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Inside Kenneth Roberts

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ROBERTS was a trenchant man who held his fire for nobody. A lope through the pages of *I Wanted To Write* will amply affirm that he was not one to salaam before eminence or quibble with an expletive. He was conscious of his prickly qualities, and what kept him this side curmudgeonry was his congenital sense of humor. After a period of nerve-eroding work, during which his household had lived in a state of continuous eruption, he dashed off a self-castigatory lyric which included the lines:

I wonder what's making him squawk and yell,
Beef and howl, roar like hell?
I wonder what's eating him now!

It was legend during the latter years of his life that he maintained a pack of forty ferocious hounds that roved his grounds, slavering for a chance to tear unwary intruders apart. (See the forty ferocious hounds in photograph facing page 83.) His surface gruffness, like that of many artists, is recognizable as the necessary mask worn to confront the world and hold it sufficiently at bay so that he might, unmolested, do the work he must do. Domestically, he was indistinguishable from the ordinary image of other sons and other husbands. He had his moments, as who doesn't, but he also appreciated the indispensable ministrations of a good mother and a rare wife. To both he left rich testimony of his love and admiration, usually in sideling fashion, sometimes with undiffused sentiment.

In Colby’s copy of *Why Europe Leaves Home* he wrote on the flyleaf: “For my mother who must read my fulminations with a constant eye on Day before Yesterday, when I wore kilts and was afraid of the dark . . . with my love.” On the equivalent page of *Antiquamania* he lauded her prescience and good taste with a characteristic satirical flip: “To my mother who recognized good antiques before the Duponts and Henry Ford.”

In “The Truth About a Novel” he repines the grind to which he subjected his wife by his persistence in the grisly occupation of writing — “an indication of the manner in which everyone connected with an author participates in the easy
gayety of his life.” Years later, in his autobiography, he commiserated more feelingly and with unabashed gratitude:

There are, as I have implied, no rules arbitrarily laid down for those who want to write. If there were, I’m inclined to believe that one of the cardinal rules would be “Marry the right woman”—one who will never suffer from quietophobia or be cowed by uncertainty, by a precarious income, by late and irregular hours: one who accepts short rations as a matter of course rather than as merely a war or patriotic measure: a good cook willing to make beds, manipulate a typewriter, keep the household accounts, pay the bills, lose track of her friends, go anywhere at a moment’s notice, forswear social functions, keep her mouth shut when urged by relatives to persuade her husband to stop being a disreputable reporter and accept a responsible situation in a respectable business (I Wanted To Write, 66).

Anna Mosser Roberts has all these merits—and more, a quiet grace that brings immediate ease into any circumstance. There is probably no surer way to understand the intrinsic Kenneth Roberts than to listen to her anecdotes about him. Here are a brace in her own words.

“You are quite right. In moments of tension, Ken’s feelings could make for an atmospheric change. I’ll tell you of two amusing incidents.

“One fall I decided to stop smoking, for financial reasons only. I did. On the two-weeks boat trip to Italy this continued. It would be hard to think of any act being more conspicuous, and this persisted after we landed. But neither of us mentioned it.

“Late New Year’s Eve I decided I’d have a cigarette. I lighted it and we were instantly enveloped in a gelid chill. No comment was made and we soon went to bed.

“I awoke in the morning to the same state of affairs. Finally I said, ‘Are you upset because I smoked a cigarette last night?’ ‘YES!’ Nothing was as mentally or morally wrecking as to make a pledge and break it. I said I had made no pledge, to myself or to anyone else; I had simply decided not to smoke, no time limit, no nothing.

“I had taken to Europe no cigarettes for myself, a winter’s supply for Ken. I think that morning Ken reckoned how many he had, allotted me eleven a day, and he went back to his pipe.

“Another time the Gibbeses [A. Hamilton and Jeannette] were visiting us in Porto Santo Stefano, Italy. One morning we
dropped the finished *Northwest Passage* into the mail for New York and continued on to Florence for a relaxing break.

“The morning we left Florence for home we went to the market district to load up with provisions. Jeannette and I were delegated to get a turkey broiler and everything else. We were on a long street, lined on either side with food booths. There were no turkey broilers. We got an outsized turkey and many other things, then proceeded down the middle of the street, heavily laden, back to the car. We were met by Ken, enraged. Where in the hell had we been?

“We were completely ignorant of the fact that Florence had a huge, covered Faneuil Hall market and Ken had stopped the car in front of its front entrance. Faneuil Hall market had turkey broilers and here we were with a mastodon. I said, ‘Go in and get one, it will do no harm to have more.’

“He disappeared while Arthur took a quiet walk alongside the market. When Arthur reached the car, Ken still absent, he said in his unemotional English voice, ‘What does anything matter?’ That little speech changed my whole life. Is it possible that you ever get upset? If so, bear this in mind.

“To go on with my tale. Presently we started toward home, via the autostrada, Ken at the wheel. We went at 80 MPH until we reached Pisa, no conversation started by anyone. At Pisa we turned into a tiny *cul de sac* and ate our lunch, our backs to the Cathedral. Had we backed in we might have had a lovely vista, but no one thought of that.

“Lunch was a great healer. Arthur was permitted to take the wheel and normalcy returned. To cap the climax, my maligned bird was eaten with the greatest relish.

“I was fortunate in not having a dull life.”

With Kenneth Roberts as with most creative psyches, the man in the house, the man in the street, and the artist within are never far apart, but they are never promiscuously the same. — R. C.
This photograph of Roberts and Gibbs, although taken thousands of miles from the Latin locale of Mrs. Roberts’ turkey-broiler story (pp. 131-132), happily apprehends the pair on another marketing jaunt, in full regalia of berets, dark glasses, shorts, and bulging basket. This time the scene is Nassau in 1946.