturesque appearance. Colonel Bullock was not only a very public-spirited man, but he had artistic tastes, and the care he bestowed upon the House and its surroundings was summed up in his credit long after his Richmond conferees knew him no more."

"He had left to the mistress the House and ample means, so that she might follow unchecked the gay social career to which she was by nature devoted. There was, of course, the proper period of mourning, but as soon as might be the comely face of the mistress blushed and smiled attractively forth from the widow's cap which encircled it. And as cap as it might properly be, widow's weeks were discarded and several young kinswomen came to help Mrs. Bullock dispense generous hospitality in the House. Mrs. Bullock and Mrs. Winfield Scott were great friends, and spent many evenings together over the card table, or at the play."

"These ladies of fashion were always happy to have under their charge the younger beauties of the town, and never enjoyed themselves more than when superintending toiletts of young girls just beginning the history of

their triumphs as belles of the first water. Thus years passed tranquilly by. One by one the girls were married and some of them went to adorn homes in distant cities. More and more Mistress Bullock was left to herself in the House. So, when Mrs. James Bruce, of Halifax county, who afterward built a handsome residence on the northwest corner of Twelfth and Clay Streets, asked to become Mrs. Bullock's tenant, the privilege was granted her. Probably because the mistress was growing old and babbled sometimes of locked doors and coffins waiting behind them, she was put, against her wishes, in a coffin had, nevertheless, become her abode when the House, standing stark and silent, with closed doors and windows passed, first into the possession of Alexander Rutherford and then into that of the late George S. Palmer."

"Ah me," murmured the Spirit of the House wistfully, "it was in this dwelling that Mr. Palmer's beautiful daughter died one for her into which she did not desire to be put. Against her wishes a coffin had, nevertheless, become her abode when the House, standing stark and silent, with closed doors and windows passed, first into the possession of Alexander Rutherford and then into that of the late George S. Palmer."

"Always to be remembered was his kindness toward the soldiers of the Confederacy during the grim, gaunt days between '61 and '65. He exercised hospitality to them without stint. Hardy a day came and went without soldiers being fed at his board and sheltered beneath his roof."

"That was when the daughters, who were afterwards Mrs. Claiborne, Mrs. Jenkins, Mrs. Adolphus Blair, Mrs. Edward Christian and Mrs. Clay Chamblin, were several of them, very young people indeed, when the sons, Colonel W. B. Ben Palmer, George S. Palmer, Jr., and Jack Palmer, were making ready, through service to State and city, for after life and usefulness. The fall of the Confederacy wrought disastrously to Colonel George S. Palmer's fortunes, hampered and thwarted his business career, even finally breaking his heart and condemning him to a life of invalidism and years of suffering. Through this trying period a faithful man servant, William Harris, was Colonel Palmer's constant attendant and nurse. William now lives with Mrs. Helen Palmer Christian, and sometimes comes past. He never fails to glance up contemptuously at the present house as he passes on, and, more than once, has been heard saying to himself:

"Lawsd, Lawsd, how times is done change, sure 'nough! Dismay's de Comin' Well, dey tells me, Well, hit never gwine be whut 'twuz when my old master lb here, on de family gadder under de trees in de yard, on de young ladies, fum across de street, fine our young mistresses, wid dey pretty white frocks and dey ribbons on, and de young gentlemen comin' up and sets among 'em, on den dey all goes in de parlor, 'en has music 'en singin' tell 'em. Talk 'bout 'ceptions, huh!"

"And the old dark face waxed eloquent with disdain. William was thus, as he conceived, a loyal adherent to the Palmer regime and family. The old mansion, in truth, never saw happier days than when the Palmer fam-



LIEUTENANT W. B. PALMER, Company E, Mosby's Command, 1864, age twenty-one.



LOVEY PALMER, MRS. E. D. CHRISTIAN, MRS. EDWARD CHRISTIAN.

ly contributed its generous and traditional share to the social history of West Franklin Street, and the "Palmer girls" carried their triumphs to the ball rooms of the White Sulphur and the Old Sweet in the Virginia mountains."

"Now the House belongs to an association of Richmond men, who have formed themselves into the Commonwealth Club, men who show their respect for past history by making of a place connected with the earliest and place of upper Franklin Street, an ornament to the city, and a credit to themselves. Sometimes people ask each other which they like best, the old days or the new days? How foolish, for the new is but the outcome of the old, without which it could not have arrived. Yet still," said the Spirit of the House, just before she went her shadowy way, "some evenings when the automobiles whirl swiftly by, and the laughter and good fellowship are at their height, the scene all fades like a dissolving view. Again the tap, tap of Colonel David Bullock's gold-headed cane is the herald of his day's homecoming. Again the difficult way winds crookedly down the steep hill of Franklin Street Road and I can see again the fairies dancing in the moonlight, as the brook goes rippling far below. And somehow, to-night, the play acting and the moonshine and your ear to whisper in, has made me tell the tale again, the tale of the House."

"It is almost 100 years old. In 1911 its centennial will be celebrated, and I hope on just such a night as this. The Passing Years will be here then, and together we will compare notes. Whatever I have forgotten you can remind me of, and I make it all clear to you. I can tell you about the great people that the Club has welcomed within its doors, the statesmen, jurists, scholars and actors. I can picture for you the beautiful women that have been feted in its rooms, I can forecast for you the triumphs and the happy anniversaries of years to come. Some here to-night will be gone by 1914, for the world is a world of change as well as of progress, but look at least for me to come and stand beside you, for the Spirit of the House will not fail when the chime of its hundred years is struck."

"A sigh, a fleeting breath and an invisible wave of a passing, and then there was every one of the audience rising from chairs and talking all together about the performance. Had I seen a Shakespeare play, or had the magic of the forest and Rosalind's wit, so attuned my mind, that the story, imparted by the Spirit of the House, was what I heard, that which I am writing for you here?"

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