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Sylvia Townsend Warner\*

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\*(1893–1978)

# Five Letters to Charles Prentice, 1925–26

*Sylvia Townsend Warner*

## Abstract

Five previously unpublished letters from Sylvia Townsend Warner to her publisher Charles Prentice of Chatto & Windus. The letters discuss Warner's first two novels, *Lolly Willowes* and *Mr Fortune's Maggot*.

**Keywords** Sylvia Townsend Warner; Charles Prentice; Chatto & Windus; letters; *Lolly Willowes*; *Mr Fortune's Maggot*.

*Editor's note: In 1924, at David Garnett's suggestion, Warner sent her poems to Charles Prentice of Chatto & Windus. When he accepted them enthusiastically and asked her if she had any other writings to show him, she gave him the manuscript of Lolly Willowes. Prentice and Warner became close friends, and he remained her editor at Chatto until he left the firm in 1935. The letters below record their early discussions of Lolly Willowes and Mr Fortune's Maggot. William Maxwell included the first three sentences of the letter of 25 February 1925 in his edition of Warner's Letters, but the rest of that letter and all the others below have not before been published.*

25:2:1925

Dear Mr Prentice,

Here is my story about a witch, that you were kind enough to say you would like to read. If you like it well enough to think it worth publishing

I shall be extremely pleased. If you don't, I shan't be much surprised. To attempt both poetry and novel-writing seems a kind of bigamy, so I am quite prepared for you to say you can't encourage such goings-on.

Yours sincerely  
Sylvia Townsend Warner

4.3.1925

Dear Mr Prentice,

What delightful letters you write! I am delighted that you should like Lolly. I have known her for some years now and though she has often been a surprise to me, and her contradictory ways a trial, I have a sneaking fondness for the creature.

Everything that you suggest about the terms of publication is entirely satisfactory. I will cheerfully strengthen the bond of empire with a 10% royalty.

You say that you feel you missed something in the conversation with Satan. That is almost certainly because I neglected to put it in.

If there is time, I think I would like to have the Mss back. I would then make someone else read it and see if their opinion about the end throws any light on where the weak spot is. If you have any particular criticisms I should be extremely grateful for them. It would be a pity not to give the Devil his due.

Yours very sincerely  
Sylvia Townsend Warner

10.3.1925

Dear Mr Prentice,

Very many thanks for your letter and for the Ms. Indeed Lolly didn't die. She is at this moment alive and much looking forward to a ripe old age vis-a-vis with Satan. Immortals make the best companions then. Think how reassuring to have a friend who won't die or go deaf or marry the cook ...

I am very grateful to you for your analysis of your un-ease, especially for the two words 'forensic' and 'humanistic'. I think they gave me the clue

as to what is wrong. I expect I have made Lolly's two tirades too convincing. She should ramble in her speech rather more. And there must be nothing humanistic in Satan's sympathetic attitude. At the moment I have an idea for making him play the flute as some point in the conversation.

I have always identified the Satan of the witch-cult with Pan.<sup>1</sup> (Warlocks seems to have worshipped a quite different Satan, with a definite religious significance: a power of evil.) I believe I am right in saying that there has never been a religion founded on Pan. He has been acknowledged only: and under two aspects: the unaccountable terror that lies in wait in solitary places; and a simple out-door festivity. This mixture of fear and Bank Holiday on Hampstead Heath is very closely reproduced in the witch-cult.

The business of the familiar animals is also significant; and there is a very wide-spread tradition that he is shaggy, and that there is something odd about his legs and feet.

Miss Murray thinks it can all be explained by the fertility cult. I don't agree with her. It explains a great many of the things witches did, but it doesn't explain why they were witches.

I will send off the Ms tomorrow, and get the opinion of a great novel-reader who thinks the story more important than the writing. I think that is likely to be the most acid test. In any case I will have at Satan's human side. I can't tell you how thankful I am that you spotted it, and told me.

Yours very sincerely  
Sylvia Townsend Warner

The Espalier will follow very shortly.

25.3.1925

Dear Mr Prentice,

Thank you very much for selling me to Mr Lincoln MacVeagh. Is The Dial Press the same as The Dial that took a story of Theo's?<sup>2</sup> ... I mean, under the same management. Theo said it was very handsome and select.

Certainly Mr MacVeagh can have the first offer of Lolly. She, I think, might be rather a success in America. I should like her to do well in Hawthorne's country.

Meanwhile she has come back from a lawn by a river; and the hostess says that she liked her extremely, which only convinces me that

she must have read most of her indoors: and that she had no objection to the end.

For all that I am at work on it, and I think I am improving it, for I have taken out a lot of chat, thrown in some moral reflections, and added a fine passage about a mammoth, not so fortuitous as you might think.

When I have cooled it with a baboon's blood I will send it all back to you.

Here is the agreement. L'appétit vient en mangeant. I hope I shall sign a great many more such. Yes, I am going to write another novel. In fact I have begun it, for I have looked up two dates and drawn a ground-plan – of a small house in Devonshire.

Yours very sincerely  
Sylvia Townsend Warner

5:11:1926

Dear Mr Prentice,

I can now tell you something about *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, my present story. It will be about 45,000 words or a little over, and I think some of it will be rather good. But I see that I shall have to spend a good while yet in considering and re-writing. It is a heavier wine than *Lolly* and it will take time to settle together. I had hoped to let you have it by Christmas but I am sorry to say there is no chance of that.

Did Miss Somerville tell you that I am reading for the B.B.C. on the 17<sup>th</sup>? I am much looking forward to it, and invoking every saint in the calendar that I may not develop a heavy cold on that day.

Later on you may come across me in the National Gallery, kneeling before suitable advocates. There are one or two obviously snuffing Magdalens who might be propitious, I think.

Yours sincerely  
Sylvia Townsend Warner

Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive, Dorset History Centre;  
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County Museum 'STW.2012.125.2412'

## Notes

- 1 Margaret Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Modern Europe* was published in 1921. Warner's uncle Arthur Machen had published *The Great God Pan* in 1894.
- 2 The Dial Press was founded in 1923, and it published the American edition of *The Espalier* in 1925. It shared a building with *The Dial* magazine, first published in 1840.

## Bibliography

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