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5-27-1894

To Harry de Forest Smith - May 27, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, May 27 - 1894.

My dear Smith,

I have just been setting out, or rather getting the ground ready for Dean to set out, thirty six tomato plants, as a kind of Sunday thanksgiving for the past rain. Now I have had a good smoke and washed my hands, and shall go on with my good work and write my letter to you.

I think I shall be a happy man when I see your genial face once more, and feel that you are here for all summer. It would be about my luck to have some industrial or educational scheme turn up that would take you out of Gardiner and leave me to continue in my present solitary discontent, but I shall not worry myself with the prospect of such a thing. I look forward to many pipes and fires and books under the pines for the next three months with great pleasure. When you get married, of course there will be an end to all that; but until then let us make the most of things and not forget "Antigone."^a The more I think of that scheme, the better I like it; and I am beginning to believe it possible that we may do something that will repay us in more ways than one for the time and labor we must spend in bringing the work to pass. We must not look for money, but we may perhaps look for

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some good words from men whose words are worth something. I dream of all this as a possibility—nothing more.—And, while I think of it, let me say that I have a curiosity to know how Plumtre¹ (is that right?) manages the "kindred form" business. Will you kindly send me his version of the opening line, in your next letter?

During the past week I have read Anatole France's "Crime of Sylvestre^b Bonnard" in French.^{2c} It is a queer thing, immensely entertaining and full of wise sayings. The book is supposed to be the "journal intime" of an old savant and is written with a beautiful disregard for all sense of form. What little story there is is lost again and again in the old man's eccentric digressions and it is hardly necessary to say that the reader does not miss it. I hope you may take a notion to read it some day. You will be glad when you find that two pages of it are

^a WA places the period outside the quotation mark.

^b WA has "Sylvester".

^c The superscriptive numeral is mine, although the corresponding note is WA's.

devoted, in a quaint way, to the same Antigone <, > in whom we are both so much interested just now. Thomas Hardy also seems to know her well. In fact, I am continually finding references to her lately. Have you ever noticed how often that is the case when we are interested in a certain name? We find it where we least expect it, and when we do, it seems somehow like a reference to an old friend.

I have been too much occupied of late to do any writing except two sonnets and some ninety lines of a queer poem called "The Night Before".³ I hope to have it done (there will be some four hundred lines of it) by the time you return and I think you may like it. It is a tragic monologue

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written in unrhymed tetrameters—that is, like "Evangeline" with two feet left out. For example, here is the opening line:

"Look you, Domine; look you, and listen."

Yesterday^d I did fifty-five lines, but was pretty tired after it was over. You see the thing demands work—wasted work, most likely, but still work that I cannot seem to help doing.

You will be glad, or sorry, to know that I have three prose tales well in my head and shall have them out as soon as I can settle myself down to such labor once more. The one I like best of all cannot fail to attract you, even when done in my poor way; but the title, "Theodore", you won't like. It seems to me, however, the only title for the story, which by the way, is not just like most stories, and I could not think of changing it.

June 20 is a date that means considerable to me just now. Then I am going to Cambridge to see my two or three old friends before^e they shake the dust of Harvard from their feet and go out into this world [which] manages to kill, in many cases, all that is interesting in a man. I am glad to say that this observation does not, in any way, apply to you. On the contrary, the world has used you so well that I would not for anything deprive you of your Rockland experience. But it was a little discouraging to have you expect me to be startled upon hearing of your engagement. But that is all right. You did not know much of what you were talking about. "Her name is Adela—and we are engaged. That's all"—I shall keep that for a novel.

Sincerely,

Robinson.^f

^d WA transcribes the "a".

^e WA transcribes the "e".

^f WA omits the underline.

{HCL US 157-159}

NOTES

1. Edward Hayes Plumtre (1821-1893) translated *The Tragedies of Sophocles*, 1865.
2. Jacques Anatole France Thibault (1844-1924), critic and novelist. *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*, 1881.
3. Chard Powers Smith relates the whole poem to EAR's loss of Emma to Herman. A copy of CN among the Robinson materials at Syracuse University has, in EAR's hand, the date "'90" written opposite the title of *The Night Before*. This would seem to confirm Smith's report of "the family legend" that the first draft of *The Night Before* was begun on the night of the wedding of Emma and Herman, February 12, 1890.