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SARAH ORNE JEWETT AND IRISH ROGER

By LEW COYLE

THE editors of St. Nicholas, a magazine for children, were enthusiastic about Gertrude Van R. Wickham’s idea to write about the dogs of famous Americans. They commissioned Mrs. Wickham to prepare a three-part article, and the Wickham correspondence began to fly.1

Letters were sent to dozens of prominent people: Sarah Orne Jewett, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Howells, Garfield, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and many others. A few replied to the appeal for information with detailed letters praising their pets — Miss Jewett was one of these. Others, like Howells, Holmes, and Harte, dismissed the subject curtly. Howells wrote: “I have no dog and I am very much afraid of other people’s.”2 Holmes wrote: “I keep no dogs. My neighbors have sometimes kept too many for my peace and comfort.” Harte sneered: “I regret that my relations with the canine race have been of too vague, promiscuous and general a character ... to add anything of interest to your professed entertaining article.”

One of the most humorous disappointments suffered by Mrs. Wickham came from Edward W. Emerson, son of Ralph Waldo Emerson: “My answer to your question must be short and, I fear, unsatisfactory. My father had no liking for dogs, either in his youth or mature life and never kept one. He used to read us with amusement, not without sympathy, how when a lady asked the Rev. Sydney Smith for a motto to be engraved on the collar of her little dog ‘Spot’ the divine suggested the line from Macbeth as fitting: ‘Out! damned Spot.’ ”

Longfellow, according to his brother Sam, “never had a pet nor any interest in one.” Robert Lincoln wrote: “My father

1 “Dogs of Noted Americans” (June 1888), 595-600; (July 1888), 673-678; (May 1889), 541-545.

2 Howells sidestepped cats, too: “I never had a cat, pet or otherwise,” he wrote. “I like them on general principles, but know nothing of them.” See Helen M. Winslow. “Some Literary Cats.” St. Nicholas (August 1900), 826.
had no special fondness for dogs and kept none." Julian Hawthorne reported that Nathaniel’s “predilection was rather for cats.” Henry Clay, reported his son John, had little fondness for dogs, and they had a distaste for him.

Mrs. Wickham’s epistolary harvest gathered bushels of good fruit, too, and her articles in St. Nicholas included warm stories about the dogs of James A. Garfield, Robert E. Lee, Edward Eggleston, John Greenleaf Whittier, Constance Fenimore Woolson, Frances Hodgson Burnett, John Burroughs, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Frank R. Stockton, General Winfield Hancock, Admiral David Porter, and Sarah Orne Jewett.

Used in Part III of the series, Miss Jewett’s letter appeared much as it is transcribed below. Mrs. Wickham did not quote directly but adapted the letter to a third person narrative, making minor changes, amplifying thoughts, adding observations, and simplifying terms for her young readers. Capitalizing upon the charm of Miss Jewett’s letter, Mrs. Wickham’s sensitive editing preserved the delightful of the original, which was written from Richfield, New York, on August 29, 1886:

My Dear Mrs. Wickham

Indeed I have a dog and a very dear one of much and varied information and great dignity of character. His name is Roger and he is a large Irish Setter with a splendid set of fringes to his paws and tail, and two eyes that ask more questions and make more requests than dogs I know. And it is nearly impossible to refuse his requests that he is quite in danger of being spoiled or would be if he were not so sensible — Once the Reverend J.G. Wood who understands dog life as well as anybody in the world, asked us reproachfully while Roger lay before the library fire on a very soft rug, if he ever had to do anything he didn’t like. And I felt for a long time afterward that I might be neglecting the dear dog’s moral education.

Roger spends his winters in Boston where luckily he has a good sized garden to run about in on the shore of the Charles River, but he likes to be taken out for a long walk and follows me so carefully and politely that I feel very much honoured and obliged. It is such a delight and such a touching thing to see what pleasure he gives the people in the

3 My wife points out evidence to the contrary in the following quotation from Anna L. Boyden’s War Reminiscences (Boston, 1887), 82: “Even his little dog Jip was instrumental in relieving his master of some portion of his burden, for the little fellow was never absent from the Presidential lunch. He was always in Mr. Lincoln’s lap to claim his portion first, and was caressed and petted by him through the whole meal.” This was from a member of Lincoln’s household staff. Quoted in Ruth Painter Randall, Mary Lincoln (Boston, 1953), 277-278.
shops and I quite forget my errands sometimes in talking about him. Roger himself cannot help feeling how tired faces light up when he comes by on his four paws with wagging tail and I am sure that he is very grateful to the tired hands that pat him — and knows that he arouses a too uncommon feeling of common humanity and sympathy — But any mention of Roger without a word of his best friend Patrick Lynch, would be incomplete. All his best loyalty and affection show themselves at the sound of Patrick's step — for this means all outdoors, and the market, and long scurries about town and splashes in the frog-pond, and, more than that, it means one person that understands what Roger wants and why he wants it — whether Patrick has learned dog-language or Roger knows how to whine English I really cannot tell but it must be one or the other. All day Roger is expecting some sort of surprise and pleasure with this most congenial of his friends, but every evening he condescends to spend quietly with the rest of the family and comes tick-toeing along the hall floor and upstairs to the library, as if he were well aware that he conferred a real benefaction — alas, there are sometimes bonnets outward bound which give him a great sorrow if he finds that as often happens he must stay at home. But if he is invited to go what leaping and whining in noisy keys! What rushing along snowy streets! What treeing of unlucky pussies and scattering of wayfarers on account of his size and apparent fierceness! But the best place to see this dog is in the summer by the sea where he runs about in the sunshine shining like copper and always begging somebody for a walk or barking at the top of a ledge for the sake of being occupied in some way! — Mrs. Fields is more than ever his best mistress there for she oftenest invites him to walk along the beach and chase sand peeps. Strange to say this amusement never fails though the sand peeps always fly to seaward and disappoint their eager hunter.

I hope that I have not said too much — I think your plan a charming one, and wish you great success.

Yours sincerely

Mrs. Fields

4 Mrs. James T. Fields (Annie Adams), 1834-1915.

5 Mrs. Wickham wrote about Roger in Part III of her series. It remained for Helen Winslow to tell the story of Miss Jewett's cats: "I look back over a long line of cats," wrote Miss Jewett, "from a certain poor 'Spotty,' who died in a fit under the library window when I was less than five years old, to a lawless, fluffy coon-cat now in my possession" (923).