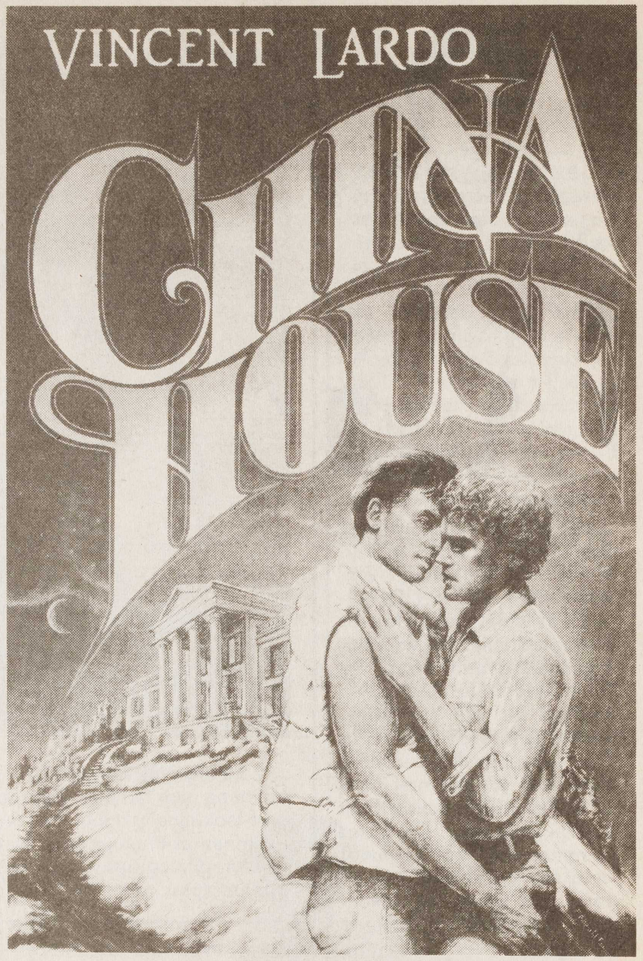
Brotherly Love

CHINA HOUSE, by Vincent Lardo, $7.00



Howard Roth, an expert on the supernatural, and his novelist son Ken are drawn into the mystery of China House, an elegant, deserted (and some say haunted) mansion perched on a hill outside the city of Salem. Scott Evans, the young master of the desolate estate, and his handsome lover Michael have asked Howard to help prove that Scott's twin brother, who died mysteriously as a child, still walks the halls of China House.

They watched the house grow larger and larger as they approached it until finally all they could see from within the car were the bases of the enormous doric columns and the lower half of the windows and front door which were set back a good distance because of the great width of the snowy portico.

The car came to a halt and almost at once its occupants emerged from all four doors, their shoulders raised and their heads held down in a futile effort to keep the snow out of their faces. Scott opened the trunk, bags were quickly pulled out, and soon all the luggage had been brought out. From a distance both car and people resembled miniature cardboard representations, blown about by the blizzard before a grossly oversized doll house.

Scott opened the front door and stood aside, allowing his guests to enter before him. They stepped in, one after the other, each carrying one or two bags, faces red and hair and coats covered with snow. The door closed behind them and they stood in a semi-circle in the sudden quietness of China House.

The entrance hall, like everything else about China House, was vast. The expanse of marble floor was broken only by several teak chairs, a long table polished to the point of brilliance, and a tall grandfather clock, its ivory face inlaid with intricate Chinese etchings. The marble floor and white walls gave the impression one had entered a temple or church, a holy place which commanded respect and reverence.

At the far end of the hall were the stairs to the second floor. The staircase was wide enough to accommodate a half dozen people, ascending or descending six abreast, and the steps were covered with a plush green carpet. The passageway beyond the stairs was unlit.

They stood like worshippers, silent, as if awaiting the arrival of the keeper of the temple and not daring to move without instructions lest they perform a forbidden act and anger the God within. The snow which had covered them melted, leaving them unadorned, wet, and looking pathetically vulnerable. It was as if the house was forcing them to declare its superiority before allowing them to occupy its being.

Howard lowered his two bags to the floor and took off his wet topcoat. "I think my entire house could fit inside this hall," he said. His tone implied respect rather than comparison.

Now that Howard had made a move and broke the silence the others became animated, putting down what they carried and removing their outer garments.

"I'm awed," Ken said as he walked to the clock and stood on his toes, trying to get a closer look at its majestic face.

"So am I," Alice agreed, "and this is just the entrance hall."

"You ain't seen nothing yet," Mike commented as he ran his fingers through his straight black hair.

"I don't remember the stairs being carpeted," Scott said. "I thought they were marble like the floor." He was the only one who had not yet moved since entering the house; he stood with his back to the door and his eyes directly on the staircase that loomed before them. His eyes moved up and down the plush covered steps, over and over again. As soon as he spoke everyone turned to look at him and once again an eerie silence pervaded the hall of China House. It was Mike who broke the almost hypnotic mood as he stepped between Scott and the staircase, obliterating Scott's view as he took the valise from their host's hand as one would relieve a child of a burden.

"We have company. Wet company. Let's get them comfortable," Mike stage-whispered.

Scott sprang into action and the tension, real or imagined, was dispelled as he flung open a closet door and told everyone to hang their coats in it. Next he marched to one set of sliding doors and with some effort pulled them apart. "The main salon," he said with a flourish of his arms. He spoke the words in jest but none of his guests laughed or even smiled. They could only stare.

What they saw was a room which dwarfed the hall in size and overwhelmed it with its opulent decor. An array of American and Chinese antiques, not clashing but blending so that teak and pine, ivory, jade, silk screen and hooked rugs, captain's lamps and bird cage tables came together and presented a picture of rich taste and comfort. A marble fireplace dominated the far wall and was flanked by tall windows, unobstructed, allowing the viewers a picture postcard scene of the snow that now whirled about with blinding rapidity.

"China House is the best of the gay gothics." — *The Weekly News*, Miami

As they looked at the salon Scott crossed the hall and opened the opposite set of doors. "The dining room is here and behind it the sun room and kitchen. As I remember you can get to the kitchen from the sun room or straight past the stairs." Scott turned and pointed toward the dark passage. The smile faded from his face and was replaced with a look of pure terror. He staggered backward, his arm still extended, his finger pointing. "Christ. Holy Christ."

The others, rooted to where they stood, could only follow the line of the pointing finger. A small boy emerged from the shadowed passageway and walked slowly toward them. His silky blond hair cast an eerie glow in the dim afternoon light. He wore a parka and yellow rubber boots. When he saw Scott's reaction to his appearance and noted the others staring at him he stopped walking and stood as still as a statue.

"It's him," Scott whispered. "Mike, it's him." The arm pointing at the child trembled spastically.

Mike moved to Scott's side and put his arm around his friend's shoulders. "Who are you?" Mike asked the boy, his voice calm and steady. Gently he pulled Scott's arm downward until the finger, still pointing, was aimed at the marble floor. "Who are you?" Mike repeated.

The boy remained silent, staring at them as they stared at him.

Ken looked at Howard. His father's eyes were fixed on the small boy. A thin film of sweat covered Howard's forehead. Ken's hand reached for Howard's elbow and he felt Howard respond to the touch as one would respond to a more than small charge of electric current. Alice's gaze was directed at Mike Armstrong.

"We won't hurt you," Mike said. He took a step forward and placed himself between the boy and Scott Evans . . . .

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