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his search for light in a darkened
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EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON:
HIS SEARCH FOR LIGHT IN A DARKEN WORLD

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CHAPTER I

A GLEAM OF UPWARD PROMISE

From time immemorial people have traced this or that personality trait back to their ancestors. If the trait is admirable, the ancestral line is praised; if it is not, the "cobwebs" spun by them "of antiquity" are lamented.

Edwin Arlington Robinson was caught in a web woven of the strong fiber of integrity, reflective humor, inner courage, firm convictions, calm resignation, and intolerance of excesses.

His ancestors, men of property, leaned toward carpentry for a livelihood and such work tended to make them acutely aware of the virtues of preciseness and accuracy. This tendency was carried into their daily living. Sometimes they were overzealous in their concern for a neighbor's salvation; they were haunted by a sense of inescapable destiny; yet they kept their own feelings behind straight lips and unrevealing eyes. They ardently believed that it was their divine purpose on earth to work diligently, lay firm foundations, and reap the harvest of eternal light. In painful hours their philosophy had assured them that God's will would be done, and if God willed it, they sought to shape at last a birth that might be long remembered for revealing much of which they left unspoken; one who would not feel that he must justify his existence in terms which the common man would understand.

Their dream of such a birth was fulfilled when Edwin Arlington Robinson was born December 22, 1869, at Head Tide, Maine. Edwin, however, did not fulfill his parents' dream. They were not happy at the prospect of a third child, but finally reconciled themselves to the thought of a baby girl since they had two sons aged twelve and four. Because of their disappointment, they did not shout his arrival from the housetops. In fact, their indifference became most evident when they did not bother to give him a name until he was six months old. Some of their indifference may have been an unconscious expression of resentment at the fact that Edwin's birth had almost cost his mother's life. Fortunately for him, during Mrs. Robinson's convalescence, she and the three boys stayed at a resort in South Harpswell. Visitors were slightly surprised at having a nameless baby in their midst and one guest suggested drawing lots. Slips bearing sobriquets were dropped into a hat and that is how Edwin received his first name. The lady who suggested the idea for naming him was from Arlington, Massachusetts, and that took care of his middle sobriquet. Little did anyone guess that much later he would make that name famous.

During his childhood Robinson's own parents failed to note any special talent in their youngest son. His attempts to express himself to them always ended in dismal failure. His young mind, full of impatient and confusing ideas, yearned to be heard. No one would listen. Undoubtedly, his parents put him off with the timeworn phrase, "We'll talk about it tomorrow!" But Edwin, who was wise for his age, knew that tomorrow would never come.

Robinson's mother, Mary Palmer Robinson, left the upbringing of the boys to her husband, Edward, who recognized no obligation beyond superficial discipline. Other fellows had "man-to-man" talks with their dads, but not the Robinson boys. Their father's interests lay elsewhere.

Edward Robinson, known for miles around as the Duke of Puddledock,¹ had built a little business world right around himself, and there he reigned supreme. Not only did he run a general store, but bought and sold timber and was the local banker and postmaster. He possessed a shrewd mind and his approach to life was solid and philosophic. Deep down he was kind and gentle, but the love and protection which Edwin sought was not there. All his love was directed toward his wife; he needed no one else. The fact that Mary Robinson was fifteen years younger than her husband may have accounted for his extreme protectiveness. Then, too, the thought that he had almost lost her at the time of Edwin's birth may have accounted for his indifference toward his son.

From his mother, Edwin inherited the characteristics which caused him much sorrow, but they also accounted for his ultimate glory. She was shy, imaginative, sympathetic, and possessed an unusual fondness for poetry. In spite of her aesthetic nature, however, she never openly expressed the strong kinship she felt for her youngest son, and Edwin's fumbling attempts to seek her confidence left him feeling even more alone and miserable.

¹Eric Partridge, A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English (New York, 1950), p. 665. Puddledock - an imaginary aristocrat.

Mrs. Robinson's favorite son, Dean, the eldest boy, became an avid reader at an early age. Noting his aptness for study, his father made plans for him to go to Bowdoin College to become a doctor. This was not Dean's choice, but he could not bear to disappoint his father. Dean did eventually become a promising young physician, but it was only through the use of narcotics and alcohol that he could sustain himself through the hardships of his country medical practice.

Dean was twelve years old when Edwin was born. This difference in age brought about a strong case of "big-brother" worship. Edwin's devotion to his older brother served as a substitute for the affection which he desired from his father. He spent hours pouring over Dean's medical books and would often imagine himself in the throes of some deadly disease. This fear, though lessened, never actually left him.

Herman, the middle son, was a "chip off the old block," of which no one was prouder than Mr. Robinson. The boy took an active interest in business and through his enterprising efforts made himself locally famous as a shrewd financial investor. Since everything seemed to come his way easily, he became over-confident, and his enthusiasm caused him to make some unsound investments. Unable to face defeat in the eyes of those around him, he turned to alcohol, which resulted in his own undoing as well as the loss of the family fortune. Edwin looked up to Herman, but at the same time thoroughly understood him. He knew that Herman would work toward his own benefits in every undertaking, but because of the attention which Edwin received, he fell in with all the schemes. Edwin would curry the horse so Herman could ride in style.

The pattern of Edwin's subservient attitude grew out of this relationship.

Neither of his brothers offered Edwin the companionship he sought, and as they grew older the gap widened. Each of the brothers seemed to have a goal in his own endeavor, even if it might have been outwardly evident rather than sincere, while Edwin, in all external appearances, seemed to have none. The feeling of rejection never left Edwin because it seemed almost as if he were on the outside looking in. What he saw did not always please him, but the picture he saw did nothing to alleviate his feeling that others "belonged" and he did not.

In a letter to a friend, Mrs. Robinson clearly revealed that this feeling of exclusion was not a figment of Edwin's imagination. "I am not worried about Dean and Herman. They will make their way in the world. But I don't know what is going to happen to Win."² Her concern came too late to benefit Edwin. The whole town of Gardiner echoed this same sentiment, "What is going to happen to Win?", and in time Edwin felt that the entire population was ridiculing him. In spite of the lack of confidence placed in him, it was Edwin, the least favored, who had the strength in later years to bear the brunt of his family's disintegration. Despite his seeming weakness he proved to be the pillar of strength in the time of moral strife.

In September, 1870, the Robinson family had moved to Gardiner, a lively river town, abounding in ship yards, paper and lumber mills,

²Hermann Hagedorn, Edwin Arlington Robinson, A Biography (New York, 1956), p. 23. Hereafter to be referred to as Hagedorn, E. A. Robinson.

and ice houses. The Robinson home, large and fenced against intrusion, sat high above the river near the cemetery where eventually rich and poor found a common bed. Robinson felt like an intruder in the large family house, and the nearby cemetery haunted him. Since his life seemed purposeless in its relationship to the other people around him, he could not construct any definite plan of life, and greatly feared the end of the scheme, death. Edwin liked to walk along the banks of the river. As he observed the many ships at anchor there, perhaps he dreamed of someday sailing away to some foreign port where he would find the answers to his unspoken questions. He liked to while away the afternoons listening to the conversations of old men, for he understood them and cherished their idiosyncrasies. If he thought their tales at times were spun from imaginary threads, he never questioned them. He knew too well the harmless desire to "elaborate" in order to capture attention. Since he lived in a world that was largely imaginary, he retained these threads of fiction for later use.

As Robinson grew older and refused to enter the race for the almighty dollar, he came to feel out of place in Gardiner. It became evident to him that the majority of people could hear the ring of the cash register, but not the cries of broken hearts and spirits. His hatred for materialism remained with him throughout his lifetime. Gardiner later became the Tilbury Town in his poems -- Gardiner, the symbol of all that was petty and heartless in conventionalism. He felt no sentimental attachment for the town, as evidenced in his letter to Smith, and to a former Harvard classmate:

. . . I suppose this is the last letter I shall ever write you from Harvard. The thought seems a little queer, but it cannot be otherwise. Sometimes I try to imagine the state my mind would be in had I never come here, but I cannot. I feel I have got comparatively little from my two years, but still, more than I could get in Gardiner if I lived a century. . . .³

Gardiner is a small place, relatively, but it contains a good deal of weather at certain seasons of the year. In the past week -- ever since my return from Cambridge -- the place has been a frozen hell to me. Here I am, shut in by myself with only one or two people in town that I care two snaps of my fingers for (and who, in turn, care about as much for me) with no prospects except of the most shadowy nature, and hardly enough interest in the general political scheme of things to work out interest at six per cent without cudgeling my brain more than I should over a proposition in Bokardo. I do not mean to say that I consider myself totally an ass (though they may) but merely that I lack a general interest in the practical side of things that may play the devil with my progress in this little journey to God knows where, which we are all making just now. I am afflicted with a kind of foolish pride that stands in my way every day of my life and which I am continually making heroic efforts to kick out. But it is "no go." I keep as much as I began with and if I end up a penniless gent full of golden theories of fame and riches, I shall not lay all the blame, but if there be blame in the matter, to myself; I shall not feel that it all might have been different had I changed my opinions and actions a little when my mind was young and flexible. My philosophy does not swallow this teaching of our good old grandfathers who worked sixteen hours and sang psalms and praised heaven that a life is what we make it. And let me beg here that you may not permit any of your ambitious pupils to write essays on "Every man, the architect of his own fortune."⁴

³Denham Sutcliffe, ed., Untriangulated Stars (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1947), pp. 102-103. Hereafter referred to as Sutcliffe, Untriangulated Stars.

⁴Lawrence Thompson, ed., Tilbury Town, Selected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1953), p. xv. Hereafter referred to as Thompson, Tilbury Town.

The last two sentences of the letter show very clearly Robinson's outlook as a result of his having lived in Gardiner. Robinson's hometown, however, did furnish him with his early education and some of his happiest hours were spent in school. At the age of five he entered primary school, and six years later grammar school where he wrote his first verse. This first venture instilled in him a love for words, and he would spend days searching for the "right" one. This fascination for words took his mind off his studies so much that one day his teacher gave him a severe box on his ear. This injury bothered him for the rest of his life, and, ironically, was the main reason for his chance to enter Harvard.

He began his high school days at the age of thirteen. His father, who saw no value in the study of the classics, selected a scientific route for his son's course of study. Robinson's great interest in literature became quite apparent to Lizzie Austin, one of his high school teachers. Miss Austin is symbolic of the "one teacher" in every student's life who seems to be a paragon of understanding and patience. She encouraged him to read extensively and greatly influenced his decision to remain an extra year in high school in order to read Milton and Horace. During most of his high school days, Robinson had peace of mind, for he expressed himself in his verse, and found companionship in Ed Moore, Art Gledhill, and Harry Smith. After Smith graduated, the remaining three formed a club -- League of Three -- for the purpose of social conviviality, and for the first time in his life Robinson had the feeling of actually belonging to society. In later years he revealed many of his dreams

and disappointments in letters to these friends. The letters served as a form of mental catharsis. On July 23, 1890, he wrote to Arthur Gledhill:

. . . Dean is weighing ice down at Smithtown, for the Knickerbockers, and consequently I am left here alone with Mother to take care of the "farm" and look after my father. . . . I tell you what it is, Art, sometimes a week or ten days goes by without my seeing one of the boys or girls (I believe I never saw much of them anyway) unless I happen to run across them down street in the afternoon for a minute or two. I never was much of a light in company, but it hardly suits me to become a genuine hermit. Perhaps if I had something like your "anchor" to take up my thoughts, life would seem different, but such a state of affairs is hardly probable, and besides, Hippolytus never meddled with females.

. . . Keep on with your pedagogic work and go through college if you can; and sometimes when you are strolling around the campus after twilight, alone . . . you may think of the fellow down east who never seemed to amount to much in school (or anywhere else) but who was proud to believe that he was not altogether a nincompoop. He never had a great many friends, this fellow, but those he did have he has never forgotten, and never will. He could forget a petty insult or injury very easily but somehow or other he never could forget a favor, however small. Living by himself as he does with a father who can hardly walk a step without his help it is not strange that he should occasionally have an attack of something bordering on the blues. You know nothing about it, and I hope you never will . . .

And again, in a letter to Gledhill, on August 14, 1890, he wrote:

. . . You say that the future stretches before you to be seized with earnest hands, etc. Seize it, by all means, but don't regret that you were enabled to enjoy two years as you never will again . . .

It is possible, but hardly probable that we, the old "three", [League of Three] together with Doc, will take another "half-day off", and stretch ourselves beneath the shadows of the "Pines" . . . as we did in the fall of '87. Yes, it is all over. And if you are able to draw a little poetry somewhere out of the past --

do it.⁵

Even though he felt close kinship with Gledhill, Robinson poured out his feelings and inner thoughts to Harry Smith in a manner far more intimate than he could with anyone else. In his letters to Smith he revealed his qualms about writing together with his dislikes for a materialistic, money-grubbing populace with which he found himself surrounded. In one letter, dated September 27, 1890, he stated:

. . . Dollars are convenient things to have, De Smith, [reference to Smith's pseudonym, De Long] but this diabolical, dirty race that men are running after them disgusts me. I shall probably outgrow this idea, but until I do I shall labor quite contented under the delusion that there is something to life outside of "business." Business be damned.⁶

The second letter was dated February 3, 1892. Robinson elaborates on his contempt of fortune seekers and, yet, indicates that even dreamers must, at times, be down-to-earth about this business of daily living.

. . . In the first place, I am and always was too much of a dreamer; I have no sympathy with the cold, matter-of-fact, contriving Nature that has made the fortunes enjoyed by multitudes all around us (by fortunes I mean the possession of enough to make a man and his family comfortable and happy) and this is a dangerous state to be in. I used to think that I was a kind of pessimist, but I have outgrown that idea. The world as a whole is surely growing better and better, but there is yet an enormous field for improvement. Another thing that troubles me is the knowledge that I am lacking to a considerable extent in self-

⁵Ridgely Torrence, ed., Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1940), pp. 4-6.

⁶Sutcliffe, Untriangulated Stars, pp. 3-4.