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12-20-1893

To George W. Latham - December 20, 1893

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO GEORGE W. LATHAM

Gardiner, Me., Dec^a 20 – '93.

My dear Latham,

I don't suppose you care a "tinker's dam" for anything that I or anyone else may write you, but I am going to run the risk and hope for a reply before^b long, and so find out something about what you are doing and how your thoughts are drifting—but no, I must take that back. No man or woman under God's heaven could ever answer that^c

In the first place, let me tell you that my bowels are marvellously better. Burnhams^d are in much the same condition

-2-

as when he used to discourse about them last year. He is feeling better generally however. As for me I have no particular fault to find except as concerns my eyes. I have not been able to use them any since the first of July. I have some glasses now that improve things very much, but still I cannot sit down and read for more than ten minutes at a time without paying the penalty usually inflicted in such cases. If you have never had trouble with your eyes, you cannot appreciate your good fortune. When you do, don't make the ass of yourself
glasses
that I did, and go without a year after you need them.

Gardiner is a small place, relatively, but

-3-

it contains a good deal of weather at certain seasons of the year. For the past week—ever

^a WA adds a period here.

^b WA has "before".

^c WA adds a period here.

^d WA has "Burnham's".

since my return from Cambridge—the place has been a frozen hell to me. Here I am, shut in by myself with only one or two people in town that I care two snaps of my finger for (and who, in turn, care about as much for me) with no prospects except of the most shadowy nature, and hardly enough interest in the general political scheme of things to work out interest at six percent without cudgelly^e {=cudgelling} my brain more than I should over a proposition in Bokardo.² I do not mean to say that I consider myself totally an ass, (though others^f may) but merely that I lack a general interest in the practical side of things that may play the devil with my

-4-

progress on this little journey to God knows where, which we are all making just now. I am afflicted with a kind of foolish pride that stands in my way every day of my life and which I am continually making heroic efforts to kick out. But it is "no go"—I keep on much as I begun, and if I end up a penniless gent full of golden theories of fame and riches I shall not lay all the blame, if there be blame in the matter, to myself; I shall not feel that it all might have been different, had I changed my opinions and actions a little when my mind was young and flexible. My philosophy does not swallow this teaching of our good old grandfathers who worked sixteen hours a day and sang psalms and praised

-5-

heaven that a life is what we make it. And let me beg here that you may not permit any of your ambitious pupils to write "essays" of on "Every man the architect of his own fortune". Some of them will cry to do it—unless your

^e WA has "cudgeling".

^f WA has "this".

office is in something higher than an ordinary high school³—but make them compromise upon something, even if it be "The Value of an Education."^g

I have struck into this second sheet as if I were sure that it was going to be read. Now I think it over I am half inclined to wonder if you will ever open the envelope. Or am I mistaken, and is your apparent indifference to humanity one of the "fakes" that make life interesting. Let me tell you that I feel sure and quite sure of one thing, though—that is, that you were in trouble over something

-6-

of which you preferred not to speak, when you carried such a hopeless "grouch" last year. I do not know what it was, but I hope that this letter may find you in a different frame of mind.

When you receive this you will probably say to yourself "What the devil is he writing to me for?" Anticipating that, I will now say that I am writing in the hope of getting a reply. If I cannot talk with you in person, I should like very much to receive a letter from you once in a while telling me what you are how reading ^{^h} and you find a pedagoguesⁱ life. So if you do not answer this, I shall take it for granted that you have "no par-

-7-

ticular use for me". I hope that is not the case and now await developments.

Yours most sincerely {?}

E.A. Robinson.

P.S. How do you find "The Lost Manuscript"⁴—or does your schoolwork bar out all such outside matters? I suppose you have read "The

^g WA places the period outside the quotation mark.

^h This is actually the location of the caret in the holograph, although obviously it belongs between "and" and "you".

ⁱ WA has "pedagogue's".

Cliff-Dwellers"⁵—Prof Norton says it is a great thing. Tryon likewise.

R.

I have your address from Mead.⁶

HCL

NOTES

George W. Latham (1871-1947), a member of the Corn Cob Club, Harvard Class of 1893, had a deep love and knowledge of literature. After a period of high school teaching, and postgraduate work at Chicago, he obtained an instructorship at Brown University, where he taught from 1901 to 1907. For thirty years thereafter he taught English and American literature at McGill University. It was EAR who reached out to Latham through correspondence. Years later, after EAR's death, Latham acknowledged regretfully that "It is unpleasant for me to realize that this exchange of letters lapsed largely through my fault." For an engaging profile of Latham, see Leon Edel's "Portrait of a Professor," *The McGill News* (Summer 1947), 8-10. Latham's memories of EAR are recorded in "Robinson at Harvard," *Mark Twain Quarterly* (Spring 1938) 19-20.

1. George Burnham was another Harvard friend—in fact, according to Donaldson, "the single closest friend of EAR's life" (81)—and fellow-member of the Corn Cob Club. Known for his argumentative nature, he had lost both of his feet as a young man and had entered Harvard at 24, also as a "special" (81). After briefly practicing law, "[b]y 1901 he had become a disciple of Hindu Vedanta philosophy that extolled the benefits of spiritual growth through personal impoverishment" (82). He was celibate, frugal, and worked as a clerk for the New York, New Haven, and Hartford railroad (82). (For more on Burnham, see Donaldson's index.) (SL)
- 2.^k Bokardo, a reference to EAR's course in Logic, which he detested.
3. Latham was teaching at the Delaware Literary Institute, Franklin, New York.
- 4.^l *The Lost Manuscript (Die verlorene Handschrift)*, a novel of 1865 by Gustav Freytag. (SL)
5. Realistic novel by H.B. Fuller, published 1893.
6. Mead ??

^j WA adds a period here.

^k This and the next four notes are WA's notes 1-5, respectively.

^l WA numbered this note but did not complete it, writing only "'The Lost Manuscript' ??" in the space.