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To George W. Latham - January 15, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO GEORGE W. LATHAM

Gardiner.^a Me., Jan^b 15 - '93^c4.

My dear Latham,

Nothing could have given me much more pleasure than the receipt of your letter. I knew well enough that it would come sometime, but hardly expected it so soon. Such surprises are pleasant in that they make us feel that we are not forgotten, and I am not writing for effect when I say that the thought that you had forgotten me, or at least lost all interest in me, troubled me more than you will believe. This would not be very complimentary to you, if you did not under-

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stand my doubts regarding you^{r}^d powers of personal attachments. A friend is a good deal to me. I find so few men in whom there is that peculiar human streak that is indispensable. We mortals may have totally different ideas and ideals, but if there is that sympathy that has no particular name but which we all feel upon rare occasions we find ourselves friends in spite of all natural differences. Sometimes, of course this sympathy is imaginary and then the bubble bursts. I am willing to confess that I had more than half concluded that it had burst in your case. Perhaps you will be amused to know the little incident that did more than anything else to lead me to

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this conclusion.--One evening early last spring I asked you in an off-hand but perfectly sincere way to "come around" after dinner. I think you agreed to come if nothing happened to prevent.

^a WA has a comma instead of a period.

^b WA adds a period here.

^c The "4" is written directly over the "3".

^d WA has "your".

I waited but ~~bu~~^e you failed to make an appearance. The next day I asked you, with ~~,~~^f perhaps
you
more curiosity than courtesy, why did not come and have a smoke. You "staggered" me a little when you replied that you "forgot all about it"^g I liked your sincerity but suffered (laugh if you like) for a long time with that most diabolical of punishments for being born—Doubt. I doubted your friendship which had grown to be a considerable part of my Harvard life, and I doubted my own judgement—which, as you must know, is no small matter. Somehow it is quite as hard, if not harder, to lose faith

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in our own selves as in our companions. In writing this I realize that there is danger of your misinterpreting my words but I shall not lessen you in my own esteem by adding any modifications. Your humanity is deep enough to understand anything I can ~~writ~~ write (unless perhaps "Supremacy"--and I think upon a certain evening you were in a fair way to comprehend that) and I feel that which I have just written will serve better to show my feelings toward you than a dozen pages of semi-pathetic drool^h

Yes, I think I can tell you a little more about myself than I did in my first letter, but what shall I write, and what shall I leave out? I have a mortal

-4-

fear of boring anyone—unless it be Saben—and too much confidence upon paper does not always show the strongest of minds. I had no scruples whatever in writing what I did a few moments ago but I am afraid I cannot go

^e This reading is highly speculative. WA omits these canceled letters.

^f WA omits this crossed-out comma.

^g WA adds a period here.

^h WA adds a period here.

into all the domestic hell of my past life. The past ten years have been for me a tough decade upon the whole, and to do the best I can for the powers over mankind I cannot see wherever {?} I have been personally responsible for any of my discomfort. My surroundings have been enough to drive a man into madness or at least a chronic "grouch" and it was more to avoid the latter than for educational advancement that I went to Harvard. I succeeded as well as I expected and if I had not got into an almost morbid condition over my ear, I

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might have enjoyed myself far better than I did. Another reason for my going to Cambridge was to find some friends, if possible. I succeeded well enough to convince my{-}self that I am not so hopelessly different from the world as I had thought. The majority of men I met I do not care to meet again; I admit this, but still, out of perhaps fifty I found five or six in whose company I find more satisfaction than in any of my old acquaintances. My great trouble now is that I am alone. Smith, the only man in Maine for whom I have what one might call a spiritual friendship, is in Rockland forty weeks of the year. If you could drop in and have a talk and a pipe—though you were never much for

-6-

tobacco—it would give me new life. The sight of Tryon last month was like an elixir of life. I fancied that Butler had changed a little, but I must not forget that a man cannot be the same in a mercantile office that he was in a college room. I wonder where I got this inborn hatred for anything pertaining to business? The word itself almost nauseates me, sometimes. You will draw from this that Butler has left college and entered his father's store. It took me a long time to make myself believe

that it was the best thing for him, but I have come to the conclusion that it is. Butler is young and last year acquired an almost abnormal liking for me. I was sorry to see it for I knew well enough that it could not last. A disappointment in this case would be a pleasant surprise at at even at the expense of judgement.

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I am living here alone, although I have two brothers in the house now,¹ with no one to whom I can talk freely and naturally and upon the subjects that most interest me. I shall go down to my "narrow house" a victim of high ideals. I envy the man who drives a soap cart and sings "After the Ball".² Life to him is something complete something taken for granted and not wondered over and stirred up with doubts and fears. The thought that I may probably succeed in a small way is all that keeps me from "getting a job" at 1.25 a day and living it out. I am full of little ideas—perhaps a little larger than I suspect sometimes—and I may write something someday that will find its way into the literary market. My hope is small, however, and I am half afraid my abilities [?] are smaller.--I once wrote Tryon that I liked him because he knew the value of a characteristic; I think I like you rather because you understand the complexities of things as no one can know them without a certain course [?]

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of mental suffering. I think your strange reserve and seeming indifference attracted [?] me towards you more than than {sic} any superficial good-fellowship could ever have done. Peters has passed out of my life with eighteen dollars of my exchequer, and you can doub[t]less form a tolerably correct list of the men whose acquaintance I most prize.--In closing I must say that I knew the cause of your trouble in Cambridge though I fancied at the time that the heart as well as the pocket book was a little crushed. I could not get over the impression that you felt

the whistle of "Faded Leaves"² around your feet. Pardon my familiarity.--I am probably wrong. As to financial matters, I was more than once on the point of offering to help you out of your temporary slough, but your sensitiveness of and almost morbid pride kept me back. Since then the house has had reverses and

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I am beginning to know myself what it means to be straightened. For God's sake do not take this as a reminder of your little debt to me. If I were in any immediate need of that I would say so without any circumlocution. When you find it convenient to pay it send it along but do not feel in any hurry about it. I am sorry I mentioned this at all, and would not have done so had I not inadvertently mentioned my reverses. I am living the quietest possible life (not to speak of "life's inner tumult") and my expenses are very small. You will do me a favor by believing me and acting accordingly.

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My eyes have not permitted me to do any reading^j since July. Except a hasty glance at the "noozpapers", as we say here, and an occasional hasty reading of a short tale by^k Coppée, Daudet, or that elegant reptile, Catulle Mendès.^l I have giveⁿ^m my eyes a rest. Yesterday I overstepped my mark and read Saint-Beuve's essay on Cowper. That a Frenchman could write that essay is a mystery to me. ⁿRegarding the Cliff Dwellers^o it is a

ⁱ WA has "life's".

^j WA transcribes the "i" and the "n".

^k WA omits "by".

^l WA has a comma. Read as a comma.

^m WA transcribes an "n".

ⁿ WA omits this space.

^o WA adds a comma here.

novel of modern life (Chicago) and is a magnificent exposé (excuse me) of the unhealthy American rush. The beauty of the thing is in that it is not overdone—unless some [?] {we?} would throw out Marcus as melodramatic. But there has been more than one Marcus in America and I have no objection to his staying where he is. The book was read aloud to me and I enjoyed it greatly. I gave Tryon a copy and he wrote me that he considered it one

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of the most "fruitful" books I could have given him. I often wonder if Mr^p Fuller ever took Fine Arts under Professor Norton.

You tell me that you have more on your mind that you would like to write. Well, all [I] wil{l}^q say is that there is no one from whom a letter could possibly be more welcome at any time, and you may feel sure that anything you say to me will {elicit?} the highest respect for your feelings and what I now believ{e}^r to be your friendship. This is a sudden confessi{o}n^s {o}^t faith for me, but you see I could never bring myself to give you up. As to your "treatment" of me—that is all right. I think I understand it fully and the only feeling I have regarding it is one of sympathy. There are other things I would like to speak about, [but] I will not impose upon your good nature by writing^u longer. Most sinc{e}r{e}ly.^v

Rob.

HCL

NOTES

1. Dean, the brilliant young doctor, suffered from sinusitis and neuralgia acquired in the course

^p WA adds a period here.

^q WA transcribes the second "l".

^r WA transcribes the "e".

^s WA transcribes the "o".

^t WA transcribes the "o".

^u WA suggests "continuing [?]"

^v WA transcribes both "e"s, has a comma instead of a period, and places the valediction on the next line.

of his practice along the Maine coast and to the neighboring islands. The excruciating pain he suppressed with morphine; by 1889 he had become an addict and had returned to Gardiner.

Herman apparently was in and out of Gardiner during this period. Bitter and disillusioned over the financial losses suffered in the Panic of '93, blaming himself for the catastrophe, he turned increasingly to alcohol for support.

2. "After the Ball," a song by Charles K. Harris (1891), was a massive early hit for Tin Pan Alley. It is a melodramatic ballad of lost love, and although EAR's reference to it here is derisive, in light of his own tragic love for Emma Shepherd, and his situation of being the lifelong bachelor uncle of Emma's children, it is tempting to contemplate whether EAR had himself been affected by its lyrics:

"After the Ball"

A little maiden climbed an old man's knee,
 Begged for a story – "Do, Uncle, please.
 Why are you single; why live alone?
 Have you no babies; have you no home?"
 "I had a sweetheart years, years ago;
 Where she is now pet, you will soon know.
 List to the story, I'll tell it all,
 I believed her faithless after the ball."

After the ball is over,
 After the break of morn –
 After the dancers' leaving;
 After the stars are gone;
 Many a heart is aching,
 If you could read them all;
 Many the hopes that have vanished
 After the ball.

Bright lights were flashing in the grand ballroom,
 Softly the music playing sweet tunes.
 There came my sweetheart, my love, my own –
 "I wish some water; leave me alone."
 When I returned dear there stood a man,
 Kissing my sweetheart as lovers can.
 Down fell the glass pet, broken, that's all,
 Just as my heart was after the ball.

Long years have passed child, I've never wed.
 True to my lost love though she is dead.
 She tried to tell me, tried to explain;
 I would not listen, pleadings were vain.

One day a letter came from that man,
He was her brother – the letter ran.
That's why I'm lonely, no home at all;
I broke her heart pet, after the ball.

(SL)

3.^{wx} Possibly a reference to the poem sequence of that name by Matthew Arnold. (SL)

^w This is WA's note 2.

^x WA wrote "'Faded Leaves' ?" in this space but did not complete the note.