

AIDS TO THE STUDY OF THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

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SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

I

ELMWOOD

ABOUT half a mile from the Craigie House in Cambridge, Mass., on the road leading to the old town of Watertown, is Elmwood, a spacious square house set amongst lilac and syringa bushes, and overtopped by elms. Pleasant fields are on either side, and from the windows one may look out on the Charles River winding its way among the marshes. The house itself is one of a group which before the war for independence belonged to Boston merchants and officers of the crown who refused to take the side of the revolutionary party. Tory Row was the name given to the broad winding road on which the houses stood. Great farms and gardens were attached to them, and some sign of their roomy ease still remains. The estates fell into the hands of various persons after the war, and in process of time Longfellow came to occupy Craigie House. Elmwood at that time was the property of the Reverend Charles Lowell, minister of the West Church in Boston; and when Longfellow thus became his neighbor, James Russell Lowell was a Junior in Harvard College. He was born at Elmwood February 22, 1819. Any one who will read *An Indian-Summer-Reverie* will discover how affectionately Lowell dwelt on the scenes of nature and life amidst which he grew up. Indeed, it would be a pleasant task to draw from the full storehouse of his poetry the golden phrases with which he characterizes the trees, meadows, brooks, flowers, birds,

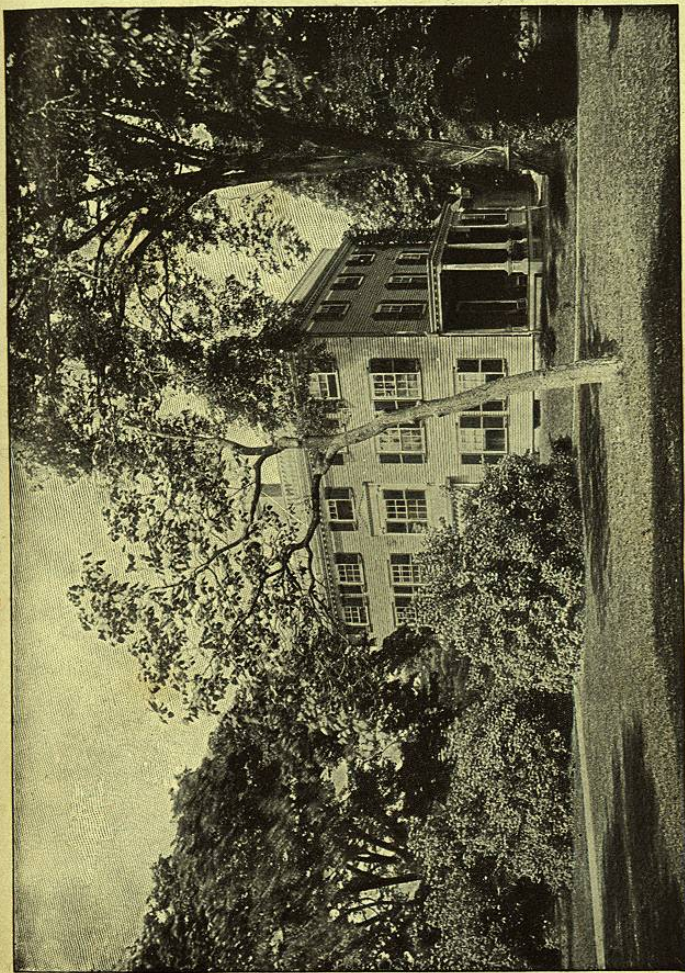
and human companions that were so near to him in his youth and so vivid in his recollection. In his prose works also, especially *My Garden Acquaintance* and *A Good Word for Winter*, Lowell has given glimpses of the outdoor life in the midst of which he grew up; and in *Cambridge Thirty Years Ago*, many reminiscences of his early life.

II

EDUCATION

Lowell's acquaintance with books and his schooling began early. He learned his letters at a dame school. Mr. William Wells, an Englishman, opened a classical school in one of the spacious Tory Row houses near Elmwood, and, bringing with him English public school thoroughness and severity, gave the boy a drilling in Latin, which he must have made almost a native speech, to judge by the ease with which he handled it afterward in mock heroics. Of course he went to Harvard College. He lived at his father's house, more than a mile away from the college yard; but this could have been no great privation to him, for he had the freedom of his friends' rooms, and he loved the open air.

Lowell was but fifteen years old when he entered college in the class which graduated in 1838. He was a reader, as so many of his fellows were, and the letters which he wrote shortly after leaving college show how intent he had been on making acquaintance with the best things in literature. He began also to scribble verse, and he wrote both poems and essays for college magazines. His class chose him their poet for Class Day, and he wrote his poem; but he was careless about conforming to college regulations respecting attendance at morning prayers, and for this was suspended from college the last term of his last year, and not allowed to come back to read his poem. He was sent to Concord for his rustication, and so passed a few weeks of his youth amongst scenes dear to every lover of American letters.



ELMWOOD, LOWELL'S HOME, CAMBRIDGE

III

FIRST VENTURE

After his graduation he set about the study of law, and for a short time was even a clerk in a counting-room; but his bent was strongly toward literature. There was at that time no magazine of commanding importance in America, and young men were given to starting magazines with enthusiasm and very little other capital. Such a one was the *Boston Miscellany*, launched by Nathan Hale, Lowell's college friend, and for this Lowell wrote gayly. It lived a year, and shortly after Lowell himself, with Robert Carter, essayed *The Pioneer* in 1843. It lived just three months; but in that time printed contributions by Lowell, Hawthorne, Whittier; Story, Poe, and Dr. Parsons, — a group which it would be hard to match in any of the little magazines that hop across the world's path to-day. Lowell had already collected, in 1841, the poems which he had written and sometimes contributed to periodicals into a volume entitled *A Year's Life*; but he retained very little of the contents in later editions of his poems. The book has a special interest, however, from its dedication, in veiled phrase, to Maria White. He became engaged to this lady in the fall of 1840, and the next twelve years of his life were profoundly affected by her influence. Herself a poet of delicate power, she brought into his life an intelligent sympathy with his work; it was, however, her strong moral enthusiasm, her lofty conception of purity and justice, which kindled his spirit and gave force and direction to a character which was ready to respond, and yet might otherwise have delayed active expression. They were not married until 1844; but they were not far apart in their homes, and during these years Lowell was making those early ventures in literature, and first raids upon political and moral evil, which foretold the direction of his later work, and gave some hint of its abundance.

About the time of his marriage, he published two books which by their character show pretty well the divided interest of his life. His bent from the beginning was more decidedly literary than that of any contemporary American poet. That is to say, the history and art of literature divided his interest with the production of literature, and he carried the unusual gift of a rare critical power, joined to hearty spontaneous creation. It may indeed be guessed that the keenness of judgment and incisiveness of wit which characterize his examination of literature sometimes interfered with his poetic power, and made him liable to question his art when he would rather have expressed it unchecked. One of the two books was a volume of poems; the other was a prose work, *Conversations on Some of the Old Poets*. He did not keep this book alive; but it is interesting as marking the enthusiasm of a young scholar treading a way then almost wholly neglected in America, and intimating a line of thought and study in which he afterward made most noteworthy venture. Another series of poems followed in 1848, and in the same year *The Vision of Sir Launfal*. Perhaps it was in reaction from the marked sentiment of his poetry that he issued now a *jeu d'esprit*, *A Fable for Critics*, in which he hit off, with a rough and ready wit, the characteristics of the writers of the day, not forgetting himself in these lines: —

“There is Lowell, who ’s striving Parnassus to climb
With a whole bale of *isms* tied together with rhyme;
He might get on alone, spite of brambles and boulders,
But he can’t with that bundle he has on his shoulders;
The top of the hill he will ne’er come nigh reaching
Till he learns the distinction ’twixt singing and preaching;
His lyre has some chords that would ring pretty well,
But he ’d rather by half make a drum of the shell,
And rattle away till he ’s old as Methusalem,
At the head of a march to the last new Jerusalem.”

This, of course, is but a half-serious portrait of himself, and it touches but a single feature; others can say better that Lowell’s ardent nature showed itself in the series of

satirical poems which made him famous, *The Biglow Papers*, written in a spirit of indignation and fine scorn, when the Mexican War was causing many Americans to blush with shame at the use of the country by a class for its own ignoble ends. Lowell and his wife, who brought a fervid anti-slavery temper as part of her marriage portion, were both contributors to the *Liberty Bell*; and Lowell was a frequent contributor to the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, and was, indeed, for a while a corresponding editor. In June, 1846, there appeared one day in the *Boston Courier* a letter from Mr. Ezekiel Biglow of Jaalam to the editor, Hon. Joseph T. Buckingham, inclosing a poem of his son, Mr. Hosea Biglow. It was no new thing to seek to arrest the public attention with the vernacular applied to public affairs. Major Jack Downing and Sam Slick had been notable examples, and they had many imitators; but the reader who laughed over the racy narrative of the unlettered Ezekiel, and then took up Hosea’s poem and caught the gust of Yankee wrath and humor blown fresh in his face, knew that he was in at the appearance of something new in American literature. The force which Lowell displayed in these satires made his book at once a powerful ally of an anti-slavery sentiment which heretofore had been ridiculed.

IV

VERSE AND PROSE

A year in Europe, 1851–1852, with his wife, whose health was then precarious, stimulated his scholarly interests, and gave substance to his study of Dante and Italian literature. In October, 1853, his wife died; she had borne him four children: the first-born, Blanche, died in infancy, as did another daughter, Rose; the third child, Walter, also died young; the fourth, a daughter, Mrs. Burnett, survived her parents. In 1855 he was chosen successor to Longfellow as Smith Professor of the French and Spanish Languages.

and Literature, and Professor of Belles Lettres in Harvard College. He spent two years in Europe in further preparation for the duties of his office, and in 1857 was again established in Cambridge, and installed in his academic chair. He married, also, at this time Miss Frances Dunlap, of Portland, Maine.

Lowell was now in his thirty-ninth year. As a scholar, in his professional work, he had acquired a versatile knowledge of the Romance languages, and was an adept in old French and Provençal poetry; he had given a course of twelve lectures on English poetry before the Lowell Institute in Boston, which had made a strong impression on the community, and his work on the series of *British Poets* in connection with Professor Child, especially his biographical sketch of Keats, had been recognized as of a high order. In poetry he had published the volumes already mentioned. In general literature he had printed in magazines the papers which he afterward collected into his volume, *Fireside Travels*. Not long after he entered on his college duties, *The Atlantic Monthly* was started, and the editorship given to him. He held the office for a year or two only; but he continued to write for the magazine, and in 1862 he was associated with Mr. Charles Eliot Norton in the conduct of *The North American Review*, and continued in this charge for ten years. Much of his prose was contributed to this periodical. Any one reading the titles of the papers which comprise the volumes of his prose writings will readily see how much literature, and especially poetic literature, occupied his attention. Shakespeare, Dryden, Lessing, Rousseau, Dante, Spenser, Wordsworth, Milton, Keats, Carlyle, Percival, Thoreau, Swinburne, Chaucer, Emerson, Pope, Gray, — these are the principal subjects of his prose, and the range of topics indicates the catholicity of his taste.

In these papers, when studying poetry, he was very much alive to the personality of the poets, and it was his strong interest in humanity which led Lowell, when he was most diligent in the pursuit of literature, to apply himself also to

history and politics. Several of his essays bear witness to this, such as *Witchcraft, New England Two Centuries Ago, A Great Public Character* (Josiah Quincy), *Abraham Lincoln*, and his great *Political Essays*. But the most remarkable of his writings of this order was the second series of *The Biglow Papers*, published during the war for the Union. In these, with the wit and fun of the earlier series, there was mingled a deeper strain of feeling and a larger tone of patriotism. The limitations of his style in these satires forbade the fullest expression of his thought and emotion; but afterward in a succession of poems, occasioned by the honors paid to student soldiers in Cambridge, the death of Agassiz, and the celebration of national anniversaries during the years 1875 and 1876, he sang in loftier, more ardent strains. The most famous of these poems was his noble *Commemoration Ode*.

V

PUBLIC LIFE

It was at the close of this period, when he had done incalculable service to the Republic, that Lowell was called on to represent the country, first in Madrid, where he was sent in 1877, and then in London, to which he was transferred in 1880. Eight years were thus spent by him in the foreign service of his country. He had a good knowledge of the Spanish language and literature when he went to Spain; but he at once took pains to make his knowledge fuller and his accent more perfect, so that he could have intimate relations with the best Spaniards of the time. In England he was at once a most welcome guest, and was in great demand as a public speaker. No one can read his dispatches from Madrid and London without being struck by his sagacity, his readiness in emergencies, his interest in and quick perception of the political situation in the country where he was resident, and his unerring knowledge as a man of the

world. Above all, he was through and through an American, true to the principles which underlie American institutions. His address on *Democracy*, which he delivered in England, is one of the great statements of human liberty. A few years later, after his return to America, he gave another address to his own countrymen on *The Place of the Independent in Politics*. It was a noble defence of his own position, not without a trace of discouragement at the apparently sluggish movement in American self-government of recent years, but with that faith in the substance of his countrymen which gave him the right to use words of honest warning.

The public life of Mr. Lowell made him more of a figure before the world. He received honors from societies and universities; he was decorated by the highest honors which Harvard could pay officially; and Oxford and Cambridge, St. Andrews and Edinburgh and Bologna gave gowns. He established warm personal relations with Englishmen, and after his release from public office he made several visits to England. There, too, was buried his second wife, who died in 1885. The closing years of his life in his own country, though marked by domestic loneliness and growing physical infirmities, were rich in the continued expression of his large personality and in the esteem of hosts of friends. He delivered the public address in commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of Harvard University; he gave a course of lectures on the Old English Dramatists before the Lowell Institute; he collected a volume of his poems; he wrote and spoke on public affairs; and, the year before his death, revised, rearranged, and carefully edited a definitive series of his writings in ten volumes. He died at Elmwood, August 12, 1891. Since his death three small volumes have been added to his collected writings, and Mr. Norton has edited *Letters of James Russell Lowell*, in two volumes. His *Life*, in two volumes, has been written by Horace E. Scudder, and also, in one volume, by Ferris Greenslet.

goal, poet had at first to be his narrative

THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

PRELUDE TO PART FIRST

OVER his keys the musing organist,
 Beginning doubtfully and far away,
 First lets his fingers wander as they list,
 And builds a bridge from Dreamland for his lay :
 Then, as the touch of his loved instrument
 Gives hope and fervor, nearer draws his theme,
 First guessed by faint auroral flushes sent
 Along the wavering vista of his dream.

Not only around our infancy
 Doth heaven with all its splendors lie ;
 Daily, with souls that cringe and plot,
 We Sinais climb and know it not.

4. See Lowell's own

"From one stage of our being to the next
 We pass unconscious o'er a slender bridge,
 The momentary work of unseen hands." . . .

A Glance Behind the Curtain.

9. Read the first four stanzas of *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*, and notice the similarity between Wordsworth's joyous May and Lowell's June. For the substitution of June for the May of English poets, see the opening stanzas of *Under the Willows*. The allusion in line 9 is rather to the thought of the entire stanza in the ode than to any single phrase or line.

12. Sinai's climb. See *The Study of the Vision of Sir Launfal*, p. 92, and Lowell's *Letters*, i, 190.