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To Harry de Forest Smith - May 12, 1895

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

[Gardiner, Maine]

My dear Smith,

I have been reading the New Testament (Matthew and Mark, which are pretty much alike) and am just beginning to realize what the rising generation is losing by letting such reading go by. For we all know well enough that the "Scriptures"^a are the last thing that a fellow takes up nowadays, though it comes natural for some reason, for a girl to know all about them. I have found that I can satisfy myself very well with the Big Book and I doubt if I read much else this summer save that and some French novels. The combination may point to certain paganistic tendencies on my part, but it is far better to read the Bible as mere literature than to read most of the stuff that is printed in these days for any thing at all

When I look over recent book lists and see the titles of some of the stuff put by out by our leading publishers it makes me tremble for humanity. But yet, I do not think it can last: I have too much faith in

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humanity for that.—I am waiting patiently for Mr A.T. Quiller-Couch to have his innings. It is a mystery to me how he can be so shamefully neglected by a reading public which buys seventeen editions of a thing like *The Prisoner of Zenda*; for any man or woman who cares for a good & wholesome romance must find "Q" infinitely superior to Anthony Hope—that is, if I am any judge of fiction. To my mind there is nothing outside of Stevenson that can be compared with "*I saw Three Ships*"¹ and I am told that "*The Blue Pavilions*"^b²

^a WA has "scriptures".

^b WA has "Pavilion".

is much better than that. "Q"s short stories are almost unapproachable in recent literature keeping up a better average I think than even our common idol, Kipling.

"Q" never wrote any thing so good as "The Children of the Zodiac"³ or any thing better, perhaps, than Georgie Porgie⁴ or Pambé Serang⁴ but I am sure that he has never written any thing half so bad as the Mutiny of the Mavericks⁴, or so magnificently dull as "The Bridge Builders."⁵ This last named piece is literature of a high

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order and as such I can admire it; but from any other point of view it seems to me a total failure. I am still of the opinion that if Kipling leaves an name to posterity it will be almost wholly for his poems. He is the greatest poet now writing English and I have said so ever since the death of Tennyson; but he has got to free himself of that habit of over loading his lines—as in the poem to Many Invitations and the dedication to Ballads & Barrack Room Ballads and even here and there in The East & West, before we can know him for what he really is

The French book you procured for me I find a very valuable companion. I do not think well of such books as a rule (but that is only because I need them) and yet I am beginning to see that [the] good that may be got from them. They serve as one more proof that there is no royal road to the learning of the French language—or any other. As long as a man reads French or German "to get the sense of it"

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just so long is he prostituting his intellect to the thinnest of their pleasures. Skimming through a French novel with no imaginative sympathy whatever and with no regard for the literary touches and other individualities of style is not only insulting an author but doing an injustice to one's self. It is far better to read a good translation of a book by a foreign author than to slop through it after the manner of the bright young ladies who read French a little, German a little, sing a little, play the piano a little and do nothing at all with any thing like completeness. There is too much of that kind of thing going on now and if I

^c Written vertically.

^d WA reads "any".

^e Written vertically.

had the bringing up of a girl I should mak{e} her do one thing well if that thing were only to take good car{e} of her eye-brows.

The last Critic has a fairly good review of *Le Petite Paroisse*,⁶ but [writer] denies M. Daudet the privilege of drawing an individual. He has a poor word for Rose an{d} Ninette and for that reas{on} he must hav{e} [read?] that

book, I think, from the sam{e} point of view. To a man like Richard Fenigan⁷ the story in question is quite plausible. As a tract the book is without value nor can I conceive of a man ~~of~~ with Daudet's insight ever dreaming that it would be taken as such. Every ma{n} an{d}f woman who ~~seems~~ writes for the Critic seems to be cursed with a flippancy that I am getting very

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tired of. If possible, it ~~w~~ is worse than the patronizing ease of Wm. Morton Payne in *The "Dial."*

It is "blowing up" a storm now and I hope it will rai{n} a week to give the burdocks and myrtle a good start in my raspberry bed. The grass needs it too.

Sincerely,

E.A.R.

I cannot find the Atlantic poster
No on{e} has seen it.

HCL

NOTES

1. *I Saw Three Ships, and Other Winter's Tales*, 1892.
2. 1892.
3. In Kipling's *Many Inventions*, 1893.
4. In *Life's Handicap*, 1891.
- 5.[§] "The Bridge-Builders": See note 4 for the letter to Smith, Feb. 18, 1894. (SL)
6. See "Some Recent French Books" in *The Critic*, XXVI, No. 689 (May 4, 1895), 324. (SL)
7. Richard Fénigan, the novel's protagonist. (SL)

^f WA reads "or".

[§] WA started this note, but has merely "'The Bridge Builders' ??'"

