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Letter to a Friend

A. Hamilton Gibbs

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For the Quinquennial

of

Kenneth Roberts

Born: Kennebunk, Maine, 1885
Died: Kennebunkport, Maine, 1957

"Great writers write what they feel. The others merely feel what they write. Many are meteorites. Kenneth Roberts is a fixed star in the literary firmament."

Jay Lewis
Dear Ken,

I think we both agree that 'friend' has become a stale word, badly frayed at the edges, due to over-much poetic fumbling. The going rate would seem to be about two for a dime.

Let's say that I here use it classically. For you and I have always agreed that friendship, in the last analysis, is a dispensation, a mystery, a force, a selection for potential singeing by some pentecostal flame.

Its exigencies, inescapable, demand everything from tears to laughter, from curses to sacrifice, — gifts these, all; freely offered, recognised, accepted, and rightfully taken in stride.

In my den today hangs an ancient map of southern Italy on which you marked in an unforgettable tour we made. But what I never told you, perhaps, is that it happens also to be a filigree of this dispensation, of mutual recognition and glad acceptance, of the jumping-off point, indeed, of continuance until the end.

Do you remember what you inscribed on its broad margin? "Here, on February 16, 1937, Northwest Passage was completed with the help of Arthur Gibbs, and the event celebrated by the great Etruscan Giro through Toscanella, Monte Fiasconi, Orvieto, Todi, Perugia, Florence and Pisa." And you signed it, not just Ken, as you usually did, but in recognition of the day and the happening, you inscribed it as a document, your name in full: Kenneth Roberts.

It is still on my wall after all these years.

Another thing I never told you, and I'd like to now, is what I saw at our first meeting on board the old Vulcania, a friendly tub wallowing her Latin way between Genoa and New York.
You were coming along the sunny deck at the heels of a tugging wire-haired terrier, and all six-foot-plus of you tuned in to the roll of the ship, to the wind that blew, to the warming sun, to the cloudless sky . . . to life itself. You were the kind of man, marked, who invites a second look, and the unvoiced query "I wonder who . . . ."

A moment later it was Frank Simonds who introduced us, unaware of the subsequent meaning to you and to me, as we also were unaware of the depth and fullness that was to come, and was to continue to grow. Mercifully, in the ensuing decades, — almost one third of a lifetime, — time enough for both of us, in our varying ways, to be marked by the inevitable sweat and anguish that go with the writing of many books, realisation, unspoken, had long been ours.

Very early in the game it became evident that to you more than to me, because of our different approach, and therefore temperaments, time was always of the essence. Yet never before, or since, have I met any man reader than you to give of your precious time to laboring over another man's manuscript, in which he had mysteriously bogged down, and come up with the magic word that sent him back rejoicing to his typewriter. The word precious as applied to time, your time, is entirely in order. To you time meant only one thing, — work, more work, and still more work. Time out was something you hardly understood because in the pursuit of your amazingly diversified interests, outdoors and in, you had the God-sent gift of putting into them the same magnificent drive, the same top-speed urge, the same intense labor-pains that went into your writing. Sometimes too intense? Who can tell? But there were many good midnights in that friendly barroom of yours when we tackled the philosophy of it, I always deliberately playing tortoise to your hare, with conspicuous unsuccess. There was no human way of making you let up, and, refusing all credit, you wrote the whole thing off to high blood pressure. Come to think of it, maybe that's a gift too . . . But it is a moot point whether the dynamo that was Ken Roberts was ever turned off, even in the few hours sleep that you snatched from its eternal hum.

What I have called diversified interests bring back to me fascinating after-work projects, between chapter projects one
might say, of themselves work, whether artistic, scientific, or merely physical, performed in sun, in rain, in snow, in warm rooms,—the trick planting of tomatoes, for instance, that caused them to leap like Jack’s beanstalk and to yield incalculable numbers of luscious fruit; the lusty carving and pernickety gilding of majestic wooden eagles now high up on blood-red barns; the Herculean dredging out of jungles of resistant black alder into whose finally evacuated beds you made streams to flow so that now great ponds are the undisturbed home of contemplative blue herons, of urgent wild ducks that pause briefly on their jet flights north and south, of gulls that whirl from the sea like kids on holiday to splash and dip their briny bodies in the clear fresh water; making try-out patterns of rich ikons on the flower-patterned rug in the living room, and then hanging them, an exotic festoon, covering half a wall over the painted fireplace; attempting, once, to paint life into the corpse-like cheeks of an unknown Italian matron, a not-so-Old Master, picked up in some equally unknown spot in Tuscany . . . our art work not so well received: late dart games against the badly wounded barroom door, open to all comers at twenty-five cents a hundred, neophytes like myself struggling with the ritualistic subtleties of ‘throwing in’ and ‘throwing out’, you, with the long-since technique of the London ‘limey’, generally raking in the shekels.

You may like to know, by the way, (most of us authors would) that the other day I re-dipped into I Wanted To Write; and I can say again, as I did at the time, that it is an extraordinary job of auto-revelation. Every line of it is you, poignantly you, at moments even hurtlingly you . . . It appears that even a tortoise can be stirred, and admit it. So would you mind if I broke down and handed you a compliment or two? If you do mind, blame it on the jacket-blurb. You hand the boys something unique and this is how they announce it “An intimate, entertaining account of how an author lives and works.”

Perhaps intimacy and entertainment are part of watching a man crucify himself, of listening to his justifiably passionate screams of anger and pain that at times become savage satirical laughter, gut-tearing laughter, during a lifetime apprenticeship to his self-created way of the cross.
To me, that is what you did,—whether you intended to or not.

Granted that you relate moments of superb triumph, moments therefore of infinite pleasure, moments when your humor was without sting, moments even of perfectly natural pride in your doing, couldn’t the blurb-people grasp that you recognised that these were only moments, and that the ceaseless battle must go on? It was there for the reading.

I still find myself unable to see any exaggeration in using the words *crucifixion* or *way of the cross* in regard to you. One does not blurt out phrases like this in the barroom. But after the thirty-odd years of association with you, of many times enjoying the privilege, and the compliment, of working with you whenever you hoisted the SOS, of sharing with you the invariably restless hours when you were away from your desk, I can say now that to me you have always seemed as driven as a volcano in obedience to nature’s invisible grindings, a dedicated crusader battling relentlessly at the gates of untruth, of half truth, of sham,—you knowing that they could never be beaten down; an obstinate seeker after perfection,—you knowing that, like the tempting pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, it was unobtainable, because non-existent, a charming fantasy.

. . . All of which in spite of what has always been our shared credo: that if, in any book, or, for that matter, sheet of music, or framed canvas, one can succeed in squeezing out even seventy-five per cent of the dream one had to start with, it was all any of us could humanly expect. A little humbling, that admission, as though the Achilles heel covered a wider area than is usually ascribed to it.

In that autobiography of yours, by the way, my eye was re-caught and held by three astounding lines which confirm all that I have been trying to say to you. I quote: “The real home stretch of *Northwest Passage* started on the first of January 1937, when I undertook, come what may, to deliver the last 80,000 words of manuscript, revised and ready for the linotype machines, by the end of February.”

Eighty thousand words in sixty days! For the love of God! Nature's grindings . . . You know as well as I do that if you divide it out the correct answer can only be in terms of mental and spiritual anguish, of definite physical distress, of utter
self-denial, of concentration to the point of scarcely being aware as to whether it were night or day, with every outrageous minute ticking off its sixty lethal seconds . . . And you did it ten days before the deadline that you had set yourself.

I have to ask you what need did you have to be as crazy as that, when you were dealing not with a short story or an article but with an important opus? Why didn’t you thumb your nose at the hungry editors and starving publishers? Why hand them not only a great manuscript, but two years of your life plugged into two months? Did you know that it showed? Did you even care if it did? All I can say is that when Jeannette and I came along, ignorant, unprepared, a few days before the end of your stretch, you were all in, bleeding nerve-ends twitching, totally absent even when present at meal times, — the only times we saw you, — at the final point of exhaustion, but like a drugged sleep-walker still engaged in writing and tearing up and digging again for the final sentences that naturally refused to come.

You have stated that I helped. How else than as counter-irritant?

Be that as it may, you survived your self-challenge; and you will never know what it meant, a few days later, to see a renewed Ken Roberts at the wheel when we all started off through the Etruscan countryside, your freed mind like a balloon, the guy­ropes of which had been mercifully cut. You were up again, and soaring . . . For the three of us with you, witnesses, — Anna, Jeannette, me, — the wild jagged mountains were flat in comparison with the Kennethian altitudes.

Incidentally your magic comeback gave the lie to one of the low pre-dawn moments in that diary of yours, when you confided that the strain was too great for you ever to undertake another long book like Northwest Passage. One can only assume that the statement was not so much intended as a fact as a kind of grumbling prayer, — certainly you had been brought to your knees, and in due course your tired “Eli! Eli! Lama Sabacthani?” was more than handsomely answered three times, with Oliver Wiswell and Lydia Bailey and Moreau de St. Méry.

Nevertheless, I agree with you, Ken, that those were the good years, when effort was made to go beyond effort, when one's
younger findings, frictioned by time and experience, showed themselves to have not only solidity, but validity. And when, later, the unbelievable encroachment of greying hair above the ears dictated the wise cutting down of the normal eighteen holes of golf to a laughable six, it certainly didn't mean that all passion was spent. On the contrary. From your high taproom chair the ether could still writhe with sheet lightnings and thunderbolts.

The particular targets at that six-hole time were the nit-wit, anti-dowsing scientists baying at your heels, and, in particular, the reluctant, sceptical, high-brass Bermudian who, never having heard before of a 'dome' of water, refused to believe that there were such things as domes on their island, four of which you had located, plus a fifth just off-shore, — which made it the more ridiculous, — any one of which would provide the entire population with all the water they needed, and had never had, and would never have unless somebody did something about it. By the time, at last, that you flew down to show them, and did, the pyrotechnics in Rocky Pasture could easily have blasted a sputnik into orbit.

Subsequently, perhaps as though to prove that a mere six holes of golf could keep a man in trim, or perhaps to satisfy yourself that the written word, always your spear and your battle-axe, had lost none of its potent point and edge, you delivered yourself of the “Water Unlimited” books which by all rhyme and reason should have relieved the peoples of the world of all drought, which should have caused even the bitter desert of Sahara to become again the sweet land of green pastures.

If any one man, single-handed, could have turned such a magnificent obsession into reality, that man was you.

A final word, old bean . . . just to tell you that now you are not here, you are even more here, and by that I mean of and among us all.

We, Jeannette and I, find ourselves repeatedly talking of you, — perhaps subconsciously to you, — going over all sorts of personal oddities and endities, such, for instance as the perfection of the lamb chops you dipped in lemon and broiled withunction in the house that you had before the building of Rocky Pasture; or, again, the block of caviar that almost ruined us in the ‘boca’ in Florence; or that golden day when we nearly
launched the 'Peon Corporation' among the Abercrombies and the Fitches in New York; or the triumphant afternoon in Nassau when we persuaded a colored boy to teach you and me the trick of sculling a boat; and, most particularly of course, the adventures without number in Rocky Pasture itself, whose door has always been open . . . and still is . . . and through which, obviously, you constantly come walking in again . . .

One is very much aware of you, Ken.

Yours ever,

Arthur

THE WORK OF KENNETH ROBERTS

By Herbert Faulkner West

It is difficult to assess an author's real worth until several years after his death, and even then it is not an easy task. Quite frequently (and often wrongly) an author's reputation drops considerably after his death, as was the case, for instance, with Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and even as good a writer as John Galsworthy. Time, however, ultimately seems to winnow the wheat from the chaff.

Kenneth Roberts, born in 1885, died about five years ago, in 1957. It would appear appropriate on this occasion to look over his written work and try to give, not a final estimate, but perhaps a more just estimate than could have been given while he was living.

His career as a writer follows, in general, three periods: the first, as a reporter on the Boston Post, where he worked from 1909 to 1917, and his work for Puck and the old Life; the second, as a reporter for the Saturday Evening Post; the third, as a historical novelist.

He certainly learned much from his activities in the Siberian Expeditionary Force in 1918-19, where he was Captain in the