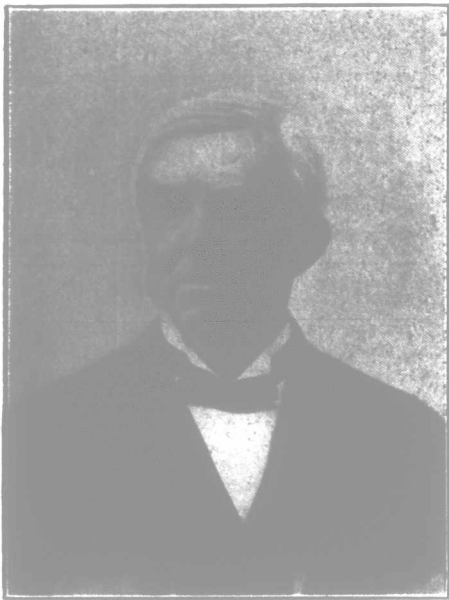


Little Trips Among the Eminent.



Oliver Wendell Holmes.
(1809 - 1894.)

Almost everyone has heard Boston spoken of as "The Hub," but comparatively few know that the name originated with Oliver Wendell Holmes. "Boston State-House is the hub of the solar system," he said, with playful patriotism, in the most famous of his books. "You couldn't pry that out of a Boston man if you had the tire of all creation straightened out for a crow-bar."

Holmes, it will be seen, recognized the idiosyncrasy of his fellow citizens in this respect; yet he joyfully took part in that idiosyncrasy. He was Bostonian to the core, American to the core, aristocrat to the core, university man to the core. Indeed, he has been called "the University poet" of America.

"Humorist, essayist, novelist, poet, physician," say the encyclopaedia. "Born in Cambridge, Mass., August 29th, 1809." He was the son of a minister of the First Parish Church of his native town, and, like the great majority of others who have attained to excellence in literature, was surrounded from infancy by an atmosphere of books. In 1825 he entered Harvard University, from which he graduated in the famous class of '29. In the same year he composed one of the best known of his poems, "Old Ironsides."

For a year he applied himself to law, then turned his attention to medicine, and for two years studied in Paris, from which he returned in 1835 with, as he said, a good stock of knowledge, some experience, and two skeletons. His growing reputation as humorist and poet, however, stood in the way of his advancement as a physician, and it is told that, when at one time he was advised to divide his practice in order to get more time for literary work, he replied that he "couldn't very well, as he had only one patient."

His intellectual attainments, however, recommended him to the far-seeing, and he was presently offered, and accepted joyfully, the Chair of Anatomy in Dartmouth College. A few years later he was appointed Parkman Professor of Anatomy and Physiology in Harvard, where, it is

recorded, the poet and humorist constantly appearing in his lectures, made them a delight to the students. "In the dissecting room, however," says a biographer, "his reverence for the poor body on the table was always that of the man who wrote 'The Human Temple,' and who always stood awestruck upon the shrine of that temple's mystery."

In 1857 the Atlantic Monthly was established, and with it began a new career for Doctor Holmes, since Lowell, who was the editor, with much perspicacity, insisted on having him taken on the staff as principal contributor.

Twenty-six years before this time, Holmes had published in the New England Magazine two or three articles written in a conversational style; he now thought of these, resolved to resume them, and so began his famous series of "Autocrat" articles with the statement, rather puzzling to the uninitiated: "I was just going to say, when I was interrupted," etc.

This series, "The Autocrat at the Breakfast Table," at once marked Dr. Holmes as an original writer of outstanding ability. There have been many essayists, but among them Dr. Holmes holds a place distinctly his own. "There was no 'Autocrat' before him; there has been none since." Even he himself failed to hold to this standard. The "Autocrat" was written at the height of his powers, when the maturity of age had come to him, and the liveliness of youth had not yet passed. "The Professor," and then "The Poet at the Breakfast Table," followed, but the order is a descending one, and the first "Autocrat," with its discursive ramblings on almost every topic, from horse-racing to "religious" insanity, from meerschaum pipes to moral obligations, from boxing to Shakespeare, will continue to be the book by which Oliver Wendell Holmes will be most widely known. The "remarks," as those familiar with the book will remember, are given in the form of conversations at a boarding-house table, the Autocrat taking the lead. Touches of pathos, flashes of wit, bits of satire, grave reflections, keen pronouncements alternate, and not infrequently, the trick of dropping from the sublime to the ridiculous is adopted—readers of Jerome K. Jerome will here see some slight analogy. Throughout appears, too, the man himself, the aristocrat, the man of culture, yet the hater of shams and stupidity.

Possibly Dr. Holmes' sympathies had been somewhat restricted. The great civil war broadened them somewhat, the more so, perhaps, that he had a son at the front who was wounded, the son to whom he proudly refers in his poem "My Hunt for the Captain."

Passing his essays, one finds Dr. Holmes a most prolific writer, along other lines. He wrote noted biographies, on Jonathan Edwards (theologian), Motley, and Emerson. He also wrote three novels, "The Guardian Angel," "A Moral Antipathy," and "Elsie Venner," the last of which has been called "the snake-story of literature." None of his novels, however, attained the very highest rank, as did those of Hawthorne. The scientist, the physician, the teacher, appears in them, to the obscurity of the romance, the story, the prose-poetry upon which the highest type of novel depends.

deed, he himself has quoted with much relish, the phrase of a lady who had spoken to him of his "medicated novels." They were, however, distinctly his own. The personality of Dr. Holmes is never wanting.

In poetry he sometimes struck a clearer note. "The Chambered Nautilus," has been numbered among the gems of poetry, and that he himself was no mean judge of his achievement in this bit, is evident from the fact that he said of it, "When I wrote that, I did better than I could." "The Chambered Nautilus," "The Last Leaf"—Lincoln's favorite—and others, were scattered among the essays of "The Autocrat."

He wrote many other poems, however, most of them by request, for anniversaries and other public functions.

In 1889 he read the last, "After the Curfew," at one of the annual meetings of his college class. The next year there was another meeting, "three present," as William Deans-Howells has told us, "but no poem—very quiet—something very like tears." Then even these two or three dropped off, and at last Dr. Holmes was left, "the last leaf," as has been noted, "on the tree of Boston's goodly men." On the 7th of October, 1894, he himself slipped quietly away, at the ripe age of 85 years. Almost to the last he was marvellously in possession of those brilliant faculties which rendered him one of the men most to be courted and admired in his day.

Upon one occasion, when Holmes was at the height of his powers, Henry James, father of the novelist of that name, said to him: "Holmes, you are intellectually the most alive man I ever knew." "I am, I am," returned he. "From the crown of my head to the sole of my foot, I'm alive, I'm alive." Mr. Howells, who met him at this time, remarks: "The secret of the man who is universally interesting is that he is universally interested, and this was, above all, the secret of the charm that Dr. Holmes had for everyone."

It is evident that a man of such personality as is revealed by these and a thousand other memoirs, in conjunction with the intellectuality and principle of Dr. Holmes, must be a force in his time; nor was the influence of this man lost with his own departure from the arena of this world's activities. "With his joyous laughter," as a student of his life (Richardson) has written, "he shook to its foundations the traditional distrust of the New England conscience in the undisguised enjoyment of life's various good. He heartily believed in human happiness, and he did much to make it more abundant." And again: "Manliness finds in him a friend, and culture a companion. Though as a poet he is almost great, but assuredly not great; while, as a prose essayist he must ever stand below the greater American whose biography he wrote (Emerson), his place on the shelf is characteristic, and likely to remain undisturbed. He has added to the valuable part of creative literature, while he has shown how an intense and perpetual localism, under the touch of a true though narrow genius and aided by culture, may earn a place in the world's republic of letters."

From "Literary Friends and Acquaintances": Howells.

Speaking of Holmes in his old age

Howells says: "He was very constant at the Saturday Club, as long as his strength permitted, and few of its members missed fewer of its meetings. He continued to sit at the table until the ghosts of Hawthorne, of Emerson, of Longfellow, of Lowell, out of others less famous, bore him company there among the younger men in the flesh. It must have been very melancholy, but nothing could deeply cloud his most cheerful spirit. . . . The last time I was at that table, he sat alone there among those great memories."

"In his pleasant study, he lived among the books, which seemed to multiply from case to case and shelf to shelf, and climb from floor to ceiling. Everything was in exquisite order, and the desk where he wrote was as scrupulously neat as if the sloven disarray of most authors' desks were impossible to him."

"As he grew older, he must have had, of course, an old man's disposition to speak of his infirmities, but it was fine to see him catch himself up in this, when he became conscious of it, and stop short with an abrupt turn to something else. . . . He carried his slight figure erect, and until his latest years his step was quick and sure. If you met him in the street, you encountered a spare, carefully-dressed old gentleman, with a clean-shaven face and a friendly smile, qualified by the involuntary frown of his thick, senile brows; well-coated, lustrously-shod, well-gloved, in a silk hat, latterly wound with a mourning weed."

"He was not a prophet like Emerson, nor ever a voice crying in the wilderness like Whittier or Lowell. His note was heard, rather, amid the sweet security of streets, but it was always for a finer and gentler civility. . . . He was not constructive; he was essentially observant, and in this he showed the scientific nature. He made his reader known to himself, first in the little, and then in the larger, things. From first to last he was a censor, but a most winning and delightful censor, who could make us feel that our faults were other people's."

A New Book of Poems.

It may be interesting news to some of our readers to hear that Mr. Lyman C. Smith, of Oshawa, has recently issued a book of poems, "A Blossom of the Sea, and Other Poems."

In his introduction, in which he compares his volume to a "wreath of blooms," Mr. Smith says:

"I proffer these to bring what cheer they may
To all that hurry on the crowded way;
For me, the breathings of their fragrant lips,
Their modest faces peering from the sod,
The touches of their velvet fingertips
Have cheered the darkest valleys
I have trod

—proof enough, if proof were needed, that the author writes for the "love" of writing, the only motive that should ever actuate the artist, whether in literature, music or art.

It is very evident, on reading the poems, that the great problems of death and suffering have been much in the writer's mind, and that he has settled the question for himself by looking to a perfect end, a "Far