

The Espalter, Time Imporuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Duffus, Twelve Poems, Collected Poems, Selected Poems, Lolly Willowses, Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After The Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Maze, Some World Far From Ours and 'Stay Corydon, Thou Swain', Elinor Barley, A Moral Ending, The Salvation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in The Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and The Guilty, Kingdoms of Elyin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, Selected Stories, Somerset, Jane Austen, T.H.White: A Biography, Letters, The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner, The Espalter, Time Imporuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Duffus, Twelve Poems, Collected Poems, Selected Poems, Lolly Willowses, Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After The Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Maze, Some World Far From Ours and 'Stay Corydon, Thou Swain', Elinor Barley, A Moral Ending, The Salvation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in The Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and The Guilty, Kingdoms of Elyin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, Selected Stories, Somerset, Jane Austen, T.H.White: A Biography, Letters, The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner, The Espalter, Time Imporuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Duffus, Twelve Poems, Collected Poems, Selected Poems, Lolly Willowses, Mr Fortune's

The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Newsletter Number Twenty Three

Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After The Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Maze, Some World Far From Ours and 'Stay Corydon, Thou Swain', Elinor Barley, A Moral Ending, The Salvation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in The Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and The Guilty, Kingdoms of Elyin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, Selected Stories, Somerset, Jane Austen, T.H.White: A Biography, Letters, The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner, The Espalter, Time Imporuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Duffus, Twelve Poems, Collected Poems, Selected Poems, Lolly Willowses, Mr Fortune's

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NEWSLETTER NUMBER TWENTY THREE

There is at the moment an encouraging amount of publishing and other activity involving Sylvia Townsend Warner - as will be seen in this Summer Newsletter. The May weekend was a great success, too, especially the lively AGM.

Particular thanks for this edition go to Jay Barksdeale, without whom...

Judith Stinton

SUBSCRIPTIONS: a reminder

If you haven't yet paid for 2011, please send your subscription to Judith Bond, 26 Portwey Close, Weymouth, Dorset DT4 8RF. The cost for UK members still remains unchanged at £10, while the rate for overseas members is \$25. Cheques should be made payable to the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society.

CONTACT DETAILS

The Society's email address is now stwsociety@btinternet.com Please amend your address books as the old address, stwsociety@tiscali.co.uk, will soon cease to function. Also, could you please note that Judith Bond's direct email address is now judithbond@hotmail.co.uk Please use this if you wish to contact her as her old address, judithbond@tiscali.co.uk, will also soon cease to function. She would also be grateful if members who are happy for us to contact them by email could ensure that we are notified of any changes to their email addresses.

ELECTION OF THE SOCIETY'S OFFICERS

All the Society's officers are due to stand for re-election in 2012. Any one wishing to stand for any named office must contact the Chairman, Eileen Johnson, by March 31st 2012.

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If you order anything (not just books) from Amazon via our website, the Society will receive a percentage.

from all over the world, attracted by its long history.

On Sunday we assembled at the Roman Baths at 10.30am. This was a revelation to me. I had thought that the bath whose greenness Sylvia described as "the eye of Bath...a green eye" was all there was to be seen. But the archaeological ruins that are open to visitors below ground, and which extend as far as the abbey (the limit of excavation) would have excited Sylvia even more, I feel.

The Pump Room was our last port of call of the weekend, for lunch. The usual little String Trio, which plays gracious music as you eat, was replaced by a sombre young pianist who played hymns very sotto voce to start with – though of course it was Sunday!

We talked Sylvia throughout the weekend – to understand what Bath meant to her, I recommend members to turn to Chapter 2 of her Somerset book.

Eileen Johnson

EVENTS

Chaldon Herring Writers' Festival Saturday the 6th August, 2011

Organiser John Brewster writes:

The plan is to run a programme from around 10.00am which will consist of a number of talks/presentations on the writers and painters who have lived in the village. Speakers during the day will be Judith Stinton, Judith Bond and Frank Kibblewhite, and there will be a bookstall.

There will be two talks in the morning, followed by lunch (not included in the price) at the Sailors Return, which should by then be under new management. There will then be another talk. We will also have the writers' walk, to take interested people around the village and up on to the coastal path to talk about them & places they lived. A cream tea, too, is included in the price. (See overleaf for more details.)

John P. Brewster

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EDWARD THOMAS SOCIETY WEEKEND

The Edward Thomas Fellowship is hosting a literary weekend in Dorset this September, and members of your society are cordially invited to join us for any or all of the events. An outline of the programme is given below.

Friday 23rd September An optional evening meal/get-together at the Wessex Royale Hotel in Dorchester.

Saturday 24th September A day based at Kingston Maurward College, nr Dorchester. In the morning, talks by Jacqueline Dillion on new Thomas Hardy research, and Judith Stinton on the early C20 writers and artists (such as the Powys brothers and Sylvia Townsend Warner) associated with the village of Chaldon Herring. In the afternoon, a group visit to Stinsford church and the opportunity to visit Hardy's birthplace cottage and Max Gate. In the early evening, a private view of the literary archives held at the Dorset County Museum, followed by a performance by Tim Laycock of his play, *The Year Clock*, on the life of William Barnes.

Sunday 25th September A day based at the village hall in Chaldon Herring, where there will be refreshments, archive displays and books for sale. In the middle of the day, a walk up over the downs and along the sea cliffs to Holworth church for a picnic lunch.

The inclusive cost for the daytime and evening events on Saturday, including drinks and lunch at the college, is £50. The inclusive cost for Sunday, including picnic lunch and tea, is £10. Further details and a booking form can be obtained from Gwyneth Guy, Tel: 01544 231628 or Email: gwynethguy@hotmail.com. Website: www.edward-thomas-fellowship.org.uk

AZRAEL: a song setting

Last year I fancied I would like to surprise the Society by honoring its 10th anniversary. So I thought of my friend, and fine composer, Jonathan David. Though he writes mostly choral music, he has written songs as well, and I sent him the *Collected Poems* with a request, that if he cottoned to her work,

Chaldon Literary Festival Saturday 6th August 2011

STW SOCIETY WEEKEND 13 – 15 MAY 2011

For this year, the Committee decided to make the May meeting rather different from previous ones. And so it came to pass that for our eleventh AGM we met up in Bath, well known to Sylvia – and also to a certain Miss Austen.

As usual, we met up for the Friday's evening meal. This time Richard (who booked all our eating venues) had booked us in to The Hole in the Wall restaurant in George Street, where we had a memorable supper. It was good to see again Ren Draya from Illinois and Jay Barksdale from New York, and to meet our new Webmaster Karina Taubert from Berlin, as well as more familiar faces. We toasted absent friends.

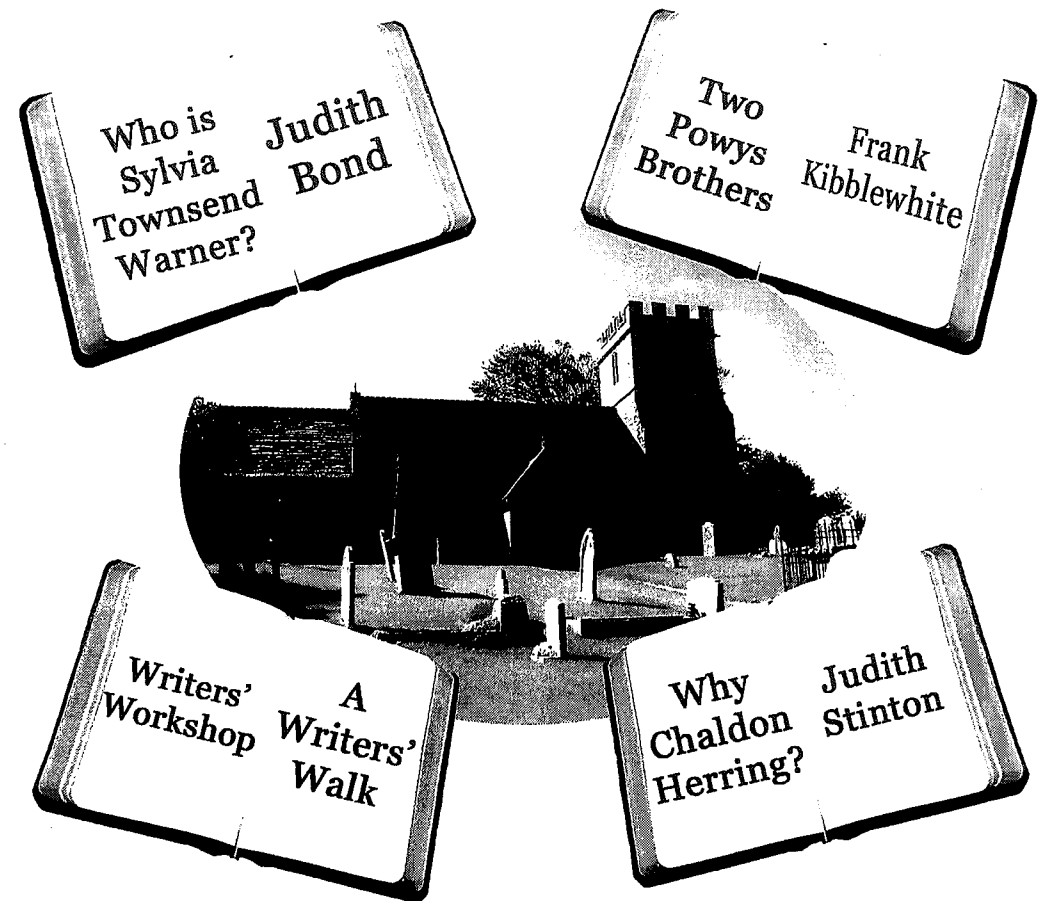
On Saturday we gathered for the AGM at our grandest venue to date – the Aix-en-Provence room, an upper chamber in Bath Guildhall, opposite the Abbey. Refreshments were set out for us, and we breakfasted on cream doughnuts and chocolate eclairs!

The AGM itself (incidentally the most useful I have ever attended), went on until 11.35am. The sealed auction bid for the Lolly Willowes picture followed, and was won by Tess Ormrod. The tape which Judith Stinton had obtained from the History Centre in Dorchester was played next. It was a recording of part of the reading given by Susanna Pinney and Richard Garnett at Dorset County Museum in 1994.

At 2pm, a group interested in the City Bus Tour met outside the Abbey. We were fortunate enough to haggle our way to a reduced rate, and had excellent seats upstairs. We were close to the garrulous guide, whose spiel I imagine he could recite in his sleep! We saw the main architectural features of the city and had a merry time.

Bookshops always feature largely in the minds of STW members, and after the bus tour several of us then walked up to Bath Rare Books in Margaret Buildings. From there we drifted to a nearby coffee shop for a mull over our purchases.

Saturday evening saw us at the legendary Sally Lunn's, for a jovial meal in an upstairs room. The shop/museum/restaurant itself is a magnet for visitors



Tickets, including refreshments and cream tea, £20 (full time pre-grad students £15) should be booked in advance through john.brewster@yahoo.co.uk or 01305 852881.

Coffee available in St Nicholas church from 10am.

Programme starts 10.30. Last cream teas at 5.30pm.
Lunch available at The Sailor's Return pub or bring a picnic to eat in God's Pocket

In Aid of St Nicholas Church, Chaldon Herring

he would consider a commission. I was happy that he did enjoy them, very much. Suggesting King Duffus, In April, Graveyard in Norfolk, Azrael, The Espousal, and The House Grown Silent, he asked if I had a singer in mind. I was hoping Beth Wladis, my dear friend and musical partner of many years, would enjoy singing its debut. (Yes!) Jonathan became more and more drawn to Azrael, its “strain of melancholy and resignation... and the hint of levity in the more conversational tone that opens the last stanza”. The song is about 4 minutes, with a non-virtuosic piano part (my only request for I’m the piano player). The primary challenges are rhythmic, with some mixed meters. Most importantly, the vocal lines reflect natural speech rhythms and are thus decidedly not four-square, incorporating fairly flexible phrasing. The tempo is relatively slow, the tessitura low, the text at times dark, at times melancholy, but for the most part still mostly imparting a sense of reserve. Though there is much variety of texture, it is basically in variation form, a passacaglia perhaps.

Happy is the commissioner who is as pleased as I am. Azrael is an intensely moving song and captures perfectly the poem’s sad beauty.

Its debut will be here in Manhattan on October 23, at three o’clock in the Dorot House Auditorium at 171 West 85th Street. If you are in town, Jonathan, Beth and I would love to see you.

Jay Barksdale, 2 June 2011.
(See enclosed flier for more details.)

A View of Mr Fortune’s Maggot

I’ve always had a leaning towards island literature (from *The Tempest* to *The Admirable Crichton*), So it wasn’t surprising that I was won over by the extraordinary enchantment of Sylvia Townsend Warner’s novel *Mr Fortune’s Maggot* some 15 years ago while on the Canary Islands. Having been left £1,000 by his godmother, Timothy Fortune abandons the real world, where he was a clerk at Lloyd’s Bank (the bank in which TS Eliot worked), and enters the church. Equipped with a harmonium and a sewing machine, he sets off on a pious adventure to an island in the South Seas. There he appears to convert a young boy but, having eaten from the Tree of Innocence, he is himself converted to nature, love and the secret of

happiness. This charming story seemed to lend a special magic to the fortunate isles where I was on holiday and, reluctant to reach the end and return home, I remember reading the book extremely slowly. But no one can stay long in such places of fantasy without destroying their unique qualities. Mr Fortune must returning to the mainland where the first world war has started. I returned to a country that would become contaminated by bankers. I still have this book, however, and can make my escape back to that island from time to time.

Michael Holroyd
(*Guardian*, 18.06.11)

Time and Tide October 22, 1926

Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia. By Dr. Johnson. With an Introduction by G.K. Chesterton and Woodcuts by Douglas Percy Bliss. (Dent. 10s. 6s)

“...The sound of a cough close behind me, made me turn my head. I saw a girl sitting on a stone bench near by; she was bent over a book, on the perusal of which she seemed intent: from where I stood I could see the title – it was ‘Rasselas’; a name that struck me as strange, and consequently attractive.

‘Is your book interesting?’

‘You may look at it,’ replied the girl, offering me the book.

I did so; a brief examination convinced me that the contents were less taking than the title: ‘Rasselas’ looked dull to my trifling taste; I saw nothing about fairies, nothing about genii; no bright variety seemed spread over the closely-printed pages.”

So Jane Eyre handed it back again: perhaps Charlotte Brontë would not have kept it much longer. It is amusing to speculate what the characters of another Jane thought of *Rasselas*. Edward Ferrars, who could have read aloud even Cowper without animation, might have delivered the measured opinions of Imlac more successfully, if Marianne could have been brought to listen to them. Mr. Bennett certainly delighted in it, and I fancy that there was a well-bound, well-worn copy in the library at Donwell.

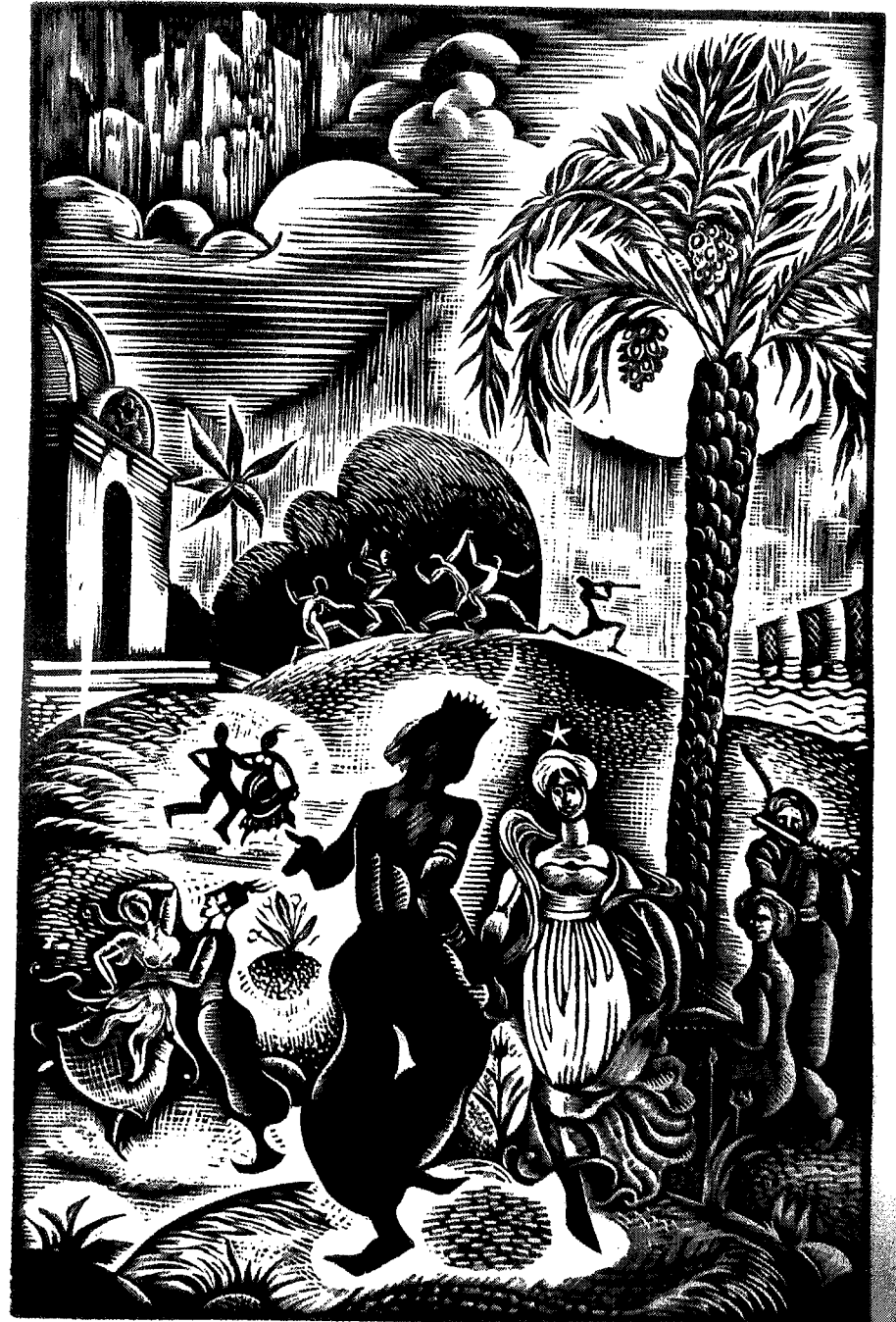
I suppose it was a classic event then; indeed, it is hard to conceive of *Rasselas* ever being other than a classic. There are few works in the English language having more the air of one in authority than this small, perfect, unimportant fable, this rounded, translucent blob of gum that oozed from the tree of vast stature and rough bark which was Johnson. Written in 1759, the author did not look at it again until more than twenty years after, when he was within four years of his death. He read it in a travelling carriage, and seemed, Boswell says, "to be intensely fixed." Little wonder. It is sad enough to cry out: "What a genius I had then!" – yet there is a kind of flourish in the cry. It is with a deeper and more irremediable pang that the wise man says to himself: "Ah, had I come to these conclusions already?"

It would be affected to write of *Rasselas* without some reference to the traditional comparison between Johnson's irony and the satire of *Candide*. It seems to me that the crux lies in the opposition of those words – irony and satire. *Rasselas* is both more sober and more crushing than *Candide*: it is, as Mr. Chesterton says in his introduction to this edition, the work of a stoic. Voltaire was not a stoic. He was an idealist, and had all the idealist's savagery. His satire is directed against this infamy or that; it is purposeful, it squirts like a corrosive fluid against whatever offends his views for humanity. Johnson's irony is shed as dispassionately, searchingly and quenchingly as rain. It is as harmless as rain; it may even be as beneficent: but to the mental picnicker it is as ruthlessly discouraging.

"You seem to forget," replied *Rasselas* – to *Nekayah*, who had drawn a black picture of the disadvantages of the married state; "that you have even now, represented celibacy as less happy than marriage. Both conditions may be bad, but they cannot both be worst."

This refusal to admit the possibility of two worsts is a degree of steadfast pessimism to which Voltaire in his satire non optimism never approached.

No bright genii are spread over these closely-reasoned pages. Jane Eyre's disappointment is not very surprising. But if she had seen this *Rasselas* of 1926 she might have received the text for the sake of the pictures, for Mr. Bliss's woodcuts have a curious quality, florid and at the same time sinister, which would have exactly hit her fancy. The dancers in the Happy Valley exhibit scorched cat agility, as though they were dancing in hell-fire. *Rasselas*, *Imlac*, *Nekayah* and *Pekuah* Visit a Hermit amidst explosions of tropical foliage, Visit and Astronomer whose telescope is like an instrument of mental torture reared against a sky which swarms with comets and nebulae, thick as bacteria under a microscope, Meet and Old



Man in a landscape more threatening than the jungle landscapes of Rousseau for being black and white, a Rousseau jungle seen by lightning.

Mr. Bliss's illustrations are not, it will be seen, just what one would call in keeping with Johnson's sedate narrative. I doubt if any woodcuts could be, for the woodcut gets its effects by emphasis and trenchancy, and the effects in *Rasselas* are got by sobriety and understatement. One may regret that Mr. Bliss did not undertake, say, *The Pilgrim's Progress* instead: personally, I think he is wantonly hobgoblinish, even for Bunyan, in his observance of the Caliban element in the woodcut tradition – an element merely due to callous craftsmanship and cheap reproduction; for instance, I can see no reason why Nekayah and Rasselas in the Invocation of the Nile cut should appear, the one a harridan, the other a moron: but his wisdom in electing to be true to his medium instead of attempting a compromise between medium and subject is well justified in a set of full-page illustrations all of which are notable and one – Pekuah among the Arabs – beautiful.

Pleasantly, though perhaps fortuitously, this, the best of the woodcuts, is also the most relevant. A woman seated in a fierce and fruitful landscape, who mediates while two other women lay their heads in her lap – it is too melancholy, too romantic for Pekuah; as an allegory of Johnson's thought it is better, though still too romantic; but as an expression of his title it is admirable. *Rasselas* – an enchanting word, evocative and unmeaning! No wonder Jane picked up her ears. When first I read the book it was a surprise to me to find that *Rasselas* was a person; I had thought of it, being so beautiful, as the name of a place, a happier valley, perhaps, wearing the rich stillness of autumn; or an island. It is said that Johnson wrote this story in the space of a week, to earn money enough to pay for his mother's funeral. One might wait for years before finding such a word. It remains in our minds, and if we are asked about it, we reply that it is the title of Johnson's one work of fiction. But it is more than that. It is his only lyric.

Sylvia Townsend Warner

Illustration: 'The Happy Valley' by Douglas Percy Bliss for *Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*.



Cousin and Friend. Letters to Rachel 1950 - 1952.

A short collection of letters from Sylvia Townsend Warner to her cousin Rachel Monckton-How has been published recently, and is being sold exclusively through the STW Society at £7.30 per copy in UK, \$14.00 or €9.00 for overseas members. All prices include shipping.

To order your copy complete the order form below and send with a cheque (payable to the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society) to Judith Bond, 26 Portwey Close, Weymouth, Dorset DT4 8RF.

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Item, One Empty House

Even when afternoon tea is unlikely - and, although I had only met my hostess twice or thrice before, I felt pretty sure I should not find her among cups and saucers - it is almost impossible for an English visitor not to arrive about teatime. I was about to do so. It was a foggy January afternoon, and though I kept on rubbing peepholes in the Pullman window and peering out for my first impressions of Connecticut, these did not get beyond the admission that a coating of weathered snow seen in a disadvantageous light looks like a coating of mutton fat and that the contours under the mutton fat were not so rugged as I expected. But no doubt they would soon begin to be rugged. A few nights earlier I had sat next to a man of letters at a dinner party - a dinner party of such magnificence that we drank claret (for all this was taking place at the end of prohibition) - and, learning that he was a Bostonian, had said to him, "Tell me about New England. I am going to spend a night there." Sparing to be particular, since my outlook was so patently general, he told me that New England was reverting to the wild; that the farming population had moved westward and snakes were beginning to come down from the mountains. "Rattlesnakes," said I, knowingly. Looking kindly at me through his pince-nez, the cleanest I have ever seen astride a mortal nose, he said that rattlesnakes were among them, though I should not meet any at this time of year since rattlesnakes hate getting cold; and that he was glad I had read "Elsie Venner". I told him I had also read about New England in the stories of Mary Wilkins. He replied with an Indeed; and reinforced the effect of withdrawal by adding that she wasn't thought much of now.

Dusk fell on the mutton fat. The contours continued to be calm. Still, here I was in my English tweed suit, getting out at a station in unknown Connecticut as isolated as any pioneer and instantly and astonishingly being recognized by a perfect stranger and driven off in a car along roads where a sledge would have seemed more natural. At this point my memory wavers. But what came next was a large room, full of people, none of whom was wearing a tweed suit and all of whom were talking, and where several kind persons noticed I wasn't drinking and offered me whiskey. Before I left London I promised various loving friends that during my trip I would on no account drink spirits and go blind (the sequel was considered inevitably part of the deed); and for a couple of days in New York City I was faithful to my vow. Then a loving American friend explained that I mustn't go on like this, since to refuse spirits was tantamount to casting aspersions on one's host's bootlegger - a most uncivil thing to do. As I always listen to the friend that's nearest, I took the plunge and drank whatever was offered

me: spirits in ordinary homes, wine in grand ones, and once - so overwhelmingly grand was the home, and able to employ fleets of bootleggers - beer. My eyesight was none the worse for it, and my moral fibre must have been enormously strengthened because of drinking so much whiskey. I loathe whiskey, the only way I could deal with it was to toss it down neat and think of the poor large men in temperance hostels who hadn't got any.

The party in Connecticut was one of those artistic parties drawn from some international Land of Cockayne. I began to slink into corners, to examine the pictures (views of Cockayne), even to wish I could find some reposeful bore. There was nothing to remind me I was exploring Connecticut. I might as well have been in California with those rowdy forty-niners. Finally the outside guests drove away, and the houseparty began to go to bed. My spirits rose: I had been looking forward to my bedroom. It was in the L of the house, with five tall windows distributed among its outer walls. My hostess came in to ask if I needed anything and to read me one or two of her poems. When she had gone I waited a little longer in case someone else should come in with a few woodcuts or a trilogy. But no one else wanted my opinion; I was left in possession of my handsome bedroom, and went from one window to the next, drawing back the curtains. Outside there were trees. When I switched off the light, the room was flooded with the piercing moonlight of snow and the pattern of branches lay on the floor, so that I seemed to be stepping through a net. Till then I had not rightly felt I was in Connecticut. Now, because of the austerity of the moonlight and the pattern of elm branches on the wooden floor, I did. And I began to think about Mary Wilkins and to reflect that perhaps at the moment I was the only person in New England to be doing so.

I had known her for some time.

After I had been taught to read I was left to read on unassisted. If a title looked promising I tried the book (and thus for years and years never opened Gogol's "Dead Souls", being convinced it was a work of piety). One day I pulled out a volume called "A New England Nun". There were two convents in our town, and a nun was a regular feature at the fishmonger's - but nuns in fiction led more animated lives; though my notions about New England were of the vaguest kind and Mary E. Wilkins not a compelling name, the title, I thought, warranted a try. There was no word of a nun; but from the moment when Louisa Ellis tied on a green apron and went out with a little blue crockery bowl to pick some currants for her tea I lost all wish for nuns and animated lives. I had found something nearer the bone. Though I could not have defined what I have defined what I had found, I knew it was something

I wanted. It was something I had already found in nature and in certain teapots - something akin to the precision with which the green ruff fits the white strawberry blossom, or to the airy spacing of a Worcester sprig. But, scampering between balderdash and masterpiece, I had not so far noticed it could happen in writing too.

Having found it, this mysterious charm, I read on how Louisa, after she had finished her tea and washed up the tea things, took off her green apron, disclosing a pink-and-white apron beneath it, which was her sewing apron. This in turn she took off when she heard a man's steps coming up the walk. Beneath the pink-and-white apron was her company apron, of white linen. The man came into the room; he was her suitor, and his entrance, as usual, frightened the canary. He was honest and good and had wooed her faithfully, but in the upshot she dismissed him and remained alone among the currant bushes; and that was the end of the story.

She must have been contemporary with Maupassant, I thought: the Maupassant of New England, telling her spinster stories as he told his bachelor ones...But one cannot ramble about a strange house at three in the morning, not even in a bohemian house - indeed, particularly not in a bohemian house - looking for a Dictionary of American Biography and saying through bedroom doors to persons rousing within, "It's all right, it's only me. I don't suppose you happen to remember what year Mary Wilkins was born?"

Besides it would be a waste of breath. She wasn't thought much of now. The spinster and the bachelor...He would have thought her a quaint character and put her into one of his stories. She would have surmised him to be a bad character and kept him out of any story of hers. For she had the defect of her thrifty virtues; she wrote within her means, which is why one feels a sameness in her stories - a sameness of effect. Keeping within her means, she chose characters who would not lead her into extravagance, situations that remain within the limits of the foreseeable, never essaying the grandeur of the inevitable. But her control of detail gives these stay-at-home stories a riveting authenticity. The details have the flatness of items in an inventory. Item, one green-handled knife. Item, one strip of matting, worn. They don't express, or symbolize; they exist by being there; they have position, not magnitude. And their infallible, irrefutable placing had fastened so many north-facing rooms, hemlocks, oil lamps, meetinghouses, pork barrels, burial grounds, new tin pails, icicles, and dusty roads into my mind that if I had had the courage of my convictions downstairs, when everyone was talking about Joyce and Pound and melting pots, I would have said, "Why don't you think more of Mary Wilkins?"

I didn't. Perhaps this was as well. For one thing, one should not draw attention to oneself. For another, there might have been someone present who had thought enough about Mary Wilkins to cross-examine my admiration. And then I should have been forced to admit that she couldn't get to grips with a man unless he was old, eccentric, a solitary, henpecked, psychologically aproned in some way or other; that she never hazarded herself; that she was a poor love hand; that lettuce juice too often flowed through the veins of her characters instead of blood. Though in one respect I would have fought hard for her carnality; she wrote admirably about food, about hunger, privation, starvation even. There was that story – which, alas, I did not completely remember because I had read it in a spare room and not had the presence of mind to steal the book – about starving on a wintry mountainside...

That bedroom was in Cambridge, England. The biscuit box had gingerbread nuts in it; the presence of my host's top hat in its leather hermitage made me feel I was one of the family; there must have been at least a thousand books on the shelves that occupied one wall – books of the utmost miscellaneity (I had taken Mary Wilkins from between a Bohn Tacitus and "Marvels of Pond Life"); there was a magnifying glass, a bottle of ink, and a bootjack; and at intervals I heard chiming bells conversing in amiable voices about the passage of time. But as I was now in Connecticut and did not wish to grow uncivilly homesick, the best thing I could do would be to fall asleep.

When I woke it was broad day. I dressed and went downstairs, reflecting that if I were late for breakfast, this was not an establishment where it would be held against me. It was not I who was late. There was no sound of life, there were no intimations of breakfast. Perhaps this was a house where breakfast was unlikely. In the large room that had been so noisy the night before there were plates and tumblers and bottles and ashtrays; but the curtains had been drawn back, so someone must be about. After a while a young woman came in. She was small and swarthy, and obviously I was a surprise to her. At first she pretended not to see me, and when I said, "Good morning," she clattered her trayful of glasses and did not hear me. I said I was down too early, and realized that she found me difficult to understand, for, smiling anxiously, she waved her hand towards the window and said, "Nice!" and then burst into a speech I couldn't understand at all. But we communicated in the language of the heart, for, beckoning me through the swing door, she took me into the kitchen, where we drank coffee and ate some leftover canapés.

The sun had come out, so I decided I would go for a walk. I followed the road through some woods and on into a landscape of lifeless snow-covered

fields. I knew I was not enjoying myself and had decided to turn back when I caught sight of a house about a quarter of a mile further on. A house standing on its own calls to the imagination. I walked on. However tame it might be – and it looked trite – it was a house I had not seen before and would never see again. I began to walk slower – because if you change pace when you come close to a dwelling the people inside will think you are prying or canvassing. As I approached, I felt certain the house was empty. It was smaller than I thought – a frame house of two stories, lean and high-shouldered, standing a little back from the roadside. It had an air of obstinately asserting its verticality against the indifferent, snow-covered horizontality all around. A fence guarded its own small portion of snow. I drew level with it, and saw how very empty it was and how forsaken. The gray paint was scaling off it, streaks of damp ran down from its guttering, the windows were bleared with dust and their glass tarnished. They were too large for the house, and this emphasized the disproportion of the door, which was too narrow. A single trail of footprints led from the gate to the door. They were recent, but not new. They might have been made a week ago, three weeks ago. A week ago or three weeks ago someone had gone into the house and not come out again. I stood for a while registering this in my memory – so well I can see it to this day. Then I turned back, walking briskly because I had grown cold. I did not speculate at all. This was no business of mine. I had come on a story by Mary Wilkins – a story she did not finish.

Sylvia Townsend Warner
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