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10-9-1892

To Harry de Forest Smith - October 9, 1892

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

ℓ^a

#1716 Camb.

Oct^b 9 - '92

My dear Smith,

Well, here it is Sunday evening, and there seems to be nothing more sensible for me to do than to write you a few lines according to the agreement, which you may be may be filling at your end at this same time. I fear I am not in the mood to flourish any masterly rhetoric this evening so will ask you to pardon all solecisms & the like which may meet your

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eye. Last evening I indulged in a rather varied form of self-entertainment. You see I though I would stay in Cambridge Saturday night for once in my life to economize. Well, about half past seven I took a little walk down to the square & dropped into Amee's¹ book store. The first thing I knew I had blown in four dollars and a half and I thought it about time to get back "into my hole". So I went back and sat up until midnight reading Plato's "Apologia" (Cary's translation) and Rudyard Kipling's "Barrack-room Ballads".^c

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both volumes being the fruits of the night's economy. Between the books above named, a copy of the Advocate, a mess of roasted chestnuts (which, by the way,

^a It is not clear what this mark is, though it appears as a cursive "l" in the holograph. WA omits it.

^b WA adds a period here.

^c WA has a comma here.

gave me a villainous pain in my bowels) and divers pipes of Golden Sceptre tobacco (which I will say, incidentally, is about the poorest smoke I ever had—if you were here I would throw the box at your head) I manged^d {=managed} to murder the time in a rather satisfactory manner. It would have been quite so, but for the aforesaid pain and a smarting tongue caused by the glorious mixture you were so fond of eulogizing.

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But then I do not lay it up against you that I bought it. I did it quite out of curiosity. One thing is certain, as the French say, and that is that the firms that makes^e the stuff know how to advertise. That ancient gentleman lying (literally & figuratively) in his dingy room¹ took me right by the hair; i.e., hit me in the neck. But I shall know better hereafter and cling to "Pride of Virginia".

I think I shall acquire a liking for German after a time though it seems to me now that it must be about as hard as Latin. But when I look around me and see the multitudes^f ~~took~~ who have appar-

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ently been successful with it, I feel encouraged and hope for the best. Shall begin reading in about a week—Grimm's Fairy Tales.

I am sorry to say that I have neglected to see about those periodicals. As to the Atlantic, I

^d WA reads "managed".

^e WA separates this crossed-out "s" thus: "make [s]".

^f WA separates this crossed-out "s" thus: "multitude <s>".

suppose it would be more sensible to wait until January, and so get a complete volume. But after all, wouldn't it be more satisfactory to have two weeklies? How about Harper's? or the "Mahogany Tree"?² I will send for a copy of the latter and let you see what you

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think of it. If you have not seen it I think it will strike you as something of an oddity, and also exceedingly well fitted for a companion to the Critic. I must confess that I think it about the best thing of its kind (if there is any anything {sic} else) that I have ever seen. It's a dollar more a year, making \$7.00 in all—something less if we can get club rates. If you are willing to split on the expense I will take the Mahogany Tree at the end of the year and give the [=you]³ the Critic if you prefer it. Let me know next week.

Here are some stanzas from Kipling.

-7g-

Seven men from all the world, back to the Docks again,
Rolling down the Ratcliffe Road drunk and raising Cain:
Give the girls another drink 'fore we sign away,
We that took the "Bolivar" out across the bay!

(Ballad of the "Bolivar".)

The Spirit gripped him by the hair, and sun by sun they fell
Till they came to the belt of Naughty Stars that rim the mouth of Hell:

pain,

The first are red with pride and wrath, the next are white with
But the third are black with clinkered sin that cannot burn again.

(Tomlinson)

³ EAR turned this page sideways and wrote horizontally upon it (see scan for this letter).

"But until we are built like angels, with hammer and chisel and pen
We will work for ourselves and a woman, forever and ever, amen."
(An Imperial Rescript)

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Upon the whole the book is rather disappointing. Much of it is simply rubbish—like much of the author's prose.

Sincerely

Robinson^h

"Ship me somewheres east of Suez, where the
best is like the worst,
Where there aintⁱ no Ten Commandments, and
a man can raise a thirst!"

"An' I seed her first a-smokin' of a whackin'
white cheroot,
An' a-wastin' Christian kisses on an 'eathen
idol's foot."

(Mandalay—Barrack

Room Ballads.)

HCL US, 70-72.

NOTES

1. This seems to be a reference to an actual image of a reclining "old gentleman" used in Surbrug's Golden Sceptre tobacco ads throughout the 1890s (see attached ad from 1894 in the "additional files" for this letter). The "old gentleman," who judging by his style of dress is an Elizabethan or Jacobean, is possibly Sir Walter Raleigh, invoked in another Golden Sceptre ad as having provided a valuable benefit "to the English-speaking world by his introduction of tobacco" (see attached ad from 1899). Although, due to its superior digital quality, the attached ad featuring "the old gentleman" is from 1894, there are various other extant ads using this exact same picture from throughout the 1890s, the earliest that I have seen being from 1892. Robinson's complaint is doubly humorous when read along with the ad's assurance (also present on the 1892 version) to potential customers that it "Will Not Bite or Dry the Tongue or Throat." It seems probable, especially considering his reference to the advertising, that Robinson had this assurance specifically in mind while making his complaint. (SL)

^h WA omits the underline.

ⁱ WA reads "ain't".

- 2.^j US reads "McNamee's."
3. A short-lived journalistic venture edited by young Harvard men and published as a handsome quarto.
4. US reads "you [take]."

^j This and the following two notes are WA's notes 1, 2 and 3, respectively.