

**LETTERS OF HARRY  
JAMES SMITH**

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Letters of Harry James Smith by Harry James Smith & Juliet Wilbor Tompkins

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**HARRY JAMES SMITH & JULIET WILBOR TOMPKINS**

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# LETTERS OF HARRY JAMES SMITH

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
JULIET WILBOR TOMPKINS



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*He was an open window for us all!  
Through him we gazed upon a different world,  
And felt the quickening winds of Heaven.  
There birds sang, and sweet scents of spring  
Stole in. From that high casement wide  
We faced the sunrise, and upon the darkest night  
Saw stars. There Truth looked lovely  
And we saw the Soul of Man;  
Smiled at it, scorned its meanness, loved it still,  
And with its Maker saw that it was good.*

*Without a sound the window is shut fast,  
The curtain drawn. How small and cramped our world!  
But where you went, Dear Lover of your kind,  
Did you not leave for us an open door?*

F. S. R.

## HARRY JAMES SMITH

HARRY JAMES SMITH was born in New Britain, Connecticut, May 24, 1880, seventh of the nine children of John B. and Lucy F. Smith.

After finishing his High School course in 1897, he taught for several months in the District School at Cornwall Hollow, Connecticut. He entered Williams College, in the fall of 1898. There he was an honor student; and during his senior year was editor of the Williams "Literary Monthly" and a member of Gargoyle.

The next year (1902-03) he was Assistant in the Biological Laboratory, preparing himself for the work by a summer's study at Woods Hole.

The summer of 1903 was happily spent in a wheel trip through France with Karl Weston.

The next year (1903-04) he studied English at Harvard, receiving his Master's degree; and in 1904-05 taught in the English Department at Oberlin College. In the autumn of 1905 he began his independent literary work, to which, except for a year on the editorial staff of the "Atlantic Monthly" (1906-07), he gave all his time until our entry into the war.

Until 1909 he lived in New York and did various sorts of hack work in addition to a goodly number of short stories, poems, and his first novel, "Amédée's Son" (1908). But in 1909, after a severe attack of appendicitis, with a protracted convalescence, he came to his home in Berlin, Connecticut, giving all his time to creative work.

His second novel, "Enchanted Ground," was published in 1910, and it was in the autumn of the same year that



"Mrs. Bumpstead-Leigh" was given its trial production in Chicago. It was produced in New York in April, 1911, and revived in 1914.

"Blackbirds" was produced in 1913, running only two weeks in New York; and "Suki" and "Oh! Imogen" were tried out in 1916.

In 1917 "A Tailor-Made Man" was produced, and in 1918 "The Little Teacher" followed. Both these plays are still running at the time of writing (December, 1918), the former with two companies.

During these seven years he wrote many other plays: "The Countess and Patrick," rewritten into "Effie's Soul"; "Mathilda Comes Back" (in collaboration with Miss Eloise Steele); "Big Jerry"; "Game"; "Ladybird," and "Northward Ho!"

His Arichat summers began in boyhood on account of ill health, and in 1912 he bought and remodelled his house, "Willowfield," on the hillside fronting the harbor.

It was here in 1917, after study with the Canadian pioneer and expert, Dr. John Bonsall Porter, that he began his own work with sphagnum moss. During the summer his collecting and preparing of the moss was done under the auspices of the National Surgical Dressings Committee of New York; but in December, 1917, he received his brevet from the American Red Cross, and late in February he went to Seattle to investigate the supply of moss in the Northwest and to help in organizing the work. After two busy and successful weeks, he went to British Columbia to arrange for a shipment of moss for the Canadian Red Cross, and it was there, on March 16, 1918, near Murrayville, that he was killed in a train and automobile collision.

## INTRODUCTION

BY JULIET WILBOR TOMPKINS

I HAVE been reading Harry James Smith's letters, written over a period of twenty years to family and friends, and now brought together by his death. They roughly outline his life, or such portion of it as he would consent to show: college days and a hint of spiritual struggle, an early impulse toward the ministry; then teaching, with the outward success that a vivid, eager intellect commands and the inner distress of the creative spirit forbidden to create; next, the firmer emergence of the artist, the demand to create even at the cost of a "starveling bank account"; a brief essay at editing and respectability, but presently off again for Grub Street; stories and a couple of novels, and at last the breathless landing on his true plane, the comedy stage. A clear, "And so he lived happily ever after" ought to have followed the success of "Mrs. Bumpstead-Leigh," as played by Mrs. Fiske; but he had to serve seven years for the second and third successes, "A Tailor-Made Man" and "The Little Teacher," crowded into the last year of his life. He had learned, however, what he was for; after that he had only to prove it. And last in the record comes war, and the further thing that he was emerges in the passion to serve. He met a tragic death in Red Cross work on the 16th of March, 1918.

The letters have remade for me the perennial discovery that one does not know one's friends so very well. So it is only from one aspect that I can write about

Harry — an indoor aspect. We were always sitting down when we were together — at little tables, where Harry would let half of his dinner go uneaten because he was so much more interested in talking, and never could learn to combine the two; or before my fire — for it was usually winter when he came. His exultant love of action, of rough seas and November woods, and the rugged coast of his Arichat summers, were in the background of his talk, but he always brought a headful of human and ethical and literary ideas to try out, so that the outdoors side of him was only a flavor. And his declared hatred of conventionality amounted in my experience to little more than a refusal of parties. He would never come when any one else was coming, unless bullied into it, but, though he had acquired impressive secondary reasons for this, I think the primary reason was his fragile health, and an outfit of nerves that would have wrecked a person less simply wise. He had to eliminate, right and left, if he was to survive. He did it with a cheerful carelessness that took away any savor of invalidism — it was an uninteresting necessity, like washing the hands, that required no emphasis.

The making of stories and plays was, of course, our prevailing theme. He was a wonderful critic, constructive and stimulating. If a plot straggled and blundered, he could bring it up into smart shapeliness with twenty minutes of concentrated listening. How he could listen! I can see him — his hair boyishly rough on his forehead over clear blue eyes, his head dropped forward, sitting very quietly with tranquil hands, saying nothing at all until he had found what he wanted; and then bringing out his suggestion with a delicacy gauged for any degree of