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LETTERS OF LAURENCE HOUSMAN TO
GRACE M. MARTIN

By FRANK R. GIORDANO, JR.

The letters* which form this volume were brought to my attention by Professor Richard Cary and his staff at the Colby College Library. The letters were presented to Colby by Mrs. Martin before she died; and though some letters in the full correspondence seem to have been lost, the series as collected retains a completeness in charting the growth and development of a friendship from its inception in 1944 to its conclusion with Housman's death in 1956.

I do not feel compelled to provide an introductory narrative of Housman's previous life, for he himself has done so, and splendidly, in his autobiography *The Unexpected Years* and novel *A Modern Antaeus*. These letters are but a supplement to Housman's biography; and to the works above, especially the first, I must refer the reader who desires more personal information. Nevertheless, a few brief remarks about the actual correspondence seem in order.

Grace Mountcastle Martin (1892-1968) was the wife of Professor David Terry Martin, for many years chairman of the Department of Speech and Drama at the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College in Stillwater, presently Oklahoma State University. Mrs. Martin also taught in the department. When Professor Martin instituted a series of lectures, readings, dramatic performances, he and his wife entertained the visiting guests in their home. Thus, the Martins met numerous prominent literary and artistic people with whom Mrs. Martin subsequently corresponded and from whom she received many letters and inscribed volumes. She also received from these people letters of introduction to a number of English authors and artists, whom she visited when she and her husband traveled abroad. Presumably she met Laurence and Clemence Housman in this way. To her friends across the Atlantic Mrs. Martin was exceedingly generous in matters of gifts and food parcels following World War II.

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Mrs. Martin was interested in Colby College's Thomas Hardy collection and its Kelmscott Press editions. In the beginning she donated a few items to the library, and in later years sent nearly every literary artifact she owned to Colby. The Housman letters and inscribed volumes were among the gifts.

The letters themselves provide some valuable perspectives about Housman the man. They are generally charming and gracious, a decorous Victorian's expression of gratitude to a beneficent American admirer and friend. Housman's amicable, chatty tone is reflected in letters whose rambling, informal style and composition often mask the importance he attached to epistolary correspondence. Others of the letters, those dealing with his and Clemence's advancing age and declining health, are always courageously and hopefully dignified, even poignant, though never sentimental or maudlin. Like the ideal Arnoldian stoic, Housman resigned himself to his limited talent and his deserved literary obscurity; then zestfully went about the enjoyable tasks of writing his books and giving his B.B.C. talks until late in his eighties. His will to live remained strong up to the time of his sister's death.

But these letters give up glimpses of much more than an English author's peaceful decline. Until his death, Housman retained the tenacious humanitarianism that involved him in woman's rights, European hunger, and the pacifist movement; while his abundant charitable generosity towards individuals persists in his wish that even Stalin may find peace in Heaven after a brief stay in Purgatory. The intellectual and ethical liberty that characterizes the early Housman is seen in his continued concern with the questions of artistic freedom and censorship, his iconoclastic treatment of the Bible and the Arthurian legends, and his religious rationalism.

Nor do these letters lack their lighter moods. Housman reveals himself as an anti-modern in his dramatic criticism, his single incursion into the field being somewhat uninspired. He takes amused delight, inveterate Victorian that he always proudly remained, in teasing Mrs. Martin for her Victorian epistolary reserve. And he obviously felt childlike joy in indulging his sweet-tooth with Mrs. Martin's ample gifts of brown sugar. Finally, and more poignantly amusing, Housman reflects throughout the correspondence his concern over his poor and weaken-

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ing memory. It gets so bad that, in 1951, after seven years of correspondence, he can ask Mrs. Martin if she is not one of his American friends who send gift parcels at Christmas!

In editing these letters, my objective is to provide a clean text that reproduces Housman with scrupulous accuracy. But the author's handwriting is not always entirely clear. Thus, in transcribing his punctuation I am guided by the principles of accurate grammar; and when it is doubtful whether Housman uses a comma or period, a colon or semicolon, I decide according to the requirements of the context. When Housman clearly errs, I reprint the error. Also, I retain British spellings and Housman's misspellings. Housman's inconsistencies in grammar and his idiosyncratic use of the dash are reproduced. In two or three cases, I take the liberty of completing sentences with periods and closing parentheses.

1

Feb: 29th
1944

Dear Mrs. Martin

Thank for your kind letter of appreciation. It is always pleasant for an author to know that he has found sympathetic readers. I am still at work, and am preparing for publication this year a sort of Anthology from my books of the last 50 years—under the title of "Back Words and Forewords"; but I may only be able to publish it in England, as I do not control the copyrights of some of my books which have been published in America.

I was glad to get from you some news of the whereabouts of my old friends the Alec Millers.¹ I have not heard from them for such a long time.

I think Mr. Kerencky will find that 'The Golden Sovereign' is still obtainable from Messrs. Charles Scribner and Sons. They have also, I believe, published my most recent book "Palestine Plays".

Again thanking you
Yours sincerely
Laurence Housman

2

Aug: 2nd
1944

Dear Mrs. Terry Martin

Your intention—in the matter of enclosing a stamped envelope for

¹ Alec Miller was a well-known wood sculptor from Chipping Camden. A native Scot, Miller worked in England and America, carving the great figure of St. George in Coventry Cathedral and the gates at Bryn Mawr. Miller spent a year at Oklahoma State during World War II.

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reply—was good; but the head of the Duke of Windsor does not frank letters from this country; and had I used it, you would have had to pay penalty postage at your end.

I am not sure whether I remember correctly how much information you wanted about my latest publication, and those which are to come. The last—published two years ago—was 'Palestine Plays': the next will be 'Samuel, the King-Maker'—another rather iconoclastic play about a Biblical character. The one after that will be "Back Words and Forewords", an Anthology from all or most of my books published during the last 54 years—showing how much I have changed in opinion, choice of subject, and style. After that?—I don't know; possibly a book, not yet written, called "Surprising Tales".

Yours sincerely
Laurence Housman

3

Dec: 1st
1944

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

Your kind gift of tea has reached me, and its good flavour and quality have been a refreshment, at a time when good tea is difficult to come by. But my gratitude has in it a disturbing element; and I feel I must make an honest confession—even at the risk of earning your reproaches for my forgetfulness . . . I cannot, for the life of me, remember who you are! My only excuse is that with old age (for I am now in my eightieth year) my memory—especially for the names of my friends—has begun to go.

If your gift had come to me from an English address, I should have taken 'Terry' for a clue—and made a guess that 'Martin' is the married name of the actress who played so beautifully the part of 'the Duchess' in one of the scenes of 'Victoria Regina' in the London production. But as your address is in America, I do not think this is likely.

So I can only throw myself on your mercy, and say—if I ought to know who you are, forgive me! But whether I *ought* or ought not to know your name and your identity, my gratitude for your kind benefaction is real and lively.

I have waited a few days since the arrival of the parcel, in the chance of a letter following to enlighten me, and supply the missing link. But as none has come this letter must go to carry my thanks to the kind unknown; and I wonder whether, a few months hence, a letter will come, 'opened by the censor', and give me the missing clue?

Meanwhile I remain

Yours sincerely + gratefully
Laurence Housman

4

Sept: 24th
1945

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

I am writing to let you know the tea arrived safely three days ago.

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It has been sampled, and is much appreciated.

Many thanks for your kind thought of me, and the form it took. But I think I ought to tell you that our tea-ration *is* sufficient for us; so you must not go on thinking that we are suffering from shortage. Others—who drink tea three or four times a day—do have to economise; so, at Christmas we shall be able to send some of our superfluity to friends who need it more.

It is very pleasant to have kindness coming to us from such a distance, and from some one who one has not yet met.

I hope the Atomic Bomb has frightened the nations into making a real effort for world-peace. But *fear* is not enough; there must be good will too. With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely
Laurence Housman

5

April 18th
1946

Dear Mrs Terry-Martin

Two days ago your kind and bountiful gift of good things reached us, and again many thanks. My sister² specially welcomed the prunes, which lately we have not been able to get. But I must relieve my conscience by telling you once more that, though now and then there is shortage of a few things we like, we never have to be hungry or go short of what is necessary for our daily sustenance. This is the only country in all Europe which is *not* suffering from under-nourishment or starvation.

I cannot bring myself, even indirectly, to pass on your gift to where it is so much more needed. But I hope you wont mind my telling you that you have enabled me to send some of our own household stores of simpler and less attractive eatables to the "Save Europe Now" organization, which with money and food is trying to save many thousands of lives in all the countries (enemy and allied) which until the next harvest (or unless more shipping can be released to bring grain and meat from North + South America,) will be in dire need. Already the deathrate has greatly increased especially among young children, while in some countries it is said that people are eating more than is good for them, and wasting also large quantities of what they cant eat.

I fancy that there was a small contraband item in your consignment, which was not listed with the other things. Of that particular item my sister is a consumer: I am not. So she sends you separate and special thanks.

We have been having a lovely April of almost continuous sunshine. On April 14th when 'summer time' started, I wrote the enclosed poem, which was published in this week's 'Time + Tide'.³ As it bears on what

² Housman's sister is Clemence Housman, an engraver and author who shared her brother's home for over seventy years.

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I have been saying about starving Europe, I send it along as a commentary thereon.

Again many thanks for your kind thought of us.

Always sincerely yours
Laurence Housman

6

as from Longmeadow¹
Street
Somerset

May 10th
1947

Dear Mr Martin

I cannot tell you how much your surprise packet of good things pleased and cheered me. It came under unusual and painful circumstances.

My doctor had packed me off two days before to a Nursing Home in Bristol for a severe operation, from which he assures me I am going to recover, though at the age of 82 it was a rather risky experiment. The pain had become just bearable when your parcel arrived. My sister, paying me her first visit brought it for me to open. She has taken it back with her, and I shall not begin eating the contents till I get home. Two small items I shall hand over to her—the cigarettes; as I am a non-smoker; but all the rest I shall wolf with great enjoyment; so I send you many thanks for your kindness.

I think you good people in America fancy we are much more short of food than we really are; and I can't help feeling that all your bounty ought to go to half-starving Europe, especially Germany and Austria.

My Nurse say I mustn't right more; but I felt I must let you know without delay how much your gift has gladdened me.

I found no letter in the parcel. I hope it has not fallen out by the way; it does not seem to have been opened for inspection, and was quite tightly packed.

Yours sincerely and gratefully
Laurence Housman

7

June 13th
1947

Dear Mrs Martin

I must answer your kind letter, and thank you again for your parcels

3 The cutout of Housman's "Summer Time, 1946" has a holograph correction in the eleventh line.

4 This letter was probably written by Housman's sister, who undertook her brother's correspondence while he was hospitalized. This may explain the letter's being addressed to Mr. Martin. Miss Housman was then in her eighty-sixth year.

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of good things. Also my Sister thanks you for the hair-net (unobtainable here just now). She *does* wear one.

It rejoiced my heart to hear that you admire 'The Were Wolf'. I have been trying to get it reprinted here: but the paper-shortage is so great that my publisher cannot promise it this year, or even next.

I suppose you have not read her greatest book—so few people know of it: "The Life of Sir Aglovale de Galis". It was quite a failure with the general public, but a few people say it is the most remarkable book they have ever read. Unfortunately, to be understood, it needs that its readers should know Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, as it is a reconstruction of the life of one of the Knights of the Round Table. Malory seems to have read elsewhere this lost life but makes only a very few references. It is the story of a Knight who put Truth above Honour: for which King Arthur never forgave him, as it was contrary to the knightly code of ordeal by battle, in which of course the wrong man often wins in real life (though not in Malory).

It is curious that in the 2nd hand market this failure (like *The Were Wolf*) fetches a high price, and is very difficult to get.

As you admire 'The Were Wolf' I thought you would be interested to hear of this other. I am getting on, but slowly: and I have a second and more severe operation awaiting me in a couple of months time.

Yours very sincerely
Laurence Housman

8

July 30th
1947

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

Your bountiful gift arrived this morning, and was received with whoops of delight, for you have hit on two of our chief shortages—sugar and rice; and the sugar comes just when my Sister is starting her jam making, which is very much restricted by the small amount of sugar we are allowed. With what you have sent us we can make about 12 extra pounds of jam. Very many thanks for your repeated kindness, and the very acceptable selection you made for us, though I assure you again that our shortage does not, in any item, amount to actual hardship; and in comparison with other countries we are well supplied with all the basic necessities.

As a small return-thanks offering I am sending you a book of mine which has not been published in America: I gather that two publishers to whom it was offered did not think the last article would suit American taste.⁵ I hope it will not offend yours. I was brought up with a lot of afflicting Victorian repressions, against which I soon began to

⁵ The work Housman refers to is probably *The Preparation of Peace* (London, 1941), the last selection of which is entitled "Stale Customs," an essay which deals with the prudish and repressive customs regarding language, and their effects on freedom of expression. Mrs. Martin donated this book to Colby College. See also letter of December 23, 1947.

rebel when I grew up, and have been rebelling ever since. My latest book, which will be out in a week or two—a narrative poem called “Cynthia, a Love-story” goes further in freedom of expression than anything else I have written; and I am looking forward with interest to how it is going to be received by the reviewers and the public. It is not a book I am inclined to send at a venture to any one of whose sympathetic acceptance I could not be sure. But I have given my publishers a list of possible subscribers both here and in America, and I think your name is among them. But it has a drawback; it is a limited edition at a very high price, which apparently is reckoned to make for safety from possible prosecution; though a K. C. friend of mine to whom I submitted the book for legal opinion assures me that it is now quite ‘safe’—but would not have been 25 years ago which was when I wrote it.

I tell you this as a sort of warning, for I would not like you to get a book of mine of which you would disapprove.

Apropos of your parcel my Sister asks me to thank you specially for the two bits of elastic you enclose in the sugar parcel. Elastic is one of the things she sometimes wants and cannot get.

With our renewed thanks and greetings

Yours sincerely
Laurence Housman

9

Sept: 3rd
1947

Dear Mrs Terry-Martin

Many thanks for your letter. I hope you found on your return home, that my book had arrived safely. I forget now which of my books it was.

The publishers of ‘Cynthia’ are Messrs Sidgwick and Jackson, 44 Museum Street, London W.C.I. It is a limited edition on hand-made paper, signed by the Author, price 2 guineas. I *hope* it will be out in a week or two; but I go to hospital for my second operation on Sept: 12th; and some-how, between now and then, the whole edition has to come to me for signature (500!) as I cannot go up to London to do it.

I don’t know what arrangements have been made for publication in America.

Thank you for your kind offer of more sugar. I can’t pretend that it would not be welcome, as my Sister is a great jam-maker. But she says (though grateful for the offer) that you are not to think of sending her stockings: she has sufficient to last her for the rest of her life (now aged 86).

I quite expect to survive my operation. If so, we shall be corresponding again: if not I send you my good wishes for your future health and happiness.

Yours sincerely
Laurence Housman

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10

as from Longmeadow
Street
Somerset

Oct 6th
1947

Dear Mrs Martin

Your letter of Sept: 18th, telling me that another parcel of good things was on its way, reached me in hospital, where I still am, recovering from an operation. I expect to be out within a week or so, completely mended; so I write as from my home address.

It is very kind of you to repeat your very welcome gifts so lavishly. The sugar will be especially welcome for jam making, as that is one of the things we are most short of; but I continue to protest to kind friends in America, Australia and elsewhere that we are not in a state of semi-starvation or any shortage at all that amounts to suffering. We are just a little bit inconvenienced, and that is all that it amounts to.

My Sister asks me to thank you very specially for the elastic, and also for the cigarettes which she smokes and which I do not.

You ask how much a 'guinea' is. It is a pound and a shilling. I don't know when it started or why, nor whether it came before the pound or after. I hope that when the book you have ordered reaches you, you won't think the price too extravagant. I do myself; but there is curious reason for it behind the scenes: publishers here have found that if a 'risky' book is published at a price which prohibits promiscuous buying by all and sundry, it lessens the likelihood of police interference. There has been an unexplained delay in publication, and the book is not yet out for sale or review; but it will be before the end of the month.

Your letter has not your complete address on it; I hope I have remembered it correctly. Again many thanks for all your kind thoughts for me.⁶

Yours sincerely
Laurence Housman

11

Dec: 23rd
1947

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

Your letter of Nov: 31st (there is no such date in the English Calendar!) gives me perturbations. You ought certainly to have received

⁶ The envelope is addressed as follows:

Mrs Terry Martin
? College Centre
Stillwater Oklahoma

USA

Mrs. Martin's Stillwater address was 37 College Circle.

acknowledgement of your bounteous gift of sugar; and though my memory is confused about it—as I was in hospital undergoing an operation at the time—I think I remember writing to you myself; though my Sister was answering all my correspondence for me that she could; and I think there was a hairnet in the parcel which she very much welcomed and also some elastic. Anyway here are thanks now, and assurance for you that your gift did not go astray.

You also mention a book as having just arrived. And again my memory is hazy. Months ago I sent you a book of my own—"The Preparation of Peace" and I think you acknowledged it. Did I also tell you, adventurously, of another book called 'Cynthia' (which was about to be published in a limited + expensive form, as a safeguard against police prosecution) and did you order it in spite of my warning, and is that the book which has now arrived? If so I shall be a little anxious to know whether you think it *ought* to have been prosecuted. Its publication was delayed for nearly two months: and so far I have seen no reviews of it.

I am making a rather slow recovery from the after-effects of my operation (which was a severe one, but was reckoned successful). It is mainly weakness now that I have to get over; and I am assured that when the warm weather comes I shall find myself in very much better health and strength that I have been for some years; but at the age of 82 plus I can't expect to be very active or productive in my remaining years. I am however well enough already still to find life enjoyable, and I have a hardy appetite and a sound digestion—gifts almost spiritual in the effects on ones happiness though very material in their nature.

I want Helen Hayes to do another series of my Victoria plays called "Old Majesty", but she has not responded to the proposal I made to her some years ago.⁷ Americans, I find, are so used to corresponding on the 'phone that they are generally bad at answering letters. Very few of my American friends keep up with me, though I know that they remain friendly in feeling. With all good wishes

Yours sincerely
Laurence Housman

12

March 9th
1948

Dear Mrs Martin

Another of your bountiful gift parcels came yesterday; and I really don't know how to thank you sufficiently for your repeated kindness. My Sister, who as my house-mate shares your gifts, asks me to thank you specially for the sugar which will enable her to go-ahead with her fruit preserving directly it begins to come in; also for the prunes which

⁷ See Housman's autobiography *The Unexpected Years* (London, 1937), 368f., for a brief account of his earlier relations with Miss Hayes.

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we shall start using today. The tapioca pudding-mixtures are a novelty here. The elastic she continues to find useful as 'dress-suspenders' etc. I wonder whether I have found the right word?

Now as regards the enclosed—which might puzzle you, if I did not send with it a word of explanation:

You may not know that I started, not as an author, but as a book illustrator. Then, as I began writing, I illustrated my own fairy tales; and my Sister (who was a wood-engraver) engraved the illustrations. This is a hand-proof of one of them—to a story called "The Rat-catcher's Daughter". It is, I think, one of the best. The original drawing is now in our National Gallery of Modern Art, and is shown with my Sister's engraving along side of it, to show how wonderfully accurate is her reproduction. Of her other engravings for my books of fairy tales the British Museum print room has an almost complete collection of hand-proofs: this in recognition of her extraordinary accuracy in what is called 'facsimile engraving'. I made my drawings for this illustration on 'tracing-paper' with an oily surface, which gives the line a slight 'scumble'; and this 'scumble' quality she has managed to reproduce perfectly. Failing eyesight, for such minute work, forced her to give up engraving about 20 years ago. My own eyesight began to fail nearly 50 years ago; but she went on engraving for one or two other artists, who preferred hand-engraving to modern 'process' work.

I am sending you this as a small souvenir of our collaboration in the past. I wonder whether you know that she also is an author—of three books now all out of print; but when paper-shortage is over I hope to get them reprinted. One of them is, I think, better than any book I have written; but only a few people have recognized its fine quality of invention and style.

I do hope I have hit upon something which will interest you, and which you may also like as a slight expression of our grateful feeling toward you for your kind beneficence.

With all good wishes

Yours very sincerely
Laurence Housman

13

May 25th
1948

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

Your continued kindness, and the very useful form it has taken, fills my Sister and myself with warm gratitude, which I am quite at a loss how to express it, as I would like to, in sending you something in return which would have a personal interest for you. I have been trying for some weeks to get you a second-hand copy of the *Were Wolf*, but I heard a few days ago from the Agent I approached, that it is unobtainable. When my next book comes out—I hope before the end of this year—a book of short stories called "Strange Ends + Discoveries"—I hope to send you a copy. My Sister asks me to thank you very

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specially for the useful oddments of tape + thread which you added to your parcels of sugar + rice. The sugar will wait for our jam-making.

I am in the throes of helping in the production of a local performance of eight scenes from my 'Victoria Regina' series entitled "Victoria + Albert." It is a heavy job, and I am very tired—but hopeful.

With greetings from us both

Yours very sincerely
Laurence Housman

14

Sept: 23rd
1948

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

Your latest bountiful gift-parcel arrived yesterday; and my Sister greeted it with cries of joy. What she most welcomed was the sugar which came just in time for jam-making, and rice, which enables us to have curries. I think the tapioca also was a well-chosen item. We send you our joint thanks for your repeated kindness. I am also sending you, by book-post my latest book, which came out a week ago, a collection of short stories called "Strange Ends and Discoveries", which I hope will amuse you. It also contains a riddle; I invite my readers to discover which six, of the twenty-four which the book contains are the "substantially true" ones: three of them can, I think, be guessed quite easily: but I doubt whether many will be able to guess the other three, because—on the 'substantially true' part of the story I have imposed an end of my own invention: I state the facts—and then I invent an edifying ending which alas! did *not* follow.

I am just back from a visit to London to meet Helen Hayes again; and see her in her new play at the Haymarket—a brilliant bit of acting; but I don't care much for the play—the 2nd half of which I thought rather poor; and its title "The Glass Menagerie" is not an attractive one, as it means nothing until one has seen the play. There was a good house, but the audience was not enthusiastic—only polite.

I have picked up an American producer, who is on the look-out for a play of unusual character for his next production; and he has carried off two of mine to consider; so I hope that something may come of it.

Greetings and many thanks from my Sister and myself.

Yours very sincerely
Laurence Housman

15

Dec: 14th
1951

Dear Mrs Terry Martin.

I am sending you, by book post, as a small Christmas greeting, a

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book of one-act plays by some of our leading contemporary playwrights, who are higher in popular esteem than I am; but it contains a play of mine which has family history attached to it, and which I hope may give it some additional interest.⁸ I forget whether I showed you the 'Family Teapot', which plays an important part in the play, and was *not* really lost at sea or swallowed by a shark, as 'Martha' angrily suggested. The Characters in the play are all real—'Laura' was our stepmother, 'Julia' and Martha her sisters—all—especially 'Laura' very true to life. The play has been acted several times by amateurs in our part of the world; and when we did it here 20 years ago, some of the audience were badly shocked at the 'Celestian Habitations' being made fun of. I guess you *wont* be.

My very bad memory obliges me to say—apologetically—that I cannot remember whether you were not one of our kind American friends who showered gift-parcels upon us at Christmas time (under the impression that we are more or less starving,) and send word beforehand. If so, I will let you hear, when it arrives. So far we have not had any losses in transit, by theft or any other 'act of God' as far as we *know*; but we have occasionally been charged customs duty on parcels in which 'gift' was not sufficiently indicated.

On Jan. 16th I am broadcasting (by BBC request), a talk about my Sister's book "Sir Aglovale de Galis", which I hope may lead to its republication. I forget whether you are one of the very few who have read it, and realise what a very remarkable book it is; though it will never be popular.

We send you our warm greetings for Christmas and the New Year; and hope that someday we may have the pleasure of seeing you again: But last November my Sister struck 90, and I am on my way to 87; so don't make it too distant a date.

Yours very sincerely
Laurence Housman

16

Dec: 27th
1951

Dear Mrs Terry-Martin

On Christmas Day, at the Church, Mrs Armstrong handed over to my Sister our share of your bounteous gifts.⁹ How did you come to know that I am a sugar-baby, and, because my Doctor says *White* sugar is bad for me, he prescribes *brown*? I hope I didn't trail my digestive weakness as a lure to the gift you have sent me; but it does come very helpfully to my tendency to absorb more sugar than is good for me. Many thanks.

⁸ Housman's play is entitled "Possession" and is included in *Seven Short Plays: For Reading or Acting*, ed. A. H. Wharrier (London, 1951), 47-78. The scene is set in the Everlasting Habitations.

⁹ The Rev. and Mrs. Armstrong, neighbors of the Housmans, were friends whom the Martins visited while in England. See letter of November 20, 1956.

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I hope that, as a return gift, I have hit on something that will interest you. The enclosed is the script of a broadcast that I shall be making some time in the New Year; but the date has not yet been fixed. I am sorry that I have no spare copy of the broadcast I am giving on Jan: 16th about my Sister's "Life of Sir Aglovale de Galis" in the hope that BBC publicity may revive interest in a book which ought not to be forgotten, as it is a *very* remarkable book. If I *do* secure its republication I shall certainly send you a copy.

My Sister is enclosing a note of her personal gratitude for your kindly indulgence of her special weakness; *hers* is cigarettes, as mine is sugar.

I do hope that someday we may meet again.

For the present, our warm greetings and best wishes for the coming New Year, and all the years that follow.

Yours very sincerely

Laurence Housman

17

March 3rd

1952

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

My Sister asks me to write for her and thank you very much indeed for your lavish gift of cigarettes of such a superfine quality.

Just now she is rather seriously ill, but does not know how serious it is: so please do not refer to it, as a *matter for alarm*, when you next write to her. A few days ago she suddenly lost consciousness for a quarter of an hour,—so completely, that, when she came to, she did not know that it had happened. She has been bed ever since, with the Doctor coming every day. She has another trouble—a foot which gives her great pain: it seems to be an unusual form of neuritis which usually afflicts only athletes who have over-strained their bones or muscles. The Doctor is fairly satisfied with her progress back to normal over the brain trouble; but for the foot he has found no way of alleviating the pain at present.

My Sister as me to tell you that she has not seen the Armstrongs since they forwarded your gift to her; but I don't think there was anything special for her to hear from them about you and the gifts which you also sent to them.

I have also been in the Doctor's hands—with a very bad cold which refused to get well; but am all right now.

My chief trouble is an increasing loss of memory, and along with that a loss of zest for writing. I doubt whether I shall be able to finish the three books which I still have on hand.

I hope I have not forgotten to write and thank you for what I had from you about Christmas: if not please forgive me.

I wonder also whether I sent you a copy of my broadcast about my Sister's book 'The Life of Sir Aglovale de Galis'; or of my other broadcast about "A Missing Scene from Macbeth". I am following this up

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with another broadcast about Malory's 'Le Morte d'Arthur', giving a much truer account of its underlying tragedy (brought about by Arthur himself to his own undoing) than is given in Tennyson's "Idylls of the King". I am trying to write that now; and if it comes off I will send it to you.

Warm greetings from us both.

Ever yours very sincerely
Laurence Housman

18

Dear Mrs Terry Martin¹⁰

I have had two letters from you—one close upon the heels of the other. I'm so glad I was able to hit on something you liked to have. That talk about my Sister's book has roused interest; and the B. B. C. has asked me to give another and fuller account of the true story of the 'Round Table'—showing what an inferior character King Arthur really was. I've written it, but no date for it has yet been fixed. I expect it will arouse wrath.

It's no use my going-on telling you that we are not really starving; but if you will, please, limit your kind gifts to an occasional packet of sugar, like the one you are sending for jam-making, we will accept it with a good conscience and gratitude for it is the one thing we are short of occasionally. In return for this, I am sending you now—or in a few days time,—a curiosity which is *not* beautiful, but will I am sure interest and amuse you. It is a photograph of myself as "Brother Juniper", taken 25 years ago, when I played the part on tour shortly after our last performance of the Glastonbury Festival." We made a profit of over £300; and then Boughton insisted on doing his setting + music of an old 'Bethlehem' play in *modern* dress, and lost us the whole of it and landed us in debt as well.¹¹ That was the end of our partnership, as he did it *against* the vote of the Committee, being very much a law to others as well as to himself.

I cannot remember whether you will have had a letter from me since about a month ago, when my Sister had a serious attack of old age—which gave me a bad fright, and obliged me to phone in haste for the Doctor. She does not know how serious it was; so please make no reference to it when you next write. Perhaps I have already made this request. She has made a fairly good recovery, but has not regained as much of her old physical energy as she would like to have for doing much more than she ought in house + garden.

My own main trouble is increasing loss of memory: otherwise I am in good health.

Cordial greetings from us both.

Ever yours sincerely
Laurence Housman

¹⁰ This letter is undated. The envelope, however, indicates it was mailed from Glastonbury, Somerset, at 5:45 P.M. on April 11, 1952.

¹¹ Rutland Boughton, writer of opera and founder of the Glastonbury Festival. The "Bethlehem" incident is fully recounted in *The Unexpected Years*, 338f.

June 5th 1952

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

My memory is now almost non-existent,—and as your letter of May 21st was forwarded to me while I was in hospital (for a dental operation) I may have already written to you to thank you for your latest benefaction. When I returned home 3 days ago I found your gift parcel awaiting me, and opened it. So many thanks for the useful assortment of contents—especially the sugar, which is our main shortage. There is one item in which at present I can't share—the nuts, which my present toothless state makes it impossible for me to enjoy, and I expect to have to wait 8 weeks before I can be fitted with new dentures which will make it possible. But my sister will enjoy them.

I hope I have already remembered to send you the script of my broadcast about "The True Story of the Round Table" which will not actually be broadcast till some date in July. If not, please send me a reminder, + I will let you have a copy of the script.

My Sister sends special thanks for the sugar for jam-making, and I for the *brown* sugar which my doctor tells me to take in preference for the white sugar which is less good for me. Mrs Armstrong has gone to Australia to pay a farewell visit to her old mother and other friends + relatives, and Mr Armstrong is left a pro tem widower.

Warm greetings from us both, and many thanks for the parcel.

I wonder what is *your* reaction to the arrival of Eisenhower in America? All, on this side, are very much interested in the contest 'Ike' versus Taft.

Ever yours sincerely
Laurence Housman

Oct: 28th
1952

Dear Kind Friend,

Your beautifully selected (and packed) gift parcel arrived yesterday. My Sister watched with delight, as I took out the various items—including the cigarettes and the little crocheted mat. (which I reckon were for *her* only). Of the rest, I don't know what pleased her most; but you did hit lavishly on what is really our only shortage that is constant—the sugar, of which (having a very 'sweet tooth'), I take more than my share.

Having said all this about their acceptability in kind, you will know how very warmly and genuinely we thank you. I think I shall have something to send you presently—not as a 'return thanks'—for I had already intended to—but because I think it will really interest you. I have been writing for the BBC my contribution to a symposium on "The experiences of Age", in which three other writers (all over 80)

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are taking part: Gilbert Murray Bertrand Russell and Walter de la Mare are the others, and I am (at 88) the oldest of the lot.

I have been able to include in my talk a tribute to my Sister who has been my life's companion and collaborator for 70 years. She is now 91! And though we are both aging fast—she growing almost daily more deaf, and I losing memory to a most troublesome degree—capable almost of forgetting my own name—we do nevertheless keep all our old interests in life + literature, + the accumulated friendships of even more than 70 years in one or two cases.

So I have been able quite honestly to say that my experiences of old age have brought me not loss but gain in all the living values that are most worth having.

I feel that this should have been an air-mail letter, but I hadn't one in the house; and having, pen, paper, and spare time all together, I am getting this letter written for early post.

Our blessings go with it: my Sister joins in warm greetings.

Ever yours very sincerely
Laurence Housman

21

March 7th 1953

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

Your bountiful gift arrived yesterday—(that word is 'bountiful', though it looks more like 'beautiful': but as it's *both* it doesn't matter!).

I'm writing, as I always do, for my Sister as well as myself: we have our different reasons for top-gratitude,—she for the cigarettes being a smoker; I, being a sweet-tooth and a non-smoker, for the sugar, especially for that double jorum of *white*, which I rescue from my Sisters jam-making, and keep all for myself.

About the cigarettes I am to tell you that you sent her some 'Pall Malls' before; and that she puts them *top* of all she has ever smoked; the others she has not yet sampled—they are new to her.

We are struggling painfully out of this long hard winter; it has been bad for both of us; and we are both feeling rather aged: but hope to renew our octogenarian youth when the Spring comes.

I'm working slowly at my new book; you shall have a copy, when it comes out—I *hope* this year. My publisher—to whom I have sent samples—assures me that it is the most amusing I have ever written.¹²

I hope you and your Husband are going to come over for the Coronation, and that we shall be able to meet again.

Just now I am feeling rather extra happy over the death of Stalin. It's risky to prophesy: but he was such an evil power in the world that I can't help feeling that it will be better without him. If there *is* such a state as Purgatory, I hope that for him it may be to look on and see the undoing of his policy in things social, spiritual and international.

¹² This book has never been published.

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Then I can say heartily 'Peace be with you!'

Our warm greetings, and many thanks for your very kind remembrance of us.

Ever yours sincerely
Laurence Housman

22

Longmeadow,
Street Somerset

July 16th
1953

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

Your beneficent "unsolicited gift" arrived yesterday; and is gratefully welcomed. The sugar will enable my Sister to make her full quota of jam and marmalade, over both of which she likes to exceed the allowance which is granted us by the registration authorities, though this year we got a more liberal an allowance than last. We cant really pretend to be 'hard up' over anything: but sugar is the one item in which we tend to exceed. My Sister sends special thanks for the cigarettes which she doesn't have to share with me.

I am going to celebrate my 88th birthday on the 18th by a week's visit to London. I hardly ever go now: but this is a special occasion, and I have a whole batch of friends whom I want to see before I depart this life. I forget whether I sent you my BB. C. broad-cast on Old Age in which I shared talks with 3 other old men—all over 80, but I was the oldest. They were Bertrand Russell, Gilbert Murray, and Walter de la Mare. In that talk I allowed myself two more years. I'm not *wanting* to die: but I've no wish to go on living if I can't go on working and enjoying life: And my literary brain has now become slow + difficult, but I have 3 books which I want to finish.

We have a hope that you will come to England again in the near future, and that it may bring you to Street.

My best bit of news is that I have secured the reprinting of my Sisters "Life of Sir Aglovale de Galis", about which I broad cast two talks early this year. I hope it will be out by the end of the year; and that it will be more generally recognized as the remarkable tour de force which I consider it to be. If you don't know it, would you like me to send you a copy? I will gladly.

Warm greetings and thanks from us both.

Always yours very sincerely
Laurence Housman

23

Aug: 3rd
1953

Dear Mrs. Terry Martin

I'm sorry, I made an offer which I can't fulfil. I said I would send

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you a copy of my broadcast "The Truth about the Round Table" but I must keep the only copy I can be sure of for publication in my collection of "Candid Commentaries" which is 2nd on the list of those which I am trying to get finished for publication.¹³ But I will send you a copy when it comes out. You wont need it so much when it does, because my Sister is going to send you a copy of the re-print of "The Life of Sir Aglovale" which I think is pretty sure to be out within the next six months.

I think my letter telling you of the safe arrival of your gift-parcel told you also that I had been on a very tiring eight day visit to London which knocked me up rather badly; I suppose it affected my brain, as I have been liable to sudden attacks of giddiness, making me unable to stand; also my bad memory has got worse. Otherwise I am feeling quite contented and happy now that a brief spell of fine warm weather has reached us.

I have just heard, with great delight, that my "Little Plays of St. Francis" are being acted at at negro school community in Southern Rhodesia. I enclose one of the photos which have been sent to me by the producer, who is mixture of Roman Catholic and Society of Friends.¹⁴ How this black rendering of his life would have pleased St. Francis!

Your Victorian streak of epistolary reserve amuses me—"Kindest regards" to *me* and "Love" to my *Sister*! In return we both send you our love and affectionate regards.

Sincerely yours
Laurence Housman

24

Aug 19th
1953

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

As I have now found the missing type-script of the True Story of the Round Table, I am able to send you the whole of the rough copy herewith.

I'm sorry it is such an untidy offering. Dont trouble to return it.
Yours very sincerely
Laurence Housman

25

July 26th 1954

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

I shall be so glad to see you again; but I doubt whether I shall be able to come and see you at the Rectory, as I am choc-a-bloc all this week with a family of German friends who are camping in my field;

¹³ Housman was never able to publish this volume.

¹⁴ The picture is at Colby College.

and I have to spend the whole day in keeping them busy and happy. They leave on Friday; then I shall be free; but if you are not staying longer, do please drop in on me with just a few hours notice any day, and we wont trouble about tea, as *their* tea-time is not till 6 o'clock.

I shall be very pleased to meet your Husband.

Yours very sincerely
Laurence Housman

26

Aug: 9th
1954

Dear Mrs. Terry Martin

With pleasure. Some of the translations were rather diffuse, and I have shortened them.

There was one item of Mithraic belief which I did *not* pass on to 'Meeting' for fear it might shock them.¹⁵ Mithraists believed that Mithras was able to walk upon the water because he was born of a Virgin, and they believed that any one so born could do the same.¹⁶ Some of those who supplied the writers of the Gospels with hearsay 'facts' passed on this information; which, in consequence, got itself tucked into the Gospel story. But those who compiled the Gospels were so avid for miracle that they over-did it, and made the miracle happen *twice over*, with variations, mistaking the variations for two separate happenings, just as they did with the miracle of the loaves and fishes, which were (I feel sure) variants of a single event.

My explanation of that event was that it had a good *spiritual* basis. Christ, on being told that a youth was there who *had* brought food for himself took it to start with, and at once others who had also brought food for *themselves*, joined in; and lo + behold! there was enough food to go round for the whole lot of them.

I told my version to Street Meeting 20 years ago, and it pleased some of them greatly, and did *not*, I think, shock any one. Quakers, I'm glad to say, do not set such store on material miracles and 'interventions' as do other religious denominations! And that is why they suit me so much better than the Church of England, or the Church of Rome, (which I tried *hard* to join, about 50 years ago! and happily failed—largely because of their silly acceptance of relics which did miracles. St John left 135 teeth behind him, and they all worked miracles. So did the blood of St Januarius, which only liquified in the Priest's hand when the collecting-box had gone all the way round and extracted from the waiting crowd every penny that could be got out of them. Father Thurston (a Jesuit and friend of Father George Tyrrell) caused great offence at Rome by exposing a whole lot of 'fakes'; but as this

15 The Meeting, as we see in this letter, refers to a Quaker gathering. See *The Unexpected Years*, 331, for other remarks on Housman's interest in The Society of Friends.

16 Mithras is the ancient Persian god of light and truth. In the second and third centuries, Mithraism competed with Christianity for converts in Rome,

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was not in any way *heretical*, he couldn't be excommunicated as Tyrrell was who went much further.¹⁷

I hope these facts will help you from tumbling into the clutches of Rome if you are tempted that way.

Yours v sincerely
Laurence Housman

27

Sept 14th 1955

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

Is it really so long since I last wrote to you? Lots of things have happened since then; but in my Sister there is no change for the better. I go to see her once a week, and take her flowers; but she does not recognise me; and when she last had a return to conscious life she was longing desperately to die. But she still has so much *physical* life that the Doctor won't do it for her, and she *may* live on for another year—or more.

The latest social event, here in Street, was the celebration of my 90th birthday on July 18th. It included speeches, dramatic performances, a birthday cake, and all sorts of mag diversions, which were amusing but tiring. On top of that, a London newspaper having made the local event public news, brought me hundreds of letters from all over the world which I am *still* answering!—as many as I can; but most of them are from strangers.

Our Rector, whom I think you know and like has been made Vicar of Glastonbury which in local importance is a rise, though a Rector is a higher clerical degree than a Vicar.

I am now very home-bound, losing my memory and also my sight and hearing; but I am well looked after by my close friends + neighbors the Roger Clarks. And when I have seen my Sister safely to her end I hope to follow soon. Thanks for the stamp; but I am not using it for an air-mail letter; as I had rather more to write about than I could get into it comfortably. With kindest remembrances and good wishes to you both

Ever yours sincerely
Laurence Housman

28

'Longmeadow,' Street
Somerset

Nov: 1st 1955.

Dear Mrs Terry Martin,

My memory is so bad that I cannot remember when your letter dated Sept 1st reached me; nor can I be sure whether I ever answered it!

¹⁷ See *The Unexpected Years*, 145, for further information about Fr. Tyrrell.

That tells you how much my mind has deteriorated since we last met. But I am so glad that you still keep a memory of me, that I will risk sending you my news twice over. I wonder whether I told you of the local celebration of my 90th birthday on July 18th. All Street spread itself to do me honour; and news of it spread to the London papers; so I was deluged with letters—from abroad also: As it was not possible to answer the hundreds that reached me—many of them from total strangers, I had to return thanks through the press. I might be a very happy man, as life still interests me so much, but my Sister is no better, she is still dying slowly, and does not recognise me. I go to see her once a week at the Nursing Home at Glastonbury; and she still seems to like flowers; and that is about the only thing I can do for her. Unhappily, she has so much *physical* life left that she may linger on for another year—or more! But it is always possible that another 'stroke' may carry her away at a few hours notice. When that happens I hope that I may follow her as soon as possible: but I don't mean to commit suicide. I have promised my publishers to finish one or two bits of work, if I possibly can; and it so happens (rather ironically) that the one they most want me to finish, is quite the most amusing I have ever written. Maybe I shall have some worth while news to send you next summer; as a part of the Edinburgh Festival will be the staging of some of my "Little Plays of St Francis" and preparations for it have already begun. I would like to go on writing, but my hand + my mind are getting tired, so I must say Goodbye. Warmest greetings to you both. I know your Husband will be glad to hear that my Farmer nephew is prospering + still loves his work. He has now two Kids—a boy + a girl, and in addition he has twenty-one cows + eighty pigs, and all this on a Farm that has only about 30 acres on which to spread itself!

Ever yours sincerely
Laurence Housman

29

Dec: 9th 1955

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

My Sister died quite peacefully; and shortly before she died laid her hand on mine when I was saying good-by to her.¹⁸

I hope, if you come to Street again, that you will let me meet you once more.

Yours very sincerely
Laurence Housman

30

Nov 20th: 1956

Dear Mrs Terry Martin

How much I wish I could help you: I'm very sorry I cannot. I don't

¹⁸ Housman enclosed in this letter a card announcing his sister's death on December 6, at the Mount Avalon Nursing Home in Glastonbury.

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know of any person or firm who buys valuable bookcovers. I have several books of my own (School-prizes) which have decorative covers; but they are all modern.

I am sending word to Sir Douglas Cockerell (in case he may be a near relation of Douglas Cockerell) telling him of your friend's offer. And that is all I can do about it.

How much I should like to see you both again. I can't remember how long ago it was when you came to Street, and stayed with the Armstrong's. They left Street six months ago—I think for a living in Worcestershire. Just before they went, my Sister (who had been an incurable patient for mental cases in a Home at Glastonbury) died; and almost the last thing Mr. Armstrong did was to read the Burial Service.

I am now all alone, and ageing fast (I shall be 93 next year) but I am being well looked-after by friends + neighbors, and also a devoted domestic; but I hope I may not have to wait long before getting my 'order of release' from a world in which I can no longer be of much use to anybody—or to myself.

So this is probably "Goodbye." With very kind remembrances to you both.

Yours very sincerely
Laurence Housman

