Baldwin's Biographical Booklets

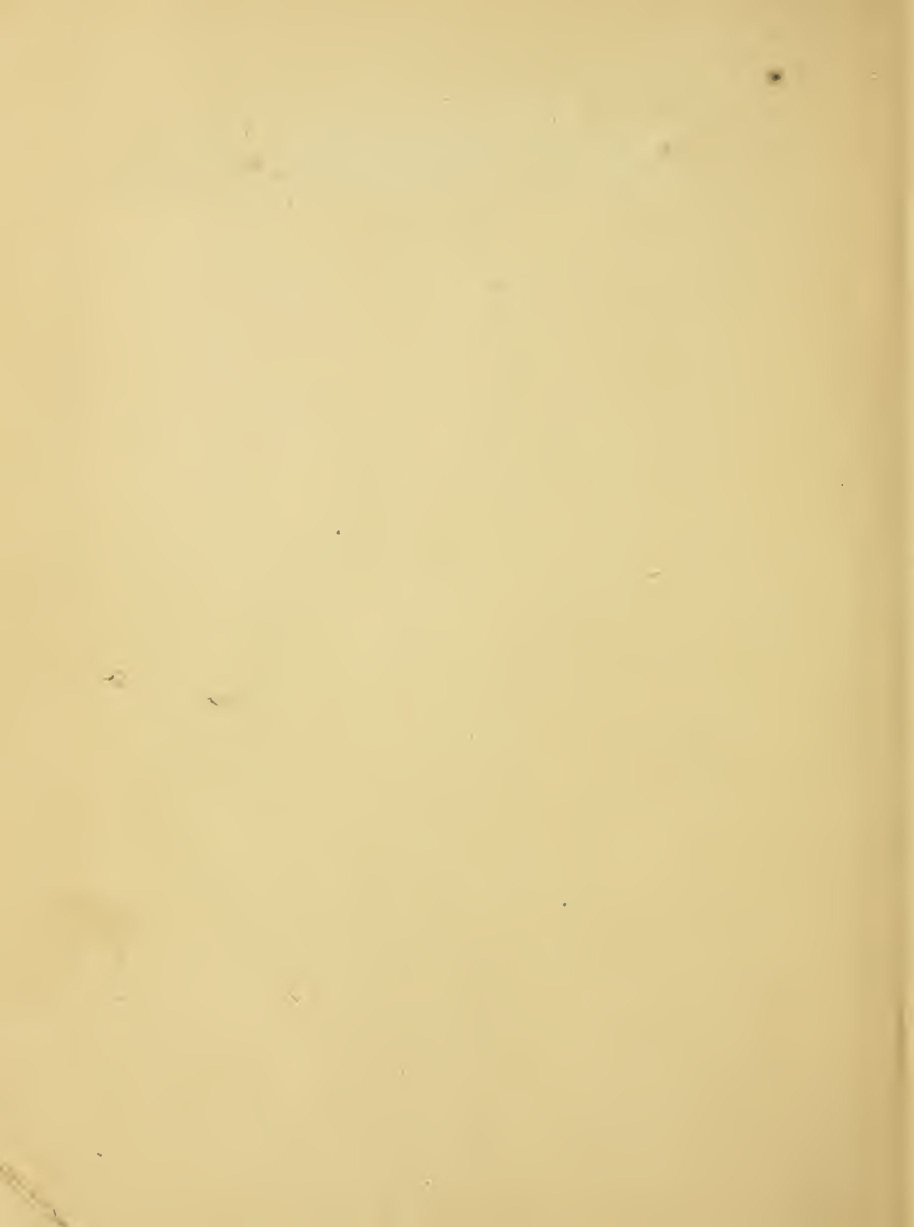
THE STORY OF Oliver Wendell Holmes

FOR YOUNG READERS

BY

SHERWIN CODY

WERNER SCHOOL BOOK COMPANY
CHICAGO NEW YORK BOSTON



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SHERWIN CODY

Author of "The Art of Short Story Writing," "Story Composition," "In the Heart of the Hills," etc.

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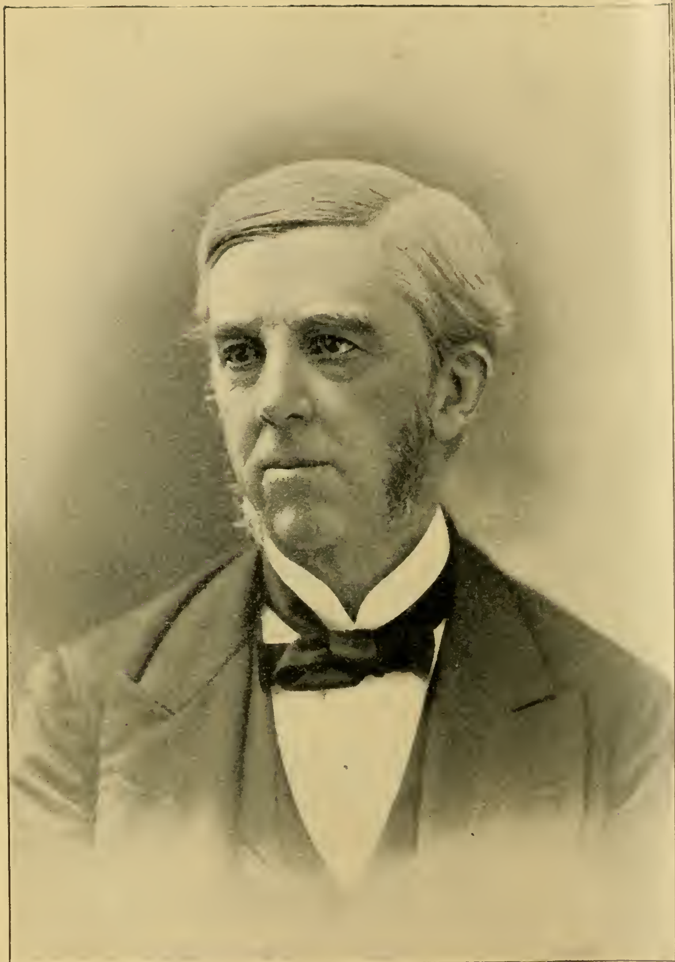

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

HOLMES

CHAPTER I

THE TRUE HUMORIST

Oliver Wendell Holmes was the humorist among American poets, always with a smile around his mouth and a twinkle in his eye, and a kindly little half-hidden joke in everything he had to say. He was a humorist of the genuine good-humored sort, the "genial Autocrat," the kindly and obliging friend (for did he not write a poem on every possible occasion at the request of all sorts of people?) How kind, how pathetic, yet how amusing, are the sweet, quaint lines of "The Last Leaf":

> My grandmamma has said—
> Poor old lady, she is dead
> Long ago—
> That he had a Roman nose,
> And his cheek was like a rose
> In the snow;

But now his nose is thin,
And it rests upon his chin
Like a staff;
And a crook is in his back,
And a melancholy crack
In his laugh.

I know it is a sin
For me to sit and grin
At him here;
But the old three-cornered hat,
And the breeches, and all that,
Are so queer!

And if I should live to be
The last leaf upon the tree
In the spring,
Let them smile, as I do now,
At the old forsaken bough
Where I cling.

Dear Doctor Holmes! He did indeed live to be the last leaf upon the tree ; but to the very end he went scattering his humorous and good-humored words among his friends wherever he was, making people happier as well as wiser, more light-hearted

as well as more thoughtful, until they turned from crying to laughing. "The Last Leaf" is a little sad, notwithstanding its lightness and fun. But there is no sadness in this, the funniest poem that Holmes ever wrote:

THE HEIGHT OF THE RIDICULOUS

I wrote some lines once on a time
  In wondrous merry mood,
And thought, as usual, men would say
  They were exceeding good.

They were so queer, so very queer,
  I laughed as I would die;
Albeit in the general way,
  A sober man am I.

I called my servant, and he came;
  How kind it was of him
To mind a slender man like me,
  He of the mighty limb!

'These to the printer," I exclaimed,
  And, in my humorous way,
I added (as a trifling jest),
  "There 'll be the devil to pay."

He took the paper, and I watched,
  And saw him peep within;
At the first line he read, his face
  Was all upon the grin.

He read the next, the grin grew broad,
  And shot from ear to ear;
He read the third, a chuckling noise
  I now began to hear.

The fourth, he broke into a roar;
  The fifth, his waistband split;
The sixth, he burst five buttons off,
  And tumbled in a fit.

Ten days and nights, with sleepless eye
  I watched that wretched man;
And since, I never dare to write
  As funny as I can.

CHAPTER II

THE BIRTH OF OLIVER HOLMES

"In the last week of August used to fall Commencement day at Cambridge," remarks the doctor. "I remember that week well, for some-

thing happened to me once at that time, namely, I was born."

It was in the year 1809—the same year that Gladstone, Tennyson, Darwin, and Lincoln were born—and on August 29. There is still in existence an old and yellow almanac that belonged once to Dr. Abiel Holmes, Oliver's father. On the page given to August the numbers of the days run down the left-hand side, 1, 2, 3, down to 28, 29, 30, 31. Opposite 29 are two little parallel lines, used as a star or mark of reference, and at the bottom of the page the two little lines are repeated, and after them is written in ink "*son b.*" Of course "*b*" stands for "born." A few grains of black sand were scattered over the wet ink to prevent it from blotting, and some of those grains of sand may be seen glistening there to this day. Oliver Wendell Holmes was born, and the fact of his birth was thus recorded in the almanac—"*son b.*"

Samuel Johnson was born in 1709; or, as Holmes expresses it, "the year 1709 was made ponderous and illustrious in English history by his birth." It appeared to strike Holmes as a huge joke that

he had been born just one hundred years after Dr. Johnson, and he amused himself by following out the parallel of their lives. Every year he used to take down his copy of Boswell's "Life of Johnson" to see what the big, wise old grumbler was doing in that year, just a hundred years before. At last, in the year 1884, when he came to the end of Johnson's life, he said that he felt that the incubus was raised; he had outlived the ponderous parallel.

The birth of the "laughing philosopher," as Holmes has been called, took place in a very old house in Cambridge, close to Harvard College, and made famous in his poems as "the old gambrel-roofed house." After the battle of Lexington, General-in-chief Artemas Ward had made this house the headquarters for the rallying of the patriots, and General Warren had stopped there on his way to Bunker Hill. George Washington and other famous men in those days must often have darkened its doors.

For years it stood, this quaint old house in which Holmes was born and grew to manhood, and from

which he went to Harvard College; but before he died the property was sold to the University and the house was torn down. Holmes admitted that it was "a case of justifiable domicide." He went to pay it a last visit, and "found a ghost in each and every chamber and closet," and to each he said a fond goodbye. When the land was leveled down he did not care to go that way again.

Oliver's father, Dr. Abiel Holmes, was an orthodox clergyman of the strictest kind. But he was nearly as good-natured as his son. He was a handsome young man, and all the girls used to say, "There goes Holmes—look!"

Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson once found a letter written by his mother when she was a girl, in which she gives some gossip about Dr. Abiel. He sent it to his friend Oliver Wendell and you can imagine the doctor's amusement when he read the following paragraph:

"Now, mamma, I am going to surprise you. Mr. Abiel Holmes, of Cambridge, whom we so kindly chalked out for Miss N. W., is going to be married and, of all folks in the world, guess who

to! Miss Sally Wendell! I am sure you will not believe it. However, it is an absolute fact, for Harriet and M. Jackson told Miss P. Russell so, who told us; it has been kept secret for six weeks, nobody knows for what. I could not believe it for some time, and scarcely can now; however, it is a fact, they say."

Evidently girls a hundred years ago wrote much as they do now.

CHAPTER III

AN AMERICAN ARISTOCRAT

Oliver Wendell Holmes belonged to one of the most aristocratic families of Boston, and he seemed proud of it. But he was an aristocrat of the right sort. Said he: "I go for the man with the family portraits against the one with the twenty-cent daguerreotype, *unless* I find out that the latter is the better of the two." He said also: "I like to see worthless rich people yield their places to deserving poor ones, who, beginning with sixpence or nothing, come out at last on

Beacon street and have the sun come into their windows all the year round."

He inherited good blood through three lines, each of which was represented in his own name. The Oliver represents his Boston "blue blood," which came to him from both his father's and his mother's family. One of his ancestors was Lieutenant-Governor Andrew Oliver, the distributor of stamps in Boston, whom the people hated so, though he was one of the richest of the old Bostonians, had coaches, a chariot, and negro slaves, as well as good sterling silver plate that exists in the Holmes and Oliver families to this day.

The Wendell stands for the old Dutch family of Wendells, who had moved from Albany to Boston, and who came originally from Embden, in East Friesland, just on the border line between Germany and the Netherlands. The Wendells are still a wealthy and influential family in Albany, solid old Dutch burghers. Two of Dr. Holmes's Dutch ancestors were shoemakers ; one was a fur trader.

Another of Holmes's forefathers on his mother's side was Governor Thomas Dudley, of whom the famous Cotton Mather wrote these verses :

> "In books a prodigal, they say ;
> A living cyclopedia ;
> Of histories of church and priest,
> A full compendium, at least ;
> A table-talker, rich in sense,
> And witty without wit's pretense."

Governor Dudley's daughter, Mrs. Anne Bradstreet, from whom Holmes was descended, was the first American poet. In 1650 she published the first volume of verse ever written by an American. It came out in London, and was entitled "The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America," and so popular was it that it went through eight editions. Among the other descendants of this first American poetess were William Ellery Channing and Wendell Phillips.

The first Holmes in the genealogy was a lawyer of Gray's Inn, London. John Holmes was born near Boston, and went in 1686 to help settle Woodstock, Connecticut. Holmes's great-grand-

mother Bathsheba, the wife of David Holmes, was a most remarkable lady. She was famous as a doctor and nurse.

They tell a fine story of her daring, how once, in 1717, when the snow almost buried the houses after a terrible storm, she climbed out of the upper window of her house in Woodstock and traveled on snowshoes over hill and dale to Dudley, Massachusetts, to attend a sick woman. She was accompanied by two men, who held the ends of a long pole, while she held on in the middle.

There is another remarkable story told of her. Those were the days of Indian massacres. When the men went out to work they took their guns with them, leaving the women in the fort or garrison house.

Once the women when alone asked, "Who will go to the garden for vegetables?" Bathsheba Holmes alone dared venture out. She got her vegetables and came back, but not until years afterward did she know in what danger she had been. Then a solitary, decrepit Indian, broken

in spirit, called at her door to beg for cider, promising to tell her a story if he got his drink.

She gave him the cider and he told his story. It related to the brave lady herself. He said that when she went to the garden for vegetables, on that occasion long ago, he had been hidden in the woods and had seen her, and had determined to kill her. He had bent his bow and aimed his arrow well, and in a moment he would have let it fly; but a mysterious power stayed his arm; he couldn't shoot. When she had gone safely into the garden he called himself a coward and determined to have her life when she came out. But, as she passed on her way back to the fort, the same power stayed his arm again, and he wondered that he could not kill a squaw. He had always thought that it was the Great Spirit who held his arm and saved her life. It was in this mysterious way that God preserved the line that was finally to give us the "genial autocrat," the "good doctor."

Our poet's grandfather Holmes was a captain in the French and Indian war, and a surgeon in

the Revolution, dying a year or two before the close of the latter war.

So you see what a thorough aristocrat, of the true American kind, Oliver Wendell Holmes was.

CHAPTER IV

CAMBRIDGE

Holmes, the poet, was born and brought up in a poetic town. The old, yellow, hip-roofed house stood close beside the grounds of Harvard College; and all around were homes of men who were famous or were to be famous. Cambridge has always been a quaint, quiet, peaceful, well-bred town. It stands at the back door of Boston, a half hour's walk from that "hub of the solar system." Elms and poplars line its streets, its houses look like rich old relics, and everywhere are evidences of comfort and culture. Imagine how George Washington and General Warren, and all the Revolutionary heroes walked up and down these streets! Already in the time of Washington many famous

people had lived there; and after him came a whole procession of great men, one after another—Longfellow, Emerson, Sumner, Garrison, Motley—their names are too many to mention.

In the center of the town are the Harvard College buildings, of brick and stone, some old, some new, surrounded by broad green lawns, and some of them overrun with ivy. Then, running out from the college grounds as a hub, are streets like the spokes of a wheel. In one direction is Mount Auburn cemetery, where hundreds of the famous dead lie buried, and which is the most beautiful cemetery in the United States. In another direction are Lexington and Concord, while on another side the Charles River flows serenely along towards Boston Bay.

Everywhere about are to be seen college students and professors. Here is a dapper young man with a pointed beard — the new professor of English; there is a bent old man, white-haired, tottering in his gait—he is the famous professor of Greek. Some of the students are gay and always cracking jokes; others have deepset eyes and shabby

clothes—"plugs" the others call them, for they are very serious minded young fellows and never waste a moment of time. Then there are many more who go singing and shouting through the streets at late hours in the night, causing the people who are abed and asleep to be aroused from their slumbers only to stick their heads out of the windows and silently wish the young fellows were anywhere but in Cambridge.

Such is this famous college town; and a very enjoyable place it is to live in. A great many famous people come here to preach in the churches, or to lecture, or to speak at banquets and meetings. A great many pretty girls come here to see the sights and visit their brothers—and look at the crowds of handsome young men.

In this old college town, this young aristocrat, the descendant of patriots and governors and men of wealth and women of beauty, grew quietly up to manhood. He went to school, learned his lessons well, but not too well, never got into trouble, had a good time, and did not fret or worry about anything, or annoy anybody, even his teachers.

There is a story of a famous feruling that he got—only one—and years afterward the teacher came to him to apologize. Holmes in a letter tells in his humorous way how the repentant master came and introduced himself to the now famous poet, how in an embarrassed manner he recalled old days, and finally the feruling, and then said he was sorry he had given it. Holmes declared he had richly deserved it; but the schoolmaster was glad to get away. Apologizing to a pupil for whipping him is indeed an embarrassing thing.

It was not at school, however, but in his father's library that Oliver learned most. That room in the corner of the old house where were the dents of the British muskets, was the study, and it was filled from floor to ceiling, every wall, with books. He says he "bumped about among books from the time when he was hardly taller than one of his father's or grandfather's folios."

Beside the library, there was the old garden, which he himself has quaintly described. "There were old lilac bushes at the right of the entrance, and in the corner at the left that remarkable moral

pear tree which gave me one of my first lessons in life. Its fruit never ripened, but always rotted at the core just before it began to grow mellow. It was a vulgar specimen at best, and was set there no doubt to preach its annual sermon. But in the northern border was a high-bred Saint Michael pear tree, which taught a lesson that all of gentle blood might take to heart; for its fruit used to get hard and dark, and break into unseemly cracks, so that when the lord of the harvest came for it, it was like those rich men's sons we see too often, who have never ripened, but only rusted, hardened, and shrunken. We had peaches, lovely nectarines, and sweet white grapes, growing and coming to kindly maturity in those days.

"As for the garden beds, they were cared for by the Jonathan or Ephraim of the household, sometimes assisted by one Rube, a little old Scotch gardener, with a stippled face and a lively temper. Nothing but old-fashioned flowers in them — hyacinths pushing their green beaks through as soon as the snow was gone, or earlier; tulips, coming up in the shapes of cornu-

copiæ; peonies, butting their blunt way through the loosened earth; lilies, roses—damask, white, blush, cinnamon; larkspurs, lupines, and gorgeous hollyhocks.

"The yellow-birds used to be very fond of some sunflowers that grew close to the pear tree with a moral. I remember their flitting about, golden in the golden light, over the golden flowers, as if they were flakes of curdled sunshine."

Oliver had a younger brother John, who was as light of heart and full of fun as he; and gay times they had together in this quiet old town, and this old house with its books and its garden. He says that as a boy he was afraid of the tall masts of ships that used to come up the river, and he would hide his eyes from them. And he was afraid, too, of a great wooden hand, the sign of a glove-maker whose shop he sometimes passed.

So in happiness and comfort he dreamed his early years away, with his brothers and sisters and father and mother. He was like a fine, luscious pear in that old garden, ripening without rotting at the core, or yet getting hard and full of cracks.

CHAPTER V

SCHOOL LIFE

When young Oliver was ten, he was sent about a mile away to a school where one of the pupils was Margaret Fuller, who afterwards became a famous writer. As a girl, says Holmes, she had the reputation of being "smart." Once she wrote a school essay which was shown to the father of Oliver. It began, "It is a *trite* remark." But Oliver didn't know what *trite* meant. It was to him a crushing discovery of her superiority. She was stately and distant, as if she had great thoughts of her own; she was a diligent student, and read a great many of what she called "naw-vels." "A remarkable point about her," says Holmes, "was that long, flexile neck, arching and undulating in strange sinuous movements, which one who loved her compared to those of a swan, and one who loved her not to the serpent that tempted Eve."

After five years at this school, Oliver was taken to Andover, and left at the house of a professor in the theological seminary. He went to Phillips

Academy, where he studied a year preparatory to entering Harvard College. There he met a rosy-faced boy named Phineas Barnes, and the two became great friends. Phineas did not go to Harvard College, and they were soon separated; but they always remained friends, and kept up a correspondence as long as they lived.

At this time, says one of his biographers, he was an energetic and lively youngster, full of fun and mischief, with tendencies in the way of flageolets and flutes, and with a weakness for pistols and guns and cigars, which latter he would hide in the barrel of the pistol, where his mother's eyes would never care to look for them.

One of the objects of most interest to the boys at this school was a tutor who had had a dream that he would fall dead while he was praying. He regarded the dream as a warning, and asked the boys to come in turn to see him before he died. Says Holmes, "More than one boy kept his eye on him during his devotions, possessed by the same feeling the man had who followed Van Amburgh about with the expectation, let us not say hope,

of seeing the lion bite his head off sooner or later."

Years later he revisited these scenes. He says that the ghost of a boy was at his side as he wandered among the places he knew so well: "'Two tickets for Boston,' I said to the man at the station.

"But the little ghost whispered, 'When you leave this place you will leave me behind you.'

"'One ticket for Boston, if you please. Good-bye, little ghost.'"

At last Holmes returned to Cambridge and immediately entered Harvard College, in "the famous class of '29." He had many well-known classmates, among them the Rev. Samuel Francis Smith, the Rev. Dr. James Freeman Clarke, and others. Smith was afterwards famous as the author of "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," and Dr. Holmes, in one of his poems, thus writes about him:

> And there's a nice youngster of excellent pith,—
> Fate tried to conceal him by naming him Smith;
> But he shouted a song for the brave and the free,—
> Just read on his medal, 'My country' 'of thee!'

Charles Sumner was in the next class below, and the famous historian Motley two classes below. Though Motley was the youngest student in the college, he and Holmes afterward became the most intimate of friends, and so remained through life; and when Motley was dead Holmes wrote his biography.

Holmes said Motley looked the ideal of a young poet, and he goes on to describe him: "His finely shaped and expressive features, his large, luminous eyes, his dark waving hair, the singularly spirited set of his head, his well outlined figure, gave promise of manly beauty."

After this description of Motley, read the following which Holmes gives of himself in a letter to Phineas Barnes:

"I, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Junior in Harvard University, am a plumeless biped of exactly five feet three inches when standing in a pair of substantial boots made by Mr. Russell of this town, having eyes which I call blue, and hair which I do not know what to call.

"Secondly, with regard to my moral qualities.

I am rather lazy than otherwise, and certainly do not study as hard as I ought to. I am not dissipated and I am not sedate, and when I last ascertained my college rank I stood in the humble situation of seventeenth scholar."

In another letter written when in college to his friend Phineas he says:

"'What do I do?' I read a little, study a little, smoke a little, and eat a good deal. 'What do I think?' I think that's a deuced hard question. 'What have I been doing these three years?' Why, I have been growing a little in body, and I hope in mind; I have been learning a little of almost everything, and a good deal of some things."

And in still another letter, he says: "I have been writing poetry like a madman, and then I have been talking sentiment like a turtle-dove, and gadding about among the sweet faces, and doing all such silly things that spoil you for everything else. This month of May is too good for anything but love."

CHAPTER VI

COLLEGE LIFE

Holmes was not only born within the present grounds of Harvard, he grew up there, was a student of Harvard, and a loyal member of the "famous class of '29," a lecturer and professor at Harvard, and he became Harvard's most famous poet and man of letters, though Harvard has had so many that were great. So the life at Harvard College was always a part of his life; and perhaps that is why he was so merry.

College students are great jokers. In the days of Holmes the students decidedly objected to going to chapel early in the morning, rising as they had to do before daylight on cold winter days. To show that they didn't like this idea of early prayers, they would sometimes fasten firecrackers to the lids of the big Bible, so that when the president or a professor came to lead the exercises and opened the book, they would go off with a snap.

In those days, too, they had only candles, and as prayers were held before daylight the chapel

candles had to be lighted. Sometimes the students would put pieces of lead where the wick ought to be, and when the candles burned down to the lead the lights went out, of course leaving the chapel in darkness. At other times the president would be startled on entering the pulpit by seeing a pig's head standing upright and bristly on his desk.

The rooms in the college dormitories were very poorly furnished. Instead of matches they had flint and steel and a tinder-box; and in almost every room was a cannon ball, which the boys would heat red-hot and set on a metal frame of some sort to help keep the room warm. Sometimes in the middle of the night a wicked student or two would send one of these cannon balls rolling, bump, bump, bump, down the stairs, waking every one and getting the proctor out of bed. Sometimes, too, the cannon ball was hot and burned the fingers of the proctor when he tried to pick it up. Then woe to the young lad who was caught and proved to be the culprit.

In college, Holmes belonged to two or three

clubs. One was the Hasty Pudding Club, which met in the rooms of the members. A worthy old lady of the village called Sister Stimson prepared the pudding in two huge pots; and the "providers" of the evening would sling these, filled with the boiling mush, on a stout pole, and, resting the ends upon their shoulders, mount gallantly to the room where the members were assembled, often in the third or fourth story. A bowl of hasty pudding was always carried to the officer in the entry, as a sort of peace offering; and when the members had eaten as much as they could, and had told all the stories they had to tell, the occupants of nearby rooms were invited to help finish up the repast.

Another club to which he belonged was called the "Med. Facs.," and each member or officer had the title of a supposed professor in the Medical Faculty of the University. The first meeting of the year was held in an upper room, draped in black cotton and decorated with death's-heads and cross-bones in chalk; a table, also hung in black, extended lengthwise through the room. In the center sat the mock president and about him were the "pro-

fessors" and "assistant professors," all in black. Near at hand stood two policemen, usually the two strongest men in the class, dressed in flesh-colored tights. On the stairs outside were crowds of Juniors, from which twenty or thirty were to be initiated into the society. This initiation consisted usually in answering disagreeable questions put by the "professors," or in doing such things as standing on one's head, crawling about the floor, singing Mother Goose melodies, or making a Latin or Greek oration.

College Commencement in those days was like a country fair. The people pitched tents on the western side of the college yard (for there were then no hotels, and boarding was expensive), and opposite them were various stands and shows, making a street which by nightfall was paved with water-melon rinds, peachstones, and various refuse, on a ground of straw,—all flavored with rum and tobacco smoke.

Holmes himself has well described this festival of the college year:

"The fair plain (the Common), not then, as now,

cut up into cattle pens by the ugliest of known fences, swarmed with the joyous crowds. The ginger-beer carts rang their bells and popped their bottles, the fiddlers played Money Musk over and over and over, the sailors danced the double-shuffle, the gentlemen of the city capered in rusty jigs, the town ladies even took a part in the lusty exercise, the confectioners rattled red and white sugar plums, long sticks of candy, sugar and burnt almonds into their brass scales, the wedges of pie were driven into splitting mouths, the mountains of (clove-sprinkled) hams were cut down as Fort Hill is being sliced to-day; the hungry feeders sat still and concentrated about the boards where the grosser viands were served, while the milk flowed from cracking cocoanuts, the fragrant muskmelons were cloven into new-moon crescents, and the great watermelons showed their cool pulps sparkling and roseate as the dewy fingers of Aurora."

And besides all this, there were the orations of the students, and the speeches of old graduates who now came back famous, and all the bustle and importance of the college men themselves, hurry-

ing to entertain their fair lady friends, their mothers, and their fathers, who had come up to see how they behaved.

CHAPTER VII

A BUDDING POET

We have already seen in one of Holmes's letters to Phineas Barnes that while in college he was "writing poetry like mad." In the appendix to the latest complete edition of his poems you will find some lines translated from the Æneid while he was a student at Andover, not yet sixteen years old. In college he was poet to the Hasty Pudding Club; had a poem at Exhibition, one at Commencement, and was elected class poet; besides that, he joined several classmates in a volume of satirical poems on the first regular art exhibition in Boston.

When he finished his college course he studied law for a year, though his father rather wished him to be a clergyman. Says he, "I might have been a clergyman myself, for aught I know, if a certain clergyman had not looked and talked so like an

undertaker." Think of the little smooth-voiced joker in the pulpit! In another place he says, "How grandly the procession of old clergymen who filled our pulpit from time to time, and passed the day under our roof, marches before my closed eyes!" You must remember that Holmes was the son of the orthodox clergyman of Cambridge, and these were the men who exchanged pulpits with his father.

At first, as an experiment, he studied law for a year; but he did not work very hard. He was writing poetry. A paper called the *Collegian* was started, and he contributed twenty-five or more poems to it, among which were some of his funniest and best. "The Last Leaf" and "The Height of the Ridiculous" were among the work of that first poetic year of his. He never thought much of these poems, though some people consider them quite as good as the poems of the famous Thomas Hood, who wrote—

"Take her up tenderly,
Lift her with care,—
Fashioned so slenderly,
Young and so fair!"

Because he didn't like them, or thought them too rollicking, he did not reprint many of them. Here is one, perhaps the first of his poems ever printed with his name, which appeared in February, 1830, under the title "Runaway Ballad":

I

Wake from thy slumbers, Isabel, the stars are in the sky,
And night has hung her silver lamp, to light her altar by;
The flowers have closed their faded leaves, and drooped upon the plain;
Oh! wake thee, and their dying hues shall blush to life again.

II

Get up! get up! Miss Polly Jones, the tandem's at the door;
Get up and shake your lovely bones, it's twelve o'clock and more;
The chaises they have rattled by, and nothing stirs around,
And all the world but you and me are snoring safe and sound.

III

I've got my uncle's bay, and trotting Peggy, too,
I've lined their tripes with oats and hay, and now for love and you!

The lash is curling in the air, and I am at your side;
To-morrow you are Mrs. Snaggs, my bold and blooming bride.

Here is another, entitled "Romance":

Oh! she was a maid of a laughing eye,
And she lived in a garret cold and high;
And he was a threadbare, whiskered beau,
And he lived in a cellar damp and low.

But not all his early poems were nonsense like these. One day, in the fall of 1830, he read in the *Boston Advertiser* a paragraph saying that the Navy Department at Washington intended to break up the frigate Constitution, which had fought so bravely in the War of 1812, and won such glory for the American people. Immediately he wrote the following poem, which stands at the beginning of his collected works:

OLD IRONSIDES.

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see
The banner in the sky;

Beneath it rung the battle shout,
  And burst the cannon's roar;—
The meteor of the ocean air
  Shall sweep the clouds no more.

Her deck, once red with heroes' blood,
  Where knelt the vanquished foe,
When winds were hurrying o'er the flood,
  And waves were white below,
No more shall feel the victor's tread,
  Or know the conquered knee; —
The harpies of the shore shall pluck
  The eagle of the sea!

Oh, better that her shattered hulk
  Should sink beneath the wave;
Her thunders shook the mighty deep,
  And there should be her grave;
Nail to the mast her holy flag,
  Set every threadbare sail,
And give her to the god of storms,
  The lightning and the gale!

This stirring poem was published on the next day but one, and was immediately copied into nearly every newspaper in the United States. Copies were even printed as handbills and distrib-

uted about the city of Washington. Because the people felt so badly about it, the Navy Department at last decided not to break up Old Ironsides.

CHAPTER VIII

DOCTOR HOLMES

Young Mr. Holmes wrote so much poetry he had little time for law during the twelve months after his graduation. So at the end of the year he gave up law and began to study medicine. At first he felt his heart come up into his throat at the sight of skeletons grinning at him from the walls; and his cheek grew pale as the hospital sheets when he passed among the sufferers and saw the dead and dying, or helped to perform a surgical operation ; but after a time these things were to him as nothing, mere every-day affairs.

About the same time, too, he became a collector of rare old books. In 1833, when he had finished his medical education as far as he could at home, he went to Europe to complete his studies in the

hospitals of Paris and other cities. He remained there two years and a half, and in that time he had a chance to pick up some rare and queer old volumes.

He returned a full-fledged doctor; but he seems to have felt that he had neglected poetry long enough, and soon published his first book, which is dated 1836. He had been invited to read a long and serious poem before the Phi Beta Kappa society of Harvard, and this he made the chief poem of his little volume, including more than forty others. Beside the early humorous poems which we have already referred to, there was the well-known poem "The September Gale," beginning,—

> I'm not a chicken; I have seen
> Full many a chill September,—

and ending,—

> And not till fate has cut the last
> Of all my earthly stitches,
> This aching heart shall cease to mourn
> My loved, my long-lost breeches!

George Ticknor Curtis describes the youthful poet in the following bright paragraph:

"Dr. Holmes had then just returned from Europe. Extremely youthful in his appearance, bubbling over with the mingled humor and pathos that have always marked his poetry, and sparkling with coruscations of his peculiar genius, his Phi Beta Kappa poem of 1836, delivered with a clear, ringing enunciation, which imparted to the hearers his own enjoyment of his thoughts and expressions, delighted a cultivated audience to a very uncommon degree."

Here is another description of the reading of the same poem, which was printed in *The Atlantic Monthly*:

"A brilliant, airy, and *spirituelle* manner, varied with striking flexibility to the changing sentiment of the poem,—now deeply impassioned, now gayly joyous and nonchalant, and anon springing up almost into an actual flight of rhapsody,—rendered the delivery of this poem a rich, nearly a dramatic, entertainment, such as we have rarely witnessed."

Abraham Lincoln read and admired the poems in this first little volume. Once, in conversation, he remarked, "There are some quaint, queer verses, written, I think, by Oliver Wendell Holmes, entitled 'The Last Leaf,' one of which is to me inexpressibly touching." He then repeated the poem from memory, and as he finished this much-admired stanza,—

> The mossy marbles rest
> On the lips that he has prest
> In their bloom;
> And the names he loved to hear
> Have been carved for many a year
> On the tomb,—

he said, "For pure pathos, in my judgment, there is nothing finer than those six lines in the English language." Perhaps Lincoln was thinking of the lonely grave of his own first love in Illinois, for he once said, "Oh, I cannot bear the thought of her lying out there with the storms beating upon her."

Holmes, having received his degree of M.D. from Harvard College, began practicing med-

icine in Boston. He was young and popular, he was related to the best families, and he had the best medical education the world could give. The result was that he had plenty of practice. He didn't believe much in giving medicine, and his doses were usually very small. He would enter the sick-room with a bright, cheerful smile on his face that of itself made the patient soon feel better. In one of his books he gives this maxim: "When visiting a patient enter the sick-room at once, without keeping the patient in the torture of suspense by discussing the case with others in another room."

Prize medals were offered in Boston for medical essays, and in the first two years after he began practicing medicine he gained three of these medals. In 1838, after two years in Boston, he was appointed professor of anatomy and physiology in Dartmouth College. He remained there two years, at the end of which time he resigned. He then came back to Boston and married the daughter of Judge Charles Jackson. He and his wife took a house in the very heart of Boston, in a

little court leading out of Tremont street, and there they lived for nearly twenty years. "When he first entered that house two shadows glided over the threshold; five lingered in the doorway when he passed through it for the last time,—and one of the shadows was claimed by its owner to be longer than his own." Those other shadows were his children, his eldest son being taller than the doctor himself. In the surrounding houses there had been sorrow and disappointment and death. "The whole drama of life was played in that stock company's theatre of a dozen houses, one of which was his, and no deep sorrow or severe calamity ever entered his dwelling. Peace be to those walls, forever," the professor said, "for the many pleasant years he has passed within them."

He had two sons and a daughter. The oldest son was named Oliver Wendell, and became a judge. The other son, Edward, was also a lawyer. The daughter, named after his wife Amelia Jackson, married Mr. John Turner Sargent, and it was at her country home at Beverly Farms that

Holmes spent much of his time toward the end of his life.

He practiced medicine again in Boston for seven years, when he accepted an appointment as professor of anatomy and physiology in Harvard Medical School. This professorship he held for thirty-five years, when he resigned on account of old age.

He had a beautiful country home called Canoe Place, in the Berkshire Hills, in western Massachusetts. There he spent "seven happy summer vacations, which," he declares, "stand in his memory like the seven golden candlesticks seen in the beatific vision of the holy dreamer." Some famous literary people lived near by, among them Herman Melville, the novelist and traveler, and not far away were Miss Sedgwick and Fanny Kemble, and for a short time Hawthorne. The doctor's dwelling was a modest one, he tells us,— "not glorious, yet not unlovely in the youth of its drab and mahogany,—full of great and little boys' playthings." This place had come to him by inheritance from his mother.

CHAPTER IX

THE AUTOCRAT

In 1852 Holmes delivered a course of lectures on the "English Poets of the Nineteenth Century,"—Wordsworth, Moore, Keats, Shelley, and others. At the end of each lecture he read a poem, and these poems now appear in his collected works as "After a Lecture on Wordsworth," "After a Lecture on Moore," etc.

In a letter to an official he states the terms on which he is willing to give this course of lectures in various towns and cities:

"My terms for a lecture, when I stay over night, are fifteen dollars and expenses, a room with a fire in it, in a public house, and a mattress to sleep on,—not a feather bed. As you write in your individual capacity, I tell you at once all my habitual exigencies. I am afraid to sleep in a cold room ; I can't sleep on a feather bed ; I will not go to private houses ; and I have fixed upon the sum mentioned as what it is worth to go away for the night to places that cannot pay more."

The landlady in the "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table" also has something to say about his lectures:

"He was a man that loved to stick around home as much as any cat you ever see in your life. He used to say he'd as lief have a tooth pulled as go away anywheres. Always got sick, he said, when he went away, and never sick when he didn't. Pretty nigh killed himself goin' about lecturing two or three winters,—talkin' in cold country lyceums,—as he used to say,—goin' home to cold parlors and bein' treated to cold apples and cold water; and then goin' up into a cold bed in a cold chamber, and comin' home next mornin' with a cold in his head as bad as the horse distemper."

Perhaps this is why Holmes was not more of a traveler, going to Europe but twice, and hardly ever leaving his birthplace of Cambridge or his home in Boston.

So twenty years passed by after he published his first volume of poems before he did anything else very literary. His fellow professor Longfellow had become famous; and so had Haw-

thorne ; and so, too, had Lowell and Whittier. But Holmes seemed to have no desire for fame. He had written a few amusing poems, and delivered some lectures.

But when the *Atlantic Monthly* was about to be started, all the literary folk turned to Holmes and said, "That jolly old fellow could write something good, if he only would."

The young publishers, Phillips & Sampson, were enthusiastic about the new magazine. Lowell was chosen editor, and Francis H. Underwood was assistant, though the idea was originally his. They called in Longfellow and Emerson, and Motley and Holmes. This distinguished company met at a dinner and talked over the new project. Holmes suggested the name *Atlantic Monthly*. Longfellow would contribute a poem now and then, and Emerson an essay from time to time ; but poems and essays do not fill up a magazine very fast. So Lowell determined to get something from Holmes, some light, gossipy prose, that should continue on from month to month. The doctor remembered that he had written some

papers twenty-five years before for the *New England Magazine*, and he determined to "shake the same bough again" and see what fruit he could get. So he began where he had left off all those years before with an "As-I-was-saying." And for a year or more, every month in the *Atlantic*, the "Autocrat" gave his opinions of life, cracked his little jokes on men and things, recited a poem, or gossiped with his landlady and fellow boarders. And each month that distinguished literary company met at some hotel or restaurant in Boston and had a dinner which was a feast of reason and good things for the mind and heart as well as for the stomach; and Holmes was the wit and soul of every banquet.

At last Oliver Wendell Holmes had come before the world as a great poet and a great humorist. The "Autocrat" is the very soul of humor, so genial, so wise in his good advice, so gay in his good nature, so light and sparkling and kind. Now was published "The Deacon's Masterpiece, or, The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay"; and by its side that most beautiful of all the poems Holmes

ever wrote, "The Chambered Nautilus." When the Princess of Wales asked him to write in her album, he copied the last verse of "The Chambered Nautilus," as he had done in the album of many a subject of our great republic. Listen! Holmes could be stately and beautiful as well as gay and humorous:

> Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
> As the swift seasons roll!
> Leave thy low-vaulted past!
> Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
> Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
> Till thou at length art free,
> Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!

If you wish to know the wise things Holmes said about anything and everything, read "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table." Here are a few bright sayings which you will not find in that book, but which will give you an idea of the kind of things with which the volume is filled:

"An Indian is a few instincts on legs, and holding a tomahawk."

"If a doctor has the luck to find out a new

malady, it is tied to his name like a tin kettle to a dog's tail, and he goes clattering down the highway of fame to posterity with his æolian attachment following at his heels."

Gunpowder: "Chemistry seals up a few dark grains in iron vases, and lo! at the touch of a single spark, rises in smoke and flames a mighty Afrit with a voice like thunder and an arm that shatters like an earthquake."

"The scholar's mind is furnished with shelves like his library. Each book knows its place in the brain as well as against the wall or in the alcove. His consciousness is doubled by the books which encircle him, as the trees that surround a lake repeat themselves in its unruffled waters. Men talk of the nerve that runs to the pocket, but one who loves his books, and has lived long with them, has a nervous filament which runs from his sensorium to every one of them."

"Slang—is the way in which a lazy adult shifts the trouble of finding any exact meaning in his (or her) conversation on the other party. If both talkers are indolent, all their talk lapses into the

vague generalities of childhood. It is a prevalent social vice of the time, as it has been of times that are past."

Perhaps the most famous expression in the "Autocrat" is that in which he calls Boston "the hub of the solar system" (often wrongly quoted as "the hub of the universe").

"The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table" was such a success that it sold the *Atlantic Monthly* by the thousands of copies. The editors and publishers both said, "This is just the thing: give us more, give us more." So Holmes wrote another book, which he called "The Professor at the Breakfast Table"; and then "The Poet at the Breakfast Table."

In the "Autocrat" Holmes said that every man had in him the writing of at least one novel. As the demand for his work was great, he thought he would write one. So he produced "Elsie Venner, a Romance of Destiny." It is a strange story of a girl who has the nature of a snake. Holmes had heard of cases like that of Elsie Venner, and he worked her story out in a scientific manner.

We read it as if it were really true, and it exercises a weird fascination over us.

Later he wrote another novel, entitled "The Guardian Angel."

CHAPTER X

"THE FAMOUS CLASS OF '29"

Holmes was the poet of the occasional, if ever there was one. If anybody held a meeting about anything, and Holmes was asked to read a poem, he kindly consented to do so. Who ever heard of opening a meeting of a medical society with a poem? Yet Holmes read an original poem at many a meeting of the Massachusetts Medical Society.

It was at the yearly meeting of "the famous class of '29" that he read his poems oftenest. Every year for sixty years, this loyal poet remained true to class traditions. A poem from Holmes was always expected, and the class always got it.

A college class is a band of friends, friends who have passed the merriest years of their lives together. They come to college from the country over, from homes poor and rich, distant and near.

For four years they live together, all on an equal footing, all together blooming into manhood. Then they scatter to their various duties in the world. One is a lawyer, another a journalist, another a clergyman, another a doctor, and others are business men. Yet how can they ever forget those happy years together?

Each year all those members of the class of '29 who could do so would come together at Commencement time to renew old memories. Some of the class were perhaps over seas and in foreign lands; some, alas! were dead. So, as the years passed by, the number grew smaller and smaller, and the gathering became sadder and sadder; yet none of them would have missed it.

The first class poem in Holmes's works is entitled "Bill and Joe," and begins thus:

> Come, dear old comrades, you and I
> Will steal an hour from days gone by,
> The shining days when life was new,
> And all was bright with morning dew,
> The lusty days of long ago,
> When you were Bill and I was Joe.

Most of these verses are of sad memories of happy times gone forever:

> Where, oh, where are the visions of morning,
> Fresh as the dews of our prime?
> Gone, like the tenants that quit without warning,
> Down the back entry of time.

But some are poems of dear friendship and pleasure at seeing friends again, like this, called "Indian Summer":

> You'll believe me, dear boys, 'tis a pleasure to rise,
> With a welcome like this in your darling old eyes;
> To meet the same smiles and to hear the same tone
> Which have greeted me oft in the years that have flown.

One poem entitled "The Boys" is well worth remembering, especially the last stanzas:

> Then here's to our boyhood, its gold and its gray!
> The stars of its winter, the dews of its May!
> And when we have done with our life-lasting toys,
> Dear Father, take care of thy children, the Boys!

During the times of the great Civil War the poems were mostly of a patriotic kind. Here, for

instance, is the way he opens his poem in 1862, entitled "The Good Ship Union":

'Tis midnight: through my troubled dream
  Loud wails the tempest's cry;
Before the gale, with tattered sail,
  A ship goes plunging by.
What name? Where bound?—The rocks around
  Repeat the loud halloo.
—The good ship Union, Southward bound:
  God help her and her crew!

In 1878 he wrote a poem on "The Last Survivor," which opens with these beautiful lines:

Yes! the vacant chairs tell sadly we are going, going fast,
And the thought comes strangely o'er me, Who will live to
  be the last?

Let us add one more verse, a humorous verse in which the joker pretends he's not so very old:

I don't think I feel much older; I'm aware I'm rather gray;
But so are many young folks,—I meet 'em every day.
I confess I'm more particular in what I eat and drink,
But one's taste improves with culture; that is all it means,
  I think.

Can you read as once you used to? Well, the printing is so bad,
No young folks' eyes can read it like the books that once
we had.
Are you quite as quick of hearing? Please to say that once
again.
Don't I use plain words, your Reverence? Yes, I often use
a cane.

* * * * * *

Ah, well,—I know—at every age life has a certain charm,—
*You're going? Come, permit me, please, I beg you'll take
my arm.*
I take your arm! Why take your arm? I'd thank you to
be told
I'm old enough to walk alone, but not so *very* old.

At last, in 1889, the poems stopped, because there were so few of the class left, and the meetings were so sad. In 1891, Holmes writes to a friend: "Our old raft of eighteen-twenty-niners is going to pieces; for the first time no class-meeting is called for the 8th of January. I shall try to get the poor remnant of the class together at my house; but it is doubtful whether there is life enough left for a gathering of half a dozen. I have a very tender feeling to my coevals."

CHAPTER XI

A FEW STRAY FACTS

In 1858 Holmes moved from his house in Montgomery Place to 21 Charles street, near the Charles River; and here he was neighbor to Governor Andrew, the war governor of Massachusetts, and James T. Fields, the publisher. He afterward occupied another house on Charles street, and finally, in 1871, moved to Beacon street, where was his home to the end of his life.

In 1882 he resigned his professorship at Harvard and devoted himself to literary work, writing, after this, his last book of table talks, which he called "Over the Teacups." In 1886 he visited Europe. With the exception of the journey which he took when a young man studying medicine, this was his only trip abroad. He was gone only four months, including the voyage both ways, and spent most of his time in the little isle of Britain. It seemed as if he disliked being long away from home, or even away from Boston.

Dr. Holmes was an ingenious man, and had

many fads and fancies. He was the inventor of the small stereoscope for hand use,—such as those used for looking at photographs. The first one he made himself entirely, all but the lenses, and he often used to say that he might have made a fortune out of this invention if he had patented it. Yet, he seems never to have regretted that he had not done so, thinking perhaps that the public had been the gainer by his loss.

A life-long hobby of his was photography—beginning in the days when this art was not so easy and common as it is now. He became a really skillful artist in it, and made many pictures of the old gambrel-roofed house and scenes about Harvard College, which have been preserved and may prove useful to future historians.

Once he thought he could learn to play on the violin. As a matter of fact, he had no ear for harmony, and could never produce music. Still, he shut himself up in his study and scraped away hour after hour, for two or three winters. At the end of that time he could play two or three simple tunes so that they could be

recognized; then he gave it up and never played any more.

One of his fads was the measuring of large trees. When he traveled about the country he always had a measuring tape in his pocket, and this he would stretch around the trunk of every big tree he saw. When he went to England he pulled out his bit of string to see if the giant trees of Old England were as big as the giant trees of New England. He tells with what bated breath and beating, fearful heart he measured one tree in particular in England with a string on which he had measured off the trunk of another big tree in America. "Twenty feet, and a long piece of string left!" he exclaims, when telling of it. "Twenty-one feet—twenty-two—twenty-three,—an extra heart-beat or two,—twenty-four—twenty-five, and six inches over!!"

He finally became so noted as an authority on big trees that he was consulted even by the famous botanist, Professor Asa Gray.

In "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table" you may read of a slice of a hemlock tree, going

straight to the center, and showing three hundred and forty-two rings, each ring representing a year of life. Holmes really had this tree section, and spent much time sticking pins in at the various rings, each pin tagged with the date of some event that was taking place when the ring was forming.

We have already spoken of his love for old books. In the "Autocrat" he says: "I like books—I was born and bred among them, and have the easy feelings, when I get into their presence, that a stable-boy has among horses. I don't think I undervalue them, either as companions or instructors." He was not only an expert in judging an old and beautiful book, but he understood the art of bookbinding, and sometimes practiced it. Here is a sentence of his about books that we should all remember: "Some books are edifices, to stand as they are built; some are hewn stones, ready to form a part of future edifices; some are quarries, from which stones are to be split for shaping and after use."

Any one who has read the stirring ballad of "Old Blue," entitled "How the Old Horse Won

the Bet," will guess that Holmes knew something about horse-racing. What could be more vivid than this:

> "Go!"—Through his ears the summons stung
> As if a battle-trump had rung;
> The slumbering instincts long unstirred
> Started at the old familiar word;
> It thrills like flame through every limb,—
> What means his twenty years to him?
> The savage blow his rider dealt
> Fell on his hollow flanks unfelt;
> The spur that pricked his staring hide
> Unheeded tore his bleeding side;
> Alike to him are spur and rein,—
> He steps a five-year-old again!

One of his most cherished memories was that of seeing the famous steed Plenipotentiary win the Derby; this was when Holmes was in England as a young man; and indeed he knew "a neat, snug hoof, a delicate pastern, a broad haunch, a deep chest, a close ribbed-up barrel, as well as any other man in the town."

Besides these things, he was fond of boxing, of

boating, and other forms of sport; and he knew the fine points about all of these manly pastimes.

You must not think, however, that Holmes was not a hard worker and a careful student. He wrote easily and freely, but revised with the greatest care; and he prepared his college lectures over every year, keeping them up to date while he was constantly studying and reading and learning new things about his profession.

CHAPTER XII

THE END COMES

The life of Oliver Wendell Holmes flowed like a placid river, with scarcely a ripple upon its surface. He was born and grew up and passed all his life near that "hub" he has made so famous, surrounded by throngs of friends, never visited by sorrow, always fortunate, always happy. He found amusement in everything, for he looked on the bright side of life and turned everything into humor. And at last he died, painlessly, serenely,

sitting in his chair, having been up and about to the very last day. This final event—we cannot call it sad—occurred October 7, 1894. He was eighty-five years old.

We cannot better close this study of America's most genial poet-humorist than by quoting the following appreciative and most touching lines from an English journal:

"THE AUTOCRAT"

"The Last Leaf!" Can it be true,
We have turned it, and on you,
        Friend of all?
That the years at last have power?
That life's foliage and its flower
        Fade and fall?

Was there one who ever took
From its shelf, by chance, a book
        Penned by you,
But was fast your friend for life,
With one refuge from its strife
        Safe and true?

*   *   *   *   *

From the Boston breakfast table
Wit and wisdom, fun and fable,
Radiated
Through all English-speaking places.
When were science and the Graces
So well mated ?

Of sweet singers the most sane,
Of keen wits the most humane,
Wide, yet clear.
Like the blue, above us bent,
Giving sense and sentiment
Each its sphere ;

With a manly breadth of soul,
And a fancy quaint and droll,
Ripe and mellow ;
With a virile power of "hit,"
Finished scholar, poet, wit,
And good fellow !

Years your spirit could not tame,
And they will not dim your fame ;
England joys
In your songs, all strength and ease,
And the "dreams" you "wrote to please
Gray-haired boys."

—*London Punch.*

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"Many years ago, when this country of ours was one great forest, * * * there dwelt a race of happy little children. The Red Children, we call them * * * Some wise men, who loved the Red Children and saw the sweetness of their simple stories, gathered them together and told them in a book, so that you and I might read these legends of the Red Children."

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Sohrab and Rustum, more than any other of his works, has placed Arnold among the poets of modern England. It is the masterpiece of his classic and heroic poems. A most interesting introduction, and valuable and abundant notes, have been prepared by Merwin Marie Snell. There is also a bibliography for the use of students.

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