

The House
of the
Prophet



Louis Auchincloss

With a New Introduction
by the Author

The House of the Prophet



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For Adele



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A prophet is not without honor,
save in his own country and
in his own house.

— *Matthew 13:57*



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INTRODUCTION
to
The Transaction Edition

The idea of writing a novel inspired by, though by no means factually based upon, the life of Walter Lippmann was unlike any fictional idea that I have had before or since. Like most novelists I had constantly drawn characters with bits or pieces of the personalities of men and women I had known, sometimes, where the model was no longer living, with rather large pieces, but in every case the character created was only indirectly, and sometimes not even importantly, related to the individual observed. But I was always perfectly aware that Felix Leitner, the protagonist of *The House of the Prophet*, would be instantly related to Walter Lippmann, and I had no objection to this. What I wanted to study was a man of giant intellect and piercing observation who was resolutely determined to view the world without the intervention of any preconception, prejudice or loyalty. If readers would see Lippmann in Leitner, it seemed to me that it might even elucidate my project.

I had known Lippmann since my college days. He was a

friend and contemporary of my parents. I admired him warmly from the beginning and read all his books and columns, and he was kind enough to take an interest in my early fiction. But we did not become close until he retained me as his lawyer after he had moved from Washington to New York. He was then in his seventies. He had few legal problems, but when he passed the age of eighty and his health began to deteriorate I found myself in charge of many of the details of his daily living, and after he entered a nursing home I had to be in fairly constant attendance.

Even towards the end, when his mind became cloudy, he was always possessed of rational periods, and we had some wonderful talks about the past. It was then that I began to put together my theory that his life had been a lonely and dedicated adventure in quest of truth, lonely because the necessary ruthlessness in eliminating sentiment in his search was bound to alienate both friends and family. People, I came to perceive, had always wanted to *own* Walter Lippmann, and when they found that he wasn't, so to speak, for sale, that no amount of love or devotion or gratitude or even admiration would swerve him for a moment from his goal, they often turned against him.

When my parents and their friends, for example, excoriated him for leaving his first wife for his second—a thing far from uncommon in their world—I believe it was an actual relief to them to find feet of clay in one who had seemed a bit superhuman. How they loved to cry out: “So *this* is the man who wrote *A Preface to Morals!*”

Ronald Steel and I had many lunches together while he was working on his fine Pulitzer Prize winning life of Lippmann. When he touched on the subject of the anti-Semitism of which Lippmann was sometimes accused, I insisted (as indeed I believed and still believe) that this was only another manifestation of how people resented a man

without loyalties. This would be particularly true of Jews, I argued, who were intensely loyal people and who, because of centuries of persecution, were quick to see independence as repudiation. Ronald, who had some of Lippmann's own assiduity in pursuing truth, had no hesitation in probing the matter, and he came up with some early remarks of Lippmann that had a rather nasty ring. I discounted these as mere expressions of impatience, caused by momentary irritation at some instance of vulgarity in clothes or manner, and at last he retorted, with a touch of understandable weariness at my constant preoccupation with the theme of the lone truth seeker: "Why don't you write *your* book about Walter Lippmann?"

Well, I wasn't going to do that. I could hardly engage in the massive research required and practice law and continue with my own fiction. My days were too full as it was. But it struck me that I could address myself to the problem of the truth seeker and dramatize my story with what I considered the essence of Lippmann, altering and inventing his life story as I chose to make my points more clear. The trouble with facts is that they lack verisimilitude. Imagine, for example, writing a novel about an American president who recorded his own crimes on the tapes that were used to impeach him. Who would believe you? No, my Felix Leitner, stripped of the irrelevancies of actuality, would be a finer example of the problems besetting the seeker of the grail of absolute impartiality.

My mother said once that Walter Lippmann believed that he could accomplish anything with words and that Hamilton Fish Armstrong had been right to keep his justified resentment isolated from the persuasion of his erstwhile friend's beautiful prose by returning unopened the letter in which Lippmann sought to explain his and Helen Armstrong's af-

fair. But if some things cannot be explained, a great many more can be, and language is what distinguishes us from beasts. Walter Lippmann was the most civilized human being it has ever been my good fortune to meet, and I endeavored to catch some part of his essence in these pages.

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Roger Cutter (1)

NOTHING is more shocking about old age than the speed with which even the most famous persons are isolated and forgotten. Felix Leitner had been a friend of presidents, of chiefs of state; his books and columns had been read by millions and taught in schools and colleges; his name had been mentioned in cartoon captions, in plays and even musicals, as the very symbol of the intellectual commentator, the detached political philosopher; and yet, in his eighty-third year, a "guest" at Mrs. Corliss's small but select nursing home in McLean, Virginia, he was largely dependent on me for his books, his papers, his company and the management of such affairs as he had left.

I do not mean to imply that Felix's isolation was entirely the result of the world's hardness or shortness of memory. Most of his old friends were dead or in similar condition. His daughter, Felicia, came dutifully, if rather noisily, once a month to call; the thinness of their relationship was as much his fault as hers. He had no wife, but then he had been twice divorced. And younger friends were put off by his sudden irrationalities. Some were secretly repelled; others wondered if it was worth their while to call, if he would even remember that

they had. And McLean is a half hour's drive from Washington.

He had made a considerable recovery from the stroke that had for a month paralyzed his left side. He could walk again, though laboriously, and he had fair use of his arms. His speech was usually clear, though the wrong word sometimes emerged. But his brain was given to curious twists. Sometimes he would be rational for as much as fifteen minutes at a time, a strange shrill ghost of the old Felix; at others, he would take complete leave of reality. The alteration would come without warning, as in this interchange:

"Roger, do you remember my address book?"

"The red leather one? It's with your other things in storage. Do you want me to get it out?"

"No, but I want you to do something for me. It has an invaluable list of people who do things and fix things: you know, tailors, cleaners, upholsterers, caterers, and the like. I couldn't get on without it. I want you to speak to my lawyer about putting it in my will."

"For what purpose?"

"I want to leave it to Harvard."

It never ceased to seem strange to me that I should be the person in the world closest to Felix. All of my life I had seen him through a barrier of older, more privileged people. As a boy, in Seal Cove, Maine, he had been the revered friend of my parents, the star of their circle. When as a young man I had been favored with his friendship, there had been nothing like intimacy. It had been the relationship of master and disciple. And even in the last years, when as his principal research assistant I had come to play a major role in his personal life, running his household, paying the bills and so forth, the factor of employment had placed a certain distance between us. But now, suddenly, I was "in charge of" Felix Leitner. And it was a position, too, that nobody disputed, nobody envied me.

Except perhaps Julie Pryor. She had been the closest of his woman friends in the last years and had acted as his hostess at the little parties in Q Street. It had been she who had persuaded me that Felix should be moved to a nursing home.

"It's really not safe to have him at home, Roger, no matter how well you set it up. When the next stroke comes, he should be in a spot where there's every sort of help available. I know just the place, too — Mrs. Corliss's in McLean. It isn't like a nursing home at all. Very comfortable, with only a few distinguished patients. Justice Kent went there, and old Senator Blandford. We can see him all the time and take him out for drives and meals. He might even come home if he gets better!"

Of course, we both knew that Felix wasn't going to get better. But I felt sick after this conversation with Julie. I had prayed that Felix would die before so drastic a step should become necessary. What I found hardest to bear was the speed with which one became accustomed to his present state. It was as if he had died and we had buried him and placed a crazy barber's pole instead of a tombstone on the site. Sometimes, when I sat by him in his wheelchair, watching him stare at some inane family comedy on the television screen, I would almost shriek under my breath, "Die, can't you! Die now!"

But when he was moved to the nursing home, he seemed to improve, and I had to concede that Julie had been right.

Mrs. Corliss was of Virginian origin, very distinguished, if one were to credit all she claimed. She was a little chirping bird of a woman, with raven-black dyed hair, a sharp knife of a nose and two plump hands that she was always clapping or clasping. Her establishment, a former private house, was all on one story with little oblong wings that protruded into a pretty garden and lawn. It had been "modern" when built in 1920. She could take six inmates, each of whom had a bedroom and living room. Meals were served on trays, but there was a large

parlor and a dining room for those who were sufficiently "ambulatory" to use them. The furnishing was comfortable, miscellaneous, Victorian. The walls were covered with large bad landscapes and prints of historical scenes. The service was excellent, and the nurses did not wear uniforms. The "guests" did not see each other unless they wanted to. It was not unlike a small summer hotel.

Felix seemed calmer after a few weeks in the place, and his mind was distinctly improved. But there were moments, perhaps when he sensed that he was never going to get out of there, that he had terrible tantrums. I happened to be present when he threw a glass of tomato juice at the girl who brought him his tray. He had wanted some other aperitif. Mrs. Corliss appeared almost at once, as if she had anticipated the incident.

"Now, Mr. Leitner," she said in a firm but kindly tone, tapping the tips of her fingers together, "I think I had better explain to you one of our house rules. We are all ladies and gentlemen here, and we try to get on. Mary is going to have to change her dress, which will mean that Mrs. Lydig next door will have to wait another fifteen minutes for her lunch. Now we don't want that to happen again, do we?"

Felix stared at her with his mouth half open as if he did not understand. But when he spoke, he was perfectly docile.

"It was an accident," he said bleakly.

And this was the great Felix Leitner!

It was the time of Watergate. The funeral pyre of our presidency, providing as it did a flickering background for the decline of Felix, gave me a lurid sense of national conflagration. Although I had never been an admirer of Nixon, I found that for some curious psychological reason I tended to identify myself in his plight. As the months passed with their increasingly scandalous revelations, I felt some of the agony of our chief

executive, twisting and turning, doubling back in his tracks, increasingly tangled in the mesh of his lies, an Emperor Jones alone in the fetid jungle of his misgovernment, listening to the ineluctable approach of the drums. Then I would imagine the president impeached, indicted, convicted, even jailed, standing, pale and haggard, in the corner of a prison yard while a circle of convicts mocked him. I fancied that there might be a kind of masochistic ecstasy in the sheer scale of such humiliation. The fall would be so awesome as to dwarf the crime.

On Felix's eighty-third birthday I arranged a little party in Mrs. Corliss's parlor, with champagne and a cake, for some of the old Washington friends. There were only about a dozen there, including Gladys Leitner — Felix's second wife — the faithful Julie and a nice young man from the *Washington Post*. Mrs. Corliss, very gracious, with an orchid pinned to her shoulder, glanced about among the elderly, perhaps in search of new recruits. Felix, neat and brushed, looked oddly young in his wheelchair. His snow-white hair was almost regal, and his long pale face and once so luminous skin seemed less blotched than ordinarily in these sad days. But when he rolled his large eyes you could see how bloodshot they were.

The conversation was desultory, constrained. We talked, of course, of Watergate. Gladys Leitner took the lead.

"Everyone seems to be so moral these days. I've never known anything like it! People who don't hesitate to cheat on their spouses or their income taxes, people who can't cross a border without smuggling something or fill in the simplest form without telling a lie, are suddenly very stern indeed about what goes on in the White House. It seems that in America only the president must obey the rules! But I fail to see why we should throw out an efficient administration for something that hasn't cost us a single penny or a single drop of blood. What is it they say? 'Nobody drowned at Watergate!'"

Gladys had shriveled with age, yet you could see that she had been a handsome woman. She was dyed and wrinkled and bony, but there was still a distinct air of chic, a whiff of the daring twenties, in her high heels, her jangling bracelets, her husky voice. It was notorious that she had always regretted having left Felix, but he had never given her the chance to come back. Now she seemed to be challenging the precedence of Julie Pryor, who was talking to the *Post* reporter. Julie, nearing seventy, was still blonde, with a faded, lovely elegance, the very opposite of her rival. It might have been a diplomatic question between them: who ranked whom? The divorced spouse or the "friend"?

"Did you hear that, Julie?" Felix demanded shrilly. "Did you hear what Gladys said?"

"No. What, dear?" Julie responded in that gentle voice that seemed to make every relationship intimate.

"She thinks Nixon shouldn't be impeached!"

"Oh, Gladys, how can you defend that terrible man? He's disgraced us in the eyes of the whole world!"

"Stuff and nonsense, Julie. You should spend more time away from Washington. Why, in Paris, where I've just been, everyone was asking me what 'Monsieur Neexon' had really done. They can't believe a great nation would seriously consider cashiering its chief executive for spying on a rival political party. 'Who doesn't do *that*?' they ask."

"It's not the spying, Gladys. You can tell your Gallic friends it's the cover-up."

"But if you spy, don't you *have* to cover up?"

"I'm afraid I find you very cynical."

"Perhaps Gladys finds *you* naive, my dear." This was from Felix, who seemed to be playing his old game of setting one admirer against the other.

"I do, Felix, I do!" Gladys affirmed.

"What do *you* think, Mr. Leitner?" the man from the *Post* asked, to break the impasse.

"Well, I can't help having some friendly feeling for a man who has been so appreciative of my columns. I should hate to see him shot."

A nervous titter spread through the listening group.

"Surely they won't go that far!" Mrs. Corliss exclaimed.

"Oh, but they will. You'll see. They'll back him up against a wall and riddle him with bullets, just the way they do in banana republics. Once Congress gets the bit in its teeth, you can't stop them. They've always wanted to kill a president. Now they'll do it." Felix glared about the silent half circle. "But they'll find they won't like his successor any better."

"You don't care for Mr. Ford?" the *Post* reporter asked.

"Ford? Why should I care about Ford? I'm talking about that Greek fellow. What's his name?"

"Agnew?" The reporter relaxed, as one who recognizes that he is dealing with a lunatic. "We thought he had resigned his office. To escape indictment."

"What if he did? The act regulating the devolution of the presidency provides that if the chief executive be impeached for high crimes and misdemeanors, his successor shall be the vice-president elected to serve with him, *if* that vice-president be living and competent. Certainly your man Agnew meets those qualifications. Now, whether or not a previous resignation of office will bar his claim is a matter for the Supreme Court, but I suggest their decision in *U. S. versus Elder* is controlling."

The *Post* reporter turned to me, gaping, and whispered: "Is that so? I never heard it. What the hell is this Elder case?"

I was happy to wrap another cloud over his misted vision. "Mr. Leitner is a great constitutional expert, you know," I whispered back.

His stare was followed after a moment by a little snort. "Come off it, Cutter. Who's loony now?"

Gladys Leitner sought to regain her lead. "It's the Duke of Windsor all over again," she opined. "Except there it was the conservatives who wanted to get rid of the king because of his socialist views. With Nixon it's just the opposite."

I wondered if I could read contempt in Felix's steady stare. He had always considered his ex-wife a goose.

"I thought it was the religious issue," Julie put in. "Surely if Mrs. Simpson hadn't been a divorcée, he wouldn't have had to abdicate."

Mrs. Corliss suggested that it might have been because the duchess was an American. She went on to say that if this were so, it was most unjust, as Wallis Warfield had been very well born — even, it was hinted, a distant relative of Mrs. Corliss.

"You're all wet!" Felix exclaimed with sudden loudness, and we all stared at him in surprise. "Mrs. Simpson could never have been an acceptable queen to the English," he continued in something like his old clear, faintly grating tone. "They could never have stomached the fact that there were two living men who would have been privileged to state, even in the sacred precincts of a gentlemen's club and without risk of being called out or expelled: 'I've fucked the Queen of England!'"

The effect on the listening circle was as if somebody had broken wind. Never had I heard that word from Felix's tongue. When it was necessary to be explicit, he had always used a more exact term.

"Two men?" Julie asked. "What two men?"

"Her first two husbands." I explained.

"But surely there have been queens who were widows," she protested. "What about Catherine Parr? And queens who had lovers. Yes, there was that poor woman who married George the Fourth. What about her?"

"No, no. I see it!" the *Post* reporter exclaimed with enthusiasm. "A widow would have been acceptable because her husband was dead. And if a queen had a lover who was crazy enough to make that boast in a club, he could be beaten up. Mr. Leitner is quite right. It's the fact that those two men were *entitled* to say it! That a gentleman would have had to take it from them." He turned to me and murmured, "It completely explains that whole abdication crisis. The old boy's as much on the ball as ever!"

I thought it was a good moment to tell Gladys Leitner that I wanted to ask her a favor. She nodded, and we moved to a corner of the room.

"I'm going to write a book about Felix."

"You always were," she said, with a sniff of hostility.

"I'm going to write two, as a matter of fact. The first will be a university press kind of thing, a history of his thinking. The second will be much more personal, a picture of Felix Leitner, the man. It will be . . ."

"A best seller, of course. A sensation! I suggest you get Warren Beatty for the film."

But I was determined to be patient. "It will be a serious book. Perhaps even more serious than the first. I want to tell the whole story. I want conversations, letters, everything. I want to reconstruct him, as best I can."

"And does Felix know this?"

"He's always known it. Ever since I became his principal assistant, back in nineteen fifty. He wants the whole truth told."

There was a gleam of malevolence in her black eyes. "Of course, it's convenient that he's no longer in a mental state to deny that."

"That would be true if I were lying. But I am not lying. I never lie about Felix. You should know that, Gladys. You were willing enough to make use of me in the old days when you

wanted to get close to him. And the only reason you've disliked me since is that I was loyal to him, not you. That should be a sign to you that I'm truthful."

"Of course, I know that Felix has been your whole life. I suppose it's only natural that you should want to write about him, no matter what the cost to the feelings of his family and friends."

"I don't believe that great men belong to their families or friends. They belong to the ages."

"That sounds very well, but it's often just an excuse to make a best seller out of their bad breath and body odor. Phooey! Would you put in the crazy things he said this afternoon?"

"Yes. In the proper context. With the proper explanation. To my mind they have a certain relevance to his former thinking, like King Lear's raving on the heath. I would put in nothing that was not relevant to his mind and soul, but I would put in everything that was."

"Well, that leaves me out. I was only relevant to his body. Surely you won't ask me to expose this ancient carcass to your lewd gaze?"

"I'd be only too happy to gaze at it," I replied, knowing that, with her, no flattery could be excessive. "But that is not precisely what I'm after. You were immensely relevant to Felix's soul. His leaving Frances and his family for you was the single most important emotional and moral event of his lifetime. I want you to write it up for me in your own lively words. I know you can do it. Felix always said that nobody could write letters like you. I want you to put aside all trumpery inhibitions and recreate for my book exactly what happened in the summer of 1938."

Gladys was speechless for a moment. I could see that I had struck home. "Well!" she breathed. Then she resumed her suspicious air. "I suppose you're asking every Tom, Dick and Harry to do the same."

"How many Toms, Dicks and Harrys do you think there are left? It's appalling how rapidly the past falls away. Lila Nickerson is dead."

"Oh, no! I hadn't seen."

"On Sunday, in New Mexico. It's not in the paper yet. And Aleck is a vegetable. And Frances is long gone. And so is Felix's old law partner, Grant Stowe. And Felicia's never known anything about her father. All the real characters of the drama have faded away. Except you and me."

"And Heyward. Heyward's still alive, you know."

"Yes, but he'd never talk to me. I doubt he'd even allow Felix's name to be mentioned in his presence."

Gladys appeared less sure of this. "You could try him," she suggested. "Time is a great healer. And Heyward has more ego than people think. He might even like to appear in your book. God knows what else the poor devil will have to show for his long life."

I suspected that in speaking so of her first husband, she was speaking of herself. For all her professed respect for privacy, she, too, wanted to be in my book.

"Will you think it over, anyway?"

"What else have I to do at seventy-seven but think things over?"

I chuckled silently to myself. I knew she was seventy-eight.

Our little party was breaking up. I saw Julie rise and go over to Felix. Apparently in response to an appeal from him, she leaned down and listened to something that he whispered in her ear. Then I saw him reach a hand into his coat pocket to give her a piece of paper which she slipped, rather furtively, I thought, in her handbag.

The *Post* reporter was taking his leave. I escorted him to the door.

"Of course, there's nothing in that Agnew business," I assured him. "I know you'll be kind in your write-up."

He did not want me to think that he had been taken in, even for an instant. "He's wonderfully convincing, isn't he? You begin to wonder which is the visitor to the loony bin, you or he?"

When the last guest had gone, I went to say good night to Felix, but he appeared to have gone to sleep in his wheelchair. I had the distinct impression that he was shamming. Mrs. Corliss and I had a brief colloquy in the front hall. I congratulated her on the party, and she simpered a bit.

"We must give him all the pleasure we can," she said. "Dr. Levy says that he's subject to continual little strokes now. Sometimes he is not even aware of them. But it can't be long before there's a bigger one."

Because she loved clichés, I supplied her with one. "When it comes, it will be a release."

"I try to think of it that way."

"Did you find any new recruits among the guests?"

"Oh, Mr. Cutter!" She gave me a little push. "You are terrible!"

The next morning I telephoned Julie from my apartment.

"What was that paper Felix gave you?"

"Oh, Roger, I *knew* you'd see it. You never miss anything. The trouble is, darling, that he made me promise not to tell you. Of course, I know that a promise to a person in his condition is not exactly binding, but, still, when he's so earnest and seems so rational, it's hard not to do as he says."

"Just tell me one thing, Julie. Was it important?"

"Well . . . no, not anything that concerned Mrs. Corliss or you or any of your arrangements. I think he really appreciates all you do for him. Certainly the rest of us do!"

"That's not the point. Does it concern his career?"

"Well . . . yes, I suppose it does."

"Was it something that he wants published?"

"Roger, you're a fiend! How did you know?"

"Listen to me, Julie. You and I are in a very delicate position. We are Felix's closest friends — the only real ones he has left. But he is incompetent, at least some of the time, and I have no legal right to be handling his affairs. The bank has been co-operative; so has his lawyer. They've given me the green light. But I'm still sticking my neck out, and one day I may face a lawsuit from darling Felicia and her moron brother. I'll take that risk — fine — but only on condition that I know *everything* that's going on."

There was a long pause. "Very well," Julie said with a sigh. "I have to admit that's fair. We certainly don't want Felicia barging in and taking over. What Felix gave me was a column. He asked me to deliver it to Sam Perkins."

Sam was the Washington editor of *Profiles*, the weekly magazine that had contracted to take a monthly column from Felix shortly before his stroke.

"And you've done that?"

"I've done it."

"Thank you, dear. Good-bye."

I hung up. There was no time to lose. Less than an hour later I was in Sam's office on Connecticut Avenue, to confront his boyish, tousle-haired, disingenuous evasions.

"But what is your authority for asking to see it, Roger?" he persisted.

"I tell you I have none — other than that I'm the spokesman of decency and fair play. Felix Leitner is a lunatic — or an incompetent, if you prefer the word. I do not wish — nor would he, in his right mind — to have the end of his career muddled by the publication of some piece of idiotic drivel!"

"You think I'd publish idiotic drivel?"

"You might. Anyone might. If it was by Felix Leitner."

"Well, then, it's not idiotic drivel."

"Is it perfectly rational?"

"Perfectly rational?" He hesitated. "What is that?"

"You know what I mean, Sam."

"Let me put it this way. It's novel. It's imaginative. It's interesting."

"You confirm my worst fears. It's nutty."

"Well . . . let's say it's unusual."

"Sam Perkins, if you don't give me back that column, I'll tell the whole world you're nothing but a yellow journalist!"

"All right, Roger, all right!" He raised his hands deprecatingly in the air. "I'll give it back to you. But you're going to have to square us with Leitner. Suppose he accuses us of censoring him? I'm not at all sure that he's as far gone as you think. I want Leitner's assurance, in his own writing, that he has withdrawn that column."

"You shall have it."

This gave me no trouble. Felix signed all the correspondence that I set before him without reading it. I took the piece of paper that Sam now handed me and left his office. In the corridor of his building I paused to read the following and to thank my lucky stars that I had taken action.

America is engaging in one of the most ancient of tribal rituals: the burial of the fisher king. The ailing chief is made responsible for the wasting of the land; the tribe must kill and bury him so that out of his corpse, symbolic of winter, may sprout the redeeming spring. Americans have always loved and hated their presidents. Though they depend on their leadership in time of trouble, they are fretted by it in time of peace. It reminds them that they are never really free. Periodically, the chief must die, that his people may enjoy the illusion of living. Even Washington, the father, had his would-be entombers. Lincoln was buried in the body of Johnson.