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To Harry de Forest Smith - January 28, 1895

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, Jan 28 - 1895.

My dear Smith,

There is nothing to be seen to-day but snow & I rather like to see it. I cannot tell just why the sight of it pleases me but still it does and I sincerely hope that we shall get a foot of it. In the meantime. I shall read write & think—oh yes, and chew tobacco (until Feb 1—then I stop) and try not to be disgruntled. I am getting along well enough with my work but am tormented with fits of wondering what it is all to amount to (To amount to" doesn't sound well, so don't ever say it) Bad language may be a good school sometimes and I fancy I have profited a little by reading "Trilby", which I finished about an hour ago.

I suppose you want to know what I think of the book, but I am not at all sure that I can tell you, as my ideas are rather mixed. When I had finished part first I was ready to swear by it; part second left me a little in doubt, and part third gave me a feeling that the bottom had dropped out and that it would be as well for me not to read any farther. The thing fascinated me, however, and I kept on' but the only part of the story that I shall ever remember with any enthusiasm is that dealing with the old days in the Latin Quarter when Trilby smoked cigarettes and wore an army coat; when ~~the~~ les trois Angliches had their room in the Place St Anatole; when they sat around the stove of a rainy day & smoked and talked of Thackeray & Dickens & Edgar Allan Poe and the glory that was Greece & the grandeur that was Rome. That is the kind of thing that sends the crinkles through a man even when the writers English is almost fantastic as this story—if not quite. I think Trilby would be a far better book if Du Maurier had kept them all there in that garret, permitted Little Billee's mother and

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mother in law to stay in England where they belonged, and Little Billee himself to marry Trilby at the end of the book—closing the whole thing with a good wholesome melancholy booze between the Laird & Taffy—two of the best men in all literature. The "story" seems to me to spoil itself. Svengali and la Svengali made no impression upon me, and the only thing in Billee's loveless English life that sticks in my memory is that little game of cup and ball for shillings between him & Fred Walker at the big man's house. That was just the thing for them to do and I would give dollars (if I had them) to have been Taffy as he opened the curtains & found the young prodigies at it.

I do not care over much for the pictures, but the more I

look at them the better I like them. That of Ripot [=Ribot] smoking two cigars on the door step and singing "Allons Glycère" and the next one where Billee tries¹ to sing "Les Glougloux" &c" are perfectly enormous. The galloping chairs in Carrells studio also pleases me. Most of the Trilby pictures are grotesque fizzles to my mind—but I do not pretend to be a judge of art.²

Part VIII (& last) is as good a close for such a story as one could expect—in fact rather better, Trilby's exposition of her religious ideas being one of the best things in the book—a refreshing antidote for Little Billee's tiresome monologues to Alins dog, which seems to me to be a little more than any author [letter crossed out] has the right to^a

inflict upon his readers. The book as a whole is saved by the atmosphere of its opening chapters. That atmosphere never leaves it, though it never comes again with its first freshness

As for comparing Du Maurier with Thackeray, the idea seems to me utterly ridiculous though there are a few places where one is reminded of the great William. The pipes, & the booze & the songs take one back to Pendennis for a moment, but the impression does not last. The "story" comes in and spoils it all. Still the book is a remarkable thing and I am glad for having read it. The style fits the scenes described but like the proverbial ready-made coat, it "fits it too much" And more than that, the English language cannot stand French paragraphing

-3^b-

I have had a lot of book catalogues lately and find particularly attractive announcements of Thackeray in Cassell's—three or four editions—cheaper than Houghton Mifflin & Co. I am anxious for you to begin reading him because I know that you will take to his novels even more than you have to Daudet's.—I was sorry to see that you did not bid for Coppées "Disillusion" (Toute une Jeunesse) but perhaps you did not know of it. Your sending me that catalogue was like putting oats before a muzzled horse (if horses have muzzles) but I thank you for sending it all the same. I had a good time reading it over and was a little amused at some of the reverend gentleman's possessions in French literature. But then, perhaps they were given to him—Mendes & the like.

I have been writing more music—this time to a little poem by J.W. Riley, which Ford sent me in his last letter. It begins and ends (every verse) with "There! little girl; don't cry!" It is very pretty and simple and I could not resist the temptation. Writing music without knowing how is a harmless amusement—if one doesn't do too much of it. I

^a These are the last words of the previous line.

^b Written vertically, hence the longer lines.

have done four or five pieces all told but do not expect to do any more. It doesn't pay—like tragedies!

I am nearly through the Manxman and whe{n} I finish it shall make an end of reading for a time. I still cling to "The Ebb Tide"³ and do not expect to change my mind until I read "The Simpletons" or, perhaps, "Celibates."⁴

With all my admiration for Stevenson's little book & my better judgment tells me that

that the novel of recent times (that I have read) is "Esther Waters."⁵ It did not make

much of a disturbance but it is going to live for all that.

I have the January Globe to send you as soon as I read it—also some Critics which are unusually good. That review seems to be coming up for some reason,

and I hope it will not go down again. The Globe is rich—Thorne being omnipresent—and not very good natured. Aaron Stark came back the other day and brought me one of the best declination blanks I ever saw—and I have seen several. Haven't heard from Lippencotts. Glad you liked Musset and still "more glad" that you hav{e} begun Antigone—I am sorry to say that I am not in-

pressed by either of the book plates—nor do I wholly like the idea of pasting your

motto into say Mlle de Maupin⁶ or The Pace that Kills.⁷ The thought of it reminds

me of the of the plate in The Magic Ink⁸ in the Harvard Library—"for the purchase of book{s} most needed by the university." But this is nothing to the point. I do not

-3a^c-

happen to care much for the design or for the Latin—would^d rather have In Utrumque Paratus⁹—Ter in Die¹⁰—Ad Lindorem¹¹—In Medias Res¹²—in fact almos{t} any thing but Pro Salute Animae¹³—which, for some reaso{n}, I cannot stand.

-3b-

I do not mean to ~~et~~^e {?} criticize your taste at all so do not think too seriously of what I say. I haven't much taste myself

Most sincerely

^c The rest of the letter is written horizontally (as normal) across the bottom of the two halves of page 3.

^d WA adds "much" here.

^e WA suggests "<criti [?]>"

E.A.R.

HCL US, 198-201.

NOTES

1. US reads "has."
2. *Trilby* was illustrated by the author, George Du Maurier, who had established a reputation as an artist and caricaturist before turning novelist.
3. *The Ebb-Tide*, a short novel by Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne, published in 1894. (SL)
- 4.^f *Celibates*, 1895, is a collection of three stories by George Moore (1857-1933).
5. *Esther Waters*, published in 1894, is a naturalistic novel by George Moore. (SL)
- 6.^g Nineteenth-century counter-cultural novel (1835) by Theophile Gautier (1811-1872), who protested the pretense of respectability of his times. See EAR's letter to Smith, May 20, 1894, in which he wrote of his disgust "with many of our modern tendencies."
7. By Edgar Saltus. In EAR's judgment, at that time, "a slimy tale." See his letter to Smith, March 10, 1891.
8. "Pitiful drool" in EAR's opinion. See his letter to Smith, February 12, 1893.
9. Prepared for either alternative.
- 10.^h Thrice a day. (SL)
- 11.ⁱ Ad Lindorem ??
12. In the middle of things.
13. For the health of the soul. US reads "Ammæ" instead of "Animæ."

^f This is WA's note 3.

^g Notes 6-13 are WA's notes 4-11, respectively.

^h WA numbered this note, but left it unfinished.

ⁱ I have not been able to find the meaning either. It is likely that the transcription is incorrect.