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5-20-1894

## To Harry de Forest Smith - May 20, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, Maine,  
May 20 – 1894.

My dear Smith,

I knew that things were going well with you as soon as I opened your last letter. The big sprawling lines, which I so dislike, told me that. I hate to disappoint you, but I was not in the least startled by the fact that you are engaged to be married. I knew well enough that you were in love with somebody and have known it for a long time: your actions have told me that and I was glad, upon the whole, as my suspicions became more and more firmly fixed in my mind. It seemed to me that you were trying to tell me of the fact without saying as much in words. I don't suppose you will believe me when I tell you that you have been slowly putting me away from you for the past six months but such is the truth. I honestly think that you did not realize that such a thing was going on; but I, who had every chance to observe and feel every little difference, could not shut my eyes to the truth. Do not misunderstand me in this; do not think that I mean to hint that you really think less of my friendship than you did two years ago, for I know that is not the truth. It is merely a case of "not that I loved

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long Robinson less, but—oh yes, Adela<sup>1</sup>—more". In short, I have lost you, and, for your sake, I am heartily glad of it. All this will displease you at first, but you will gradually come to understand me. Of course we shall sit and read and smoke together next summer, but there will be another person there besides myself. I say this, my dear fellow, because I know only too well what I am talking about.

Ever since the great change for higher things came over you—it began three or four years ago—I have felt your worth and have had a corresponding admiration for you. I have felt the countless weaknesses of my own flickering nature and wondered that a man of your strength should find so much in me to like. All this was well grounded before y I went to Harvard. Then I found that there were other people besides yourself who could find something in me worthy of their friendly attention. The only think [=thing] that saves me from total discouragement is the knowledge, or at least the belief, that such men as you Tryon, Saben, Butler, and Ford, look upon me as a person worth knowing. This leads me to

think that I am not wholly an ass. These I have named, with one or two others, are my friends; and where are they? You alone are where I can still feel that you are near me. Tryon and Butler are hopelessly out of my way—except through correspondence; Latham, that mysterious man you have never seen, I may never see again; Ford is just now in Harvard, where I expect to see him for a day or two in June,—after that, perhaps never; Saben sailed yesterday for Europe,

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and I have seen the last of him—at least, for many years. So you see I am pretty much alone, and perhaps you will not think it so strange after all that I am not so jolly as some fellows you know. More than this, all my life at home has been a kind of hell from which there seemed to be no release until I broke from my harness and went to college. I have queer feelings of cowardice as I write this, but I depend upon you to take it in the right spirit.

You are engaged to ~~m~~ be married, you are happy, and the world and the future look bright in your eyes; I am not (now) engaged to be married, I am not happy, and the world and the future look so dark and gloomy that I look mostly into the past. Here is the difference.—But the Fates have been kind to me in one respect,—they have given me To<sup>a</sup> {? = the} ability to rejoice in the happiness and good-fortune of others. So I am happy on your account and am glad for what seems to be in store for you. Did I ever tell you of a kind of intuitive sense of ~~ph~~ prophecy I sometimes feel in the presence of my friends? Of course it does not amount to anything, but still you may be glad to know that I have never once had the trace of a doubt as to your ultimate welfare. I do not think that you will ever be rich, or publicly great (in the bow-wow sense of the word) but you will, if you live, fill an eminently respectable place as an intellectual American citizen; as a married man you will be happy and make your partner the same; and whenever long Robinson comes to see you for a day or so, you will treat

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him like a brother. So speaks my prophetic spirit.

Yes, I am glad you are going to be married. I have always looked upon a bachelor as only half a man, though

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<sup>a</sup> WA has "the".

this is of course too violent language to use. I have always believed in love, and always shall believe in it. The fact that so many thousands go astray sometimes shakes my faith a little, but it always rights itself after a time. There are natures that positively cannot be faithful to a single companion, and sometimes the people who have them seem to be the happiest in the world; but I<sup>b</sup> think if we knew them as well as they know themselves (I use "know" in its everyday sense) we should find there is something in their souls that is never satisfied,—their lives are not complete, they live without a mission. Their life is a fevered irregularity, and, when they are past their forties—and oftentimes long before that, the original nature stamps itself in the face, and those lines of hardness, which we have all seen, tell us that something is wrong. S—<sup>2</sup> is an extreme example of this class of men. In my opinion, the true happiness requires no such stimulation as that which these people demand.

"L'Amour" is pitifully abused in spoken and written literature. The word is used without a particle of its consideration<sup>c</sup> as to its better meaning. Love and lust have become so mixed by our poets and novelists that we poor puritans are half inclined to wonder, as we read, whether there is such a thing, after all, as a better nature in a man or woman. The modern French school is doing its best to kill these higher sensibilities, and their work is not wholly a failure in that

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direction. It may sound foolish, but I know it to be a fact that [=that] many fellows who ought to know better are mentally and morally debilitated by the matchless trash produced by such writers as Maupassant, Mendès and Gautier. I can stand a good deal in the way of freedom of expression, but I am disgusted with many of our modern tendencies. I make these few remarks on love because I am glad to know that there are still men in these progressive days of ours who can value it for its true worth. When you get to read Shakespeare (you are bound to do so someday) you will find in all his later plays an undertone of manly melancholy which you will naturally trace to a love of the higher kind, which, for some unknown reason, was never satisfied.

This is a good time for you to read "The Queen's Gardens"<sup>3</sup> aloud. Whether Ruskin was the man to write that essay or

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<sup>b</sup> WA adds a second "but I" here.

<sup>c</sup> WA transcribes the "o".

not, I cannot say, but it stands for what it is, and the author is loved and respected. So I think it is safe to take it as a work of sincerity. Of course you have read it, but sometimes we read things for a second or a twenty second time.

It seems to me that I have written almost enough of this sort of thing, but have I written enough for you to fully understand me? Do you fully understand that I am glad that this change has come to you—that your life is beginning, in the true sense of the expression, to mean something to you? When the time comes to put away childish things the individual stands in a new light. The lost days of boyhood and youth begin to put on the appearance of broken toys in a dusty garret. The man has come and

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has taken the boy away. The child has grown to maturity without knowing what has been going on. Youth is over. This is something the way of it with most people, I fancy, but somehow I, with my crotchets and my childish sensibilities, cannot put away the old things. The world frightens me; my "one talent" is forever laughing at me. When I look far into the future I see myself—sometimes in the light of a partial success—living alone in some city—Boston, mos[t] likely—with a friend or two to drop in upon me once in a while, and a few faithful correspondents.

When you are married you must not ask me to come to your wedding. I can fancy now the effect it would have upon me, and the sorry figure I should cut. When I began this letter I intended it to be good natured rather than melancholy, but I fear I have only half succeeded in my purpose. Do not read too much vinegar into it, however, and as consider, as one of its lessons, the inevitable truth that a man cannot be a good husband and still be one of the boys. Then comes the ~~p~~ time when Memory must take the place of Reality, when the new life must draw its curtain over the old. All I ask or hope is that there may have been some one little act or word on my part that you will feel and remember as a part, however small, of your life. You have my heartiest congratulations and best wishes. In the meantime, I await a long pipe under the pines, and remain,

Always sincerely,  
Robinson.

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I shall see your mother  
to-day and arrange the books  
you mentioned a week ago.

R.<sup>d</sup>

HCL US, 153-157.

#### NOTES

1. Adela Hill Wood, Smith's fiancée.
2. Mowry Saben.
3. "Lilies: of Queens' Gardens" from *Sesame and Lilies* by John Ruskin (1819-1900) is concerned with the education and duties of women.

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<sup>d</sup> This postscript is written upside-down and diagonally, at the bottom-right of the page.