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To Harry de Forest Smith - March 11, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, Maine, March 11, 1894.

My dear Smith,

Your third belated letter came Saturday, and I was glad to hear that you are coming home in a fortnight. You say that your^a time will be pretty well taken up, but you may be willing to take one or two brief vacations and listen to my five wild sketches - not including Marshall. I have another in my mind on the philosophical enmity of two broth^bers^b who were not born for the same purpose. I think I see a chance for a good thing, but I am beginning to ask myself if these complex affairs are not a little too heavy for my experimental work: it is a pity to waste good material in practice if the same end can be attained - and I have little doubt but that it can - by careful and conscientious work on more meagre and less valuable matter. A light sketch, written with no thought of^c publication, but still written with all possible care and earnestness, ought to bring its reward; and I think seriously of giving the coming summer to that kind of work - together (I trust) with Antigone. But for the present I shall tinker over what I have written and wait your candid opinions, trusting much to your choice for the selection of theree^d {=three} to be sent^e

to my uncle,¹ who thinks^f he may get them read - and probably damned -in the "Atlantic"^g office.

I wonder why it is that we poor devils are so cursed with high ambitions? Do I ask this question in every letter I write you? - If I do, it is because the matter is forever in my mind. This and my fatalism have interfered to an alarming extent with my pleasure in life: the belief that we have done well does not amount to much if we cannot bring ourselves^h to feel that we deserve the credit. For example, I gave a kid some old postage-stamps yesterday: his eyes snapped at each one I gave him, and I ~~h~~ⁱ think that I enjoyed the business fully as much as he. That youngster went away with a glad heart, and I felt a quiet satisfaction myself - until some devil or other made me ask myself why I did it. Most men would have^j followed the natural bent of their natures and the kid would have been dis{-}missed and not thought of again. I followed the natural bent of my nature and spent an hour overhauling an old cigar-box full of stamps. I did it

^a The "r" is written in black ink.

^b The "h" is typed over the "t".

^c The "f" is written in black ink.

^d WA omits the canceled "e".

^e This is the last word of the previous line.

^f The "n" is written in black ink.

^g Both quotation marks are written in black ink.

^h The "s" is written in black ink.

ⁱ WA omits this mistake.

^j The "v" and "e" are written in black ink.

because I enjoyed it - because I was prompted to do it^k by some inner selfishness over which it seems that ~~that~~ I had no control^m. This same characteristic leads me to give a beggar a nickel sometimes, while another mood at at {sic} another time often compels me - can I call it anything else?- to pass him by without a care o{r}ⁿ a thought. This all goes to show you how finical I am, and whta^o a bundle of crotchets goes to make up my ego. When we feel in a mood like this, it is good tc^p {=to} quote Hartley Coreridge's^q sonnet, begin{-} ning:

Let me not deem that I was made in vain,
Or that my being was an accident
Which Fate, in working its sublime intent,
Not wished to be, to hinder would not deign.²

-2-

For the past day or two I have been reading Daudet's "Tartarin de Tarascon."³ At first I did not understand how a man is able to write such a book, but now I think he did it by hard work. The book is very small and the chapters so marvelously short that it seems incredible that such a satisfactory effect can be attained. The reader forgets that he is reabing^r a microscopic narrative, and all because the author makes^s every sentence c^t count. The thing is tremendously funny in places - particularly the chapter describing the hat-shooting tournaments. There is no game in Tarascon^u, so its inhabitants become "chasseurs de casquettes" - of whom the greatest is - of course - Tartarin^v. Eventually he goes to Africa to shoot lions, and falls in with the wily Prince Gregory of Montenegro. Through the kindness of this prince, Tartarin lives like a small sultan for a time with an

h

Arab girl, Baia, forgetting all about te lions. The whole thing is a mild satire on the French people, and is magnificently done. It seems incredibl^w that the book should be written by the author of "Jack."

I am afraid that my brain is too nearly empty to-day for me to write much of a letter. There is very little weather outside - one of

^k The "t" is written in black ink.

^l The hyphen is written in black ink.

^m WA omits the canceled "l".

ⁿ WA transcribes the "r".

^o A "transpose" symbol (↔) is written here in black ink, indicating that the "t" and the "a" should be switched.

^p WA simple has "to".

^q WA corrects this to "Coleridge".

^r WA corrects this to "reading".

^s The "m" is written in black ink.

^t WA omits this typo.

^u The "o" is written in black ink over a typed "e".

^v The upper-case "T" is written in black ink.

^w WA adds an "e".

these dull dirty days when everything stagnates. I fancy it is much the same^x in Rockland; in fact, I rather hope that it is, - for in that case you may feel something as I do at present. I cannot describe the feeling: I can on{-}ly say that I have a half active desire to eat, drink, read, write, and smoke.

me^y

Do you know what kind of a feeling that is? If you do, you will excuse for breaking off here and descending to the cellar for a whiff of Virginia. And by the way, speaking of smo king^z makes me think of the coming summer, and, indirectly, of the Greek Drama. I shall go over^{aa} the hills before long for your books, and shall be very much obliged if you bring Mr. Moulton's book from Bowdoin. The more I think of (is this a warning?) the Antigone scheme, the better I like it. Only I foresee the necessity of a great deal of preparation in order to make the work anything like adequate.

Before many weeks I shall surprise you with a specimen of my reformed penmanship,^{bb}

Very truly yours

E.A.R.^{cc}

-3-

Excuse folding.^{dd}

HCL US, 137-140.

Typewritten. {Single-spaced.}

NOTES

1. Edward Proby Fox.
2. "Not in Vain." See EAR's letter to Smith, June 10, 1891.
3. *Les Aventures Prodigieuses de Tartarin de Tarascon*, 1872.

^x The "m" and the "e" are written in black ink.

^y Written in black ink.

^z The "k" is typed over the "i". The space is in the holograph.

^{aa} The "e" is written in black ink.

^{bb} WA has a period instead of the comma.

^{cc} The valediction and signature are written in black ink. WA omits the underline.

^{dd} Written diagonally in black in in the center right of the page. WA omits the underline.