

James Russell Lowell



*Heartsease
and Rue*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. FRIENDSHIP.

POEMS.

AGASSIZ.

TO HOLMES ON HIS SEVENTY-FIFTH BIRTHDAY.

IN A COPY OF OMAR KHAYYÁM.

ON RECEIVING A COPY OF MR. AUSTIN DOBSON'S "OLD
WORLD IDYLLS."

TO C. F. BRADFORD ON THE GIFT OF A MEERSCHAUM PIPE.
BANKSIDE. (HOME OF EDMUND QUINCY.) Dedham, May 21,
1877.

JOSEPH WINLOCK. Died June 11, 1875.

SONNET. TO FANNY ALEXANDER.

JEFFRIES WYMAN. Died September 4, 1874.

TO A FRIEND WHO GAVE ME A GROUP OF WEEDS AND
GRASSES, AFTER A DRAWING OF DÜRER.

WITH AN ARMCHAIR.

E. G. de R.

BON VOYAGE!

TO WHITTIER ON HIS SEVENTY-FIFTH BIRTHDAY.

ON AN AUTUMN SKETCH OF H. G. WILD.

TO MISS D. T. ON HER GIVING ME A DRAWING OF LITTLE
STREET ARABS.

WITH A COPY OF AUCASSIN AND NICOLETE.

ON PLANTING A TREE AT INVERARA.

AN EPISTLE TO GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS.

II. SENTIMENT.

ENDYMION. A MYSTICAL COMMENT ON TITIAN'S "SACRED
AND PROFANE LOVE."

THE BLACK PREACHER. A BRETON LEGEND.

ARCADIA REDIVIVA.

THE NEST.

A YOUTHFUL EXPERIMENT IN ENGLISH HEXAMETERS.

IMPRESSIONS OF HOMER.

BIRTHDAY VERSES. WRITTEN IN A CHILD'S ALBUM.

ESTRANGEMENT.

PHŒBE.

DAS EWIG-WEIBLICHE.

THE RECALL.

ABSENCE.

MONNA LISA.

THE OPTIMIST.

ON BURNING SOME OLD LETTERS.

THE PROTEST.

THE PETITION.

FACT OR FANCY?

AGRO-DOLCE.

THE BROKEN TRYST.

CASA SIN ALMA. RECUERDO DE MADRID.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL. FOR THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL CHILDREN
OF THE CHURCH OF THE DISCIPLES.

MY PORTRAIT GALLERY.

PAOLO TO FRANCESCA.

SONNET. Scottish Border.

SONNET. On being asked for an Autograph in Venice.

THE DANCING BEAR.

THE MAPLE.

NIGHTWATCHES.

DEATH OF QUEEN MERCEDES.

PRISON OF CERVANTES.

TO A LADY PLAYING ON THE CITHERN.

THE EYE'S TREASURY.

PESSIMOPTIMISM.

THE BRAKES.

A FOREBODING.

III. FANCY.

UNDER THE OCTOBER MAPLES.

LOVE'S CLOCK. A PASTORAL.

ELEANOR MAKES MACAROONS.

TELEPATHY.

SCHERZO.

"FRANCISCUS DE VERULAMIO SIC COGITAVIT."

AUSPEX.

THE PREGNANT COMMENT.

THE LESSON.

SCIENCE AND POETRY.

A NEW YEAR'S GREETING.

THE DISCOVERY.

WITH A SEASHELL.

THE SECRET.

IV. HUMOR AND SATIRE.

FITZ ADAM'S STORY.

THE ORIGIN OF DIDACTIC POETRY.

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN.

CREDIDIMUS JOVEM REGNARE.

TEMPORA MUTANTUR.

IN THE HALF-WAY HOUSE.

AT THE BURNS CENTENNIAL. JANUARY, 1859.

IN AN ALBUM.

AT THE COMMENCEMENT DINNER, 1866, IN
ACKNOWLEDGING A TOAST TO THE SMITH PROFESSOR.

A PARABLE.

V. EPIGRAMS.

SAYINGS.

INSCRIPTIONS.

FOR A BELL AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY.

FOR A MEMORIAL WINDOW TO SIR WALTER RALEIGH, SET
UP IN ST. MARGARET'S, WESTMINSTER, BY AMERICAN
CONTRIBUTORS.

PROPOSED FOR A SOLDIERS' AND SAILORS' MONUMENT IN
BOSTON.

A MISCONCEPTION.

THE BOSS.

SUN-WORSHIP.

CHANGED PERSPECTIVE.

WITH A PAIR OF GLOVES LOST IN A WAGER.

SIXTY-EIGHTH BIRTHDAY.

I.

FRIENDSHIP.

POEMS.

[Table of Contents](#)

AGASSIZ.

[Table of Contents](#)

Come

Dicesti *egli ebbe?* non viv' egli ancora?

Non fiere gli occhi suoi lo dolce lome?

I. 1.

THE electric nerve, whose instantaneous thrill
Makes next-door gossips of the antipodes,
Confutes poor Hope's last fallacy of ease,—
The distance that divided her from ill:
Earth sentient seems again as when of old
The horny foot of Pan
Stamped, and the conscious horror ran
Beneath men's feet through all her fibres cold:
Space's blue walls are mined; we feel the throe
From underground of our night-mantled foe:
The flame-winged feet
Of Trade's new Mercury, that dry-shod run
Through briny abysses dreamless of the sun,
Are mercilessly fleet,

And at a bound annihilate
Ocean's prerogative of short reprieve;
Surely ill news might wait,
And man be patient of delay to grieve:
Letters have sympathies
And tell-tale faces that reveal,
To senses finer than the eyes,
Their errand's purport ere we break the seal;
They wind a sorrow round with circumstance
To stay its feet, nor all unwarned displace
The veil that darkened from our sidelong glance
The inexorable face:
But now Fate stuns as with a mace;
The savage of the skies, that men have caught
And some scant use of language taught,
Tells only what he must,—
The steel-cold fact in one laconic thrust.

2.

So thought I, as, with vague, mechanic eyes,
I scanned the festering news we half despise
Yet scramble for no less,
And read of public scandal, private fraud,
Crime flaunting scot-free while the mob applaud,
Office made vile to bribe unworthiness,
And all the unwholesome mess
The Land of Honest Abraham serves of late
To teach the Old World how to wait,
When suddenly,
As happens if the brain, from overweight

Of blood, infect the eye,
Three tiny words grew lurid as I read,
And reeled commingling: *Agassiz is dead*.
As when, beneath the street's familiar jar,
An earthquake's alien omen rumbles far,
Men listen and forebode, I hung my head,
And strove the present to recall,
As if the blow that stunned were yet to fall.

3.

Uprooted is our mountain oak,
That promised long security of shade
And brooding-place for many a winged thought;
Not by Time's softly-warning stroke
With pauses of relenting pity stayed,
But ere a root seemed sapt, a bough decayed,
From sudden ambush by the whirlwind caught
And in his broad maturity betrayed!

4.

Well might I, as of old, appeal to you,
O mountains woods and streams,
To help us mourn him, for ye loved him too;
But simpler moods befit our modern themes,
And no less perfect birth of nature can,
Though they yearn tow'rd him, sympathize with man,
Save as dumb fellow-prisoners through a wall;
Answer ye rather to my call,
Strong poets of a more unconscious day,

When Nature spake nor sought nice reasons why,
Too much for softer arts forgotten since
That teach our forthright tongue to lisp and mince,
And drown in music the heart's bitter cry!
Lead me some steps in your directer way,
Teach me those words that strike a solid root
Within the ears of men;
Ye chiefly, virile both to think and feel,
Deep-chested Chapman and firm-footed Ben,—
For he was masculine from head to heel.
Nay, let himself stand undiminished by
With those clear parts of him that will not die.
Himself from out the recent dark I claim
To hear, and, if I flatter him, to blame;
To show himself, as still I seem to see,
A mortal, built upon the antique plan,
Brimful of lusty blood as ever ran,
And taking life as simply as a tree!
To claim my foiled good-bye let him appear,
Large-limbed and human as I saw him near,
Loosed from the stiffening uniform of fame:
And let me treat him largely: I should fear,
(If with too prying lens I chanced to err,
Mistaking catalogue for character,)
His wise forefinger raised in smiling blame.
Nor would I scant him with judicial breath
And turn mere critic in an epitaph;
I choose the wheat, incurious of the chaff
That swells fame living, chokes it after death,
And would but memorize the shining half

Of his large nature that was turned to me:
Fain had I joined with those that honored him
With eyes that darkened because his were dim,
And now been silent: but it might not be.

II. 1.

In some the genius is a thing apart,
A pillared hermit of the brain,
Hoarding with incommunicable art
Its intellectual gain;
Man's web of circumstance and fate
They from their perch of self observe,
Indifferent as the figures on a slate
Are to the planet's sun-swung curve
Whose bright returns they calculate;
Their nice adjustment, part to part,
Were shaken from its serviceable mood
By unpremeditated stirs of heart
Or jar of human neighborhood:
Some find their natural selves, and only then,
In furloughs of divine escape from men,
And when, by that brief ecstasy left bare,
Driven by some instinct of desire,
They wander worldward, 'tis to blink and stare,
Like wild things of the wood about a fire,
Dazed by the social glow they cannot share;
His nature brooked no lonely lair,
But basked and bourgeoned in copartnery,
Companionship, and open-windowed glee:
He knew, for he had tried,

Those speculative heights that lure
The unpractised foot, impatient of a guide,
Tow'rd ether too attenuately pure
For sweet unconscious breath, though dear to pride,
But better loved the foothold sure
Of paths that wind by old abodes of men
Who hope at last the churchyard's peace secure,
And follow time-worn rules, that them suffice,
Learned from their sires, traditionally wise,
Careful of honest custom's how and when;
His mind, too brave to look on Truth askance,
No more those habitudes of faith could share,
But, tinged with sweetness of the old Swiss manse,
Lingered around them still and fain would spare.
Patient to spy a sullen egg for weeks,
The enigma of creation to surprise,
His truer instinct sought the life that speaks
Without a mystery from kindly eyes;
In no self-spun cocoon of prudence wound,
He by the touch of men was best inspired,
And caught his native greatness at rebound
From generousities itself had fired;
Then how the heat through every fibre ran,
Felt in the gathering presence of the man,
While the apt word and gesture came unbid!
Virtues and faults it to one metal wrought,
Fined all his blood to thought,
And ran the molten man in all he said or did.
All Tully's rules and all Quintilian's too
He by the light of listening faces knew,

And his rapt audience all unconscious lent
Their own roused force to make him eloquent;
Persuasion fondled in his look and tone;
Our speech (with strangers prudish) he could bring
To find new charm in accents not her own;
Her coy constraints and icy hindrances
Melted upon his lips to natural ease,
As a brook's fetters swell the dance of spring.
Nor yet all sweetness: not in vain he wore,
Nor in the sheath of ceremony, controlled
By velvet courtesy or caution cold,
That sword of honest anger prized of old,
But, with two-handed wrath,
If baseness or pretension crossed his path,
Struck once nor needed to strike more.

2.

His magic was not far to seek,—
He was so human! Whether strong or weak,
Far from his kind he neither sank nor soared,
But sate an equal guest at every board:
No beggar ever felt him condescend,
No prince presume; for still himself he bare
At manhood's simple level, and where'er
He met a stranger, there he left a friend.
How large an aspect! nobly unsevere,
With freshness round him of Olympian cheer,
Like visits of those earthly gods he came;
His look, wherever its good-fortune fell,
Doubled the feast without a miracle,

And on the hearthstone danced a happier flame;
Philemon's crabbed vintage grew benign;
Amphitryon's gold-juice humanized to wine.

III. 1.

The garrulous memories
Gather again from all their far-flown nooks,
Singly at first, and then by twos and threes,
Then in a throng innumerable, as the rooks
Thicken their twilight files
Tow'rd Tintern's gray repose of roofless aisles:
Once more I see him at the table's head
When Saturday her monthly banquet spread
To scholars, poets, wits,
All choice, some famous, loving things, not names,
And so without a twinge at others' fames;
Such company as wisest moods befits,
Yet with no pedant blindness to the worth
Of undeliberate mirth,
Natures benignly mixed of air and earth,
Now with the stars and now with equal zest
Tracing the eccentric orbit of a jest.

2.

I see in vision the warm-lighted hall,
The living and the dead I see again,
And but my chair is empty; 'mid them all
'Tis I that seem the dead: they all remain
Immortal, changeless creatures of the brain:

Well nigh I doubt which world is real most,
Of sense or spirit, to the truly sane;
In this abstraction it were light to deem
Myself the figment of some stronger dream;
They are the real things, and I the ghost
That glide unhindered through the solid door,
Vainly for recognition seek from chair to chair,
And strive to speak and am but futile air,
As truly most of us are little more.

3.

Him most I see whom we most dearly miss,
The latest parted thence,
His features poised in genial armistice
And armed neutrality of self-defence
Beneath the forehead's walled preëminence,
While Tyro, plucking facts with careless reach,
Settles off-hand our human how and whence;
The long-trained veteran scarcely wincing hears
The infallible strategy of volunteers
Making through Nature's walls its easy breach,
And seems to learn where he alone could teach.
Ample and ruddy, the board's end he fills
As he our fireside were, our light and heat,
Centre where minds diverse and various skills
Find their warm nook and stretch unhampered feet;
I see the firm benignity of face,
Wide-smiling champaign, without tameness sweet,
The mass Teutonic toned to Gallic grace,
The eyes whose sunshine runs before the lips
While Holmes's rockets curve their long ellipse,
And burst in seeds of fire that burst again
To drop in scintillating rain.

4.

There too the face half-rustic, half-divine,
Self-poised, sagacious, freaked with humor fine,
Of him who taught us not to mow and mope
About our fancied selves, but seek our scope
In Nature's world and Man's, nor fade to hollow trope,

Content with our New World and timely bold
To challenge the o'ermastery of the Old;
Listening with eyes averse I see him sit
Pricked with the cider of the Judge's wit
(Ripe-hearted homebrew, fresh and fresh again),
While the wise nose's firm-built aquiline
Curves sharper to restrain
The merriment whose most unruly moods
Pass not the dumb laugh learned in listening woods
Of silence-shedding pine:
Hard by is he whose art's consoling spell
Hath given both worlds a whiff of asphodel,
His look still vernal 'mid the wintry ring
Of petals that remember, not foretell,
The paler primrose of a second spring.

5.

And more there are: but other forms arise
And seen as clear, albeit with dimmer eyes:
First he from sympathy still held apart
By shrinking over-eagerness of heart,
Cloud charged with searching fire, whose shadow's sweep
Heightened mean things with sense of brooding ill,
And steeped in doom familiar field and hill,—
New England's poet, soul reserved and deep,
November nature with a name of May,
Whom high o'er Concord plains we laid to sleep,
While the orchards mocked us in their white array
And building robins wondered at our tears,
Snatched in his prime, the shape august