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# Sinclair Lewis and the Baxters

## *The History of a Friendship*

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Roger K. Blakely

THIS YEAR marks the centennial of the first American Nobel in literature. Minnesota-born Sinclair Lewis. The occasion gave rise to an exhibit in New York sponsored by the prestigious Grolier Club, and a three-day conference in St. Cloud, near Lewis' home town of Sauk Centre, that brought scholars from around the country to examine his life and his works.

Minnesota History notes the century year of this much-discussed and often maligned author with the following article by Roger Blakely, professor of English at Macalester College and a specialist in American literature. Working with only half of a correspondence that lasted for six years, Professor Blakely weaves together a hitherto little-known story of a friendship. (The Baxter letters to Lewis have apparently disappeared, according to a family member.) His article includes 28 letters from Lewis, all but one of which are published here for the first time.

The letters are part of the Lewis collection owned by and housed in Macalester College's Weyerhaeuser Li-

brary. We publish them here in their entirety, exactly as Lewis wrote them, with the following exceptions: identifying material, when known, has been added in bracketed italics; footnote numbers have been added; and the letters' closings have been omitted to conserve space. Seventeen of the letters were signed "Ever. Red"; nine close with "Love, Red." Lewis' spelling and punctuation (or lack of it) appear intact, and his frequent use of dots should not be read as ellipses points.

—Editor

THOSE WHO KNEW Sinclair Lewis well found him alternately kind or curmudgeonly, swinger or recluse, liberal or petty, generous to rivals or nasty behind their backs, appalled by Main Street but nostalgic for its barbershop gusto, a slapdash stylist who made careful chronologies and street maps for his novels, a dissipated wassailer who arose at 4:30 to write until breakfast and then steadily into the afternoon.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not any of the work of this unusual person endures except for the eponymous *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, Lewis—along with his younger contemporary,

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis, An American Life*, 725-733 (New York, 1961) cites choice examples of Lewis' conduct.

THE CARTOON is © Al Hirschfeld/Margo Feiden Galleries



JOHN and MARY  
BAXTER, with two of their  
sons, Lewis and Charles,  
about 1947

F. Scott Fitzgerald, or his fellow Nobel-laureate, John Steinbeck—remains a classic case study of the American author on trial. Like them he was full of promise, short of permanent accomplishment, unable to discipline his talent with the critical judgment of a William Faulkner or Henry James or, on a high but less Olympian level, of the Willa Cather both he and Fitzgerald admired.

Nevertheless, Lewis could handle ideas and dramatize them effectively; he belongs among those rare innovators who, whatever their faults, generate myths and mythic personages (George Babbitt comes to mind, in the company of Jay Gatsby, the Joads, or Dreiser's Hurstwood) to embody new social facts. That he triumphed over the long haul as either writer or human being we admit less willingly nowadays. Though he was as given to migrating as a water fowl, his taste and technique fixated at the level of his first novels or fell below them. His brash prose of the 1920s persisted too long into the serious 1930s and the war-vexed 1940s in spite of the broadening of his sympathies to cover the women's movement, anti-Fascism, and racial justice. His friendships, like his enthusiasms and obsessions, shifted all too often without gaining depth or insight, until even his most loyal fans (and he had many) lost patience.

Fortunately, a set of letters from "Red" Lewis to perhaps his closest Minneapolis acquaintances of the 1940s, the insurance man John T. Baxter, Jr., and his wife Mary, permits us to follow one of these friendships from beginning to end. Faithfully preserved even to their postmarked envelopes, these materials were bequeathed to Macalester College's Weyerhaeuser Library by Mary Baxter, who, after her second marriage to lawyer Loring Staples, Sr., became a benefactor and

trustee or trustee-emerita of that institution until her death in 1978.<sup>2</sup>

This correspondence had been consulted by Lewis' major biographer, Mark Schorer (who recommended giving it to the novelist's alma mater, Yale), and by John J. Koblas, who also cited the publication of eight letters, with an explanatory preface, in the *South Dakota Review*. The Baxters' youngest son, now an author and teacher in Ann Arbor, knew the letters, too, and quoted from or alluded to several in a fascinating sketch titled "Realism in Fiction" that appeared obscurely in the mid-1970s.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the bulk of the material has never been made public in spite of its valuable revelations of the many sides of an important and controversial literary figure.

Marred by only a few misunderstandings, Lewis' connection with the Baxters survived most of the 1940s. And perhaps the Lewis centennial of 1985 gives it renewed interest. His letters, mostly hurried and concerned with travel arrangements, changes of address, housing problems, party plans, or season's greetings, still manage to dig deeper at times. In fact, he shows here at his best, during some of the good years that

<sup>2</sup> Jean Archibald, "Two Minnesota College Reports on Sinclair Lewis Collection at Macalester," in *Sinclair Lewis Newsletter* (St. Cloud), 17 (1972) describes the history and contents of Macalester's full Lewis collection which has many items in addition to the Baxter bequest.

<sup>3</sup> Mary E. [Baxter] Staples, "As I Remember Sinclair Lewis," in *South Dakota Review* (Vermillion), Winter, 1969-70, p. 11-13; all other citations to this publication are from the Winter, 1969-70, issue. See also Charles Baxter, "Realism in Fiction," in *The Little Magazine* (New York), Fall-Winter, 1976, p. 38-47. The other Baxter sons are Thomas and Lewis. Charles Baxter to Roger Blakely, January 24, 1985, letter in author's possession.

opened with his guest teaching at the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1942. The following year saw the debut of *Gideon Planish* (a money-maker, whatever the critics thought of it), then Lewis' Duluth residencies, a Hollywood interval, the composing of *Cass Timberlane* and *Kingsblood Royal* (the latter perhaps the strongest of his late novels), and the return to New England as his only real home until the forlorn final period in Rome. After the failure of Lewis' marriage to writer and columnist Dorothy Thompson, these were also the courtship years of the young actress Marcella Powers, who wisely settled later for a younger man, the years of radio exposure on network programs such as "Invitation to Learning" and "Information Please," and of lecture tours and even a bit of professional acting because Lewis, like his idol Charles Dickens, adored the stage and the podium. Meanwhile, steady royalties refueled him even as his productivity and health declined.<sup>4</sup>

He kept the Baxters informed of all these happen-

<sup>4</sup> Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 646-652, 758; a sampling of responses to *Gideon Planish* appears on p. 697-699. For a chronology of Lewis' wanderings, see John J. Koblas, *Sinclair Lewis: Home at Last*, xi-xiii (Bloomington, Minn., 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Baxter to Roger Blakely, June 16, 1984, letter in author's possession; Staples, in *South Dakota Review*, 11.

ings. As a young-married, domesticated, socially well-connected couple living on Minneapolis' upper-middle-brow Girard Avenue, they seemed to understand and accept their mercurial and foot-loose new friend. If not ranking intelligentsia like the writer Brenda Ueland or the university don Joseph Warren Beach—Lewis' chum from an earlier Twin Cities stay—they were college educated, civilized, lovers of music, good sports. They knew the upcoming novelist Robert Penn Warren, and conductor-composer Leonard Bernstein once made an omelette in their kitchen, but for Lewis they mostly supplied an index of normality, a comfortable oasis, a reference point. "Lewis was restless," Mary Baxter recollected later, "and could never stay in one place for any length of time, yet he was always looking for a home." And Charles Baxter, only a year old when the friendship terminated but privy to his family's history, adds that "my parents offered Lewis some comfort and security," although "being Lewis, he grew impatient with security and comfort at the same time that he wanted it."<sup>5</sup>

Their association began when Lewis would drop by after teaching on the Minneapolis campus. Apparently he had been introduced to the Baxters first by Brenda Ueland, whose informal circle of young sophisticates

THE BAXTER house on Girard Avenue in Minneapolis



LEWIS' residence on Mount Curve in Minneapolis



called the "Linden Hills White Trash" had adopted, or at least tolerated, their city's famous visitor. At the Baxters, Lewis would "appear around 9:30 at night and stay until two, talking and talking. He was a manic talker," Charles continues, "and although my parents probably wanted to go to bed, they couldn't. As my father is reported to have said to my mother, 'Well, he's won the Nobel Prize; it'd be rude to fall asleep with him here.'"<sup>6</sup>

The acquaintance continued when Lewis left for New York after the fall teaching term, the letters now supplanting those nocturnal talk fests. Of the 35 over the next six years, the first, handwritten on Hotel Dorset stationery and dated December 15, 1942, set the tone of mingled wit and affection that was rarely broken thereafter:<sup>7</sup>

Dear John & Mary:

For a Minneapolis boy like me, this place is filled with a bewilderment of shops, Xmases, & restaurants at which fried eggs with gold sauce are served for \$5<sup>00</sup> per egg. But I'm enjoying it. But I miss my neighbors. But just to be metropolitan & hellish, I'm starting a short story. Love from Marcella — too!

Writing again from the Dorset on December 19, he mentioned a new work by Maritta Wolff, a young author he boosted with his frequent but unpredictable benevolence.<sup>8</sup> Dimitri was undoubtedly Mitropolous, then conductor of the Minneapolis Symphony, evidently doing guest appearances in New York:

Dear John & Mary:

Merry Xmas! I'd hoped to have a copy of *Nite Watch* [sic] autographed by Maritta in time for Xmas for you, but I shan't get it in time. But I enclose some—at last satisfactory—ads of it, & news of yr friend Dimitri

Soon after, Lewis thanked the Baxters (actually Mary, to whom the letter is addressed) for "Xmas cheese and pudding," reported his own holiday dinner with Marcella and her mother, mentioned his publisher's acceptance of the *Gideon Planish* manuscript, and, in an attractive sally of self-criticism, described his next task as "an endless series of short stories: some of them plagiarisms of Conrad, some of Freud, some of the Sears-Roebuck & some of Sinclair Lewis."<sup>9</sup>

A letter of January 26, 1943, rejoiced that the Baxters received their copy of *Night Shift*. Lewis got the title right at last, and called Maritta "the real thing. I'm sorry to see by the best seller lists that it [*Night Shift*] has not gone over more—she will, though, Lord how she will!" Also he called his new flat "a cross between Elizabeth Arden's Beauty Salon and the horse-stables at Ringling Circus Winter Headquarters: 29 floors up in the air, and commanding a fair view of the Orkney Isles on the East, of Girard Avenue South on the North &

West." This letter closed with love to the Fire Warden—a private joke, because John Baxter as a wartime warden (this was World War II, and Minneapolis lay only a few thousand miles from Japanese submarines) had once threatened to report the novelist for showing an illegal light in his study late at night.<sup>10</sup>

March 12 produced a multiple message to various Minneapolitans, of whom the Cousin [Addison] Lewises were not related except in jest:<sup>11</sup>

The Baxters  
The Cousin Lewises  
The McNallys  
The Rand  
The Uelands  
The Wilsons

The new address is 300 Central Park West, New York City, which is corner of 90th Street, and the telephone number — to be put down in your most gilded notebook, and there preserved, because the damn snob won't have his number in the phone book — is SCHuyler 4-0449. I would write you all seperately [sic], and tell you how joyous I was to see you again, but what with moving in (now complete) I would never get it done for weeks

and weeks

and weeks

and weeks

and I don't want to wait that long, not for weeks

and weeks,

no!

THE books will be out on April 19, and onorabout [sic] that date I shall be sending copies to you.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Baxter to Blakely, June 16, 1984. For a fuller account of this clique of "local writers, artists, and novices," see Koblas, *Home at Last*, 62.

<sup>7</sup> Sinclair Lewis to John and Mary Baxter, December 15, 1942, in Lewis collection, Weyerhaeuser Library, Macalester College, reprinted in *South Dakota Review*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Michigan-born Maritta Wolff's *Whistle Stop*, written when she was an undergraduate student, caused a stir in 1941 for its precocious skill and gritty realism. Lewis' letter refers to her second novel, correctly titled *Night Shift* (1942).

<sup>9</sup> Lewis to John and Mary Baxter, December 29, 1942, in *South Dakota Review*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis to Mary Baxter, January 26, 1943, in *South Dakota Review*, 13. For a full description of the apartment, which was photographed for *House Beautiful*, January, 1944, see Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 699. See also Charles Baxter to Blakely, June 16, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Not all the personal references in Lewis' letters are intelligible or pertinent to present-day readers. Minneapolis City Directories for the early 1940s indicate that Addison Lewis was an advertising man; William J. McNally was a writer, critic, editor, and vice president of the Minneapolis Star-Journal and Tribune Company; "The Rand" may be Rufus R. Rand, president of the Rand Company; Alfred M. Wilson was a Minneapolis-Honeywell executive. See also Koblas, *Home at Last*, 64.

Meanwhile *Gideon Planish* reached the printers and its author made radio appearances, of which he informed his friends on April 6.<sup>12</sup>

Dear Mary:

Why Mary, that wasn't me on Information Please! That was that other Sinclair Lewis, the New York one that hangs around cafes and writes for the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. I'm the gaunt, dignified Minnesota one, that teaches in the University and writes forewords for the Readers' Club and is a nice, well-intentioned guy.... I have a kind of creeping general hunch that you-all will be seeing me in Minnesota before the end of next month, and that I'll put in maybe three months exploring the state this summer. Yes, I do miss you all. I was able to see Al and Fefa [Wilson], but only for a short time—they had a lot of plans, and Win and Peter were in town.

I'll be sending you your copy of the novel early next week — it will be published two weeks from yesterday. Apparently a large advance sale.

I'll be on Information Please again on April 19, and next Sunday, the 11th, on a program I dunno if it comes to Mpls — Invitation to Learning, on Columbia system, 11:30 New York time. Will you please telephone these overwhelming facts to thr [sic] Wilsons, Lewises, Daniels, Brenda and maybe — look him up in Mpls phone book — Prof. Jos Warren Beach. What? What did you say? How will Joan know about it, d' you say? Why, Mary, I dunno what you're talking about. You been reading books again.

I have one more long (30,000 wd) story to finish, then the drive that has lasted for a year will let up a little, and I may be able to drop in on the Baxters again and go view

the wonders of the Cuyuna Iron Range — no, I didn't say Mesaba, I said Cuyuna.  
Wassails to the Warden.

Instead of the projected Minnesota visit, the summer of 1943 found Lewis staying on at Central Park West into June, and then giving nearly three months to a Hollywood collaboration with Dore Schary over a pseudo-western concealing a Hitler-Mussolini allegory—a scenario so complicated that the movie moguls later scrapped it.<sup>13</sup> A series of letters charted the author's movements and reactions:

4/13 [1943]

Dear Mary:

Information Please.

May 3

NOT

Apr 19

Mother & child are doing well. Scenery is sleeping under blankets. Any fire warden that doesn't sell \$10000000 worth of war bonds EVERY evening is not worth his weight in bubblegum. Who is this Wendell Stassen you speak of?<sup>14</sup> Where is Minn.? AWOL [*The letter apparently ends here.*]

May 1 [1943]

Dear Mary:

Delighted by your note. And I *am* coming to Minnesota, for two or three months of wandering & exploring, with plenty of time in Minneapolis. I'll get there some time before May 20th. Tell Hannah Daniel I'll then answer her pleasant note in person. Tell the Adolph Wilsons & the Addison Ludwigs that I'm coming, & to save their vintage White Rock for me.<sup>15</sup> Tell the Fire Warden I sent his damn judge my fine by *mail*

June 22 [1943]

Dear Mary:

Yes. New York is beautiful, tho hot. But what have I to do with that? Tomorrow I leave for 10 weeks in Hollywood, in the galley — just a little golden slave! Then, Oct. 4, I start lecturing. Your Mpls lecture courses won't have me. Better *make* 'em so I can see you all & tell you my undiminishing love.

Midway through his Hollywood assignment, Lewis described in some detail the frustrations of a script writer. Giving his address as the Chateau Marmont on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, he wrote on August 7, 1943:

Dear Mary & John:

Hail! I've been here now for six weeks: four weeks from today, I'll leave for New York, with three weeks there; then, on October 7th, I'll be starting my lecture tour — or rather, debating tour — with Lewis Browne, which will last till early December;<sup>16</sup> then New York and the still beatitude of 300 Central Park West.... I'm sorry that we shall not be lecturing in either Minneapolis or St. Paul, but the reasonable people in charge of

<sup>12</sup> On Lewis' tours and radio appearances, see Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 696, 702. University professor Joseph Warren Beach was a prominent scholar, critic, and an authority on Henry James; Dr. Lewis Daniel and his wife, Hannah, were cousins of John Baxter.

<sup>13</sup> Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 704-708. Schary, a film producer and writer, is remembered for such movies as *Boys' Town*, *Bataan*, *Lassie Come Home*, and *The Farmer's Daughter*. He was also known for quarreling with the House Un-American Affairs Committee and for liberal and progressive sympathies; he was a delegate to the 1948 Democratic national convention, not long after his association with Lewis. *Current Biography*, 555 (New York, 1948).

<sup>14</sup> This is Lewis' amusing conflation of Wendell Willkie, the 1940 Republican presidential candidate, and Harold E. Stassen, the "boy wonder" governor of Minnesota from 1939 to 1943 and perennial presidential aspirant after World War II.

<sup>15</sup> Adolph and Ludwig are evidently facetious Germanizations of friends' names, reflecting the mood of the war years.

<sup>16</sup> Browne, a rabbi and author of popular books on religion, was an old friend and frequent lecture partner of Lewis. They debated such topics as "The Country Versus the City," "Has the Modern Woman Made Good?" and "Can Fascism Happen Here?" Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 683.

lecture courses in both those towns explained to my agent that as they had already heard me speak free, naturally they would never pay any money to hear us! So that if you teach at the University without charging for it, your breast may swell with the thankful thought that, on the other hand, you can adjust the budget by getting 100% of the guilty take at all the lectures your agent will later get you in that locality — only, there won't be no lectures. But as the damn tour will be too long anyway, my only regret is that I shan't see you-all again this year.

Write voluminously and give me all the news of the Baxters, Cousin Lewises, Wilsons, McNallys, Dalrymples, Cowleses, Pillsburys, Swetts [Sweatts], Danielses, et al, et al.<sup>17</sup>

The work here has been comparatively easy, and I do know the most incredible number of nice people. Yet I dislike the whole business, and shall probably never write a film again. It is, for me, and I think for most novelists, both too mechanical and too co-operative. I haven't encountered any of the exasperations of which you hear in anecdotes: the producer with whom I work is not a pretentious and illiterate cloak-and-suiter but a highly intelligent and friendly man who was himself a writer for a long time. He, and MGM in general, do not seem to care when I work or where — at the studio or here at my hotel or in a swimming pool. What really bothers me is the taboos — and among them, not the fact that, say, a couple of gunmen couldn't say anything so vile as "damn," but that all really stirring issues, political, racial, biological, must be sidestepped or not even approached.

But it has been cool....compared with New York or Minnesota!

I wish that it had been this year that the McNallys came here. I could have introduced them to 5,967 just slightly faded stars, and have bought them a dreamy planter's punch at the Beachcomber. Same goes for Baxters!

From New York again, a fascinating letter regretted the miscarriage of Mary's letter to him in Hollywood; in retrospect Lewis also regretted "the ten weeks grind on a movie script" but "just to make you respectful" tallied the nice people he met there—"Katherine [sic] Hepburn, Tallulah Bankhead, Cedric Hardwicke, Spencer Tracy," among others. He also alerted the Baxters to a scheduled stop of Jean Hersholt in Minneapolis to sell war bonds, hoping that the Uelands and the Baxters would entertain "the most important actor of Scandinavian origin in America."<sup>18</sup> Sometimes Lewis himself didn't know whether he was being serious or not.

Within a few weeks Lewis was on the road again, debating with Lewis Browne in several cities, including St. Louis, from where he wrote on October 24:

Dear Mary:

A hell of a fine pair of correspondents Brenda & you are! I haven't heard from either of you whether you had the party with Jean Hersholt....Debate here tonight,

Kansas City tomorrow — & just arrived from Seattle: gay little jaunt of 4 nights & 3 days!

I have juggled dates so that, between Iowa City & Eau Claire, I'll be in Minneapolis from 7:30 AM, Nov. 16 (a Tuesday) to 2:15 PM on the 17th. The Baxters might come down & have breakfast with me on the 16th & would you like to try to get up a party at somebody's house for me that evening — the 16th? I'll be at the Hotel Nicolle —presumably — & Lewis Browne, with whom I am touring, will not be with me, except possibly at Wednesday lunch. He is skipping over to Aberdeen, S. Dak., to fill in an extra lecture date.

Write me care of my lecture agent: Harold R. Peat, 2 West 45th St., New York, who will know how to catch me en route — but don't wait long before writing. And Love to you & the warden

<sup>17</sup> This intermix of the Baxters' crowd with such Minneapolis movers and shakers as the Harold Sweatts of Honeywell, the John Cowleses of newspaper publishing, the John S. Dalrymples of Red River Valley wheat farming fame, and the flour-milling Pillsbury family suggests a real breadth to the author's social contacts in that city.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis to Mary Baxter, September 15, 1943, in *South Dakota Review*, 14.

Dallas, Tex.  
Nov. 4

(Tomorrow, on to New Orleans, San Antonio, + Houston)

Dear Mary:

GROSS! Party of Baxters, Lewises, Wilsons, McN's, Daniels, Brenda & you 16th sounds fine. & you and they would like, you might add the Dalrymples + the Peavy + the Peavy + the Peavy! See you at breakfast!

Love!

Red

The care with which Lewis tended his social life continued to be evident in the following November 4, 1943, letter from Dallas:

(Tomorrow, on to New  
Orleans, San Antonio,  
& Houston)

Dear Mary:

Gruss! Party of Baxters, Lewises, Wilsons, Mc N's, Daniels, Brenda for 16th sounds fine. If you *and* they would like, you might add the Dalrymples & the Peavey Heffelfingers. See you at bxfst!

When Lewis was once more in New York, three weeks of flu allowed him an "orgy of reading—especially that bright young coming man, Charley Dickens, with *Tale of Two Cities*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *Edwin Drood*—I was somewhat astonished to find that I had never read the last two." After praising *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* "by one of the very best of the younger writers, Wallace Stegner," Lewis described Christmas with Marcella and her mother, but now he would turn to "the sinister typewriter keys....Did I ever write a whole book? It seems impossible....and according to a fair number of critics, *is impossible!*"<sup>19</sup>

A February communication briefed the Baxters on his coming summer in Duluth: in March he made plans to entertain them even earlier, if they were to visit out East:

February 29, 1944

Dear Mary:

It will be wonderful if you really come in March — or April. In May, you are likely to see me in Minnesota. I'm probably going to spend three or four months in that beautiful state, but I warn you that I expect to stay in Duluth, most of the time. With no car, the country will be impossible, and Duluth — aside from being in itself a charming town — will be much cooler than Mpls or St. Paul. Perhaps Johnny and you will come up and spend a long week-end. You can come by train. Tell John to start making plans: that I shall not take a No.

PLEASE let me know as far ahead as you can just when you will be arriving in NY and — if possible — where you will stay, so that I can keep a lot of time free, and make plans (but plans no more complicated and tiring than getting hold of Hal [Harrison] Smith, Edith Hag-

<sup>19</sup> Lewis to Mary Baxter, January 4, 1944, in *South Dakota Review*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> The letter identifies the family affected by the scandal, the author chooses to exercise discretion in omitting it here.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis to John and Mary Baxter, May 25, 1944, in *South Dakota Review*, 16. The Duluth chess player (actually only in his 70s) is said to be retired lawyer and judge, Patrick J. Lyons: telephone interview with Professor Roger Forseth of the University of Wisconsin-Superior, January 15, 1985, notes in author's possession.

gard [Lewis' agent], Carl Van Doren [author and critic], and a girl called Marcella). I shall yell a welcome.

Bill and Lois McNally are here, and I've seen them several times. They are really wonderful in the way they do not even mention the real tragedy that occurred to them. We had them here with Hal Smith and Marcella's editorial-office-mate, Kay Ruddy, playing Monopoly and yelling happily.

No, I had *not* heard the \_\_\_\_\_ SCANDAL. I was delighted.<sup>20</sup>

March 31 [1944]

Dear Mary:

If you get here by April 25th, just to pick a date arbitrarily, I think I'll still be here. Apparently I am definitely going out to Minnesota for three or four months (though as I told you, I'm likely to be living in Duluth or some other northern haunt) but I don't expect to start till May 1st, or just before it.

Let me know beforehand just when you will get here and where you will stay. I want to plan a party that you will like, and I don't want to be all tied up with a lot of dates when you are here.

Since my lecturing and writing a two-part story, I've done almost nothing but read. And I have fallen into a new vice, much worse than dope or arson: I've taken to playing chess, and I'm mildly insane about it. This is, obviously, the final stage of dissolution.

Come on! Marcella is already planning to go out and get drunk with you — to ride on the top of a taxi and beat up policemen.

Knowledgeable readers will recognize echoes from Fitzgerald's Jazz Age tales (some fiction, some fact) of three-day debauches, wading barefoot in public fountains, riding through Central Park on the hoods of taxis, or threatening to saw waiters in two. But Lewis took Duluth seriously enough—if not New York—to report from that city in late May the rental of "a handsome brick English manor-house...with a great view over lake & hills... I miss you both very much; & I'm glad that we did have a few days together at least." He urged John and Mary to come see his "672 bedrooms—all of them with traces of furniture." As to the new obsession, "I have been playing with a lawyer who is 88 years old and has played chess for 77 years! (I mean it.) So far, he has beaten me only 7 games. That is because we have played only 7 games."<sup>21</sup>

The Baxters owned a family summer home on Lake Superior's Madeline Island, where Minneapolitans and other midwesterners had been vacationing since the early 1900s. Writing to them there, Lewis renewed his invitation to nearby Duluth:

August 15, 1944

Dear Mary:

I hope this will reach you. You gave no address at all on your letter, and I'm guessing at one from the post



*CHESS PLAYER Lewis, with an unidentified opponent, pictured in his Duluth home, June, 1944*

mark. I do wish to God I could see you, see La Pointe, and then see Minneapolis, but, as I shall have been away for four months, I have to get back to New York, and I'm leaving here for NY on August 28. But I think I shall be back in Mpls before a year is gone, and this time stay longer. And shan't I see you in New York? I'll be there most or all of the fall and winter..

Duluth has been a great success — sensationally lovely in its physical background, full of pleasant people and, for working, wonderfully cool all summer, so that my book has gone swimming on. I wouldn't mind really living here....or in Minneapolis...just provided, of course that I could skip off to China or Mozambique on a day's notice.

From New York on November 23, he congratulated Mary on her news and laconically thanked her for the note about his elder son, Wells, killed in action by a sniper in Alsace, France.

Dear Mary:

I'm extremely happy about your coming baby. Whether or not I'll see you-all before its appearance, I can't tell, but it's not impossible. I certainly want to!

Thank you for your note about Wells.

This letter is apparently one of the very few acknowledgements of the many condolences Lewis received after his loss.<sup>22</sup> However, the new year brought new events to interest his Minneapolis friends:

January 6, 1945

Dear Mary:

Your nice letter found me in a very Minnesotaward frame of mind. I am actually buying the house in Duluth

in which I lived all last summer; I shall be in it before May, and this summer I do demand that John and you come up and stay with me, even if it is for not more than a week-end.

Meantime, I'll be in Minneapolis at least once this year; maybe on my way to Duluth, maybe later. I want so much to see you all. I believe that I am to see Addison here in NY this month or next. I devoutly hope so. I've been working like the devil on a new novel ever since early last spring, and I still have a month or so to go on it. It won't be published till some time in the fall.<sup>23</sup>

It would have been fun if I could have shared your Xmas and New Year's celebrations. Maybe another year?

Lobe to the whole family

Curious word here.

Does it mean Lobe of the Lung?

April and June sequels betrayed the usual pattern of nervous comings and goings. It is no wonder his friends lost track of his movements. From his New York residence, he wrote on April 9:

Dear Mary:

No. I do plan to go via Mpls to Duluth, & I should be seeing you about Apr. 25 — I can't plan exactly, because

<sup>22</sup> Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 722, 723, includes a moving letter of sympathy to Lewis from his son's immediate superior, who was an eyewitness to Wells Lewis' death.

<sup>23</sup> The new novel was *Cass Timberlane*, published in October, 1945, after earlier serialization in *Cosmopolitan*. Set in a quasi-Duluth area, it drew on Lewis' admiration for the distinguished work and legal career of his friend, Judge Mark Nolan; Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 715.

I'll be driving. And I *may* be in Mpls for some time in the fall.

Dust off the Welcome Mat!

2601 East Second St.  
Duluth 5, Minnesota  
June 29 [1945]

Dear Mary:

I was delighted to have you well enough to be able to write, and I send you and the infant much love. I have been fussing and fussing here, getting the house in order, as it now is.

Why did you have to pick that particular time for Madeline Island, which I would like to see as I would like to see you. For I shall be going to New York on July 25th, returning here (probably) on August 9th, and unless I should be able to skip over between the 9th and 15th — no go. I wonder if you-all could possibly come here on your way back to Mpls?

Preparing for *Kingsblood Royal*, Lewis' compulsive travels took him through the South that fall to research Negro-white relations, though he did manage a mid-winter rendezvous with Minnesotans:<sup>24</sup>

Hotel Algonquin  
Oct. 23 [1945]

Dear Mary

It was sweet to hear from you, but you didn't tell me a thing about the baby or Mr. John.

I've been here for a month; shall be here for about 3 weeks more the[n] off to explore some Ohio & Michigan; to Duluth for Xmas. *Then* I hope to have about a week in Mpls before going South & expect to see the Baxters daily from 9 AM to 6 PM for eating, then 6 PM to 3 AM for chess, local scandal, & sandwiches.

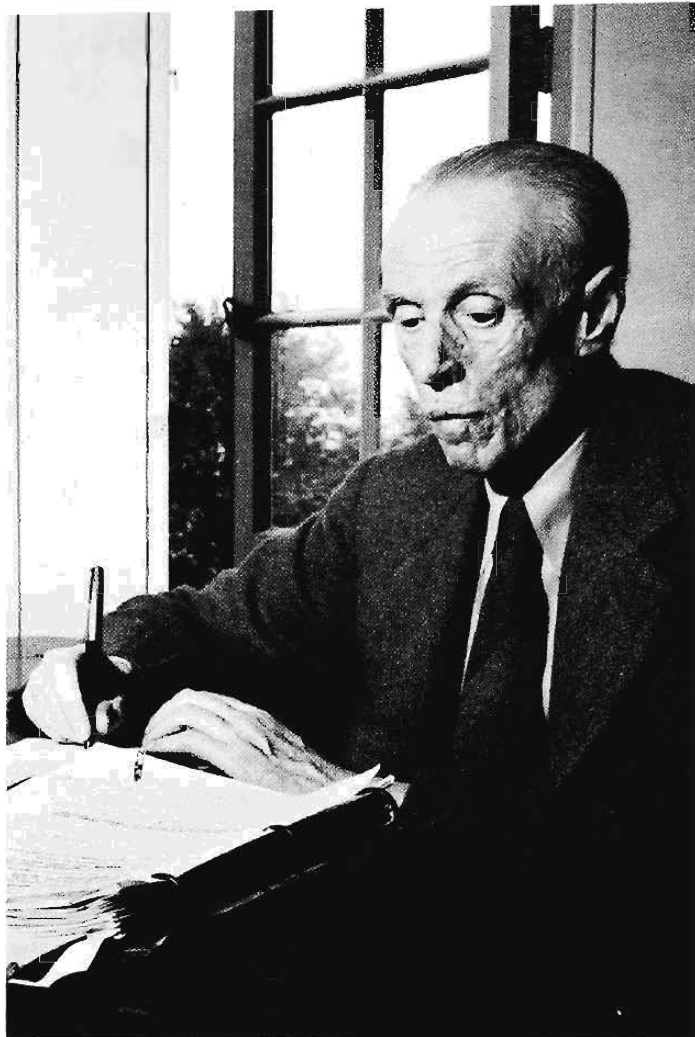
2601 East Second St.  
Duluth 5, Minnesota  
December 13, 1945

Dear Mary:

I never saw your letter, dated November 12, until almost four weeks after it was written, because on November 14 I left New York for a 3½ week motor tour through the South — as far down as Biloxi and New Orleans. So I find it awaiting me here, where I shall spend about three Christmas weeks, and I am delighted to think of John and you and the seventeen children (all future chess-wasters). (That last compound word: I meant to make it chess-masters, but maybe the type-writer knew better.)

When I leave here, I'd like to spend a couple weeks or longer about Minneapolis, and I wish you'd rally yourself and John and maybe Addison Lewis to find out whether there is a hotel — resident or transients — where I could get a room or a suite for that long. Could you think up a few and call them up for me? If they wanted a definite date, I could make it arbitrarily.

<sup>24</sup> Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 742.



THE AUTHOR at work in Duluth, 1944

Tuesday, January 8th. It would, presumably, be some place quieter than the Nicollet, Radisson, or Dyckman. And, no, I wouldn't want to be a guest at anybody's house. I know too many tough people — like Helen Baxter and Joe Louis and Albert Einstein and their gang.

With Xmas episcopal blessings, meanwhile, I await your suggestions.

2601 East Second St.  
Duluth, 5, Minnesota  
Dec. 22 [1945]

Dear Mary:

So many thanks to you & Al for finding me the Leamington & a great Xmas to

ALL BAXTERS

See you in a couple weeks

Although Lewis must have visited John and Mary, he used his brief Twin Cities foray chiefly to collect more data for the next book; also he attended his brother Fred's funeral in Sauk Centre before returning to Du-

luth. There he entertained the new novelist Frederick Manfred, who later described several guests' discomfiture as their host, piqued by someone's remarks, stamped out of the living room and angrily paced a den overhead, only to return after a half-hour with apologies.<sup>25</sup>

A characteristic change of mood prompted Lewis to unload his recently acquired Duluth home in spite of rumors that "some Democrats would like to see him run for senator against Shipstead." Back east for the spring of 1946, he wrote Mary about househunting in New England and his fondness for a country place "where Mt. Greylock sits confidently in the front yard." He purchased Thorvale Farm near Williamstown, Massachusetts, and promptly urged the Baxters to come see it for themselves.<sup>26</sup>

June 22, 1946

Dear Mary,

My debatable whereabouts, per yrs of 11th, are herewith solved. I've bought this farm, 750 acres and a good old house to which I'll have to do a lot, directly opposite Mount Greylock, and here I shall be till mid-fall anyway.

Look, Johnnie is a WILLIAMSMAN, isn't he? Is there any chance that he might come for the big Wms roundup of alumni which, I understand, they are to have in October, and bring Mrs. Fire Warden, and both of you stay with me? My place is only three miles south of Williamstown, on Route 7 (nearly down to South Williamstown).

Then I would be able to give you a Buchmanite treatment (with a slight combination of sulfa drugs and the Communist Party Line) so that you will NEVER be ill again.<sup>27</sup>

Where is Leonard in college?

The invitation is reiterated and then withdrawn in a curt sequel:

8/20 1946

Dear Mary:

I think I'm going to be here through October, & if I am, I shall be eager to see John & you. Just when in October does the reunion come — exact date?

August 31, 1946

Dear Mary:

As I am wiring you today, I shall not, after all, be able to be here the first half of October, during which is the Williams reunion. I shall have to be in New York. So I must take back my invitation to John and you to stay here with me.

Maybe next year?

This hint of some contretemps did not preclude the customary Christmas letter or its mention of the Berkshires half-hidden by flying snow. Of *All the King's Men*

by rival author Robert Penn Warren—whom Lewis had avoided back in Minnesota—he now said cryptically: "for a combination of prestige and box-office, [it] seems to have been THE novel of 1946, and I'm glad."<sup>28</sup>

Meager and infrequent correspondence through 1947 further suggests a cooled relationship. It was, however, a busy phase for Lewis that took him back to Hollywood for a script-writing assignment that terminated in a row with the producer. The "new nephew" of June is the aforementioned Charles Baxter, who was never to know his unofficial "uncle" directly, nor his father, dead within another year; and "Kb" of course refers to Lewis' own literary progeny and his last significant title, *Kingsblood Royal*:

c/o Berg: Allenberg  
121 South Beverly Drive  
Beverly Hills, Calif  
Jan. 30, 1947

Dear Mary:

It was so good to hear from you. This is just an excursion of a few weeks to Hollywood, to do an original story for the screen for Leo McCarey—and maybe to escape some of the cold, & I'll be joyously going back to the farm in April.<sup>29</sup>

I hope very much that I shall be seeing all of you some time this year.

The new book, called "Kingsblood Royal," will be out in May.

Thorvale Farm  
Williamstown, Mass.  
June 6, 1947

Dear Mary:

I'm delighted to hear of the arrival of my new nephew. I hope I'll see him some time during the next 12 months.

Yes, send on Kb & I'll autograph it — or wait till I get there.

---

<sup>25</sup> Frederick L. Manfred, "Sinclair Lewis: A Portrait," in *American Scholar*, 23:175-179 (Spring, 1954). See also J. Harold Kittelson, "Lewis," in *South Dakota Review*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 743; Lewis to Mary Baxter, April 4, 1946, in *South Dakota Review*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> The Buchmanite treatment derives from Frank Buchman's world-wide Moral Rearmament Movement, pledged to "right what is wrong in the world." Its uplift would hardly sort well with sulfa and Communism, the other panaceas Lewis offered. Leonard K. Eaton, Mary Baxter's brother, attended Williams College; Charles Baxter to Blakely, January 24, 1985.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis to Mary and John Baxter, December 22, 1946, in *South Dakota Review*, 18. On Lewis' relations with Warren, see, for example, Koblas, *Home at Last*, 64.

<sup>29</sup> Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 753. McCarey was a writer and film producer whose successes include Laurel and Hardy comedies, the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*, and Bing Crosby films. His belief in letting "somebody else photograph the ugliness of the world" suggests differences of temperament with Lewis: *Current Biography*, 361 (New York, 1946).

The hinted trip to Minneapolis was not mentioned later, and possibly the old friends failed to make connection. Other Minneapolis comrades were so shocked at the appearance of their prematurely aged, 60-year-old author—“sick old man, shaking badly, who placed an ashtray on his lap and used both hands to hold it still”—that one of them burst into tears.<sup>30</sup>

Thus alcohol, inner torments, frantic schedules, and botched relationships were taking revenge. Only a brief Christmas note from Thorvale Farm came to the Baxters that winter:

Dec. 26, 1947

Dear Johnnie & Mary:

It was nice to remember you on Christmas day. It was glorious here — sun on hills & unbroken snow.

His biography states that Red drew up his will at this time, that the Marcella connection was defunct, that he planned a novel to be called “Tired Warrior” or “Lonely Warrior,” and jotted down a long list of vanished friends. Among the names on this melancholy list were Max Eastman, Walter Lippmann, Ezra Pound, Norman Thomas. Not all were close friends, of course; some were co-workers or intellectual colleagues, but all had disappeared from Lewis’ life.<sup>31</sup> And yet a message to the Baxters the following March bespoke old warmth:

Sunday, March 21 [1948]

Dear Mary:

There could be no more wonderful news than that you may be coming this way in about a month. I shall be right here, unless I happen to be called to New York on business for a few days. In that case, I would see you there, but I want you to look at these hills and valleys — I want to be here — so let me know as far ahead of time as you can when you can come.

You — or your mother and you — or, best of all, Johnny and you — can take a train right from Boston to Williamstown, and then ten miles from here, at North Adams, we put you on the train for New York.

We’ve had lots of cold and snow, but as I have been working extremely hard and not wanting to see much of anybody, it has been very pleasant. But now the thaw has come, a fair semblance of Spring has already arrived, and I want to see people — but especially you.

When you say “I have wondered whether I could properly invite myself to Williamstown and, more important, if I could properly go,” that is in a language that I don’t understand.

Let me know. Soon! For your use in Boston, the phone here is Williamstown 151 W.

Charles Baxter theorizes that “the letters ended because of a misunderstanding. Lewis wanted Mary to visit Thorvale Farm while Johnny was at a reunion at Williams. This meant that she would have been there a day or two alone, and her mother, my grandmother, wouldn’t hear of it; a married woman alone with SL... Anyway, he called her up and denounced her; later, my mother said that he certainly could be articulate when he was angry. After this break, though, he wrote one last letter, the one after my father’s death.”<sup>32</sup>

Because the Williams reunion had taken place a year earlier, perhaps two different “misunderstandings” occurred. All Mary ever indicated in print was that “Lewis was extremely sensitive, and our friendship was terminated when inadvertently I made a remark which offended him.” And Charles adds what sympathetic readers of these papers must assume—that “Lewis was fond of her (and of Johnny, my father) but it is to her that they are really addressed. I suppose that he had a very minor romantic attachment to her, but it was certainly never more than that.”<sup>33</sup>

On August 6, 1948, at the age of 44, John T. Baxter, Jr., died of a heart attack at the family’s summer place on Madeline Island. His own father had also died young. Minnesota newspapers identified him as a “risk executive,” vice president of the insurance firm of Wirt Wilson and Company, son of the late John T. Baxter (former president of Northwestern National Life Insurance), and graduate of Blake School and Williams College; he was also a member of the board of Walker Art Center and the prestigious Minneapolis Club. He was survived by Mary Eaton Baxter, their three sons, and two sisters.<sup>34</sup>

Forgetting earlier differences, Lewis responded to this tragedy almost immediately:

Thorvale Farm  
Williamstown, Mass.  
August 11, 1948

Dear Mary:

There was no one in all the Middlewest of whom I was fonder than of John. I shan’t know how much I miss him till I go back to Minneapolis & find that, unconsciously, I shall have been counting on him & on you to provide a real home in that unknown city. The dear Fire Warden!

At Lewis’ own death in 1951 and afterward, many who knew or read him tried to assess him. Some complained that he failed to grow, but John Flanagan argued in a fine article that “his fiction began to decline as soon as he got away from the Minnesota or at least the Middle

<sup>30</sup> Koblas, *Home at Last*, 65, 66.

<sup>31</sup> Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 770, 771.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Baxter to Blakely, June 16, 1984.

<sup>33</sup> Staples, in *South Dakota Review*, 11, Charles Baxter to Blakely, June 16, 1984.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Baxter, in *The Little Magazine*, 47: *Minneapolis Star*, August 7, 1948, p. 3.

Western background.... Upon returning to the source toward the end of his career he could still write with some authority, despite the familiarity of his technique. But much of the intervening fiction is stiff and self-conscious."<sup>35</sup>

More recently, one of the best anthologies of American literature ranked *Main Street* and *Babbitt* among the approximately 20 novels basic to an understanding of our culture, while a rather tendentious literary reference work described Lewis to be "only of socio-anthropological interest; as a writer he is almost worthless.... The notion that he is in any sense important as a writer must be resisted." But if such opinions represent the two extremes of Lewis criticism, a sane middle ground—as regards the man, if not the artist—was taken at the time of his death by his former wife, Dorothy Thompson, in a letter to Frances Perkins, a mutual acquaintance who had tried to contact the ailing author in Rome: "No one more wanted love than he, or more needed it, and no one more often doubted and rejected it. He was a tragic personality in the deepest sense of the word."<sup>36</sup>

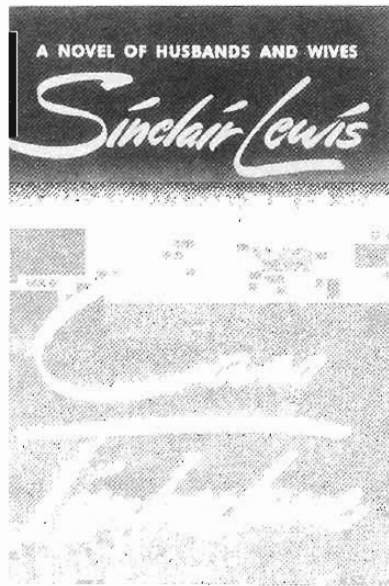
Mary Baxter Staples, however, deserves the last

comment. Her own postscript to Red Lewis' letter of sympathy, the one grieving John's death and the last she would receive from the novelist, was added, much later, after her remarriage. She jotted down the simple phrase "The end—M.E.S." to bid good-byes to her "dear fire warden," to that enigmatic family friend who was perhaps a great man after all, and to her own role in a real-life epistolary novel.

<sup>35</sup> John T. Flanagan, "The Minnesota Backgrounds of Sinclair Lewis' Fiction," in *Minnesota History*, 37:13 (March, 1960).

<sup>36</sup> Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren, *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, 2:av (New York, 1973); Martin Seymour-Smith, ed., *Who's Who in Twentieth Century Literature*, 209 (New York, 1976); Dorothy Thompson to Frances [Perkins], February 9, 1951, in Lewis collection, Macalester College.

THE CARTOON by Hirschfeld on p. 166 appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, April 18, 1943; the family portrait on p. 168 is courtesy of Charles Baxter, the photographs on p. 169 are by Alan Omsky and those on p. 174 and 175 are by Ted Miller.





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