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Leaves from a Dorset Diary

Jean Starr Untermeyer*

*(1886–1970)

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Abstract

An abridged chapter taken from Jean Starr Untermeyer's memoir *Private Collection* (1965), previously published only in the United States. The chapter is principally concerned with her longstanding friendship with Sylvia Townsend Warner, and, later, Valentine Ackland. Untermeyer also touches on her related friendships with Siegfried Sassoon and figures from the Powys circle.

Keywords Jean Starr Untermeyer; Louis Untermeyer; Sylvia Townsend Warner; Valentine Ackland; Schubert; Gluck; Siegfried Sassoon; Dorset; Llewelyn Powys; Alyse Gregory

Leaves from a Dorset Diary

Jean Starr Untermeyer

Editorial note: In 1965, Jean Starr Untermeyer, a poet and singer primarily known today as the former wife of Louis Untermeyer, published a collection of memoirs with Alfred A. Knopf under the title Private Collection. *The book, which was never published in the United Kingdom, is arranged as a sequence of essays, for the most part framed around her encounters with the major literary celebrities of her day. Figures discussed in* Private Collection *include Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay, D. H. Lawrence, Robert Frost and Edith Sitwell. The chapter abridged here, 'Leaves from a Dorset Diary', is principally concerned with Untermeyer's longstanding friendship with Sylvia Townsend Warner (and later, Valentine Ackland), but also touches on her relationship with Siegfried Sassoon and association with figures from the Powys circle.*

In 1934 my plans to spend the summer at a camp in the Adirondack Mountains were abruptly changed by a letter from a correspondent who was turning from an interesting acquaintance to an intimate friend. A few years previously, Ben Huebsch, my friend and publisher, had shown me the manuscript of *The Espalier* (a book of poems) and also that of a novel by the same author which he was about to publish. *Lolly Willowes* was a Book-of-the-Month Club choice and an immediate success, and both it and the poems were the work of a born writer. Louis and I met the author, Sylvia Townsend Warner, on a trip to England in 1926, but at that time my chances of really knowing her were slim. Hers is a brilliant and adroit mind, capable of meeting any challenge; and she and my husband crossed conversational foils with high good humor and in the best fencing tradition. It was only after a year or two, subsequent to her visit to America, when I had a few opportunities to be alone with her, that the foundations were laid for one of the warmest and most stimulating of my friendships.

Sylvia's letter read: 'Valentine and I shall be spending most of the summer at Norfolk. So, Jean darling, why don't you come over and live here in "Miss Green", my little workman's cottage at West Chaldon? An old country is the best place for an old wound'. That was the phrase that fetched me. *An old country is the best place for an old wound.* Sylvia's grace of language springs from Sylvia's grace of heart. It did not take me long to decide to accept her invitation.

The afternoon was ending as the train from London reached the village of Wool in Dorset. A taxi was procured to take me and my luggage to Chaldon Herring. Sylvia had written me instructions and her regrets that she couldn't meet me in person. But Mrs. Way, her 'char,' was at Miss Green as arranged when my taxi pulled up at one of the least promising of dwelling places. Near the road squatted a small boxy structure of yellow stucco, a story and a half high, with a single chimney pot rearing cockily from near the center of the roof. There was no thatch, there were no climbing roses, no leaded casements, none of the country endearments associated in the literary mind with rural England.

[…]

And what of Sylvia, who is she that . . . Although this chronicle is being written with the express purpose of picturing those people who have been most meaningful to me, there comes a point in friendship, as in love, when the inner and outer being are so intermingled that an objective description is almost impossible. In the case of Sylvia, what comes to the forefront is not her figure of medium height, her graceful movements, nor her dark eyes and hair, now striated with gray, her somewhat sharp features, nor her delicious voice, round and yet airy, with what a BBC producer pronounced a classless accent (and since Shaw's *Pygmalion*, we know that is a rarity in England)—no, it is none of these, although one has noted them long since, to be sure, but it is the emanation of the inner self into which all her qualities are absorbed: she is so *alive* that her vital awareness is translated into everything she thinks and does. She can make an event of the fact that the carrots have come up large and healthy in her garden; a casual stroll on the lookout for mushrooms becomes a kind of picnic; a passing remark on one's appearance is, by its affectionate inflection, almost a caress. This vibrant quality of spirit is what gets into her work. Her mind, with that elegance and absence of excess that we associate with the eighteenth century, is not simple, but her diction is direct. I would rather read her prose than that of any other

woman writing in our time. Her acts and her words denote sensibility, but not the sensibility of frayed nerve ends; and her metaphors are both homely and apposite. They delight me and I like to repeat them. In *Summer Will Show*, she says of two revolutionary workers, a man and a woman who spend their days together, distributing literature and doing chores for their cause (1848): 'but when evening came, they parted as neatly as a cup and saucer.' In *After the Death of Don Juan*, she says a libertine's credo should be: 'If you want a thing well done, do it yourself.'

Yet all is not wit, though it springs out from her as pointed as a prow. There is wisdom, as final as a proverb. The last stanzas of the ballad called 'Nelly Trim,' the lonely dairy-woman who feeds the famished wayfarer, whether his need be a cup of steaming broth or the assurance of body's warmth, has a finality of wondering compassion that silences all creeds. If men, indeed, should one day wreak their passionate frustration upon the world because they are not, after all, gods; if our nightmares of destruction should ever, God forbid, come to be witnessed by a blighted day; then it may be that a last forlorn woman, too bereft for fear, remembering the world as a personal metaphor, will whisper to herself such words as these:

A wanton, you say—
Yet where's the spouse,
However true
To her marriage vows,
To whom the lot of the earth-born allows
More than this?—
To comfort the care
Of a stranger, bound
He knows not where,
And afraid of the dark,
As his fathers were.

Sylvia Warner, like Robert Frost, is all in one piece. Everything has been assimilated—music and learning and country lore and wit. And her letters flow spontaneously into form like her conversation. A letter from Sylvia has lightened many a dark day for me. I will give only three excerpts to show that whenever she puts pen to paper, the stamp of the writer is there.

After my sojourn at Miss Green, I had paid Sylvia and Valentine a visit in Norfolk and as an acknowledgment of hospitality I sent down

a box of delicacies from Fortnum & Mason with the following bit of rhymed fooling.

Brown's Hotel
London, W. I

Dear Valentine and Sylvie sweetest,
That belching beast was not the fleetest
That bore me thence from Norfolk meadows—
But yet too fleet—to London shadows.
And where to turn me in that home-lost mood?
Who to my rescue but Sir Henry Wood!
Helped Brahms disburden him in four fine movements,
So physicked me, and with improvements
In backward thoughts and inward clinging
The unresolving chord was cut—to singing.

So I to bed—without a fire;
Sans Sedebrol *to sleep. Desire*
Made me in dreams a happy snail
Whom neither heart nor homeland fail,
Who makes bright track to heaven or hell
And keeps his secret in his shell.

But morning brought me out to Fortnum-Mason's
The goal so different from Jason's:
Of golden fleece not they the giver
But the taker—long 'ere they deliver.
Pearls beyond price I had me of two ladies.
I auctioned one off—What the Hades!
Remembering midnight lack, when all but perished,
Orpheus must be fed and Eros nourished.

So as a pâté by a truffle dressed
Le me become a wedding guest;
Or in humility translated to a cheese,
Lay off my arrogance and melt to please;
As anchovy in soothing oil
My restless spirit rest and coil;
And though in flesh I dare not risk it
Crumple me proper in a biscuit.

Now as your laugh re-echoes like a banshee
With gasping each to each 'How can she?'
I'll wager you are asking, ad hysterica,
'Is that the way they grow them in America?'
So must exonerate my native green
Not like to any—but thine ever

Jean

Immediately, Sylvia responded with the following eclogue, falling in with my playful mood.

Eros: *Orpheus, good friend, your voice is somewhat choked.*
Orpheus: *These eels are quite superlatively smoked.*
Eros: *Why does thy hand forsake the lyre, and stray*
Towards that crystal vase?
Orpheus: *Nuts, so they say,*
Are death to singers. I don't find them so—
Tra-la! How's that for an arpeggio?
Eros: *Those russet cylinders with which you toy*
Are large-scale lozenges perhaps?
Orpheus: *My boy,*
There is a land, I speak as one who knows it,
That greets my art with sympathetic Prosit!
The song they reverence, and reverence too
The thirst that follows on the soul's halloo.
The matrons of that genial clime don't rend
The exhausted vocalist at the aria's end,
But turn their hands and wits to better use
And bring, on trays, the recreating juice,
Emollient puddings, entrees that entwine
With subtle freaks the solid worth of swine.
Thence came—and by true love of art deployed—
Those Frankfurters, which I have much enjoyed.
Eros: *Did you, dear Orpheus?*
Orpheus: *What! An empty jar!*
Eros! You've eaten all the caviar.
Eros: *Eaten the caviar? Why, certainly.*
Salt as my mother rising from the sea,
Sleek as her shoulder polished by the wave
And phallic as the incident which gave

Her birth, that rose-red caviar was mine
As surely as the roses at my shrine
By suppliant or successful lovers placed.
Mine too, this salmon and anchovy paste;
The herrings mine. All creatures of the sea
I claim by right of filial piety.
But, as you've eaten them, I waive the eels.

Orpheus: *Eros, such magnanimity appeals*
To all the poet in me. If you please,
I offer you—a fair exchange—the cheese.
Dame Baucis swears, and doubtless she is right,
That cheese, so virgin-seeming, soft and white
As any maid on whom Diana beams,
Will bless that maiden with erotic dreams
Till she wakes fluttering like your mother's sparrows—

Eros: *I thank you, Orpheus. It shall tip my arrows.*
Eat, and be friends. She sends unblemished peace
Who foie-gras sends, and sends a pot apiece.

Orpheus: *Eat and give thanks. And any little ruffles*
That marred partition should be mourned in truffles.

It was precisely this responsiveness that made our friendship such a liberating experience for me. I was not only allowed but encouraged to give expression to every mood; and I realized—with great relief after the restrictive years of childhood and early womanhood—that the fact that I had many moods as well as a variety of interests and enthusiasms constituted a positive value to Sylvia. I believe, on her side, Sylvia realized that in me she had not only a loyal and loving friend but one on whom not a nuance of epistolary effort would be lost.

It was sometimes before my first visit to Dorset that Sylvia Warner and Valentine, as well as Llewelyn Powys, his wife Alyse Gregory, his brother Theodore and his wife Violet, his brother Willie, his sisters Gertrude and Katie, and his friend James Cobb and other local residents, up to the number of forty-two, signed a petition to the Dorset County Council asking that a local home for mentally defective girls be investigated. Several girls had tried to run away and others had been heard crying. Any insubordination was likely to be met by at least the threat that the delinquents would be 'put away' permanently. It would have seemed to be a simple and humane effort that deserved prompt and

effective action. However, English law being as complex as it is, instead of that, the main signers of the petition were summoned to the Dorset courts, charged with libel. At this point—that is, just before the trial—I wrote to Sylvia, among other things, that I was resuming my interest in singing. Here is part of her reply, in which, with consummate skill, she leads up to her brilliant allusion:

> July 25, 1934
> West Chaldon, Dorchester
> Dorset, England
>
> . . . From this is a natural transition, of course, to your singing! But seriously, I am so glad you are singing again. If one sings long enough one will spring too, no doubt of it. And I wish you the greenest leaves, the earliest windflowers, daffodils that come before the swallow dares.
>
> Do you know what you ought to be singing? You ought to be singing Gluck. 1 have said so before, I repeat it now. It is the rarest equipment of all, the equipment for Gluck, the tone broad enough and full enough to sit down on, the finesse of the lieder-singer, the enthusiasm sustained enough to wear those splendid folds of music without twitching them or creasing or sullying them, or pinning foolish nosegays to them. Jean, you must sing Gluck.
>
> If I could sing Gluck I would do nothing, nothing, NOTHING else, I tell you. I would sing his recitative at meals, and his arias all the rest of the time. And when invited to take the oath in the Dorchester law courts, I would shake my ribs free and begin '*Divinités du Styx*.'

Divinités du Styx they proved to be: Sylvia and Valentine were fined one hundred pounds each and costs. Llewelyn's expenses, with lawyer's fees, came to £573 8*s*. 3*d*. A cross reference to these events can be found in Edna St. Vincent Millay's letters. In one of them Edna Millay (March 9, 1935) reproaches both Llewelyn and his wife for being reluctant to accept her gift of $1,000.

Scarcely a letter of Sylvia's but contains some gem of characterization or description. A recent one says of an admired writer's profile that it has the contours of a holly leaf. Doesn't that stamp for all time the aquiline nose and jutting chin?

But in 1937, coming back from a visit in Norfolk, she wrote me this lavishly detailed account of a visit to a deserted house. It is in its way so masterly that I cannot resist sharing it.

24 West Chaldon,
Dorchester, Dorset.
5. i. 1937

Dearest Jean:
. . . We also went over a good rich specimen of the deserted house. There was a queer old man, gentleman-farmer, called Cuddon Fletcher, who lived near Winterton till about four years ago. He was over eighty, and had a spade beard and a violent temper and used to drive about in a dog cart with a shawl around his neck. He left the house to a rather riff-raff elderly man, who had no desire to live in the Norfolk fens among the family remains, so the house has stood empty all this time. A Winterton girl, a white-faced red-gold-haired creature with a sharp nose and brilliant grey eyes like pebbles that the tide has just left, and a snarling barking Norfolk voice, who lives in sin with a very engaging suave rogue of a postman and has a most beautiful small boy by him, is caretaker of the house; and it was through her that we went over it.

It is an ugly house, with two vast Victorian bay windows, looking out on a vague lawn, and a couple of yewtrees and a sycamore. We went over it one afternoon, when it was already growing dusk. The grand part of the house is the purest Victorian. The drawing room has one of those mushroom shaped seats where you sit tangentially to your neighbor and are called sociables (the seats are), lovely buhl tables with very large oriental china urns and coffers, and a complete series of family portraits, done in coloured chalks, about 1850, representing the plainest-headed family you ever set eyes on. We went round peering at them with an electric torch, pulling down books from the shelves, fingering the curtains and sofa covers. The two rooms of state are in good order, the rats have not really got at them yet; but all the rest of the house is a rat's paradise. There are dozens of small poky bedrooms, with desolate marble-topped wash-stands holding one tooth tumbler and a chipped basin, maybe: tall wardrobes and presses, stuffed full of mouldering clothes ('There's three funeral hats in there,' the rogue-postman said in his gloating and half-mocking voice), more

portraits, four-poster beds with ghostly limp curtains dangling from them.

'This is where old Mrs. Fletcher died. He never had the room opened again. The bed was just as she got out of it (had a stroke on the floor) till the rats pulled it to pieces.' And there was the bed, its great feather mattress torn open, the matted feathers bleeding out, rats' dung all among them.

Then we explored the cellars and the pantries. Lovely cellars, much older than the house, empty, draped in spider webs like black crape: a gunroom with the guns still there, and about two dozen pairs of mildewed boots on a rack. From the cellars we went up an incredibly steep narrow and twisted stair to the attics, which had been kept as the most macabre gobbet and bonne bouche. Eva went before with a candle, we followed and Claude came after, holding the child. It was extraordinarily moving to hear the child's delighted crowing laughter on those eldritch stairs, which would have daunted any heart.

As for the attics, there was dereliction unparalleled. Ruined beds, broken walls, dangling ceilings, rat-holes everywhere. And in the furthest attic, heaven knows how it had even been got up those stairs, a gigantic Empire daybed for two. Exceedingly beautiful, and long past saving.

What supplied the best, the grimmest, touch to this devilish house was its religious atmosphere. The Fletchers were raging Roman Catholics; in every room there were religious pictures, nineteenth century steel engravings of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, rolling their eyes and fingering their horrid little pincushion hearts; or broken Immaculate Conceptions, simpering on though the rats had fouled their white night-gowns; or little gimcrack grottoes in gold paper, with dust-coloured bouquets of cotton artificial flowers. Finally, in the last pantry of all, amid a heap of chewed-up numbers of the Veterinary Journal we found a Synoptic Table of the Popes. Every single pope, legendary or authenticated, from the year A.D., his holy head in a little round, arranged in columns of sixteen all the way down an enormous sheet of paper, looking like some fantastic polka-dotted wall paper.

I can't tell you how romantic it was in this vile house, this rat-ridden fortress of religion and respectable living, with all its good gear left heartlessly to waste, to see this disgraceful young couple,

comely both of them, with their beautiful unabashed bastard child. I have never seen a finer example of love among the ruins. Gay, cynical, full of fierce life, concerned only with the rats, and not much disturbed by them, they strolled uncorrupted through this house of corruption, as careless as two foxes who might have jumped in through a broken window, hauling their cub after them by the scruff of its neck.

And so I send you them as my new year's present.

My love always, and Valentine's with it,
Sylvia

When I first met Sylvia Warner she did not know Valentine Ackland, but they came together before 1933, and the meeting was fortunate. Although they are utterly different, theirs is a marriage of true minds, and their companionship has been abiding and fruitful. In 1934 they published a book of poems together, *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*. The joint authorship was acknowledged but the poems were not identified. Today Sylvia publishes few poems, whereas Valentine's gift has deepened and grown graver and more musical. Their poems could not, at this time, be confused.

It is all too many years since I have seen my dear friends, but I like to recall Valentine as I first saw her. She was like a very handsome boy, with her high-bred and somewhat haughty features, her close-cropped nut-brown hair, and the look of a real dandy: for she chose, whenever suitable, to cover her long, slender legs in well-cut and well-pressed trousers, and her trim shirts and sport jackets, even in the country, were *comme il faut*. She was Sylvia's junior by several years, and we both doted on her when she swung off into the country, with her gun under her arm, to hunt for small game. That summer, both Sylvia and Valentine conspired to spoil me, and I have never been so pampered in my life; I was always being urged to rest, and one would come to my bedside with the indispensable hot-water bottle against the damp, the other with a steaming cup of Sedebrol to make sure that sleep should come and relax me. Happy memories!

We found ourselves able to live harmoniously together, and the following summer I was invited to stay with them in a long, narrow stone house in the middle of a field—the dairy of Nelly Trim! But before the visit proper, all three of us went off for an automobile trip in a large rented car—Valentine's stream-lined sports car being too small for us and our bags—which Valentine drove with dash and expertise. The journey

took us up one side of England and into Scotland, as far as Edinburgh, and down again on the west side. I still have the map they drew for me, and my memories are the most vivid of Berwick-on-Tweed, where we had tea with hot scones, and where—so I was told—the natives still discuss with fierce partisanship the superior qualities of Mary, Queen of Scots, as against those of the first Queen Elizabeth. Then there was the quaint town of Bath, with its rococo chic: a foundation of Roman waterworks and the architectural refinements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries superimposed upon it. There were the lovely houses on a crescent at Cheltenham, where Sylvia repeated a rhymed epitaph that she herself might have written.

Here lie I and my three daughters,
We died of drinking the Cheltenham waters;
If we had stuck to the Epsom salts
We wouldn't be lying in these cold vaults.

And, of course, Stratford-on-Avon. We passed through a great diversity of scenery, none lovelier than that surrounding the small inn tucked into a Scottish glen, where the streams rushed noisily pure and cold, and doubtless full of trout. But it was not trout we were given for breakfast, but that inimitable bacon which I have already spoken of in connection with the hospitality at Sevenels.[1]

As we were starting out from Chaldon, our way led through Wiltshire, and Sylvia said: 'We will soon be near the home of your friend Siegfried Sassoon. You must stop for a moment and see him.'

'But I can't go unannounced. I must telephone first.'

'No, you mustn't do that,' said Valentine firmly. 'It would only upset him.'

And before I could unravel this reasoning, there we were at the entrance to Heytsbury House, for by this time Siegfried had married and was living in a well-known Georgian house that was quietly impressive.

The butler, looking slightly askance, admitted me, for no urging of mine had availed to make Sylvia or Valentine join me. Soon Siegfried appeared, as handsome as I remembered him, a neat patch on his riding breeches, pipe in mouth, flushed, happy, but ill at ease as he always had been until he got used to one's presence. He apologized for the fact that his wife couldn't meet me, for she was confined to her bed. He appeared glad of my visit, but his eyes wandered, and when I told him: 'Oh Siegfried, you can't know what it means to me to see you, after your

unhappy years, in these surroundings,' he replied with a pleased smile: 'Yes, it suits me, doesn't it?'

Although I told him my visit must be short, he insisted on showing me his gardens, his orchard, and his fine, dark mount, whinnying in the well-kept stall. Then he went to meet my friends, but ran back to gather us some fruit from his own trees.

What recollections this chance meeting evoked! Siegried was the shyest celebrity I had ever known. When he first came to us in New York and was hailed, by my husband, both publicly and privately, for his war poems, he did a beautiful and impulsive thing (and this impulsiveness was the mark of his shyness): he made a gift to my husband of a notebook in which he had written his earliest poems; pleasant bucolic verses in no wise distinguishing him from other youthful celebrants of the English countryside.

In his book *Siegfried's Journey*, he himself speaks of our friendship:

> With the Untermeyers I felt more at home than anywhere else in New York. I spent several evenings at their 'apartment' and heard some excellent playing by that intellectual pianist Richard Buhlig. It was there that I met two of the most prominent American poets, Robert Frost and Vachel Lindsay. While talking to Frost I felt—as one usually does with original writers—that he was just as good as his poems. The essence of them was in him, gravely humorous and obliquely commentative.

It was after one of those musical evenings when I had been struck by the pain in Siegfried's downward-looking countenance that I wrote:

A SOLDIER LISTENS
(To Siegfried Sassoon)

What was it came to distress you,
Who from the restless dead,
As you sat in the slanting shadows
With a heavy head?

The music pressed in among us,
Almost too much—
You quivered and seemed to be startled
By a known touch.

Even when healing cadences
Reached out to you,
Your face looked broken in pieces,
Shot through and through.

As you sat in the slanting shadows
With a heavy head,
What was it came to distress you?
Who from the clamoring dead?

Louis showed it to Siegfried, who read it and murmured: 'She knows, good God, how does she know?'

We planned a weekend for Siegfried, along with close friends to whom we had introduced him: Helen Teschner Tas, the violinist, her husband Emile and their two daughters, the painter Bertram Hartman and his wife Gusta, and Richard Buhlig, the pianist, called by our inner circle, 'Luc'. And Ben Huebsch and his bride-to-be, Alfhild Lamm. On the way down to Milford, Pennsylvania, Richard sat in front with Louis, and Siegfried and I in the back seat of the automobile. Little by little, I could feel him relax from the terrible tension that held him. Then I was deeply touched when, like a child, he slipped his hand into mine, and for the time being at least, seemed utterly carefree. When we reached our destination, he was like an adolescent youth: riding the branch of a willow to let himself down on the opposite side of a stream; or leaping a fence into a field where a horse was grazing, to mount him bareback, and gallop around the enclosure. Our small son, Richard, was absolutely delighted.

Another passage in *Siegfried's Journey* gives an account of an evening with us:

> By the end of April I had ceased to bother keeping a diary, so I am now a mere vehicle for the capricious revelations of an unaided memory which prefers not to take the situation too seriously. Entreating it to recover something important, I receive nothing in return except frivolities. For instance, I see myself sitting in the Untermeyers' flat on a very sultry June night. I have been invited to meet Amy Lowell. She is reading us her latest and longest Imagist poem. She does it with lively expressiveness, but it continues almost an hour. I fall asleep. Fortunately, she attributes my closed eyelids to mental concentration.

Yet our meetings were not altogether frivolous. It was Siegfried who introduced us to the poetry of Charlotte Mew, by reading us 'Madeleine in Church,' and we had quite a discussion of those English and American woman contemporaries, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson. Siegfried read aloud the long religious poem, 'From House to Home,' of Christina Rossetti, and afterwards gave me as a present the small vellum-bound volume of her poems that he always carried with him. I treasure it to this day.

One of my sweetest memories of Siegfried was connected with my London song recital in Aeolian Hall in 1924. When I entered the green room, an attendant presented me with a parcel done up in florist's tissue paper, which contained the largest bunch of violets I have ever seen. They looked like violets freshly picked in the woods, but that seemed impossible, for it was December. The stems were short and the underside of the bouquet, over which was no protective silver paper, measured nearly five inches across. There was no possible way I could attach it to my bodice, but, since the flowers were from Siegfried, I carried them in my hand during the whole evening.

On the way to London, I had had a miserable encounter with an American in Paris, a dentist, who pierced my left antrum with his drill. The result was an immediately noticeable loss of brilliance in the voice. In spite of that I had many fine notices, and a darling old couple, complete strangers, presented themselves after the concert. 'My dear,' quavered the old lady, 'you have given us back our youth. We have never heard anyone sing Schubert like that since we were young.' Then came Siegfried. 'I don't know whether or not your voice is beautiful. But it was art—art,' he said, and his eyes were misty; 'and you carried my violets!'

The following day I had been invited to take tea with Siegfried at his lodgings. A manservant admitted me, but when he knocked, Siegfried did not open the door. 'Come in,' said his voice, and when I pushed open the door, there he stood in the middle of the floor, almost tongue-tied, his arms hanging limply and that curious, helpless look that I knew so well upon his face. He had quite forgotten to procure a fresh cake for tea, but on his piano rack were the several volumes of Schubert and Hugo Wolf songs from which my program had been taken.

Now, seeing him here in his Wiltshire home, apparently above the battle, made me hope he had taken to heart the affectionate admonition of my second poem to him.

TO A WAR POET

I stand before your grief with hanging futile hands—
And long to bring you healing, piteous youth;
Yet here the matter stands—
You must plow other lands.

These planted bones will bear no flower,
For you have garnered all their truth,
Go—in another place, another hour,
Find a new power!

Time seems to have flown with supersonic speed. I can hardly realize that this meeting took place twenty-nine years ago, and that my young friend, whose looks and qualities would have entitled him to a place at King Arthur's Round Table, is the same age as myself, has a married son, and has, apparently, found peace in the Catholic faith. Shall I ever see him again? Do I want to see him and the inevitable changes that time has wrought? Or is it better to look upon his once-upon-a-time likeness, in the photograph I have of him, or upon that inward and indelible impression that remains so fresh, so lovable in my memory?

I forgot to mention that before we reached Wiltshire on our ride through Dorset, Sylvia called my attention to one of the oddities of the countryside: the Cerne Giant. The Cerne Giant is a huge human figure cut out of the turf on the chalky side of a large hill, visible at a great distance. This figure discloses itself as aggressively and irrefutably male. It is said to have magical properties, and, even in our time as of old, barren couples trudge up to this ancient symbol of phallic potency, bringing appropriate votive offerings of eggs or, it might be, a mandrake root, if such can be found. Even newlyweds will make a pilgrimage to the giant and under his shadow will perform fertility rites in untutored nature's own sweet way.

After we left Siegfried in Wiltshire, our automobile journey had taken us not only through the green of Scotland's hills and dales but also through the grime of the North of England's industrial towns, over which a smoky haze, like a lowering mood, hung with a peculiar acridity. It was after lunch on a damp Sunday when we arrived at Haworth, intent on visiting the home of the Brontës. The cobblestoned hill that led to the old parsonage was steep and slimy, so Valentine parked the car at its base and we proceeded on foot. Just as we were setting out, a thread

of pure melody, with the earmarks of Bach, streamed out on the chill, gray afternoon with the vibrancy and intensity of a blowing red scarf. Sylvia identified for me the instrument on which it was played as the little trumpet in D. Now a commonplace in Bach performances it was at that date still sufficiently novel as to be unexpected and memorable if heard at Haworth. Sylvia also told me that in this region music was a passion, and that these Yorkshiremen used all their spare time practicing and singing. Coming when it did, this lively sound was an infusion of warmth and gaiety into the grimness of scene and weather.

Haworth itself was as gloomy a place as could be imagined. When one looked out from the upper windows of the parsonage onto the graveyard, one wondered more than ever at the genius of this family that the moorlands had engendered, and that it had thrived so lustily on the surrounding bleakness.

The moors themselves were positively terrifying to me, stretching out for miles without ever a landmark, and I frightened myself thoroughly by conjuring up the feelings of a wayfarer lost in this looming waste.

But, however various the scenery, there come moments when eye and mind can absorb no more, so occasionally I regaled my companions with stories and jokes. After one of these, the point of which I have forgotten, Sylvia said: 'Jean, you must tell that to Llewelyn Powys when we get back to Chaldon. Llewelyn has such a delicate and spontaneous sensuousness that, were he at death's door, he would return if you passed a ripe peach under his nose, or if a pretty girl in a sheer blouse came within scope of his failing glance.'

I was most eager to meet Llewelyn, whom I had missed the previous year. I had heard so much about his personality, which included, besides his great personal beauty and sensitivity, some traits of a Don Juan. Both Llewelyn and Alyse Gregory, his wife, were now with Miss Gertrude and Miss Katie at Chydyok.

The invitation to visit him came soon after our return. Unfortunately, it was one of his bad days, and the consumptive was not permitted to speak. We were to sit with him one at a time, and for only a few minutes. He was reclining out of doors in a little roofed shelter, placed on a turning device so that he could be shielded immediately from any change in the wind. Seldom have I seen a more beautiful person. He had the same characteristic features of his brothers and sisters, but in him they were refined by illness. His abundant hair and beard, once golden, were now streaked with silver, and this gave him

a touch of divinity, as if he were a favored son of both sun and moon. His garments were spotless and white, though he had a woolen scarf about his shoulders, and he looked as regal as some Welsh king of old. Although he was friendly and inviting, one felt that his sense of himself matched his appearance.

After a few exchanges, during which I spoke and he answered by writing on little slips of paper, I made the following observation: 'A plague on my wretched memory! There was a story that Sylvia wanted me to tell you, and for the moment it has gone completely out of my head. I'm afraid I would not dare tell it before Alyse' (who was probably not as restrictive as she seemed), 'for it was a little bit bawdy.' Llewelyn took up his pad and pencil and there followed this remarkable message: 'I do not like bawdy stories; I take my lust seriously.'

Somehow that bit of paper got lost, and it was a document that I would have liked to preserve. The story, by the way, was rather risqué than bawdy, but I used the first word that came to mind.

What I found so intriguing about all the Powyses was a certain unpredictability of response. This also extended to Alyse, who was of the clan only by marriage, but at that time had taken on a Powysishness, like a protective coloration. One morning she visited us and said that the night before they had all been discussing Montaigne. Then she said: 'As I was coming along the main road I was passed by a motorcar in which were four girls. One of the young girls was driving, and they were all laughing. They seemed so strange to me, so free of care; I could not identify with those girls. But later, to the side of the road, I saw a dead rat. And you know, Mrs. Untermeyer, I found I could identify with the dead rat.'

Later, in America, I had the pleasure of seeing Alyse Gregory again, and she had entirely divested herself of all the macabre hints she had let fall during that summer which I shall never forget.

From 'Leaves from a Dorset diary'. In *Private Collection* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), pp.144–75: pp.144–5, 156–75

Note

1 Untermeyer here is referring to an earlier comparison she had made between Amy Lowell's hospitality at Sevenels and her encounter with Scottish bacon while on tour with Warner and Ackland:

> But before I quit this room I must not forget to salute the delicious breakfasts that were served to us there. Never was coffee so fresh and fragrant, never butter so sweet and toast so crisp; and only at Amy's and a little mountain inn in Scotland where I stopped while on tour with my friends Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland have I tasted bacon that defied all the adjectives to describe its smoky savor.
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> (*Private Collection*, pp.76–7)

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