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E. A. Robinson and Tilbury Town

By GEORGE ST. CLAIR

Note: The setting of many of Robinson's poems is Tilbury Town, the name he gives to his native village, Gardner, Maine. In this study, whose purpose is to determine the truth or falsity of his portraits of the villagers, these poems have been used: the sonnets—Reuben Bright, Aaron Stark, Annandale, Shadrach O'Leary, A Man From Our Town, and the lyric and narrative poems—Richard Cory, Miniver Cheevy, Mr. Flood, Isaac and Archibald, and Captain Craig.

The time is some year far in the future.

Edwin Arlington Robinson, by many authorities regarded as the most distinguished poet our country has produced, has just died. He has paused on his flight to some other star, detained for examination by the Recording Spirit.

The Court Room, situated somewhere out in space, is brilliantly star-lighted, but very plainly furnished.

Behind a severe-looking desk sits the Recording Spirit. He is white-bearded, serene, and benignant. At the right of the desk is seated the Prosecuting Spirit, a stern and melancholy individual. All the weight of all the woes of the little planet swinging so far below him seems graven on his face though at times a curious twinkle in his eyes belies his apparent severity.

The poet sits at the left of the desk. The usual preliminary questions of a court room have already been asked, and the Magistrate has just requested the stern Spirit at his right to give his reasons for detaining Mr. Robinson. Rising from his place, the Prosecuting Spirit reads his indictment slowly and gravely.

PROSECUTOR—I accuse Mr. Robinson of having painted a false and unsympathetic picture of the village in which he passed his childhood. I charge him with having drawn only harsh, crabbed, and bitter failures, often incomprehensible, but just as cold and hard as are the rocks of his native Maine. I assert that he has failed to see the hidden kindness and neighbourliness of these no doubt dour souls, and that, in his preoccupation with

wasted and futile lives, he has betrayed his high calling as an Apostle of Beauty and Truth.

RECORDING SPIRIT—(Rising. There is a look of doubt and pain on his kind face. His tones are sweet and gentle.) Is this indictment true, Mr. Robinson? I hope not. What defense have you?

MR. ROBINSON—Your Honor, I am no lawyer, nor am I accustomed to speak in public. I should like to ask one favor of the Court, however.

REC. SPIRIT—What is it?

MR. ROB.—I should like to call in certain townsmen of mine and have you question them. If their testimony proves these charges true, then I shall be willing and glad to suffer whatever punishment you may impose upon me.

REC. SPIRIT—Certainly. Who is it you wish to call in?

MR. ROBINSON—May I make a list of these people, Your Honor?

REC. SPIRIT—By all means. Make your list.

(The poet sits down and makes his list, and then hands it to the Spirit.)

REC. SPIRIT—Will you, Prosecuting Spirit, see that these souls are called in?

PROS. SPIRIT—Yes, Your Honor. (He goes out.)

REC. SPIRIT—While we are waiting, Mr. Robinson, do you mind telling me what your aims and purposes were in writing your poetry?

MR. ROB.—Your Honor, I felt something burning within me that would not let me be quiet, something that was always saying, "You must write. You must record what you see, but you must see and record truly. You must not romanticize as your immediate predecessors did; you must look with clear eyes upon life in all its complexities, observe its tangles, its welter of cross purposes, its beauty but also its ugliness, its good but also its evil." I had no theories to prove, Your Honor. If I

have presented sadness and sorrow and futility frequently, it is because I saw so much of them in life.

(At this moment, the Prosecuting Spirit returned. He is followed by a group of souls, most of them rather dejected in appearance.)

PROS. SPIRIT—Here they are, Your Honor.

REC. SPIRIT—Kindly read their names! Souls, answer to your names!

PROS. SPIRIT—Reuben Bright! (Each soul steps forward as his name is called and answers, "Here!") Aaron Stark! Richard Cory! Miniver Cheevy! Mr. Flood! Shadrach O'Leary! Annandale! The Man From Tilbury Town! Isaac! Archibald! Captain Craig!

REC. SPIRIT—Now that these souls have come here, Mr. Robinson, what do you wish to do with them? Some of them seem to have come from a distant and warmer place. Do you desire to question them?

MR. ROB.—Your Honor, may each one be allowed to present himself as I have painted him? I ask nothing more, nor shall I offer any other defense.

REC. SPIRIT—It shall be as you wish. Shall they be called in the order you have here?

MR. ROB.—If you please, Your Honor.

REC. SPIRIT—Then, call the first soul, Prosecuting Spirit. But wait! I shall first give them all an idea of what is expected of them. You must know that Mr. Robinson here, who called you into being, has been charged with presenting a false picture of you and your village. To combat this accusation, he summons you here. You are to speak truthfully—though it scarcely seems necessary to tell you that, since none can speak a lie in this star and live—of yourselves and your lives. Now we are ready, Prosecuting Spirit.

PROS. SPIRIT—Reuben Bright! Tell your story!

REUB. BRIGHT—(A big, full-blooded, shambling man, with a trace of tears on his ugly face.) I was a butcher, Judge.

I didn't know very much an' I didn't have much education, but I had a pretty good little business, an' I had a good wife, too, Judge. An' I loved her. We was getting along fine an' then she dies. Well, I cried all night, Judge, I couldn't help it, and then when they had put her away I tore down my slaughter house. That's all I remember, Judge.

REC. SPIRIT—That is all you remember, Reuben, because here you have only the memory of good things done. Stand back, Reuben, and wait!

PROS. SPIRIT—Aaron Stark!

REC. SPIRIT—(Shrinking back, he covers his face with his hands at the sight of Aaron, who is a mean, wizened, and naked soul, of repulsive aspect.) Surely this shrivelled soul does not belong in this star, Prosecuting Spirit?

PROS. SPIRIT—No, Your Honor, he was summoned especially for this investigation from the world of utter darkness.

REC. SPIRIT—Well, let's get through with him as quickly as possible and thrust him out where he belongs. What did you do, Aaron Stark, on your miserable earth?

AARON—(Whining and cringing) I didn't do nothin', please Your Honor. I loaned people money and took a good interest for it but I had a right to it an—

REC. SPIRIT—Hurry up! Did you ever give anybody anything?

AARON—No, Your Honor, that would have been bad business.

REC. SPIRIT—Did you ever say a kind word to anyone or smile at a little child.

AARON—No, Your Honor, but I laughed once.

REC. SPIRIT—So, you laughed once, did you! And what was the occasion of that laugh?

AARON—When I heard poor fools pitying me, Your—

REC. SPIRIT—Take him away at once! (He is obeyed.) He doesn't help your case, I'm afraid, Mr. Robinson.

MR. ROB.—I'm not trying to stack the cards in my favor, Your Honor.

REC. SPIRIT—That is in your favor, at least. Who is the next witness, Prosecuting Spirit?

PROS. SPIRIT—Richard Cory, come forward!

REC. SPIRIT—What did you do in life, Mr. Cory?

MR. CORY—(He is a slim, clean-favored, handsomely-dressed gentleman, very graceful and self-assured, in spite of his face, which is baked like fireclay!) As I was a gentleman and wealthy, Your Honor, I did not need to do anything. I did, it is true, brighten the lives of my fellow-townsmen, by strolling among them and occasionally giving them a smile.

REC. SPIRIT—Do you belong in this Star?

MR. CORY—No, Your Honor.

REC. SPIRIT—Why?

MR. CORY—I killed myself, Your Honor.

REC. SPIRIT—Killed yourself! You were rich, admired by everybody, with every reason for living, and yet you killed yourself! Why did you do it?

MR. CORY—I don't know; Your Honor. I never understood it myself. I just put a bullet through my head.

REC. SPIRIT—Can you explain his action, Mr. Robinson?

MR. ROBINSON—I'm afraid not, Your Honor. It just seemed the right way for him to go.

REC. SPIRIT—He is another count against you, then?

MR. ROB.—I must admit it, Your Honor.

REC. SPIRIT—Do you hold any resentment against him, Mr. Cory?

MR. CORY—No, Your Honor. I felt that was as good a way to go as any other.

REC. SPIRIT—You are a cynic, Mr. Cory. We do not like cynics here. Take him away! He and that miser make a good pair. Call the next witness, Prosecuting Spirit.

PROS. SPIRIT—Miniver Cheevy! (Miniver Cheevy steps forward. He is lean and lank, but shining-eyed. He is dressed in a splendid suit of Milan armor.)

REC. SPIRIT—That is a beautiful suit you are wearing, Mr. Cheevy.

MIN. CHEEVY—Yes, Your Honor. It is what I like about this Star. For the first time in my life, I am wearing what I want to—I mean, what I dreamed all my life of wearing, and now—

REC. SPIRIT—That is all very good, Mr. Cheevy, but, did you do anything worth while there on your earth?

MIN. CHEEVY—Nothin' much, Your Honor, but I did keep a sort of vision of beautiful things alive in my heart.

REC. SPIRIT—But your dream or vision never came true?

MIN. CHEEVY—No, Your Honor, it never did till now.

REC. SPIRIT—Then, what did you do?

MIN. CHEEVY—I just scratched my head and thought and thought and then as I couldn't find any answer, I took to drinking.

REC. SPIRIT—Um! Not such a bad solution of your problem. Do you hold anything against Mr. Robinson?

MIN. CHEEVY—Not at all, Your Honor. He made me different, anyway, from anybody else in Tilbury Town.

REC. SPIRIT—So life did not seem gloomy and futile to you?

MIN. CHEEVY—I should say not! As long as a fellow has somethin'—

REC. SPIRIT—Yes, that is all, Mr. Cheevy. Stand over there with Mr. Bright. Call the next one, Prosecuting Spirit!

PROS. SPIRIT—Mr. Flood! (A portly, jolly-faced man, with a rubicund nose comes forward. In his hand he carries a fat and jolly-looking jug.)

REC. SPIRIT—You seem happy, Mr. Flood. Were you so on earth, too?

MR. FLOOD—No, Your Honor. I was pretty much of a failure generally. I outlived my friends and came to live

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alone in a lonely house. No, I wasn't happy, except when this jug of mine was full.

REC. SPIRIT—But you found some pleasure in life then! You had your share, no doubt. Do you place any blame upon your creator, this poet here?

MR. FLOOD—Blame, Your Honor! Why no! He just wrote me down as he found me. And he did give me my one moment of glory. I thank him for that.

REC. SPIRIT—Join those other two over there, Mr. Flood. Another witness, Prosecuting Spirit!

PROS. SPIRIT—Shadrach O'Leary, step forth! (Shadrach O'Leary, a small, gross-faced man, whose face, however, bears marks of long thought, takes his place in front of the desk.)

REC. SPIRIT—What was your occupation on earth, Mr. O'Leary?

SHAD. O'LEARY—Your Honor, I started out as a poet, and—

REC. SPIRIT—A poet! That is interesting. We get singularly few poets up here, considering how many there are down on your planet who call themselves that. What kind of poetry did you write?

SHAD O'LEARY—I started with love poetry, Your Honor.

REC. SPIRIT—Love poetry! You don't look like a poet of love. Did you manage to sell it?

SHAD. O'LEARY—Sometimes I did, but I got tired of it, and so I tried to write something grand and sublime to inspire men. I found I couldn't do that. Then, I began writing verses in the Eddie Guest manner and—

REC. SPIRIT—Stop there! That condemns you. Take him away! (He is taken out.) You haven't done yourself any good with this witness, Mr. Robinson. We have neither time nor inclination for such versifiers.

MR. ROB.—But he is a liar, Your Honor. What I meant for him to write was idealistic, mystic verse, freighted with man's constant, though thwarted, aspirations. I wanted

him to sing of our constant striving after the Light, the Gleam.

REC. SPIRIT—What Light, What Gleam?

MR. ROB.—I don't exactly know myself, Your Honor, but it was a mystic sort of symbol. It stood for what I felt man needed, something higher than himself—

REC. SPIRIT—A symbol of God, perhaps?

MR. ROB.—Perhaps, Your Honor.

REC. SPIRIT—Well, I shall forget the evidence of that witness, since you say he is not trustworthy. Who is next?

PROS. SPIRIT—Mr. Annandale, Your Honor.

REC. SPIRIT—Come forward, Mr. Annandale. (A large man, with very loose clothing, steps to the desk. His face bears a very puzzled expression, as of one always about to ask a question.) Tell us about yourself.

MR. ANNANDALE—I'm sorry, Your Honor, I can't do that.

REC. SPIRIT—Can't do it! What do you mean?

MR. ANNANDALE—I mean, Your Honor, I can't tell you anything about myself because I've never understood myself. I am an enigma to myself.

REC. SPIRIT—Perhaps you were to your creator, too. How about it, Mr. Robinson? Can you help us here?

MR. ROB.—I'm afraid not, Your Honor. I have often puzzled myself over this man and have never found an answer.

REC. SPIRIT—At least, he doesn't hurt you, then. Where is your station, Mr. Annandale?

MR. ANNANDALE—I don't rightly know, Your Honor. I wander everywhere trying to find myself and my home but I don't seem to get anywhere. Perhaps you could help me, Your Honor?

REC. SPIRIT—(Shaking his head regretfully) Too bad! You will have to continue your wanderings. Some day, you may meet up again with Mr. Robinson. He may have you figured out by that time. Good luck and good bye. (Mr. A. goes out.) Send the next one here.

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Prosecuting Spirit. We are taking a long time to examine all these witnesses, aren't we?

PROS. SPIRIT—Yes, Your Honor, they are all like their maker in one respect, at least. They are all lengthy talkers, but good ones, too, I'll admit. Next witness! The Man from Tilbury Town! (The Man takes his place. He seems at first glance a most unimpressive person, one that would be passed over in any crowd. At least, at first. As one looks closely at him, however, some sort of strange power seems to flow from him, a kind of spiritual emanation.)

REC. SPIRIT—So you're the Man from Tilbury Town! What is your name?

MAN—I don't have any name, Your Honor.

REC. SPIRIT—No name, eh? That's strange! What was your business?

MAN—Your Honor, I didn't have any kind of regular business. I just went around, doing odd jobs here and there and picking up a few dollars as I needed them.

REC. SPIRIT—Was that all you did? Was that enough to justify your creation and existence? How about it, Mr. Robinson?

MR. ROB.—Your Honor, this man always had a strange fascination for me. He seemed so negligible and unimportant, and yet everybody in Tilbury Town knew him, trusted him, and asked his advice on everything. The neighborhood seemed different after he was gone, and men mourned him sincerely. There was an increase in a man like him.

REC. SPIRIT—There is a peculiar spiritual flow from him. He will be one of your best witnesses, Mr. Robinson. Take your place with those over there, Man! (The Man does so.)

PROS. SPIRIT—(Calling to the group still remaining) What is the matter there? (There is no reply, but a little, bald-headed old man detaches himself from the group

and shuffles up to the desk. He wears faded and worn overalls, which are glorified by a pair of shining wings. From these a radiant silver light proceeds.)

REC. SPIRIT—Who are you? Why do you push yourself forward before you are called? (As the little man starts to answer, he is interrupted by another man, who looks much like his twin brother.)

OLD MAN—Don't hold it against Isaac, Your Honor. Him and me got to disputin' back there because I made up my mind he wasn't goin' to speak without me. You see, we was always together down home, leastways when we wasn't workin' on our own farms and—(He pauses for breath.)

REC. SPIRIT—Good! I'll get a chance to talk now. Who are you?

OLD MAN—Why, I'm Archibald, Your Honor, and this old rascal here is Isaac. We was neighbors but I had a better farm—

REC. SPIRIT—I see. And you were friends on earth?

ARCHIBALD—Yes, Your Honor, but I was always stronger than him—

ISAAC—(Indignantly breaks in on him) That's not so, Your Honor!

ARCHIBALD—It was, too, Your Honor. And then we used to have words sometimes when I beat him at Seven-Up.

REC. SPIRIT—Seven-Up, eh! That's curious. I used to be pretty good at that game myself. We'll have to get together some time, Archibald.

ARCHIBALD—Any time you like, Your Honor. You and me and Isaac. I couldn't play without old Isaac.

REC. SPIRIT—Do you think this charge against Mr. Robinson is true?

ARCHIBALD—No, Your Honor. He created for me a friend, and that's about the best thing a man can have. An' he made me and Isaac work hard and be happy with our farms and our apple cider and our game of Seven-Up.

An' he made me see the Light behind the Stars. Ain't I right, Isaac?

ISAAC—Your Honor, this old friend of mine is generally wrong and generally a fool, especially when he thinks he can beat me at Seven-Up, but this time he's right, an' he's a tellin' the truth. If there was any happier people in our township I didn't know them.

REC. SPIRIT—So you don't think you were harsh and crabbed and bitter failures, eh?

ISAAC—Not us, Your Honor. We was just common, ordinary old dirt and rock farmers, and we had a pretty hard time on those stony farms of ours, but that wasn't Mr. Robinson's fault, and we praised the Lord at times, and found the days glorious, and enjoyed the wayside flash of leaves, and the warmth and the wonder of it all, and the cold, too, an' liked our hard cider, an' loved livin' an' - -

REC. SPIRIT—I'm sorry, Isaac, but we can't listen to you forever. You and Archibald join the group over there. I think you deserve your wings, and you have helped Mr. Robinson. I see we have but one more witness, Prosecuting Spirit. Who is he?

PROS. SPIRIT—Captain Craig, Your Honor. Come up to the desk, Captain! (Captain Craig steps forward. A tall, spare and stooped man, who yet retains something of his military carriage. His face is heavily lined, his clothes are threadbare, but a glory shines from him.)

REC. SPIRIT—Captain Craig, have you found your station up here?

CAPTAIN CRAIG—Yes, Your Honor. I am in the Star of the Musicians.

REC. SPIRIT—The Musicians' Star! What instrument do you play?

CAPT. CRAIG—The trombone.

REC. SPIRIT—The trombone! I had forgotten that was con-

sidered a musical instrument. But, tell me about yourself!

CAPT. CRAIG—I was a failure in Tilbury Town, Your Honor. Men laughed at me. I was alone; my body old and broken, my nerves shaken; I suffered want and was very near to starvation often. I was no good to anybody.

REC. CORY—Why didn't you end it then, as Richard Cory did?

CAPT. CRAIG—What, kill myself! No! There was something in me that forbade that, something I could not define. To die! That is easy. But to live on, to suffer, to hope, to hope that something in the stream of words that always pours from broken men like me might be of service to somebody! To keep steadily before you the Light—

REC. SPIRIT—So you followed this elusive Light—

CAPT. CRAIG—Yes, Your Honor. And it comforted me. Besides, did I not have the flowers and the grass, my brothers the trees, and all summer and winter to keep me joyous! I failed, yes. But in ruin as in failure there lives and has always lived the supreme fulfillment unexpressed, the rhythm of God that beats unheard through the songs of shattered men who dream but cannot sound it. Always the ideal was my comfort; always in my failure I knew that far above me, for me, and within me, there shined and burned and lived the unwavering truth. Through the clouded warfare of Life I discerned the Light. Was that not enough?

REC. SPIRIT—Yes, I think that was enough, Captain. And you, do you find any fault with your creator, Mr. Robinson?

CAPT. CRAIG—Far from it, Your Honor. Rather, I thank him, that out of my apparent failure he made for me such a magnificent victory.

REC. SPIRIT—I think you are right. Step forward now,

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the rest of you! Do you think Mr. Robinson treated you unfairly?

ALL—(Together) No, no!

REC. SPIRIT—And you, Prosecuting Spirit, what do you say?

PROS. SPIRIT—I understand him a little better now, Your Honor. I withdraw my charges.

REC. SPIRIT—That is well, Mr. Robinson, you stand acquitted of the charges made against you. It appears to me that these creatures of yours are much like people everywhere else. Good, bad, and indifferent, and you drew them, I am sure, as you found them. There is one thing, though, that strikes me as strange. You summoned no women.

MR. ROB.—No, Your Honor. I didn't know women as well as I did men. You see, I am a bachelor.

REC. SPIRIT—Oh, is that it? Well, we must remedy that. And that Light of yours! It interests me. Do you think any of your people have found this mystic Light?

MR. ROB.—I do, Your Honor.

REC. SPIRIT—I think so, too. The rest of you! Go now with your maker and keep him company, but—do you like to listen to the trombone, Mr. Robinson? No, of course you don't. Else you had never been the great poet you are. God go with you all! Go to your Star with your well-earned Light!

ARCHIBALD—(As they turn to go) How about that game, Your Honor?

REC. SPIRIT—Yes, I shall not forget, Archibald. But not now. Goodbye. Call in the next soul, Prosecuting Spirit.

(And so they all go out into the Light.)