

MY TILBURY TOWN

*Strange to me now are the forms I meet
When I visit the dear old town;
But the native air is pure and sweet,
And the trees that o'ershadow each well-
known street,
As they balance up and down,
Are singing the beautiful song,
Are sighing and whispering still:
"A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long
thoughts".*

From "MY LOST YOUTH"

by HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

The exigencies of my work keep me — greatly to my loss and genuine distress — from often visiting the town of my youth, my Tilbury Town, Gardiner, Maine.

I regret that I do not possess the literary ability of Mr. Herman Hagedorn, whose recent biography of my one-time fellow townsman and life-long friend, Edwin Arlington Robinson, has led me to set down these memories of the town of my youth.

"E. A.", as Robinson came to be known, was the close friend of my brothers. He was a few years older than I, but I clearly remember his father and mother, his brothers, and the house on Lincoln Street. He often came to our home.

In the summer of 1893 I was struggling to pass college entrance examinations. Robinson helped me in French. I recall his eating apples, of which he was so fond, in our warm and comfortable cellar and a later remark that pears were "nothing but sand and sweetened water". At the same time Harry Smith who lived out beyond Iron Mine Hill was guiding me through the intricacies of Algebra. After-

wards Robinson visited me while I was at Harvard, and later we continued our friendship in Boston and New York.

But what I am particularly interested in at this time is the Gardiner of that period of my life up to my departure for Cambridge. Mr. Hagedorn's reference to it seems so at variance with my own vivid and fairly clear-cut memories that I am recording them here with what may seem to some, unnecessary length and perhaps some feeling of resentment.

Gardiner at that particular time held some five or six thousand inhabitants. My memory does not recall the "nabobs and paupers" of the Hagedorn biography. "Nabob" is a strange word to apply to the well-to-do merchants of the town, and as for the "paupers" I only recall a few elderly poor at the rather fine red brick poor farm — and such poor exist in every town of the size of Gardiner — and a few families who perhaps were living somewhat precariously on charity and the returns from odd-job work.

Of course the families who lived nearest my own home on Brunswick Avenue stand out clearest in my memory. On this avenue where the lots extended for the most part clear through to Liberty Street at the rear, lived the Woods, the Merchants, Harvey Scribner, Charles Swift, Washburn Benjamin, known familiarly and affectionately as "Wash," Lincoln, Smith, Tarbox, and Dennis. Close by was the old Heater Piece where we played baseball and tag. On it now are houses. I have never known why it was called the Heater Piece and am not even sure of the spelling. Perhaps someone will enlighten me. Farther up the avenue was the Brown house. It was over Brown's dry goods store that the little club of Blair, Pope, Robinson, and Barnard met. It was called the "Quadruped" and undoubtedly is the "Chrysalis" mentioned in "Captain Craig".

"That evening, at 'The Chrysalis', I found
The faces of my comrades all suffused
With what I chose then to denominate
Superfluous good feeling" etc.

This I am told by Leonard Barnard was preceded by another club called, I believe, the "Water Street Club" though I stand to be corrected here.

Across from our house on Brunswick Avenue was the J. S. Maxcy house, and further down the Sagers, Dr. Whitman, and the red brick Whitmore home. In the triangular space now occupied by the Catholic Rectory stood the wooden, brown-colored Swedenborgian Church where Dr. Whitman held forth. He was unconventional as a preacher, moving up and down the aisle as the spirit moved him and sometimes quoting Shakespeare, but always with a glance upward and the remark, "With apologies to you, Brother Shakespeare." He was withal a man of erudition, a student of geology with a large mineralogical collection, and I recall seeing him shoveling snow in a straw hat. He was very kind to me as a small boy and often showed me his collection with comments that I am afraid were far above my head. And then came the Common — much as it is today — except less well-cared for — where we played baseball and football. Then, as now, there was the Episcopal Church, the graveyard, the Parish House where we made long, evergreen garlands for Christmas decorations for the Church — I sang in the boy choir by the way — and then the red brick school house of my High School days.

It was in this Tilbury Town that Robinson passed his early years, so well described in Mrs. Richards' "Stepping Westward". And here I may quote from her quotation in "Stepping Westward" of Robinson's remark that Gardiner "may be responsible in a shadowy way for Tilbury Town". But Mr. George Burnham has just recently told me — and I quote him literally — that Robinson said to him with emphasis "that neither Tilbury Town, nor any of the portrait-sketches, nor the "Town Down the River" referred to any particular place. In no instance whatever in any of his writings did he refer to anyone or any place. Tilbury Town might be any small New England small town". Nor was the Gardiner estate, Oaklands, "The House on the Hill".

At this point also I cannot help mentioning the well-bred reticence and gentle kindness with which Mrs. Richards touches on the tragedies that early befell the Robinson family. These had their very decided affect on the sensitive

Win as he was usually called at that time. In his after years he often spoke of this period and said again and again that he hoped that if ever the time came when his biography should be written, these tragic aspects of the Robinson family should not be emphasized. It is a great pity that Mr. Hagedorn could not have respected his wishes and used more restraint in dealing with the misfortunes of the family. I am told that Mr. Hagedorn felt that if he did not cover this aspect in his biography some one else would at a later date and with less understanding. One may regret that he did not take this chance.

As for the indifference of Gardiner to Robinson's early struggle in producing verse, it is hardly to be wondered at. After all it was but natural that the citizens of Gardiner might wonder why he did not follow the ordinary path of the young man of that day and get himself a job. No publisher had at this time published his verse. And yet what town in New England could have produced more sympathetic and encouraging friends than Blair, Pope, Robbins, Barnard, Dr. Schuman, Ed Moore, Gledhill, Harry Smith, the Barstows, and Augustus Bailey. There were others who believed in him, Judge Webster and Earnest Morrill to mention two I know personally. Mrs. Herman Robinson writes me that "everyone felt kind towards him, respected him, and hoped he would attain his goal". The obscurity of some of his verse did not help to an appreciation by his fellow townsmen — a fact that Mr. Hagedorn notes. The great bulk of Gardiner's citizens were going about their business earning an honest living, bringing up and educating their children, and with no more thought of the dollar than existed elsewhere. It was no small struggle to raise and educate one's children in the Gardiner of that period — or now for that matter — and Gardiner has sent a surprising number of its boys away to college. Four of my own friends of that period, not to mention others, went to universities.

It is with regret that I state here that I myself supplied Mr. Hagedorn with data concerning the Gardiner of Robinson's earlier years — and my own. It did not occur to me that I was not speaking to a man of discretion, and I did not dream that this data would be used with the men-

tion of names of people, some of whose relatives are still living. Robinson himself would be the last to hurt the feeling of others in his own town or elsewhere. I once remarked to him that his character portraits such as "Aaron Stark", "John Evereldown," and several others had their prototypes in Gardiner. This he denied, and Ridgely Torrence confirmed this in a conversation I had recently with him when he spoke of a John Evereldown in his own home town in the middle west. Many a town has its John Evereldown. As for myself I have always had a great liking for the salty characters of the town of my youth. Peg-leg Talbot, whose store was next to my father's, was what we called a "tin knocker" or tinsmith. I must have been nine or ten years old when he used to greet me with outstretched hand, turn my knuckles down, and bring up his wooden leg against them with a crack. And I was always fooled and took the outstretched hand offered so cordially.

Back of my father's store was the so-called "Mill Pond," and from the rather rickety platform I often fished with a long bamboo pole with worms for bait. I can still recall the thrill of catching a huge chub. It is this same Mill Pond that Robinson refers to in a letter from New York in 1900. The Mill Pond, as I remembered it, came up also behind Brown's dry-goods store. This is the Mill Pond that Robinson refers to in "The Analysis of an Old Maid" which was later printed as "Aunt Imogen". To quote his own words.

"In the meantime I am wearing poetical petticoats and making a regular analysis of an Old Maid — 120 odd lines of blank verse. I did it in rough two years ago when I had my eyre over Brown's dry-goods store and smoked "Before the War" cigars. I had a good mill pond to look out on and somehow conceived the notion of writing down this particular spinster. Perhaps I thought she ought to have drowned herself; at any rate the mill pond had something to do with it."

As for Mr. Hagedorn's comment on Robinson's friend, Harry Smith as being an outsider "by the circumstance that

his parents were not of an accredited line and lived in the wrong part of the town", this is beyond my comprehension and seems to me both silly and untrue. Harry Smith, as I remarked before, helped me in Algebra. I remember the long walk up over Iron Mine Hill to the Smith house and the patient help he gave to a rather stupid boy. An outlying part of Gardiner did not then, and certainly does not now, strike me "as the wrong part of the town". In regard to the statement that his parents were not of an "accredited line", I can't recall that we thought in those terms, and it must be rather amusing to Harry Smith, now a professor at Amherst and a distinguished classical scholar.

It has been my lot to teach many boys, some of whom spend perhaps nine months of the year at boarding school and their summers at Newport, Bar Harbor, or on Long Island. I often think of what they miss and I can conceive of no happier boyhood than that led in a Maine Tilbury Town — Dean's Grove, Harden's pasture and woods where "E. A." hunted the wily and elusive gray squirrel — not to be confused with the Central Park type — the blueberry pasture, the hunt for early "Mayflowers" or Arbutus, canoeing trips on the Cobbosseecontee Stream, camps in the woods, and our early attempts at smoking sweet fern and dried corn silk. What memories of the town of my youth! Sturgeon leaping in the river, schooners bringing in coal and taking away ice, skating on stream and river, smelt-fishing through the ice, and a kind of ice hockey with sometimes twenty or so on a side and a small block of wood for a puck. We cut our own hockey sticks in the woods. I remember that Len Barnard was particularly good at this exciting game. And then there was the Boston boat, "The Star of the East", with Captain Jason Collins in command. It was he who turned back into Boston harbor when a storm threatened, and begged the captain of the ill-starred "Portland" to do likewise. The "Star of the East" was a side wheeler, paddle-box boat, and at low tide particularly she rolled high waves to the shore much to the delight of the boys swimming at Bradstreet's wharf.

And now a few last words on "E. A." and Tilbury Town, and I quote from Mr. Hagedorn. "He was obsessed by what

he imagined the people of Gardiner were saying of him. They were probably saying very little since that was Maine's way and possibly Robinson might have been astonished at what they did say. Like himself Gardiner had a sense of inferiority; it knew it was provincial, out of the stream of life, and was less inclined to criticize than to feel a shy pride in any son of hers who woke even the faintest echo in the intellectual world".

If shyness, reticence, and an extraordinary sensitiveness to the words and even the unexpressed thoughts of others can be considered a "sense of inferiority" then Robinson may have had it. If Gardiner had it, it is news to me and probably to Gardiner. We must credit Mr. Hagedorn with great energy, but he once said in my presence that he could come to know New England and the New Englanders in a couple of weeks — a somewhat rash remark.

As for the comment on Robinson's "unprintable" tales of Gardiner and the State of Maine — it may interest his friends to hear that several of us — including Mr. George Burnham and myself — were recently commenting on this passage in the biography, and we all agreed that we had never heard an "unprintable" tale from his lips. And yet — there had been numerous opportunities during our long friendship for Robinson to indulge in such tales.

During the last winter of his life E. A. came often to our apartment in New York where we talked and played poker. He usually won.

And one last word from the hospital in New York: "Well, Jimmie, they've got me on my back at last". Two days later Robinson was dead. There will be no more of Tilbury Town except in his living verse and in the hearts of his friends.