

The Romance of Linden Hall

BY JULIA BOWLES PHILLIPS

FOREWORD. The following story was written in 1886 by my mother, Julia Bowles (Alexander) Phillips. It contains a description of Linden Hall (the Alexander House) as it was in 1857 when purchased by my grandfather, Henry Alexander, Jr., from Mrs. Trask, the Southern lady whom my mother tells of meeting when she was first taken to the house.

At the end of the tale the house is described as it was in 1886 and substantially as it stands today, although my grandfather moved the house to its present location in 1873.

As a small boy I remember my mother's reading this story to our family and to occasional friends who gathered to hear it, but she was never willing that it be published. Now, over sixty years since it was written, it seems suitable that this account of Linden Hall and its romantic past should find a place in OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND.

ALEXANDER PHILLIPS, New York City, March, 1950.

IT is a cold, blustering November evening, a fit ending to a New England Thanksgiving day. Within, a happy family of three generations clusters round the great open fireplace filled with huge logs which send their roaring blaze up the wide black chimney. The darting flames are reflected in the shining brass andirons, and again in the glass doors of the immense mahogany bookcase which fills one entire side of the spacious library. As the lamps have not yet been lighted, corners of the room seem miles away to the children who give them furtive glances now and then in hopes of seeing a "brownie's" face while they nestle in the security of mother's or father's knee. For years it has been the custom to come to "Grandma's" for a bountiful Thanksgiving dinner, and to remain till cakes and coffee have been served in the twilight. Tonight the children have begged to stay a little longer because they have "grown a whole year older," and one bright lad of twelve years is pleading for a story—"a real true story." "Surely, Grandma, you can tell us a story about something you used to do when you were a little girl—isn't there a nice story about this dear old house?"

"Fudge, Frank, we don't want a *nice story*," said a younger little fellow with snapping black eyes and saucy upturned nose—"give us something *bloodcurdling*, Grandma."

The lady of the mansion sits quietly in her comfortable rocking-chair with her accustomed knitting lying neglected in her lap. Her busy fingers, for a wonder, are still; a sad, tender smile curves her expressive mouth, and a misty veil seems to have fallen over her large brown eyes, which can flash on occasion with unusual brilliancy and power. Her nose is purely Grecian, and she holds her head with a stately grace rarely seen. The brown waving hair, streaked with grey, is parted over a high intellectual forehead and falls in curls behind the ears. Her youngest grandchild there is impressed by her beauty and charm of manner, as she sits smiling upon them all. At last, hesitantly, she speaks.

Yes, children, there is a story connected with this house; but I am not the heroine of it. It is romantic enough to please Frank, and tragical enough to suit Gus. I almost dread to tell it, it will recall vividly so many scenes of the past which are both sad and happy; but, how can I withstand your pleading? Who knows what another year may bring forth, and I am the only *living person* who can tell you truly:

The Romance of Linden Hall

When my father bought this place, I was very young, only seven years old; but my first recollection of the house is

quite distinct. I was brought here by Father one afternoon when he came to talk over some business arrangement with the former owner, an elderly Southern lady who occupied it as a summer residence, bringing with her a family of two sons and a beautiful daughter, a retinue of slaves, a fine yellow coach and thoroughbred horses. I never shall forget her haughty aristocratic manner as she came forward to meet us in the spacious hall with its high arches supported by Corinthian columns. Large doors stood open at either end, showing stone porches with more white columns connected by iron chains, and beyond, a mass of green foliage, noble trees and shrubs of all kinds. On the left of the hall, I caught a glimpse of large drawing rooms with heavy curtains of crimson damask hung upon gilt poles. It all seemed very grand to my childish eyes which had only been accustomed hitherto to the plain New England house. The little old lady with her patrician air appeared like a fairy godmother, and I could not believe that this was to be my future home.

Soon we were established, however, and I and my younger sister roamed at our own sweet will through the lofty rooms and the lovely gardens. At this time the house was so thickly surrounded by trees and shrubbery as to be almost invisible from the street—and under them, instead of grass, a thick carpet of moss covered the ground, studded in the early spring with a multitude of wild blue violets which we never tired of picking and which you find so plentiful in the corner lawn. Directly in front of the house were three large magnolia trees which had been brought from the south and planted here by a famous artist, Chester Harding. In June when these were covered with their immense white blossoms giving forth their heavy oriental odour, the view from

our upper piazza was exquisite. At the left of the house was the driveway leading to the stables, and on the other side of this a wide lawn filled with fine trees—lindens, maples and graceful elms—stretched far away till it terminated in an orchard of apple trees, their gnarled trunks black with age. On the other side of the house a path led round the library wing to a garden walk or pleached alley lined on either side with rare flowering shrubs; and at the left of this the flower garden, a marvel of intricate design—stars, circles and semi-circles laid out and bordered with the dwarf-box plant which I presume you children have never seen, but which was very fashionable in my young days.

Beyond the flower garden was the vegetable garden, laid out in a similar style, but less fancifully; and this was separated from the other part of the grounds by a high hedge of thorn trees; the entrance, which was at the end of the garden walk, consisted of a pretty rustic gate over which climbed honeysuckle on an arched trellis.

But the flower garden was the delight of my sister and myself. What a tangle of odd old-fashioned flowers it held! Yellow and moss roses, the famous York and Lancaster rose, day lilies, yellow lilies, fleur-de-lis, sweet William, larkspur and clove pink—a perfect riot of sweetness and color. How we revelled in it! In connection with the flower garden was an open grass plot partially surrounded by small fir trees; and on a summer evening in the twilight we took great delight in playing hide-and-seek among them, fancying we were fairies. Then there was an old pear tree with a great cavity in its trunk where we would deposit letters for each other, and a cherry tree among whose branches we spent hours eating the juicy fruit.

My sister was a strange child, fanciful



Interior, Linden Hall

SHOWING ELABORATE CEILING TREATMENT. RIGHT-HAND DOOR LED TO GARDEN WALK, ORIGINAL LIBRARY WAS ENTERED TO RIGHT OF THIS DOOR. MIDDLE DOOR LED TO SMALL BEDROOM ON GROUND FLOOR

and dreamy. Very soon I noticed the house seemed to have an especial charm for her, and we passed much of our time, at her suggestion, in searching for trap doors and a secret staircase.¹ Our dining room was then in the eastern wing and the library in the western; and it is in this library wing that my story centers. This room, being so far from the rest of the

wasn't so much fun to go after them into the cold, dark library. What a gruesome place it seemed to us! The great bookcase over there, *now* looking so warm and attractive in the firelight, loomed up in our childish imagination like some icy cliff, from which the white busts on top looked down with ghastly significance, and the large glass doors seemed to reflect myriads



Linden Hall, showing original wings

house, was difficult to warm and for this reason was used only in summer. In the winter, apples and pears were kept there (your grandfather was a great lover of fruit) and we children were often sent on a winter evening to bring him one or the other. The apples he used to toast before the open fireplace, and what fun we thought it to watch them swell and burst and the juice come sputtering out. But it

¹ See illustration.

of ghostly phantoms! We would snatch our apple or pear with fearful eagerness, you may be sure, and rush back to the warmth and light of the sitting room as if swarms of foul fiends were after us.

We were still quite young when we learned that this library and the little room opening out from it had been tenanted for years by a young man, one of the sons of the Southern lady, and that during all this time no one had looked up-

on his face. He was a very handsome fellow, they said, clever and fascinating in his manner; but, like many attractive young men with plenty of money, and with the Southern abhorrence of work, he had become dissipated and led for several years a very fast life. Then, satiated with what he supposed to be the only pleasures of this world, he concluded to isolate himself from his fellows and spend his remaining years in study and self-communion.

So, surrounded with his books and papers, he lived in this room for *ten years*. He would see no member of his family, not even his mother, it was said. His meals were taken in by his colored body-servant and deposited on a table while he retired to his bedroom, and they were then removed in the same way. For outdoor exercise he took nightly walks in the pleached alley and flower garden which I have described to you. The termination of this romantic proceeding we children could never find out, but were simply told that master and servant suddenly disappeared one day and nothing more was seen or heard of them.

As I said before, my sister Leila was a peculiar, dreamy, reticent child; and this story naturally made a great impression upon her. In the summer when the old library was opened she spent a great deal of time there, sitting at the window which looked out upon the garden and reading queer old books from the bookcase, delighting in those especially which treated of the supernatural. Thus the years of our childhood rolled slowly by. As I grew older, household duties fell to my care, in which I displayed considerable proficiency, being of a practical and domestic turn of mind. But my sister was unmistakably an idler. Indeed, there was very little for her to do. She picked the flowers which pleased her and arranged them with ex-

quisite taste. Her delicate white hands seemed to reprove the suggestion of labor, and were rarely seen to hold anything but a flower or a book. She was of a very winning and gentle disposition, and we each in our own way adored her. She would surprise me, at times, with such strange fancies that I began to look upon her almost with awe and often wondered what would become of her in this stern, practical world.

The summer Leila was sixteen, she was looking very lovely, with an ethereal sort of beauty—very dignified and mature in her appearance for one so young, and yet with an air of ingenuous youthfulness about her which was very charming. Her large blue-grey eyes were filled with the mystic expression of maidenhood, prophetic of a nature which would feel both joy and sorrow intensely. Her gold-ash-burn hair clustered in delicate curls over her low white forehead and lay in heavy coils upon a head held in proud defiance like a young queen. What could we expect of her more than a gracious recognition of our willing ministrations? My mission in life seemed to be to wait upon her and receive her confidences.

One warm Sunday afternoon early in the month of June, we were all sitting in this very room. My sister as usual had wandered off to the library. All the windows and the outer doors stood open wide, in order to let the summer breeze laden with the scent of roses and honeysuckle fill the spacious rooms and hall. Leila had been reading and dreaming, I suppose, and finally, feeling the silence or perhaps the closeness of the room oppressive, strolled out into the pleached alley and thence into the garden. She picked a flower absently here and there, and as she stood facing the library she looked towards it, feeling drawn to do so by some strong impulse. There in the window sat

a young man—beautiful as a god, he seemed to her—and his large dark eyes rested upon her with a gaze of burning intensity. His expression was both stern and melancholy, and from his high white brow his waving dark hair rolled back in profusion. Her eyes returned his gaze with awe and astonishment. Her feet were rooted to the spot. She dropped her flowers and placing her hands upon her breast she realized, though vaguely, that this man, whoever he might prove to be, possessed a strange power over her which she could not resist. Then, with drooping head and unconscious steps she walked through the garden, around the pathway, and up the library porch steps. But, on looking into the room, what was her amazement to see the chair in the window *empty*! She came immediately back to the rest of the family and asked me what young man had been in the library. We laughed and replied that she must have been dreaming. She turned from us with a troubled look in her lovely eyes; and later, upon my pressing her, confided to me this strange occurrence.

Several days had passed and I had quite forgotten the affair when she came to me one evening late in the twilight and said excitedly:

“I have seen him again!”

“Who?” I asked carelessly.

Without replying to this question she told me that she had stepped out upon the eastern porch for a moment and was astonished to see, standing in the driveway close to the end of the porch, a spirited black horse saddled and bridled with rich silver-mounted trappings. She was leaning on the heavy iron chain which connected the two end pillars, looking with amazement at this apparition, when she was conscious of a presence near her. She turned her head and encountered again the face of the man she had seen at

the library window. Before she had time to speak or even think, he leaned towards her, eagerly grasped her hand on which he pressed a burning kiss, then sprang over the chain, mounted the horse as it seemed in a flying leap, and galloped away in the dusk without one backward glance.

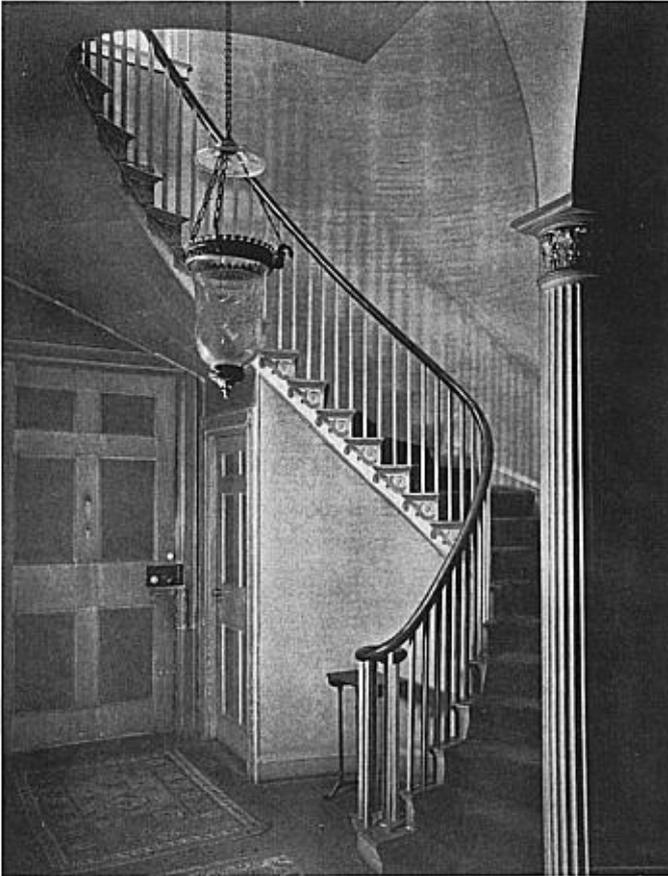
As Leila related this to me she was trembling with intense excitement and her face was white with terror. She begged me to say nothing of the matter to our parents, and I consented, though greatly troubled.

The summer days slipped by. Mother was an invalid and we were a very quiet household. Leila grew daily more and more reserved, and ceased finally to speak of the strange occurrences which I have just related and about which she had formerly talked with me frankly and with great wonder and speculation. I did not notice it then, but I remember afterwards that she spent more time than ever alone. Hurrying through her light daily tasks she would go to the library where she remained for hours; or else she would sit under the great fir tree, which shaded the corner of the library wing, with an open book in her hand, though the leaves were rarely turned. This same fir tree also shaded one window of her little bedroom, from the other window of which one could overlook the flower garden and the pleached alley beyond. Off towards the west could be seen the quiet hills rising above the trees and housetops of the city; and, when the evening star arose in the mellow golden light of the fading sunset, the scene was beautiful beyond description. It seemed no wonder to me that my sister should be fascinated by this view of natural loveliness and that she should like to sit at this western window lost in reverie! With my New England common sense, however, I could not be resigned to the hours of idleness she spent

during the day. Yet my remonstrances only increased her haughty reserve, and this I later had every reason to deplore.

I discovered, about this time, that Leila had become a somnambulist. How long it had gone on, I have no idea, but one night I was awakened from a heavy

sleep by a slight noise. I lighted my candle, hurried into my wrapper and slippers, and reached the foot of the stairs just as a white figure opened the library door and passed out onto the porch. I was not of a timid disposition, but this ghostlike apparition was almost too much for my nerves and I



**Linden Hall, showing stairway and
detail of Corinthian column**

leaned against the wall weak with fright. But in a moment I recovered myself sufficiently to think that the figure looked like Leila. Acting upon this thought, I hurried up to her room. Both windows were open wide. The white moonlight streamed in over the great fir tree lighting up the whole chamber, and one hasty glance showed me that her bed was empty! As fast as my trembling limbs would carry me I groped my way downstairs again and hurried out the library door.

The moonlight made everything as distinct as day and enhanced all it touched with a weird beauty. Something, I know not what, led me down the garden walk and midway in it I met Leila. Fortunately I held my tongue; for by this time the thought of somnambulism had occurred to me, and I knew that in such cases it was better not to awaken the sleeping person. As I had expected, she was walking slowly with wide-open eyes and seemed utterly unconscious of my presence. It struck me as very curious that she was completely dressed, in a soft white Cashmere—her favorite dress—and her manner of walking was very peculiar. She seemed to be leaning toward one side, and now and then she moved her lips as if in speaking, though I could distinguish neither words nor sound. With quickly beating heart and scarcely daring to breathe, I stood on one side and waited.

Up and down the alley she walked, continuing the same manner, as if she were walking and conversing with *someone*. Finally, when I was nearly worn out with waiting, she stopped under the shadow of the fir tree; and as clearly as I could distinguish in the dim light she held out both hands, as if in parting. She then turned and went directly into the house, I following close after. She walked straight to her room, undressed, closed

her blinds and went to bed.

I scarcely slept the remainder of the night and waited with much anxiety to see how Leila would appear the next morning, but nothing in her manner showed that she had any consciousness of the night's proceeding. I feared to speak of it, and after lying awake several nights expecting a repetition of the sleepwalking, I began to think it would not occur again.

In a few weeks, however, I overheard the servants talking mysteriously together about a white figure they had seen walking at night in the garden. Finally one of them came to me, as spokesman for the group and, with a manner in which timidity and fear were mingled, asked me if I had ever known of a ghost about the house. I thought immediately of Leila's midnight promenade and with much reluctance related the affair to them, saying at the same time, with an appearance of composure which I did not feel, that such sleepwalking was very common at a certain age among young people. This explanation apparently satisfied them outwardly, yet the faces of one or two looked incredulous and this little outbreak on their part led me to fear that Leila's sleepwalking had not been confined to one night, but perhaps had been repeated many times. I had become seriously alarmed by this time, and without saying anything to Leila I determined to speak to Mother about it. I could not bring myself, however, to speak to her about the two strange meetings of which Leila had told me—they seemed too whimsical to mention.

To my surprise Mother appeared to think little of the sleepwalking, and said she had been subject to the same nervous affliction herself when a young girl, and that it would pass off as Leila grew older. Yet at the same time she suggested that

I should share Leila's bed with her. This would seem a very natural and simple arrangement enough between two sisters, but a decided barrier had sprung up between us, for what reason I knew not. Yet there it was, inexplicable and insurmountable, and I approached this suggestion of Mother's with considerable shyness. I was not surprised, therefore, when Leila utterly refused to comply with my request. Involuntarily I refrained from giving her any reason for this change on my part, and strangely enough she never asked for an explanation. All this came to me long afterwards when I had time to think over this terrible affair more in detail. The only thing then for me to do was to sleep on the alert, as it were, as one does when watching a sick person, and my ear soon became so sensitive that I awakened at the slightest sound.

Every fine night, especially when there was a moon, I would awake about midnight, hearing a soft footfall descend the hall stairs and pass out the library porch door—*so softly* that it seemed like the flitting of a phantom! Flinging on some light wrap, I would run to Leila's room and, seeing that her bed was empty, seat myself at the western window and watch her white form through the shrubbery and trees. Then, after a time—perhaps half an hour, an eternity it seemed to me!—I would hear the hall door close gently and know that I could retire for the remainder of the night. Weird and mysterious as this was at first, I soon became accustomed to it and finally began to think it was nonsense for me to watch Leila through these nocturnal promenades. So I presume I slept through many of them, and as she seemed as well and even happier than ever, the anxiety which Mother and I had at first felt was almost forgotten.

The sultry days of August had come—it seemed to me I had never known such oppressive heat. For weeks we had had no rain, and the ground was parched and dry. Night after night the sun went down a lurid ball of flame. The air was full of dust, and smoke from distant forest fires. At last one evening we started to bed feeling a slight breeze stirring, and we said hopefully "before morning we shall have rain." How little we dreamed what the morning would bring forth!

Leaving the windows open, as usual, I went to bed. I must have slept heavily for several hours when I was awakened by a frightful flash of lightning followed immediately by a deafening crash; and before I could gather my senses down came the longed-for rain in drenching torrents. My first thought was of the open windows throughout the house, and I flew from room to room closing them as fast as the quickly recurring lightning would permit me. Of course the whole family were aroused as soon as I and followed my example. On reaching Leila's room, a sudden flash illuminated the entire chamber and showed me at the same time that the *bed was empty*. Oh horror! Could she be out in this fearful storm? I ran to my room to get on a few clothes, screaming out, as I did so, "Leila is out in the storm!" Soon two or three of us met in the lower hall, foolishly carrying lighted candles which were blown out by gusts of wind the moment we opened the outside door. A lantern was at last found and silently they followed my lead through the blinding rain out onto the garden walk. Halfway down the walk we found her—her *sweet life shattered by a thunderbolt!*

With breaking hearts we bore her into the house and up to her own bed in her little room. It was then that we realized she was not dressed in her accustomed

clothes, but in Mother's bridal dress, which we remembered having seen in an old cedar chest in the garret. She had arrayed herself in this quaint old-fashioned gown, and around her head had wrapped the bridal veil of antique lace, yellow with age. Lovely, indeed, she must have looked in it; but now, wet and sodden with heavy rain, how pitiful!

The cruel lightning had failed to mar her exquisite beauty, and the stillness of death only gave an added charm to her sweet face, which wore no sign of terror or dismay, but an expression of trustful confidence and restful happiness. What strange fancy had led her to dress herself in this old bridal gown and veil? We could not imagine. Not until all was over and we had laid her away in the grave with hushed sorrow and wonderment was everything explained; and the explanation was more marvelous than human being could conceive.

A few days after the funeral I was in her room. We had determined to leave everything as she had left it, but I was trying to console my grief by looking over some of her things. On opening a little escritoire, I saw to my surprise a thickly folded letter addressed in Leila's handwriting to "my dear sister Mary." With trembling fingers I broke the seal and through blinding tears read as follows:

My dearest sister:

What I am about to tell will seem very strange to you, I know, and it is all very strange to me, yet most true. I know that my actions for the past two months have been peculiar and that my unnatural reserve must have wounded you greatly; but when I have explained, I am sure you will understand and forgive all.

You remember what I told you about the "unknown" whom I saw at the library window and of the mysterious en-

counter I had later with him on the eastern porch. I talked with you freely about his appearance and actions at that time, but I did not tell you that after this the memory of his face never left me for a moment, and I grew to long with the most intense longing for another meeting. And for this reason, I spent so many hours alone, in the library and in the garden walk, hoping he might come again. Several weeks must have passed, when one night I was lying awake with the lovely summer moonlight streaming through the room. All was still. Not a breath of air stirred the branches of the great fir tree, and the drowsy hum of the insects seemed hushed in a midsummer night's sleep. Suddenly, through the stillness I thought I heard a voice from the garden calling my name.

Leila! Leila! Softly it came to my ears, but in the tone of a man's deep, rich voice. I felt, rather than knew, that it must be he, and without a moment's delay I sprang from my bed and dressed myself as quickly as I could, putting on my favorite Cashmere dress. Then I went quietly downstairs, hoping no one would hear me, and out into the garden. As I reached the shadow of the fir tree, there he stood—more beautiful than ever he seemed to me, with his face lighted up by a smile of heavenly sweetness. His hands were stretched out towards me, and as I stood before him my soul was filled with happiness and awe. Then, for the first time, I heard his voice.

"*Leila,*" he said, and his words were like music, "*the power of love has drawn me from a far-off country to your side. Without question or fear, will you put your trust in me?*"

And without a moment's hesitation of fear or doubt I placed my hands in his, and he knew that I belonged to him heart and soul. Then we walked up and down

the garden walk. Oh, such happy moments! What words of love he spoke to me, and with what eager interest listened to all my childish confidences! After a while, I know not how long, for every moment seemed golden to me, he said that I must leave him, as he feared the night air might do me harm; but before I left him he made me promise I would say nothing to you or to anyone with regard to this meeting. While knowing how painful it would be to keep anything from you, I readily consented, so great was my trust and confidence in him. He then turned and left me with sweet words of love and assurance that we should meet again soon. I found my way, I know not how, into the house, and from that hour my whole being was flooded with a supreme happiness of which I had never dreamed.

After this we had many such meetings; and I think, dear sister, you imagined all was not right when you asked to sleep with me. But these hours which I passed with my beloved were more precious than life to me, and I felt that I could not bear to miss any one of them, though it grieved me sorely to refuse your sweet care.

At last the time has come when he wishes me to be his bride. I shall dress myself in Mother's bridal dress and veil—for she said once it was to be mine, and 'tis all I shall take with me. I am going to that far-off country from which he came to me, and it may be many years before I shall see you all again.

Think of me always as very, very happy, though the parting from you and Mother and Father and the dear old home fills me with heavy sadness now. And above all others, dearest sister, is it hard to say goodbye to you, but I must, I *must*—a power unspeakable forces me to leave, almost without regret, all that I

have loved and cared for in the past. The future is unknown, but I go with him, and that is enough!

Your loving sister,

LEILA

This astonishing confession of Leila's was never known outside of the family. Before long, however, we learned that it was generally understood the house was haunted, though people were shy in speaking of it to us, and we never willingly approached the subject. The ghost, if any there were, never disturbed the inmates of the house; but a white figure was said to be seen often on summer nights pacing slowly up and down the garden walk.

Years went by, and the city grew rapidly. Father sold building lots one after another, so that our place became smaller and smaller; and finally, through the constant raising of the street, the house seemed so low that he thought it advisable to raise it and move it to the side lawn where it now stands, at the same time replacing the old back part with a new one much more convenient. The wings were taken away and placed together, forming the little cottage which now stands near the stables. When the library wing had been removed, the workmen discovered in the low cellar beneath the bedroom the skeleton of a man, dressed in clothes of a peculiar fashion such as were worn by gentlemen of a past generation. His bones were given decent burial near the graves of our own dead, and Father yielded to what he thought a strange fancy of mine and buried them next to Leila's grave.

The beautiful garden was then, of course, demolished and the grounds laid out as you see them now. The garden walk was gone, and the restless ghost which haunted it was seen no more! And after Mother and Father died, the memory of my sister Leila and her tragical

death became like a fleeting dream.

The change in the house was made just before my marriage, and in a few years two younger sisters—mere babies when Leila died—grew up into bright and merry girlhood, fond of the world and all the joys that it brings. Their gay young friends came and went, and the old house was filled with happy laughter. Of the Christmas balls, the jolly sleighing parties, the tableaux and masquerades which the

walls of these rooms have witnessed, your fathers and mothers can tell you. But, in the midst of all the gayeties, sad thoughts would come to me, now and then, like minor chords in a brilliant symphony, recalling the sweet companion of my own youth whose short life was blighted by a cruel fantasy!

JULIA B. PHILLIPS

Springfield, August 6, 1886



Linden Hall, 284 State Street, Springfield, Mass.

AS IT STANDS TODAY