Clasp, Angel of the backward look
And folded wings of ashen gray,
And voice of echoes far away,
The brazen covers of thy book;
The weird palimpsest old and vast,
Wherein thou hid'st the spectral past;
Where, closely mingling, pale and glow
The characters of joy and woe;
The monographs of outlived years,
Or smile-illumined or dim with tears,
Green hills of life that slope to death,
And haunts of home, whose visted trees
Shade off to mournful cypresses
With the white amaranths underneath.
Even while I look, I can but heed
The restless sands' incessant fall,
Importunate hours that hours succeed,
Each clamorous with its own sharp need,
And duty keeping pace with all.
Shut down and clasp the heavy lids;
I hear again the voice that bids
The dreamer leave his dream midway
For larger hopes and gravier fears:
Life greatens in these later years,
The century's aloe73 flowers to-day!

Yet, haply, in some lull of life,
Some Truce of God which breaks its strife,
The worldling's eyes shall gather dew,
Dreaming in thoughtful city ways
Of winter joys his boyhood knew;
And dear and early friends—the few—
Who yet remain—shall pause to view
These Flemish pictures74 of old days;
Sit with me by the homestead hearth,
And stretch the hands of memory forth
To warm them at the wood-fire's blaze!
And thanks untraced to lips unknown
Shall greet me like the odors blown
From unseen meadows newly mown,
Or lilies floating in some pond,
Wood-fringed, the wayside gaze beyond;
The traveller owns the grateful sense
Of sweetness near, he knows not whence
And, pausing, takes with forehead bare
The benediction of the air.

1864—1865

73 A reused parchment on which the original writing is still faintly visible.
74 Legendary immortal flowers. 75 A plant said to bloom once each century.
76 Flemish seventeenth-century art was noted for its portrayal of domestic scenes.

OLD IRONSIDES1

Ay, tear her tattered ensign2 down!
Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see
That banner in the sky;
Beneath it rung the battle shout,—
The cannon's roar;—
And burst the clouds no more.

1 In 1830 Holmes read of plans to demolish the U.S. Constitution, the frigate that had defeated the British Guerrière in the War of 1812. The resulting poem was widely reprinted and created a response that saved the ship.
2 Flag.
THE CHAMBERED NAUTILUS

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign, —
Sails the unshadowed main, —
The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings.
In guls enchanted, where the Siren sings,
And coral reefs lie bare,
Where the cold sea-maidens rise to sun their streaming hair.

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;
Wrecked is the ship of pearl!
And every chambered cell,
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
Before thee lies revealed,—
Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

Year after year beheld the silent toil
That spread his lustrous coil;
Still, as the spiral grew,
He left the past year's dwelling for the new,

3Monsters in Greek myth who snatch away those who offend the gods and carry the offenders to retribution.
4The pearly nautilus, a mollusk of the South Pacific and Indian Oceans that builds its spiral shell by annually adding a larger section, or chamber, in which it lives. The Greeks believed it could move over the water by using a membrane as a sail.
5Pretend.
6Venturesome ship.
7A creature in Greek myth whose singing lured sailors to their destruction.
8Mermaids.
9Rainbow colored.

THE DEACON'S MASTERPIECE

OR, THE WONDERFUL "ONE-HOSS SHAY"!

A LOGICAL STORY

Have you heard of the wonderful one-hoss shay,
That was built in such a logical way
It ran a hundred years to a day,
And then, of a sudden, it — ah, but stay,
I'll tell you what happened without delay,
Scaring the parson into fits,
Frightening people out of their wits, —
Have you ever heard of that, I say?

Seventeen hundred and fifty-five.
Georgius Secundus was then alive, —
Snuffy old drone from the German hive.
That was the year when Lisbon-town
Saw the earth open and gulp her down, —
And Braddock's army was done so brown,

9Triton, the sea god of Greek myth, is often shown blowing a conch shell.
10A chaise, a two-wheeled, horse-drawn buggy.
11George II, the German-born King of England from 1727 to 1760.
12The Lisbon earthquake of 1755.
13Edward Braddock (1695–1755), commander of British forces in America. He was killed when his army was defeated by the French and Indians in July 1755.
Left without a scalp to its crown.
It was on the terrible Earthquake-day
That the Deacon finished the one-hoss shay.

Now in building of chaises, I tell you what,
There is always somewhere a weakest spot,—
In hub, ire, felloe, in spring or thill,  
In panel, or crossbar, or floor, or sill,
In screw, bolt, thoroughbrace,  lurk'mg still,
Find it somewhere you must and will,—
Above or below, or within or without,—
And that's the reason, beyond a doubt,
That a chaise breaks down, but doesn't wear out.

But the Deacon swore (as Deacons do,
With an "I dew vum," or an "I tell yeow")
He would build one shay to beat the taown
'N' the keounty 'n' all the kentry raoun';
It should be so built that it couldn't break daown:
"Fur," said the Deacon, "'t's mighty plain
Thut the weakes' place mus' stan' the strain;
'N' the way t' fix it, uz I maintain,
Is only jest
T' make that place uz strong uz the rest."

So the Deacon inquired of the village folk
Where he could find the strongest oak,
That couldn't be split nor bent nor broke,—
That was for spokes and floor and sills;
He sent for lancewood to make the thills;
The crossbars were ash, from the straightest trees,
The panels of white-wood, that cuts like cheese,
But lasts like iron for things like these;
The hubs of logs from the "Settler's ellum,"
Lost of its timber,—they couldn't sell 'em,
Never an axe had seen their chips,
And the wedges flew from between their lips,
Their blunt ends frizzled like celery-tips;
Step and prop-iron, bolt and screw,
Spring, tire, axle, and linchpin too,
Steel of the finest, bright and blue;
Thoroughbrace bison-skin, thick and wide;
Boot, top, dasher, from tough old hide
Found in the pit when the tanner died.
That was the way he "put her through"  
"There!" said the Deacon, "naow she'll dew!"

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5Wooden rim of a wheel.  6One of the two shafts between which a horse is harnessed.
6I.e., an elm planted by the first settler.  10Pin holding the wheel to the axle.
7Leather strap that holds the carriage body to the springs.  12"I do vow."
8Lurking still.
9I.e., an elm planted by the first settler.  13Pivoted bar to which the horse's harness is attached.
10A reddish-brown horse with a thin neck and a hairless tail like a rat's.
The parson was working his Sunday's text,—
Had got to fifthly, and stopped perplexed
At what the—Moses—was coming next.
All at once the horse stood still,
Close by the meet'n-house on the hill.
First a shiver, and then a thrill,¹
Then something decidedly like a spill.—
And the parson was sitting upon a rock,
At half past nine by the meet'n-house clock,—
Just the hour of the Earthquake shock!
What do you think the parson found,
When he got up and stared around?
The poor old chaise in a heap or mound,
As if it had been to the mill and ground!
You see, of course, if you're not a dunce,
How it went to pieces all at once,—
All at once, and nothing first,—
Just as bubbles do when they burst.

End of the wonderful one-hoss shay.
Logic is logic. That's all I say.

1858

James Russell Lowell 1819–1891

As a poet, essayist, editor, and public gentleman, James Russell Lowell reflected the taste of nineteenth-century America. Like Longfellow and Holmes he was one of the literary Brahmins who thought themselves to be the "untitled aristocracy" of Boston—and hence of all America. Lowell was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, into an honored New England family. At Harvard he was the class poet, and not long after his graduation he published his first volume of poetry, A Year's Life (1841). In a single year, 1848, he established himself firmly in New England's literary hierarchy by publishing four volumes that represented his most notable literary achievement: Poems: Second Series; A Fable for Critics; The Biglow Papers; and The Vision of Sir Launfal, a Christian parable in verse that became his most frequently reprinted work.

As a young man Lowell was an ardent reformer; he crusaded for abolition, temperance, vegetarianism, and women's rights. But as he grew older he became a conservative spokesman for the dominant and comfortable society that honored him. For thirty years he was a professor of literature at Harvard, filling the position vacated by the poet Longfellow. He was the first editor of the Atlantic Monthly and editor of the prestigious North American Review. He received honorary degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge. And for his political service to the Republican party he was made United States ambassador to Spain (1877–1880) and to England (1880–1885).

Through his lifetime Lowell was a prolific writer of poems, essays, and literary criticism, and in his last years he was considered to be America's most distinguished man of letters. His poetry was fluent, cultivated, and facile; his dialect verse and his rhymed satire crackled with witty commentary on the follies of his age and on the character of his literary contemporaries, among them Poe, who was "three thifths of him genius and two fifthshs good judge," and Thoreau, who "watched Nature like a detective."

Yet Lowell's preference was for the mannered elegance of a poetry filled with "classic niceties." His life and his writings were detached from the human concerns of such writers as Whitman, whom Lowell thought a humbug. As a result, his own efforts to unite art and ethics produced a moralizing literature in many ways typical of New England's "schoolroom" poets, gentlemen who, once exalted in reputation, were today best understood as emblems of the orthodoxy and the genteel hopes of an age that has long since passed away.


Text: The Writings of James Russell Lowell, 10 vols., 1880.

To the Dandelion

Dear common flower, that grow'st beside the way,
Fringing the dusty road with harmless gold,
First pledge of blithesome May,
Which children pluck, and full of pride uphold,
High-hearted buccaneers, o'erejoyed that they
An Eldorado ¹ in the grass have found.
 Which not the rich earth's ample round
May match in wealth, thou art more dear to me
Than all the prouder summer-blooms may be.

Gold such as thine ne'er drew the Spanish prow
Through the primeval hush of Indian seas,
Nor wrinkled the lean brow
Of age, to rob the lover's heart of ease;
'T is the Spring's largess, which she scatters now
To rich and poor alike, with lavish hand,
Though most hearts never understand

¹Legendary city of gold.