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C Addison Hickman

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Barlow Hall

About five miles southeast of Sioux City stands a vast brick mansion known as Barlow Hall. It is perched in desolate majesty upon the crest of a hill overlooking the busy highway. Standing back from the road and screened by a grove of stately trees, it is seldom noticed by passing motorists. To most of those who do notice the Hall, it seems but an incongruous note in the Iowa landscape and is soon forgotten. To those who know its story, however, it stands as the last tangible remnant of an ambitious attempt to transplant the culture of Victorian England to raw and vigorous frontier Iowa.

During the 1870's and 1880's a number of English settlers of noble birth and considerable wealth migrated to northwestern Iowa. Since many of these men were younger sons and had little hope of inheriting ancestral estates, they were intrigued by the prospect of creating vast new estates in this frontier land of promise. Most of these settlers concentrated in the area around Le Mars, but some located in other sections of the country. Captain Alexander K. Barlow, of Manchester, England, chose to live a few miles south-

east of the bustling frontier town of Sioux City. In 1879 he arrived in Iowa and purchased some 3000 acres of land for an average of six to eight dollars an acre. On a sloping hill commanding a magnificent view of the surrounding hills, valleys, and bottom lands, he planned to build a huge manor house. This was to be a virtual replica of a mansion which then stood in Northampton, England.

Captain Barlow was anxious to have the dwelling completed during 1880, hence haste was imperative. He selected William Sparkes, also an Englishman and an old friend of the Barlow family, as master builder. The crusty personalities of these two men never blended too well and many an acrimonious dispute resulted. The firm of George Hartley, Edward, and Albert Jenkinson, employed as contractors for the masonry, recruited a crew of some twenty-five men and began to set up the walls and fireplaces.

The actual construction of the mansion was a laborious and difficult process, for the dwelling was to be on an unprecedented scale for frontier Iowa. It was to contain a large number of rooms, an immense central hall, hand-carved woodwork, stained-glass windows, and fireplaces in nearly every room. It is scarcely surprising that construction of such a manor house in sprawling fron-

tier territory presented baffling problems. The fact that it was built so well that Barlow Hall still stands virtually intact in its lonely grandeur constitutes a monumental achievement.

Raw materials were hauled to the grounds and then transformed into building materials. The brick used throughout was made from native clay. Most of the supplies came from Sioux City, then numbering about 6000 inhabitants. Roads from the city were but glorified trails which were blocked by snow in winter and became bottomless streaks of mud during wet weather. Ox teams and horses had to ford Big and Little Whiskey creeks and to ascend the steep hill on the crest of which the great house was rising. During the construction of Barlow Hall, a blizzard struck with all its fury. Roads were blocked and the workers who were quartered in flimsy shanties near the Hall suffered real agonies. Construction was also impeded by a flood which inundated much of the bottom land between Sioux City and the new mansion. This flood interrupted the movement of raw materials and supplies and drowned many of the cattle that were on the estate. The well-digger, Pat Crow, toiled all summer without striking water. Yet Barlow Hall was finally completed and ensconced on its hill.

It emerged a three-story brick, slate-roofed

mansion, with barns, outbuildings, and landscaping to match. A number of trees were planted on the slope between the house and the flat lands below, and two winding trails through the grove converged near the Hall. These trees were small during Barlow's occupancy of the estate but have since grown to imposing size. The great doors were surmounted by a keystone with an armorial device, the initials AB, and the date 1880. They swung open to reveal a huge hall with a large fireplace at one end. This hall featured heavy, solid woodwork, richly carved and decorated. Opposite the doors were great stained-glass windows which filtered sunlight in intricate patterns upon the floors and walls. There were many large, high-ceilinged rooms on the first floor, most of these containing separate fireplaces. The kitchens were also on this floor. A wide, open stairway led to the second floor where a long hall was flanked on both sides by more big, high-ceilinged rooms. The partitions in Barlow Hall have been shifted on various occasions during its long history and it is now difficult to determine the number of rooms originally in the mansion. Estimates range from twenty-two to thirty-four, although an actual count of the number of rooms now extant reveals twenty-seven.

Barlow Hall was also lavishly furnished. The

dining room boasted monogrammed linen and solid silver. Treasures in armour, old swords, oil paintings, bronzes, and highly polished furniture were scattered throughout the manor house. About the only existing remnant of this departed splendor is a tall clock in a dark, charred oak case that now stands in the office of the Sioux City public library. Surely present-day Barlow Hall, with its silent, empty rooms and its tattered wall paper, gives no indication of its former opulence. Staffing the house was a retinue of servants catering to the Barlows and their numerous guests. Legends still persist concerning the dauntless but futile efforts of these servants to preserve old world protocol in this frontier region. The butler's inevitable query when a neighboring farmer appeared at the front door, "Tradesman or gentleman?", provoked mingled irritation and amusement.

This attitude of the servants merely reflected the views of Captain Barlow. While his neighbors looked with amused tolerance upon his efforts to re-create an English manor house, they found it more difficult to tolerate his arrogance. Intent upon hunting and his own purposes, Barlow had a sublime disregard of trails, bridges, roads, and other impediments created by his neighbors. This involved him in continual and protracted disputes, many of which culminated in litigation. On one

occasion he blocked a trail with new fencing. The sheriff and his deputy arrived and were confronted by Barlow, flourishing two small, pearl-handled pistols. Wisely turning to strategy, the two westerners so praised the dainty weapons that they persuaded Barlow to hand them over for further admiring inspection. When this ruse succeeded, Captain Barlow was taken to Sioux City.

At another time, he blocked the important upper Smithland road and removed a bridge over Little Whiskey Creek. Since this road was much-traveled and the bridge had cost Woodbury County over \$300, the board of supervisors acted promptly in seeking redress. Captain Barlow, however, stoutly defended his somewhat arbitrary actions. In reference to closing the road, he quoted the Iowa code, which granted him six months after notice in which to move fences. He also warned the township trustee that he would hold him "answerable in your private person" if the county opened the road. As for the removal of the bridge, Barlow regarded himself as a misunderstood public benefactor. He argued that the bridge had been wrongly located in the first place, and that the supervisors should do some grading and put the bridge in the right place instead of attacking honest men. Furthermore, countered the Captain, "I have put in four days hard work

with two men and a team each day removing that bridge and I think I have done my share." This dispute was taken through the district court, appealed to the State supreme court, and Barlow was eventually assessed \$500 damages and costs.

Barlow and his wife lived in the mansion for several years, although they traveled to England during some of the winters. While the fireplaces were huge and numerous, they did not prove to be a complete success in heating the cavernous halls. The great dwelling stood exposed to wintry blasts and was yet unscreened by the trees which had been planted. Hence, the Barlows often preferred ancestral England during the winter months. After a few years, he moved to an estate near London and returned to his Iowa manor only on occasion.

The reasons for his departure are not entirely clear. It may have been the coldness and dampness of the Hall, it may have been nostalgia for England, or it may have been a rumored stipulation in a will bequeathing him another fortune. It is dubious that the disputes with neighbors or the county authorities particularly disturbed Captain Barlow, who apparently thrived on these wrangles. In any event, Captain Barlow lived for less than a decade in his new home. When he did return on his visits it was for only a few days at a time, dur-

ing which he inspected Barlow Hall and his Sioux City property. Each visit of the Hon. Alexander K. Barlow was duly recorded in the Sioux City papers, causing a stir in local society and derisive comments by his neighbors.

Barlow Hall has had a rather lonely and anticlimactic existence since its original owner departed. The land around it has been farmed continuously, but the house itself has often stood silent and idle. The spacious hall has been used to store grain or protect farm machinery from the weather. For a brief interval during the early 1930's the Hall was operated as a tavern, but this experiment did not prove financially profitable. At present, three rooms of the vast building are occupied by the tenants who operate the adjacent land for the owner. While properly appreciative of the woodwork and the remnants of the stained-glass windows, the present occupants rather wistfully deplore the fact that the electric light lines are not connected. There are twenty-seven rooms, but that is slight compensation for an electric washing machine that must collect dust in the corner. The present tenants also make heroic but often fruitless efforts to keep the two winding roads through the grove open to their automobile.

While rich in historic interest, the huge dwelling is now cold, barren, and dark. Most of the exte-

rior remains intact, except for partially crumbled foundations and a few bricks that have fallen from the walls. The interior is littered by tattered wall paper hanging from the walls and piled on the floor. The woodwork is split and mutilated, the hand-carving defiled, and the stained glass windows largely broken or chipped away. Yet the mansion itself still stands, for Barlow Hall was built to last. That is its tragedy. The manor house has remained to watch its glamour fade, its story forgotten, and its halls once bright with candles and alive with laughter now shrouded in clammy darkness.

C. ADDISON HICKMAN