

the irresponsible manner in which her people have treated questions of great and far-reaching public import. The irony of the Paris bookseller who, when asked for a copy of the French constitution, replied that he did not keep periodical literature, was sad as well as mordant. It was this same irresponsibility in lofty station that made Palmerston

an object of hatred in every court in Europe, and that has ministered directly to England's isolation. It is such irresponsibility among men of influence that is rendering wise and conservative settlement of our own foreign questions increasingly difficult, and an assertion of true American dignity well-nigh impossible.

Edward M. Chapman.



### THREE LETTERS FROM JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

**I**N the spring of 1890 a discussion arose between a friend and myself in regard to the following sentence in Lowell's «My Garden Acquaintance»: «The robins are not good solo singers; but their chorus, as, like primitive fire-worshippers, they hail the return of light and warmth to the earth, is unrivaled.»

The argument was rather one-sided. My friend spoke with the conviction born of his long and close observation of the robin. I could only urge my confidence in the correctness of Mr. Lowell's statement.

At length, feeling my inability to defend my favorite author, I resolved to write and ask Mr. Lowell himself to explain the passage. By return mail I received a letter in Mr. Lowell's own hand, which read as follows:

«ELMWOOD, CAMBRIDGE, MASS.,  
May 2, 1890.

«DEAR MISS CLARKE: I used to be thought a fairly good observer; indeed, Darwin once paid me the doubtful compliment of saying to me, «You ought to have been a naturalist.» I have lived in the same house (except when in Europe) for seventy-one years, and robins find good building-sites in my trees. I once counted seventy on my lawn at the same time. As the males sing without any reference to each other of a morning, and as there are many, I spoke of it, loosely, perhaps, as a chorus. Considered as a thrush, the robin is surely inferior to most of his kind; I am tempted to say all of them. Now and then

there is a better singer among them. I have heard one this year who entertained me with some very agreeable variations on their habitual *ding-dong*.

«As for their singing during the day, I am surprised that your friend has never heard their (rain-song,) which times itself by the fore-feeling of a shower in the air. Nay, I heard the performer of which I have just spoken at about half-past four in the afternoon. If yours don't begin matins until five o'clock they are lazy creatures. Ours salute the day. But perhaps they don't build with you? That would make a difference in the singing; for though, as I think, rather *bourgeois*, it is love that makes them sing, as it made *Polonius*, no doubt, when he (suffered great extremity for love.)

«All the same, though I can't quite give in to your friend, I like her<sup>1</sup> all the better for taking sides with a bird against a man. The worst of them are better than we deserve.

«Faithfully yours,  
«J. R. LOWELL.»

I received this letter just as I was starting on a visit to the home of the Hon. Charles Anderson, a brother of Colonel Robert Anderson, and ex-Governor of Ohio. I resolved to delay answering the letter—for of course I must write and thank Mr. Lowell—until I had shown it to Governor Anderson. As I anticipated, Governor Anderson was much interested in the letter. He told me that years before, when he was a lawyer in Cincinnati, he had entertained Mr. Lowell during

<sup>1</sup> He evidently thought the friend a woman.

a political convention. In replying to Mr. Lowell I mentioned this circumstance, adding: «Governor Anderson, with characteristic modesty, says that you have doubtless forgotten him; but I do not believe that any one who ever met so charming a man as Governor Anderson—Colonel Anderson, I think he was when you saw him—could forget him.»

This is Mr. Lowell's reply:

«ELMWOOD, CAMBRIDGE, MASS.,  
May 17, 1890.

«DEAR MISS CLARKE: Do I remember Charles Anderson,—colonel or governor matters not,—the handsome, fair-haired, brilliant Norseman who, with all his refinement, had a look as if he would cheerfully have gone out with his battle-axe to a *holmgang*? One is not blest with such apparitions so often as to forget them. I suppose the yellow hair is silver now, but men like him do not grow older. May I ask of your kindness to convey to him my warmest salutations?

«If I said that birds were better than men I was not to be taken too seriously. But you shall not put me down in that peremptory fashion. I did n't say they were better than women, did I? You know I did n't, nor ever will!

«I have listened more warily to my robins since your letter, and find that I was right, though I take no credit to myself for what was merely a matter of familiar memory. During the love-making season they may, and often do, sing at any hour of the day.

«You will be glad to hear that my few acres are very *birdy* this year, and many trees full of new homes and songs. I had heard such stories of the usurping habits of the English sparrow which has been naturalized here that I feared to find our native birds diminished. But I think it is not so. How I love creatures that can both fly and sing! 'T is what we all would if we could.

«There is something very pleasant to me in your letters, and I thank you for them. For the first time in my life I have been seriously ill this winter, and am still to a certain extent invalidated by my physician. The less I feel myself worth, the pleasanter it is to hear that I have been something to somebody, especially to one who loves Tennyson, so easily the master of us all.

«Faithfully yours,  
«J. R. LOWELL.»

In my second letter I had ventured upon an expression of my admiration for Mr. Lowell, and, feeling that no words of my own would

express my meaning with sufficient delicacy, I had made use of a quotation from Tennyson. It is to this that Mr. Lowell refers in the last paragraph of his letter.

But now I found myself in an embarrassing position. I felt that I ought not to intrude longer upon Mr. Lowell, and yet would it be courteous to one of his age and position to permit him to write the last letter? I finally decided there could be nothing presumptuous in writing again, if I made it evident that I did not expect him to respond.

But his unflinching courtesy would not permit him to drop the correspondence in that manner, as the following letter testifies:

«ELMWOOD, CAMBRIDGE, MASS.,  
May 27, 1890.

«DEAR MISS CLARKE: A line more to thank you for your very cordial and in all ways welcome letters. You will understand why I cannot undertake any additional regular correspondence, however agreeable.

«This gives me the chance to make a correction. In my first note to you I mentioned that I had been led to raise my opinion of the robin as a solo singer by the fine performance of one which I had heard this year. But I had been deluded. The bird which had shaken my opinion turns out to have been a rose-breasted grossbeak. All the first part of his song is so like that of the robin that I am still puzzled by him sometimes; but as he goes on he is tempted into variations, voluntaries, and raptures of which the robin is quite incapable. It is the difference between Shelley and Shenstone. I had seen him only once before in my life, and never heard him. But this year two pairs of them are, I hope, building within my boundaries, and the males sing amorpeans from the tops of neighboring trees. It is a pleasure to see as well as to hear them sing, for this lyrical ecstasy makes their wings quiver with the delight of it. 'T is a great joy to have them in my old age.

«I must n't have more of your sympathy than I deserve—pleasant as it is. I am *feeling* very well, but have to be very careful of myself, which is a bore. I have made the wholesome discovery that at seventy one gets beyond middle life. Faithfully yours,

«J. R. LOWELL.»

I did not know then that these letters were penned when Mr. Lowell was suffering from a disease which had compelled him to give up outdoor exercise and continuous literary labor, and which a few months later ended his life.

Mary A. Clarke.