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Letter, Sinclair Lewis to Claude Lewis [July 23, 1925]

Sinclair Lewis

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Katonah, N.Y.
July 23.

during that
year

Dear Claude:

It is, of course, a hell of a job to decide for any one else, but now that Freeman can, if he wants to, enter Harvard this fall, this trouble arises with his going to Exeter or any other prep school: As he will know that he needn't work unless he wants to, wouldn't he or any one else tend to get into habits of laziness -- or at least of not sticking to his books -- which would be bad for him when he did go on to Harvard? I don't know him well enough to tell; it's something Mary and you and Freeman himself must decide. If you-all feel that even without the compulsion of having to work for his exams he will put in the year to advantage, then by all means Exeter -- and I'm sending on his application today -- now that he's admitted to Harvard there will certainly be no trouble about his entering. What do you think? How does Freeman himself feel? He must not consider this question of mine about developing lazy habits as any reflection on him: I would ask the same question about myself at seventeen.

Certainly there are several things he could take with advantage during this year -- and they would later be of value to him not merely in Harvard but for all his life. He ought to finish up his Cicero and possibly his Vergil in Latin and -- much more important -- he ought to start German; which, I note by his record, he has not yet taken. Also he might take more English and Ancient History and Chemistry. And I'd like him to read widely -- by himself, not for the classroom -- in the great classics: poetry, history, essays, biography, as well as fiction. Certainly to have both German and French is only a beginning, and I think probably he'll be expected to have both before he finishes college. So he could put in the year well -- if you feel he can make himself work. Let me know how you feel, and I'll send on the tidings from Exeter as soon as they come. (I'm sending the blanks to them today)

About the round the world trip. I don't think a hell of a lot of it. The world is so vast a place that to try to see it in eight months is like trying to see the whole U.S. in a month, with, say, one day in New York City and three days for California; one sees things so sketchily that he forgets all he's seen. And when you add to this an effort at the same time to keep up studies -----! But equally important is the fact that after such an exciting junket, it will seem awfully tame to settle down to college; and as for going, say, to England when the time comes, all the joy of that will have been removed by having already seen India and so on. It would be a glorious thing to do when he finished college, or perhaps at twenty-five, but I wish he could have his grounding first. What would be invaluable would be a year or a year and a half in Europe after graduation. If he spent four months in England, four in France, and four in Germany, then he would have time really to see something; and it would be worth all the time and money. But what's the good of ten days in India or China -- countries about as big as the whole U.S.? Another thing I hope he will do is to go to Europe after his Freshman or Sophomore year in college -- either work his way over on a cattleboat, if they still do that, or go 3d class, as thousands of college students are now doing every summer, at about a third the cost of ordinary passage and perfectly good food and bunk. He would then immensely enjoy and profit by two and a half months divided, say, between England and Paris. Then after graduation the whole family of you might be able to go to Germany and Austria and Sweden together, and leave him to study somewhere in Europe for the following winter. Again, what do you think, and Mary, and Freeman?

Whether he goes to Harvard or Exeter, I wish you'd have him come on here two or three weeks before entering -- i.e. about September first -- and see a bit of the life here and meet some Eastern boys before entering. And if you'd like we'd be glad to get whatever wardrobe he might need for him in New York. Besides regular suits, he'll need evening clothes. And I'll go up to Exeter -- or Cambridge -- with him. If he has an unfurnished room he'll need furniture -- probably bought second hand and kept all thru his four or five years. I can meet him in New York City and bring him out here. When would you like him to come?

There's one unimportant-sounding little thing which he simply must do. I don't know whether he now has the western hair-cut -- I mean the kind in which the clippers are run in front of the ears, and the hair is clipped short half way up the back of his head. If he has that kind, he must get over it before he comes East -- though you see it on the nicest boys in Minneapolis, here it is seen only on toughs. Let him let his hair get even a little too long and shaggy and have it cut in NY, if he can't get just the right kind there, rather than have it too convict-like, for that would make a bad impression on first meeting the other boys, and these first impressions are sometimes dangerously important. Write him about this -- you might even send him this letter as it is. I want him also to know that I'm not crabbing about this exciting-sounding matter of going round the world right now. I hope to Heaven he will go round -- but I hope he'll take two years to it when he does go. It's bully to go while still young -- say before 30 -- ~~minima~~ still better before 25 -- while one's impressions are keen and excitable; but to go at 17 is the other extreme. I've spent about seven ~~month~~ months in all in France alone, and I don't feel I know a thing about it -- just beginning to know the least little bit about it.

This will go on the same mail with another letter in which I invite you to accompany me to Japan. I hope you can.

Ever

h

Have you read the Exeter bulletin and catalog yet?

you'd better see Freeman himself
& talk over with him the
questions in the 15th 2
paragraphs of this letter. what
does he think?