



[From Fernelius' *Universa Medicina*, Geneva, 1670.]

BOOKSHELF BROWSING

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES*

PHYSICIAN, POET, AUTHOR

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THERE is a common complaint against the biographies of men, that they are, with few exceptions, insufferably dry reading. The cause is simple in that, if a man has put the best of himself in his work, he has as a rule left little for another to tell. "There are but two people who can tell the story of a man's or woman's life, one is the person himself, and the other is the recording angel." Having no relationship or communication with the latter I may fail in my endeavor to interest you, but when we also recall that Dr. Holmes has written so freely about himself, in the end this paper may possibly become of interest.

An interest in the biography of medical men, as a pastime, has convinced me of its value as an educational factor. In the study of the biographies of the lives of some of the leaders in our profession, I have been impressed that the Hippocratic ideals are realized and exemplified in their lives. If, therefore, those teachers can enlighten us as to the darkness that went before, and the darkness that is to follow, let us hear what they have to teach us, and though we may not as yet perceive any special line of research, we may hold that every addition to our knowledge is

one small step towards the great revelation. But let us proceed without further effusion.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, the son of Rev. Abiel Holmes, a clergyman of the Church of England, was born in Cambridge August 29, 1809. There is little of importance to record of his childhood, suffice it to state that at 15 he entered Philips Academy in Andover. Staying but a year in this institution he matriculated in Harvard in 1825, graduating with what is now known as the "Famous Class of Twenty-Nine." Contemplating the legal profession as his field of work, he studied law for one year in the Dane Law School. In answering the question as to why he relinquished the study of law to enter that of medicine, I can best do so by quoting his words:

What determined me to give up law and apply myself to medicine I can hardly say, but I had from the first looked upon that year's study as an experiment. At any rate I made the change, and soon found myself introduced to new scenes and new companionships.

So from law Holmes turned to medicine. He says in his reminiscences:

At the end of the first year in the Dane Law

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School, I took up my new study which was to be my final choice. There is something very solemn and depressing about the first entrance upon the study of medicine. The white faces of the sick that fill the long row of beds in the hospital wards saddened me and produced a feeling of awe-stricken sympathy. The dreadful scenes in the operating theatre, for this was before the days of ether, were a great shock to my sensibilities, though I did not faint as students occasionally do. When I first entered the room where students were seated at a table with a skeleton hanging over it, and bones lying about, I was deeply impressed, and more disposed to moralize upon mortality than to take up the task of osteology which lay before me. It took but a short time to wear off this earliest impression. I had my way in the world to make and meant to follow it faithfully. I soon found an interest in matters which at the outset seemed uninviting and repulsive, and after the first difficulties and repugnance were overcome I began to enjoy my new acquisition and knowledge. The head of the private school at which I studied was Dr. James Jackson, a very wise and a very good man, whose influence on the minds of his students who followed him in his visits to the hospital, and who listened to his teachings, was of the soundest and best character. Dr. Jackson never talked of curing a patient except in its true etymological sense of taking care of him. I think we may say in general that the doctor who talks of curing his patients belongs to that class of practitioners known in our common speech as "Quacks." It is in medicine as in surgery—nature heals; art helps, if she can, sometimes hinders, with the best of intentions; oftener is entirely ignored by the great remedial agencies, ordained by the shaping intelligence, which gives form and life to mortal organization.

Holmes attended two courses of lectures in this private school. If he was to be anything better than a rural dispenser of pills and powders he had to pass, at the very least, two years in European hospitals. Practically this must have been incorporated in the program when his choice of the medical profession was made. Yet so large a part of the "Consideration" received by clergymen was "good," rather than "valuable," that this foreign

education would have been wholly impossible, had it not so happened that the daughter of a prosperous Boston merchant had brought with her into the clerical household a purse not altogether empty; and even with this aid, it would seem that some effort had to be made in order to send the young student to Paris with funds enough in his pocket to enable him to live comfortably, "like a gentleman," as he jealously expressed it. But his father and mother, like true New England parents of that day, came gallantly to the mark and equipped him.

More than once in his writings Holmes refers to his delightful student days in France where he was the follower of the great Louis. His valedictory address to his class in 1882 is largely made up of his reminiscences of his old Paris teachers. The following are his interesting comments on Lisfranc and Ricord.

Of Lisfranc, I can say little more than that he was a great drawer of blood and hewer of members. I remember his ordering a wholesale bleeding of his patients, right and left, one morning when a phlebotomizing fit was on him. I recollect his regretting the splendid guardsmen of the old Empire, *for what?*—because they had such magnificent limbs to amputate. I got along as far as that with him when I ceased to be a follower of Lisfranc.

Speaking of Ricord, Holmes says:

There was also the "Vivacious Ricord," whom I remember calling the Voltaire of Pelvic Literature, a skeptic of the morality of the race in general, who would have submitted Diana to treatment with his mineral specifics and ordered a course of blue pills for the vestal virgins.

Late in November of 1835 he returned to Boston and commenced the practice of his profession in January, 1836. In 1847, he was appointed Parkman professor of anatomy in Harvard, which chair he held for thirty-five years.

As the story of his life goes on it is now that he commences to attract the attention of his friends, and inspires by his life

the enduring reverence of posterity. Follow me while I lead you, somewhat hurriedly, through the succeeding years by portraying him in the rôle of *Anatomist*, and medical *Essayist* with an occasional citation of incidents that reveals the broadness of his character and mind.

ANATOMIST

That Holmes should have selected anatomy and dissection as his province of labor may seem a little odd when we are told that he was too tender hearted to practice medicine. Here is what two good witnesses, who have been placed upon the stand, deponeth to his point. Dr. Cheever says:

Too sympathetic to practice medicine, he soon abandoned the art for the science, and always manifested the same abhorrence for death and tenderness for animals. When it became necessary to have a freshly killed rabbit for his lectures, he always ran out of the room, left me to chloroform it, and besought me to not let it squeak.

Professor Dwight says:

In spite of the attention bestowed on dissection, I do not fancy that he much fancied dissecting, though the museum still has some few specimens of his preparation. Once he asked me what part of anatomy I liked best, and on my saying the bones, he replied, "So do I; it's the cleanest."

To better present to you Dr. Holmes in the rôle of anatomist permit me to describe one of his lecture hours. It nears one o'clock, and the work in the demonstrators' room in the old Medical school in North Grove Street becomes even more hurried and eager as the lecture hour in anatomy approaches. Four hours of busy dissection have unveiled a portion of the human frame, insensate and stark on the demonstrating table. Muscles, nerves, and blood vessels unfold themselves in unvarying harmony, if seeming disorder, and the subject is nearly ready to illustrate the lecture. The room is thick with tobacco smoke. The winter light, snowy and dull,

enters through one tall window, bare of curtains, and falls upon a lead floor. The surroundings are singularly bare of ornament or comfort or beauty, and there is naught to inspire the intellect or imagination, except the marvelous mechanism of the poor dead body which lies dissected before us, like some complex and delicate machinery whose uses we seek to know. To *such* a scene enters the *poet*, the *writer*, the *wit*, Oliver Wendell Holmes. Few readers of his prose or poetry could dream of him as here, in this carnal house, in the presence of death. The very long and steep flight of stairs leading up from the street below resounds with a *double* and labored tread, the door opens and a small, gentle, smiling man appears, supported by the janitor, who has often been called to help him up the stairs. Entering, and giving a breathless greeting, he sinks upon a stool and strives to recover his asthmatic breath. Anon, recovering, he brightens up and asks, "What have you for me today?" and plunges, knife in hand, into the depths of his subject. Time flies, and a boisterous crowd of "turbulent Bob Sawyers" pours through the hall to his lecture room door and begin a rhythmical stamping and shouting and pounding. The doors open, a rush takes place, some collapse, some are thrown headlong and three hundred raw students precipitate themselves into a bare and comfortless amphitheatre. Meanwhile the Professor has been running about, now as nimble as a cat, selecting plates, rummaging dusty museums for specimens, arranging microscopes and displaying bones. The subject is carried in on a board; no automatic appliances, no wheels with pneumatic tires, no elevators in those days. The cadaver is decorously disposed on a revolving table, and is always covered with a clean white sheet. Respect for pure humanity and admiration for God's divinest work is the first lesson and uppermost in the poet-lecturer's mind. He enters and is greeted with a shout and stamp of applause. Then silence and there begins a

charming hour of description, analysis, simile and anecdote, which clothes the dry bones with poetic imagery, enlivens a hard and fatiguing day with humor, and brightens to the tired listeners the details of a difficult, though interesting, study. We may say tired listener because the student is now listening to his fifth consecutive lecture that day, beginning at nine o'clock and ending at two. No rest, no recovery for the dazed senses, which have tried to absorb materia medica, chemistry, practice and obstetrics all in one morning. One o'clock was always assigned to Dr. Holmes because he alone could hold his exhausted audience's attention. He came in with a grave countenance. His shoulders were thrown back and his face bent down. No one realized better than he that he had no easy task before him. He had to teach a branch repulsive to some, difficult to all; and he had to teach it to a jaded class which was unfit to be taught anything. The wooden seats were hard, the backs straight and the air bad. The effect of the last was alluded to by Dr. Holmes in his address at the opening of the new school in 1883, in which he referred to those early days as follows:

So when the class I was lecturing to was sitting in an atmosphere once breathed already, after I had seen head after head gently declining and one pair of eyes after another emptying themselves of intelligence, I have said inaudibly, "Sleep on dear youth, this does not mean that you are indolent or that I am dull; it is the partial coma of commencing asphyxia."

To make head against these odds he did his utmost to adopt a sprightly manner and let no opportunity for a jest escape him. These would be received by quite appreciation by the lower benches, and with uproarious demonstration from the mountain, where, as in the French Revolution, the noisiest spirits congregated. He gave his imaginations full play in comparisons often charming and always quaint. None but Holmes could have compared the microscopical coiled tube of a sweat

gland to a fairy's intestine. You will appreciate the aptness of his likening the mesentery to the shirt ruffles of a preceding generation. He has compared the fibers connecting the two symmetrical halves of the brain to the band uniting the Siamese twins.

As a lecturer he was accurate, punctual, precise, unvarying in patience over detail, and though not an original anatomist in the sense of a discoverer, yet a most exact descriptive lecturer; while the wealth of his illustrations, comparisons and similes was unequalled. Hence his charm. The student received information and was amused at the same time. He was always simple and rudimentary in his instructions. His flights of fancy never shot over the hearers' heads. Iteration and reiteration was his favorite motto in teaching. "These gentlemen," he said on one occasion, pointing out the lower portion of the pelvic bones, "are the tuberosities of the ischia, on which man is designed to sit and survey the works of creation." On another occasion in picking up a female pelvis and pointing to the pubic arch he said, "Gentlemen this is the Triumphal Arch under which every candidate for immortality must pass." But if witty, he could also be serious and pathetic, and he possessed the high power of holding and controlling his rough auditors. In earnest himself, enthusiastic, and of happy temperament he shed the glow of his ardent spirit over his followers and gave to his students some of the most attractive and happy hours of their life.

ESSAYIST

We have not in mind only his contributions to medical science and literature, which, though overshadowed by his work in general letters, were many and important, but we are thinking of that wider province of the physician that lies beyond the laboratory, the drug shop, the hospital and the consulting room, *the education of the public at large*. Dr. Holmes never lost sight of his profession, and he never

allowed the world to lose sight of it. Throughout his writings from "The Fly in the Stethoscope" to the good-natured raillery at a too exclusive specialism in "Over the Tea Cups," he did not hesitate to hit at its weakness and foibles; while apart from the admirable characters in his novels, he has in many noble passages pictured the life and influence of the true, modest and sacrificing doctor, in terms of the highest appreciation. Holmes is best known to English readers through the Breakfast Table Series, the Autocrat, the Professor and the Poet. These were all written when our author was comparatively young. They contain less direct reference to medical ethics than some of his later works, but even in these we note some very pertinent sayings. In the "Later Day Warnings," a short poem in the Autocrat, after dilating on the duties of legislature, haberdashers, preachers and property dealers, there is a fund of philosophy in these two lines:

When lawyers take what they would give
And doctors give what they would take.

He evidently despairs of the attainment of this high ideal, for he ends by saying.

But when you see that blessed day
Then order your ascension robe.

The medical elements are much more noticeable in the "Professor." The following lines are worth remembering by those of us that are apt to look upon ourselves, in our professional capacities, as in the world but not of it.

You can't keep gas in a bladder, and you can't keep knowledge tight in a profession. Hydrogen will leak out and air will leak in, and special knowledge will leak out and general knowledge will leak in, though a profession were covered with twenty thicknesses of sheep-skin diplomas. Till common sense is well mixed with medicine and common manhood with theology, and common honesty with law, we, the people, will crash down upon the lumps of nonsense in all of them, till we have made them like Aaron's calf.

In our relation with patients we might well bear in mind the professor's advice to those about making a choice of a physician:

Be sure you get one with a serene and cheerful countenance. A physician is not, or ought not to be an executioner; and the sentence of death upon his face is as bad as a warrant for the execution signed by the Governor. As a rule no man has the right to tell another by word or look that he is going to die. It may be necessary in an extreme case, but as a rule it is the last extreme of impertinence which one human being can offer to another.

In a discussion as to whether the art of healing makes men hard hearted and indifferent to human suffering, we have a delightful sketch of the ideal doctor in these words:

You may be sure that some men, even among those who have chosen the task of pruning their fellow creatures, grow more and more thoughtful and truly compassionate in the midst of their cruel experience. They become less nervous but more sympathetic. They have a truer sensibility of others pains, the more they study pain and disease in the light of science.

In the Poet, the last of this series, there are some very amusing and highly instructive references to young Doctor Franklin. The following may remind us all of our younger days:

The young doctor has a very small office and a very large sign with a transparency at night big enough for an oyster shop. These young doctors are particularly strong in what they call Diagnosis, an excellent branch of the healing art, full of satisfaction to the curious practitioner who likes to give the latin name to one's complaint; not quite so satisfactory to the patient. Sometimes, in fact, one would rather not know the exact name of his complaint, as, if he does, he is liable to look it up in a medical work, and if he reads, "This terrible disease is attended with vast suffering and is inevitably mortal," or any such statement, it is apt to affect him unpleasantly.

The description of the doctor's office is racy, and I cannot pass on without

relating Holmes description of a patient's interview. I crave your indulgence in this quotation:

With superhuman air of sagacity, with much corrugation of the forehead and fearful concentration of attention Doctor Franklin examined the discolored spot. After dwelling on this most interesting and rare affection and asking if there were any objections to showing the case to the Society of Medical Improvement and Medical Observation, hints are given about *Morbus Addisonii*. So he gave the patient a prescription, "which," said the poet, "I took care to put where it could do no hurt to anybody, and I paid him his fee, which he took with the air of a man with a great income and said Good Morning. My landlady on seeing the same spot said it was a bump, recommended a piece of brown paper dipped in vinegar; the discoloration soon disappeared." The next interview after Dr. Franklin had had more experience was more satisfactory. The Poet had an ugly cut from a carving knife. It was astonishing to see what a little experience of miscellaneous practice had done for him. He did not ask any more questions about predispositions on the maternal and paternal sides. He did not examine me with the stethoscope and laryngoscope. He only strapped my cut and informed me that it would speedily get well by "first intention."

Dr. Holmes has written three novels all full of medical interest, namely, "Elsie Venner," "The Guardian Angel," and "Moral Antipathy." To begin with "Elsie Venner," this is not the time or place to describe the plot or purpose of the story. I shall therefore dwell on those parts referring to our subject matter. Towards the end of the book we have the following description of Doctor Kettredge:

The old doctor was a model for visiting practitioners. He always came into the sick room with a quite, cheerful look, as if he had a consciousness that he was bringing some relief with him. The way a patient snatches the first look at a doctor's face, to see whether he is reprieved, whether he is unconditionally pardoned or whether he is doomed, has something terrible about it. It is only to be met by an impenetrable mask of serenity, proof

against anything and everything in a patient's aspect. The physician who reflects his patient's condition, like a mirror, may do well enough to examine people for a life insurance office, but does not belong to the sick room. The old doctor came to her (Elsie's bedside), in such a natural quite way, that it seemed that he was only a friend that had dropped in for a moment to say a pleasant word.

In the "Guardian Angel," a delightful story, we will dwell but a moment on one comment of Dr. Holmes on the condition of Myrtle Hazard after she calms down from a series of hysterical attacks. Holmes utters these weighty words:

But all this series of mental disturbance left her in a very impressive state of mind and an excitable condition. This was just the state to invite the spiritual manipulations of one of those theological practitioners who considers that the treatment of all morbid states of mind, short of raving madness, belongs to them and not to the doctors. The same condition was equally favorable for the operations of any professional experimenter, who would use the flame of religious excitement to light the torch of an earthly passion. So many fingers that begin to play on the black keys, stray to the white ones before the tune is played out. Evidently from this we may conclude that the Emmanuel Movement is not of recent origin.

There are many short sayings in this volume which plainly indicate how high Holmes' ethical ideas were. In reference to Myrtle's case I again quote as follows: "Few households have ripened a growth of womanhood without witnessing some of these hysterical manifestations, and its phenomena are largely traded in by scientific pretenders and religious fanatics."

I shall be content with only one more extract from the third volume, in many ways a remarkable book. I refer to "Moral Antipathy." It refers to the ethics of doctors' discussing matters of private interest with their wives. I shall not enlarge as Holmes exactly hits off the danger as follows:

Dr. Butts carried these questions with him. His wife was a sensible, discreet woman,

whom he could trust with many professional secrets. He told her of Paolo's revelation, and talked it over with her in the light of his experience and her own. Mrs. B . . . buried the information in the grave of her memory where it lay for nearly a week. At the end of that time it emerged into a confidential whisper to her favorite sister-in-law, a perfectly safe person. Twenty-four hours later the story was all over the village. Dr. Butts resolves that he would be a little more careful the next time, at any rate, and in spite of every wish to be charitable, he concludes that the worthy lady must have forgotten the rule that "A Doctor's patients must put their tongue out, and a Doctor's wife must keep her tongue in."

From the number of his purely scientific writings on medical subjects, one will always be recalled, "Puerperal Fever as a Private Pestilence." The high estimate in which this work of Holmes is held is demonstrated by the frequent references made to it today by writers on obstetrics. Presuming that all of you have read this medical classic, I am going to quote but one paragraph that has always appealed to me:

It is as a lesson rather than as a reproach that I call up the memory of these irreparable errors and wrongs. No tongue can tell the heart-breaking calamities they have caused; they have closed the eyes just opened upon a new world of life and happiness; they have bowed the strength of manhood into dust; they have cast the helplessness of infancy into the stranger's arms, or bequeathed it with less cruelty, the death of its dying parent. There is no tongue deep enough to record, and no voice loud enough for warning. The woman about to become a mother, or with her new-born infant upon her bosom, should be the object of trembling care and sympathy where ere she bears her tender burden or stretches her aching limbs. The very outcast upon the street has pity upon her sister in degradation when the seal of promised maternity is pressed upon her. The remorseless vengeance of the law brought down upon its victims by a machinery as sure as destiny, is arrested in its fall at a word which reveals her transient claims for mercy. The solemn prayer of the litany singles out her sorrows

from the multiplied trials of life, to plead for her in her hour of peril. God forbid that any member of the profession to which she intrusts her life, doubly precious at that eventful period, should regard it negligently, unadvisedly or selfishly.

Was ever a more beautiful plea made for the expectant mother? Its sentiment is still applicable today.

In the Professor at the Breakfast Table, in comment on this essay, Holmes says:

When by the permission of providence I held up to the profession the damnable facts connected with the conveyance of poison from one young mother's chamber to another, for doing which humble office I desire to be thankful that I have lived, though nothing else should come from my life, I had to bear the sneers of those whose position I had assailed, and, as I believe, have at least demolished, so that nothing but the ghosts of the dead women stir among the ruins.

The inquiry is often made as to the exact reason why Dr. Holmes relinquished the practice of medicine. The cause may be found in his farewell address as follows:

Let me begin with my experience as a medical student. I had come from the lessons of Judge Story and Mr. Ashmun in the Law School at Cambridge. I had been busy more or less with the pages of Blackstone and Chitty and other text books of the first year of legal study. More or less I say but I am afraid it was rather less than more. During that year I first tasted the intoxicating pleasure of authorship. A college periodical conducted by friends of mine tempted me into print, and there is no form of lead poisoning which more rapidly and more thoroughly pervades the blood, bones and marrow than that which reaches the young author through mental contact with type metal. "He who has once been a drinker will drink again," says the French proverb, and so the man or woman who has tasted type is sure to return to his old indulgence sooner or later. In that fatal year I had my first attack of lead poisoning and I have never quite gotten rid of it from that day to this. But for that I might have applied myself more diligently to my

legal studies, and carried a green bag in place of a stethoscope and a thermometer up to the present day.

Proud as we are to think of him as a member of our profession, and proud as we are of his achievements in it, we realize that his great work in life had more to do with making people better spiritually than making them well physically. Physician by education, he devoted himself to practice and the acquisition and imparting of scientific knowledge. Poet by nature, he spent his leisure time and declining years in those writings which have so endeared him wherever they have been read. Philosopher, by thoughtful study and love for his fellow men, he made, for many, life's path less rugged by kind and philanthropic words.

The Doctor glided gently and imperceptibly into the period of old age. He came to it in excellent condition both of mind and of body, for he had led a well-regulated life. He had been a hard-working, but never really overworked man, and he had never taken either work or play nervously or tensely. Above all, he had been little preyed upon by anxieties; in the middle path between poverty and riches, with good company, he moved along amid the changing shade of sunshine, by the enchanted hedgerows, enjoying all the possible beauty and peacefulness of the journey through life. In this way he became old by degrees and hardly knew it.

Death drew near with steps so slow, so gently graded that the approach was hardly perceptible. He was out of doors taking his usual walks a few days before the end. He was up and about the house on the last day, and he died, in his chair,

painlessly, as so humane a man well deserved to make his escape out of life, on October 7, 1894.

So passed a way one of the most lovable and notable figures of medicine. A personality pregnant with the perfume of ripe old age, and leaving recollections of a rarely perspicuous and sympathetic insight, a playful and pungent but not caustic humor, and a persuasive benevolence, which was far reaching but discriminating.

Among all his interests two were dominant and transcendent, medicine and literature. By the first he is known to more than a third of a century of students and to the whole medical world, by the second he is known throughout the entire English-speaking world.

In the rush and hurry of our restless life it may be well for us to look back upon the lives of some of the leaders of old, and if by so doing the tension of our mental alertness receives a healthy relaxation, we may consider the time thus spent as not wasted.

"I have only made a nosegay of culled flowers, and have brought you nothing of my own, but the thread that ties them together." Montaigne.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: All claims for originality are waived. This is but a compilation of extracts and paragraphs of many articles that have been read and to whose authors full credit is given for that which I have assembled in an endeavor to transmit a word picture of Dr. Holmes.

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