November 1947

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 2, no.4, November 1947, p.61-64

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WILLA CATHER'S CALL ON HOUSMAN

By Carl J. Weber

WILLA CATHER'S death on April 24, 1947, reminded a friend of the Colby College Library of the brief correspondence he had once had with her, and as a result all the communications that Miss Cather addressed to him were deposited a few weeks ago in the Library's file of Letters from Famous Authors. In one letter Miss Cather wrote reminiscently of her early friendship with Sarah Orne Jewett of South Berwick, Maine, and mentioned her own interest in Flaubert. The most valuable part of the correspondence, however, deals with Miss Cather's admiration for the poetry of A. E. Housman and with her call upon the poet many years ago. Since these letters authoritatively discredit a number of statements that have appeared in print at one time or another, it may be well to place Miss Cather's testimony on record here.

Shortly after Housman's death in 1936, one of his American admirers contributed a brief article to The Forum, in which he said:

I had written ... to Mr. Housman ... after an evening spent in ... reading his poems to a few fellow enthusiasts. ... Housman was a friend ... but ... I never tried to see him. ... I knew he had once fled when a group of admiring ladies from Pittsburgh headed by Willa Cather called on him in his rooms in Trinity College to present him with a golden laurel wreath.1

When this passage was called to Miss Cather's attention, she replied under date of January 10, 1945: "If you are able to find where the writer ... got his information, I would be obliged if you would let me know. The statement

you quote is absolutely untrue.” This request for help was enough to set Miss Cather’s correspondent to work.

As nearly as he was able to learn, the story originated years ago with Miss Cather herself; but before it reached the ears of the contributor to The Forum, it had been metamorphosed into something rare and strange by the vivid imagination and the unrestrained pen of Ford Madox Ford. This is his way of telling the story:

In Pittsburg... in early days, there was a Shropshire Lad Club. Beneath the palls of smoke that hang over that terrible valley..., there existed valiant spirits in large numbers who met for the daily study and reading aloud of Mr. A. E. Housman’s volume..., In due course, they decided to do something to make Mr. Housman aware of their admiration. They subscribed therefore for a solid gold laurel wreath and deputed Miss Cather and Miss [Isabel] McClung to carry it to the poet and explain suitably why it was sent.

Mr. Ford assured his readers that this story was one that “Miss Cather told about herself.” He had heard her tell it back in 1906, when he, as a visitor in New York, had “passed the greater part of my time in McClure’s office... because I liked the editorial staff.” At that time McClure’s Magazine was an extremely influential periodical, and on its staff were Miss Tarbell, Miss Cather, and Miss McClung. “I lounged, then, in and out of McClure’s office,” says Ford, “getting in the way of Miss Cather.” This presumably provided her with an occasion for telling him about her call upon the English poet. Ford Madox Ford’s version of the story continues:

The ladies got off the boat at Liverpool. They knew Liverpool to be near Chester and Cheshire to be the county next to Shropshire. They visited all the villages whose picturesque names give so much color to the poems. They called at innumerable parsonages to ask information as to the poet... but none of them had heard of Mr. Housman.

The two ladies... got as far as Shrewsbury... They went to the public library and asked their embarrassing question. The librarian had heard neither of book nor poet...

They went to the British Museum. . . . The quite courteous Principal Librarian . . . said that he too had never heard of Mr. Housman.

Eventually, however, the American ladies “found their way to Hampstead.” Mr. Ford now becomes quite circumstantial:

A teeny-tweeny maid opened the door of a boarding-house to the extent of a crack large enough to show her nose. They were inspected by a landlady from an upper landing. At last they were admitted to a parlor. . . . They waited a long time. At last there appeared the poet. He exclaimed: “Oh! If I had not thought you were my American cousins I would never have seen you,” and disappeared. They laid the solid gold laurel wreath reverently on the grand piano and departed.

When, twenty-five years later, Ford repeated to Miss Cather and Miss McClung this embroidered account of the visit, Miss McClung said it was “very much exaggerated.” Ford himself admits that “Miss Cather made no comment, but she never does make any comment.”

Well, on December 12, 1944, Miss Cather did comment, for on that day she wrote to her Colby correspondent “about my very pleasant visit with Housman.” She added: “Some day I intend to write a careful and accurate account of that visit for persons who are particularly interested.” If she ever carried out that intention, no news of her “accurate account” has been as yet made public. If her death prevented the carrying out of her resolve, the letters now in the Colby College Library acquire added value and significance.

“It all happened many years ago,” wrote Miss Cather, “when I was very young and foolish and thought that if one admired a writer very much one had a perfect right to ring his doorbell. On the occasion of that uninvited call—certainly abrupt enough—Housman was not in the least rude, but very courteous and very kind. I judged he was not accustomed to such intrusions, but he certainly made every effort to make one feel at ease.”

This statement ought to put an end, at once and forever, to all talk about Housman’s rudeness, or flight. Similarly,
Miss Cather’s letter dated January 10, 1945, ought to end further talk about her calling on him “in his rooms at Trinity College” (Cambridge), as The Forum has it, or in Hampstead, as Ford Madox Ford has it. Miss Cather is quite specific: “We called upon him at his lodgings in Highgate.” Not a boarding-house, but “lodgings.” Miss Cather continues: “He might perfectly well have refused to see us, as the names we sent up were simply, ‘Young ladies from America.’ It would have been very easy for him to send down word that he was not at home.” In fact, Miss Cather admits, “we scarcely expected that he would see us at all.”

The letter of January 10, 1945, also explains how Miss Cather found the poet’s place of residence:

I went not alone, but with a friend from Pittsburgh, to call on Housman at his lodgings in Highgate, a suburb of London. I had been staying in London for some time. I asked Housman’s publisher, Grant Richards, for Mr. Housman’s address, which he readily gave me. . . . My friend and I were courteously treated. . . . At that time Housman . . . was lecturing at the University of London. . . . I had not known that he was a professor there until he told me so.

Miss Cather’s last communication to her Colby correspondent is dated January 31, 1945. In it she returns to the subject of an earlier letter, in which she contradicted the report that Housman was “rude, as always.” Says she: “He wasn’t rude at all, but very courteous.”

In none of the letters is there any mention of a solid gold laurel wreath. No reference to a Pittsburgh Club of ladies “who met for the daily study of Mr. Housman’s volume.” On the contrary, Miss Cather’s letter says: “I had been staying in London for some time.” No doubt there are readers who will prefer the Falstaffian embellishment to Miss Cather’s simple, unvarnished tale; but the letters now in the Colby College Library will at least allow readers to know just what they are choosing.