

A. E. HOUSMAN AT CAMBRIDGE

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A TRADITION grew up at Trinity College that the Latin scholar with the drooping moustaches was thoroughly and unalterably unsociable, and that any mention of the beauty of Shropshire or of the poems of A. E. Housman was the surest way to incur his frigidly vehement wrath. It is true that Housman did avoid crowds, large gatherings, foolish people, and silly undergraduates. But his door was never closed against any earnest student, and he enjoyed a measure of society even to showing himself a good fellow.

A story is told by Professor Raymond Wilson Chambers, of how on one occasion at a dinner where speeches were not expected, but where the wine had been good, Housman rose slowly to his feet and, to the amazement of all, began:

There were two things it was very difficult to meet in Cambridge a hundred and twenty years ago: the one was Wordsworth drunk, the other was Porson sober. I am a better scholar than Wordsworth; I am a better poet than Porson. Here I stand, half-way between Wordsworth and Porson.

He sat down again. It was a short speech, but proved a great success!

Sharp at seven-thirty, Housman came in and seated himself at Trinity's High Table without a word. He ate his dinner in silence, and left without a word—austere, almost morose in manner, it cannot be denied. And yet as the essayist Arthur Machen writes, "he was a fine gourmet; a curious lover of choice dishes and good wine." It is reported that he handled a bottle of rare Tokay almost with reverence.

"He gives us all an important lesson in this habit of his. The Manichean Heresy, which has assumed so many poisonous forms throughout the ages, always looks back to its first principle, that the earth is the Devil's and the emptiness thereof; and, consequently, that it is unseemly, even impious, to care what we eat and drink. Hence the horrors of Teetotalism—the chief manifestation of the Manichean abomination in our day."

Housman's fame in the rôle of epicure was so widely known that once when a colleague at Trinity was giving a literary dinner, for the final course he had served on a silver platter with a cover over it an old hat of Housman's!

A friend, who wishes to be anonymous, writes:

I knew Housman very well. Not only were our classical tastes very much the same—though, of course, here I was the humblest of followers—but we thought alike on many questions of food and drink, and we have bought wine together before now. We often met at dinner; but especially we used to give one another a curious meal once a year, alternately in Trinity and Magdalene, toward the end of September: a stew of tripe and oysters, washed down by Russian stout and followed by the very best and oldest port.

The hospitable mistress of one of the most delightful houses in Cambridge once inveigled Housman to accept an invitation to lunch. Knowing the reputation of her guest as a gourmet, she did her best to provide a distinguished menu for him. He alarmed her greatly by remaining quite silent during the beginning of the meal. Suddenly he said:

"This fish is excellent."

Towards the end of the repast he complimented his hostess on the wine. Later he stood sipping his coffee with his back against the mantelpiece. No sooner had he finished his cup than he made his third and last remark:

"I always take a walk about this time."—At this he hurried off.

As a gastronomical connoisseur, he had fame which spread even to Paris, where the noted Chef Frederic of the Tours d'Argent Restaurant invented the *barbac (fish grill) à la Housman* in the poet's honor.

Naturally he took a lively interest in the food and cooking of the ancients, and wrote several papers about dishes mentioned by Manilius, Lucan and Juvenal. When the well-known scholar, Cecil Bowra, read a paper at Cambridge on Attic Drinking Songs, Housman in the open discussion questioned the speaker's interpretation of the crab and the snake. Although Bowra did not feel that he had answered the scholar at all adequately, two days later he received a letter from Housman, which began, "You are probably right," and which went on to say that he would have to give up his own earlier views. Despite what his opponents affirm, it is Mr. Bowra's conviction that Housman was a profoundly modest man, who would always change his views if good reasons were brought against them.

Housman liked best the wine "that went down sweetly, causing the lips of those who are asleep to speak." He was at his best sipping some rare wine after a finely cooked meal. On

such occasions his dry humor came forth in diamond flashes. His keen enjoyment of country sights and sounds, and his love of old churches, of which he had a vast knowledge, were delightfully if shyly expressed at these times.

Mr. Stephen Gaselee, Fellow of Magdalene College and editor of the *Oxford Anthology of Medieval Latin*, in describing his friendship with Housman, told the present writer:

Our conversation was often of the classics, but more perhaps of food and drink, in which we were both much interested: he was particularly keen on Hock and Burgundy, and we often entertained each other at small (and I venture to say) good dinners.

He preferred the company of a few or of a single congenial friend, and as much as possible avoided crowds and noisy gatherings. William Scawen Blunt once persuaded him (after no little difficulty) to go to a grand race-meeting. But it was evident that he had not the slightest interest in anything connected with the racing or the gay spectacle, though he courteously tried to pay as much attention as possible to all the afternoon's events.

As the Cambridge years progressed (he first went there in 1911, and remained until his death in 1936), slowly but surely Housman's love of fun and mental frolic increased. On one occasion, for instance, he jokingly sent a friend about to be married a silver tobacco-box, with a Latin inscription, and a letter which began: "Marriage is a thing which I cannot approve in the abstract; but, after all, it usually takes place in the concrete, and may also be palliated by circumstances, such as I doubt not exist in the present case."

The "culprits" had the good fortune during their honeymoon to meet the misogynist in the pleasant town of Beaume, in Burgundy, where he regaled them at luncheon with the choicest foods and wines that could be procured.

When William Cartwright went up to Cambridge in 1926, he became homesick for his family in Stafford. Housman's poems, read for consolation, became more significant to him then and he determined to call on the poet, whose rooms were just opposite his own on Whewell's Court.

Although he knew that Housman reputedly made short work of undergraduate visitors, Cartwright screwed up his courage and knocked at the great man's door one Sunday night in May, 1927. The great man sat reading, but put down his book, and motioning his visitor to a chair, waited expectantly. Cartwright briefly described how for some years he had been

one of a number of old boys at Wolverhampton Grammar School, who had immensely admired his poetry. Turning shyly from this subject, Housman remarked that he had not been back to Shropshire for some twenty years, and then asked the other what he was reading in Trinity. On learning that it was German, he talked about Heine and praised him enthusiastically. Presently the visitor said that he must not detain him any longer. Housman looked at his watch: "It is a quarter of an hour until dinner; stay until then."

Upon returning in August, 1933, from three months in Germany, Cartwright spent some days in Cambridge, and called for a second time—on this occasion in the morning—and found the poet-scholar reading as before.

Housman appeared to remember his young friend, and asked what he had been doing in the interval. Cartwright described his activities briefly, and was at once asked: "Are you satisfied?" Then learning that his visitor had been in Germany recently, Housman asked such pertinent questions as to give the impression of knowing more about Germany than many dons who actually taught German and visited the country annually. But when Cartwright referred to Germany as one of the great nations, Housman scoffed sharply:

"Of course it is *not* a great nation. Germany's historical mission was to defend Europe from the East, but it left that, to try and conquer the world."

Cartwright told of having seen a naval exhibition at Bonn, where it was maintained that the German fleet won the battle of Jutland.

"Of course they won the battle of Jutland," Housman exclaimed; "if they did not do so, then the English did not win at Corunna."*

Although he might have been famed as a gourmet, in accord with his distaste for outright opprobrium he regularly and persistently declined all the academic honors which were offered him in later years by universities both at home and abroad. Twice he refused the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from Oxford—in 1928 and 1934. And it is known that he declined at least eight Honorary Doctorates.

A few years ago, he told his brother Laurence of another refusal which, till then, he had kept secret. Laurence had for

*It was at this combined sea and land fight between the French and English, in 1807, that the famous Sir John Moore was killed and hastily buried in a military cloak.

"Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
As his corse to the ramparts we hurried."

some time felt concerned that the one honor his brother might be willing to accept, the Order of Merit, had not been offered him. Since others felt the same way, one day Laurence asked if he would accept it. Housman declared he would not, and when disappointed Laurence demanded the reason, he said that, though he knew it would be offered him if he lived to the age of eighty, he had decided against accepting any honor and against this particular one because it was not always given to the right persons. Then he recalled how he had consoled Robert Bridges for having had to receive the honor at the same time as John Galsworthy, whose writings they both disliked, and that Bridges had admitted the circumstance had not given him pleasure.

After some further talk, Housman suddenly blushed (a characteristic which he had retained from the days of his youth) and said:

Well, as a matter of fact, Mr. Baldwin did write to me not long ago to say that the King was ready to offer it; and I believe it was offered at the same time to Bernard Shaw. But for the reason I have already stated, and because I could not have the trouble of going to be received by the King, I declined. But I don't want it to be known: it wouldn't be fair to the King.

Yet, from what Francis Brett Young writes the author, it is evident that Housman must have been offered the Order even earlier:

A couple of years ago I was discussing with Mr. Lloyd George the names of men of letters whom I thought fit for the Order of Merit, our most distinguished decoration. I insisted on Housman, but Lloyd George demurred. I asked him if he really knew the *Shropshire Lad* poems and he admitted that he did not; so I made him telephone to London that evening for a copy. It duly arrived, and he read the poems I chose aloud to us—superbly, for he has a voice of gold. During the night he read for himself the rest of the volume, and in the morning surrendered to my claim.

"I'll give you Housman," he said.

But all his life long Housman retained a pronounced objection to decorations of every sort. There is a Cambridge story (also vouched for by Francis Brett Young) that a young woman offered him a Flanders poppy when they were sold on Armistice Day for the benefit of the blinded soldiers of the First World War who had made them.

"Madam," Housman replied, "I do not approve of decorations of any kind and least of all, on such an occasion, of one that is the symbol of oblivion!"