

The perusal of literature develops the intellectual powers; increases our knowledge of all other sciences and arts; fills out the vacancies left in our national history; and is in itself pleasing, interesting and full of profit, whether pursued as a recreation or as a study.

SIGMA.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

THE subject of this sketch was born at Cambridge, Mass., in 1809, in an old-fashioned gambrel-roofed house, to which he feelingly refers more than once in his writings.

There is no doubt but that the precocious young Oliver received many a worthy lesson which played an important part in shaping his future destiny and in contributing to his greatness, from his father, an eminent and talented clergyman. At the age of sixteen he entered Harvard College, where he soon distinguished himself, particularly by his class poems and poetical contributions to the "Collegian." Upon graduating in 1829, he entered upon the study of law. But the young poet could not find in copying deeds and perusing musty law-books, work congenial to his nature. He accordingly gave it up for the study of medicine, and going to Paris, spent some years in the famous hospitals of that city. He received the degree of M.D. in 1836, and two years after was chosen professor of Anatomy and Physiology, in Dartmouth College, and in 1847, was elected to fill the same chair in the Medical College of Harvard University, a position which he has filled with the greatest credit to himself and to the utmost satisfaction of those who came under his tuition. Through all this long period of professional labour, he has been an earnest and enthusiastic worker in nearly every department of literature. His genius shines forth with equal lustre in the lecture-room as in his poetry, in his table-talk as in his scientific researches. It would be difficult to find a man who has done so many things in the course of a long, busy life, and who, at the same time, has performed them so remarkably well. His character is unique and style peculiarly his own. While the intellects of some great men are not difficult of analysis, that of Holmes, while manifesting many strongly marked attributes, eludes all attempts at comparison and preserves its individuality in all his works.

He is a true poet "born and not made." His verse is overflowing with freshness and originality, in which tender sentiment, humour and mirthful satire are strangely combined. Some of his patriotic lyrics are scarcely surpassed in their high spirit by the best pieces of Campbell. The following stanza from

"Union and Liberty," will illustrate this class of his poems,

"Lord of the Universe! shield us and guide us,
Trusting thee always, through shadow and sun!
Thou hast united us—who shall divide us?
Keep us, O, keep us, the Many in One!
Up with our banner bright,
Spinkled with starry light;
Spread its fair emblems from mountain to shore,
While through the sounding sky
Loud rings the nation's cry—
Union and Liberty! One evermore."

In the best of his poetry there is a delicacy of feeling, vivacity of observation and a literary elegance and ease seldom surpassed. The "Last Leaf" is one of those rare poems in which humour and pathos are successfully mingled. Perhaps no one, since Pope, has possessed a like faculty of condensing so much power into lines of such elastic and graceful movement. As an example of his great proficiency in this style, some lines may be given from his prologue to the Autocrat:—

"Rudolph, professor of the headsman's trade,
Alike was famous for his arm and blade.
One day a prisoner Justice was to kill
Knelt at the block to test the headsman's skill.
Bare-armed, swarthy-visaged, gaunt and shaggy browed,
Rudolph the headsman rose above the crowd;
His falchion lightened with a sudden gleam,
As the pike's armour flashes in the stream.
He sheathed his blade, he turned as if to go—
The victim knelt, still waiting for the blow.
'Why strikest not? perform thy murderous act.'
The prisoner said (his voice was slightly cracked.)
'Friend, I have struck,' the artist straight replied;
Wait but one moment, and yourself decide.
He held his snuff-box—'now then if you please'—
The prisoner sniffed and with a crashing sneeze,
Off his head tumbled—bowed along the floor—
Bounced down the steps—the prisoner said no more.
'Woman! thy falchion is a glittering eye;
If death lurks in it, oh how sweet to die!
Thou takest hearts as Rudolph took the head;
We die of love, and never dream we're dead."

Another characteristic of Holmes, as displayed in some of his finest poems, is his entire sympathy and love for children and all that is childlike. Nothing can be more touching than his description of the thrush-like thrill in the voice of the poor little girl lying crushed by a cruel accident in a Paris hospital. The great kindness and gentleness of heart of this man shine forth in such poems as these, and we almost forget the man and his achievements, in wonder at his extreme tenderness. In the estimation of the thoughtless, Holmes may have suffered as the author of comic verses. As he himself says, they—

"Suspect the azure blossom that unfolds upon the shoot,
As if wisdom's old potato could not flourish at the root."

But in so doing, such persons see only the surface ripple and sparkle, while the wealth of thought and sentiment lie below. The very fact of his being able