

## A Valentine (circa 1914)

*John Q. Barrett\**

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In fall 1911, Robert H. Jackson, a nineteen-year-old high school graduate with a year of law office training in Jamestown, New York, enrolled as a senior at Albany Law School.

During that academic year, law student Jackson studied intensely and earned top grades. He also met Irene Alice Gerhardt, a twenty-one year old government secretary. On one occasion that winter, a Jackson classmate invited him to go skating on Albany's Washington Park Lake. The classmate knew that his cousin, Miss Gerhardt, would be there, and he wanted her and Jackson to meet. They did, they skated together, and they seemed to get along pretty well.<sup>1</sup>

According to Jackson family lore, there came another day that spring when Irene Gerhardt was taking her lunch break on an outdoor bench. On this occasion, she tried to entice a squirrel to approach her and nibble the food she was offering by calling to it, more than once, in lingo of the day: "Come here, Bobby." Within earshot was law student Jackson. Beckoned by name, he approached her and more conversation ensued. Soon they were attending weekend dances, and that June she was his guest at his Albany Law School commencement.

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Robert Jackson then returned to Jamestown. He again worked as a law apprentice. In 1913, when he had turned twenty-one, he took and passed the New York State Bar Examination and began his own practice.

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For an archive of selected Jackson List posts, many of which have document images attached, visit [www.stjohns.edu/academics/graduate/law/faculty/profiles/Barrett/JacksonList.sju](http://www.stjohns.edu/academics/graduate/law/faculty/profiles/Barrett/JacksonList.sju).

To subscribe to the Jackson List, which does not display recipient identities or distribute their email addresses, send a note to [barrettj@stjohns.edu](mailto:barrettj@stjohns.edu).

<sup>1</sup> See John Q. Barrett, *Albany in the Life Trajectory of Robert H. Jackson*, 68 ALBANY LAW REVIEW 513, 525-26 (2005), available at [www.stjohns.edu/media/3/ab5545c4178b406a919f987bdd94ff6b.pdf?d=Barrett](http://www.stjohns.edu/media/3/ab5545c4178b406a919f987bdd94ff6b.pdf?d=Barrett).

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A VALENTINE (CIRCA 1914)

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During this time, Irene Gerhardt continued to live and work in Albany. She wrote letters to Jackson. He wrote back, but apparently less frequently.

At some point, probably in 1914 or so, Irene began to write less often. Robert, distressed, responded by sending her this poem:

Self-convicted.

Once on a time there lived a philosopher,  
One of your sage and cynical kind,  
Two doctrines he cherished which perfectly suited  
His unsentimental, satirical mind.

The First of these notions, simply preposterous,  
Defying all precedents, customs and rules,  
Was this, that (except those pertaining to business),  
“All letters are written by Women and Fools”!

Most of these letters are silly, romantic,  
Puerile, morbid, flatly inane,  
“A mere piece of paper” (maxim the Second)  
Who would wish for, or value it, if he were sane?

Now, across the big state there dwelt a fair maiden,  
And unto this stoic(?) she sometimes would write  
Such letters of helpfulness, hope and affection,  
As only such dear, gentle hearts can indite.

And it happened that once these “mere pieces of paper”  
Met with delay as letters will do,—  
A week passed—a fortnight—now look at our cynic—  
How spiritless, silent, and bluer than blue!

x—x—x—x—x—x—x—x—x

A night letter sped, a “long distance” followed,  
The wires fairly hummed, (now where is his hobby?)

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A VALENTINE (CIRCA 1914)

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“Dear, what can have happened to your precious letters!  
I miss them. Please write.  
Yours distractedly,  
Bobby—”<sup>2</sup>

(Some decoding: A night letter was a telegram sent at night, at a reduced rate, for delivery the next morning. Jackson apparently sent one to Irene. Then he called her by long distance telephone—an expensive act, which was not his sensible style. Then he composed and mailed this poem to her.)

It all worked. Irene’s letters resumed. Letters and occasional, chaperoned visits led to their engagement. In April 1916, Robert bought his first house in Jamestown. Then he and Irene married at St. Peter’s church in Albany. They lived together in Jamestown, then in Buffalo, then again in Jamestown, and then at various times in Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia.

Throughout their thirty-eight year marriage, on occasions when one was away from home, each Jackson continued to send the other letters, cards and, on occasion, poems. And they saved them.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Jackson, *Self-convicted* (no date), in Robert H. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C., Box 2, Folder 3. An image of this poem, handwritten by Jackson with obvious care, is at the end of this file.



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Such letters of helpfulness, hope, and affection,  
As only such dear, gentle hearts can indite.



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 Met with delay as letters will do,  
 A week passed - a fortnight - now look at our  
 How spiritless, silent, and bluer than <sup>[cynic -</sup> blue!

x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

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 The wires fairly hummed, (now where is his hobby?)  
 "Dear, what can have happened to your precious letters!"  
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