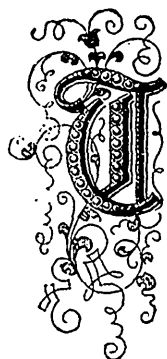


THE AUTOCRAT OF THE BREAKFAST TABLE.



THE book which bears the above title does not require to be chewed and digested, according to Bacon's prescription, but it is swallowed and tasted with great relish. It is not bread and meat to sate the craving for truth, it is light claret which may be swallowed after, which tickles the palate and aids the digestion. That is all the author meant it to be, for one does not choose a quiet breakfast table as a place for saying astounding things. The autocrat has somewhere in his talks intimated that it was summer reading, by which we usually understand something of an entertaining nature, which does not require much mastication on the part of the reader, but slips down easily like his ice-cream. The proper mood for reading it is that which commonly comes on after breakfast. After you have read it you will probably set it on that shelf in your memory labelled "Humorous," but you will not forget that there is much in it that is beautiful, a great deal that is wise, and many things that are curious. It is a mosaic of wit, wisdom, pathos, and a myriad of unclassified curiosities. Oliver Wendell Holmes was a man of most happy turn of mind and this book is simply a record of its products for a time. Its work is not at all bookish in form, it is rather conversational. It has no unity of topic or plot, each paragraph is a new subject. It is only a record of conversation held over the breakfast table and was not intended for book form when written. When the *Atlantic Monthly* was started, James Russell Lowell accepted the editor's chair only on condition that Dr. Holmes would be a contributor. The genial

doctor consented and contributed this series of familiar talks. It was an eminent success, his wit caught the fancy of the people and he became their favorite.

In the *English Literature* recently issued by the Christian Brothers, Holmes is introduced with the remark—"extremes meet. The staid New Englander becomes a world's wit: the straight-laced Puritan gives society a son whose mission is to sow mirth broadcast as he passes along, to send merry laughter a-ringing wherever he is read." It is indeed remarkable that the people's humorist should spring from a stock whose traditions were so sombre. However, we must remember that Holmes is a Puritan of the nineteenth century, and that the staid New Englanders are now something more than the rugged farmers of Independence days. The activity which has become a national characteristic pervades their literature, and the keen discernment, ingenious analogy and pleasant satire which distinguish Dr. Holmes are not, after all, such a paradox in the son of a Puritan minister. He is the "nation's humorist" not only because he has pleased the people, but because he has produced wit peculiar to the people. There is something about his wit that is refined and delicate; it does not excite a sidesplitting laugh such as pleases the vulgar taste, but only a quiet laugh or a good-natured smile.

Although the book consists principally of lectures by the autocrat, it has other features which enliven it a great deal, and contribute to the spirit of it. In the characters he has drawn around the breakfast table, one is reminded of Chaucer's company in the *Canterbury Tales*. Of course the autocrat handles the characters as though they were mere chance listeners, but second thought reveals a purpose in the personnel. There