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AN AFTERNOON WITH OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

BY EDWARD E. HALE.



Y first recollection of Doctor Holmes is seeing him standing on a bench at a college dinner when I was a boy, in the year 1836.

He was full of life and fun, and was delivering—I do not say reading—one of his little college poems. He always writes them with joy, and recites them—if that is the word—with a spirit not to be described. For he is a born orator, with what people call a sympathetic voice, wholly under his own command, and entirely free from any of the tricks of elocution. It seems to me that no one really knows his poems to the very best, who has not had the good fortune to hear him read some of them.

But I had known all about him before that. As little boys, we had by heart, in those days, the song which saved "Old Ironsides" from destruction. That was the pet name of the frigate "Constitution," which was a pet Boston ship, because she had been built at a Boston shipyard, had been sailed with Yankee crews, and, more than once, had brought her prizes into Boston Harbor.

We used to spout at school :

"Nail to the mast her holy flag,
Spread every threadbare sail,
And give her to the god of storms,
The lightning and the gale!"

Ah me! There had been a Phi Beta anniversary not long before, where Holmes had delivered a poem. You may read "Poetry, a Metrical Essay," in the volumes now. But you will look in vain for the covert allusions to Julia and Susan and Elizabeth and the rest, which, to those who knew, meant the choicest belles of our little company. Have the queens of to-day any such honors?

Nobody is more accessible than Doctor Holmes. I doubt if any doorbell in Boston is more rung than his. And nowhere is the visitor made more kindly at home. His own work-room takes in all the width of a large house in Beacon Street; a wide window commands the sweep of the mouth of Charles River; in summer the gulls are hovering above it, in winter you may see them chaffing together on bits of floating ice, which is on its way to the sea. Across that water, by stealthy rowing, the boats of the English squadron carried the men who were to dis-



O. W. HOLMES'S BIRTH-PLACE AT CAMBRIDGE, MASS., ERECTED IN 1725, A.D. FROM PHOTO BY WILFRID A. FRENCH.

at Concord the next day, at Concord Bridge. Beyond is Bunker Hill Monument; and just this side of the monument Paul Revere crossed the same river to say that that English army was coming.

For me, I had to deliver on Emerson's ninetieth birthday an address on my memories of him and his life. Holmes used to meet him, from college days down, in a thousand ways, and has written a charming memoir of his life. I went round there one day, therefore, to ask some questions, which might put my own memories of Emerson in better light, and afterwards I obtained his leave to make this sketch of the talk of half an hour. When we think of it here, if we ever fall to talking about such things, every one would say that Holmes is the best talker we have or know. But when you are with him, you do not think whether he is or is not. You are under the spell of his kindness and genius. Still no minute passes in which you do not say to yourself: "I hope I shall remember those very words always."

Thinking of it after I come home, I am reminded of the flow and fun of the Autocrat. But you never say so to yourself when you are sitting in his room.

I had arranged with my friend Mr. Sample that he should carry his camera to the house, and it was in gaps in this very conversation that the picture of both of us was taken. I told Doc-



GARDEN DOOR OF THE CAMBRIDGE HOUSE.

tor Holmes how pleased I was at this chance of going to posterity under his escort.

I told him of the paper on Emerson which I had in hand, and thanked him, as well as I could, in a few words, for his really marvellous study of Emerson in the series of American authors. I said I really wanted to bring him my paper to read. What I was trying to do, was to show that the great idealist was always in touch with his time, and eager to know what, at the moment, were the real facts of American life.

I. I remember where Emerson stopped me on State Street once, to cross-question me about some details of Irish emigration.

Holmes. Yes, he was eager for all practical information. I used to meet him very often on Saturday evenings at the Saturday Club; and I can see him now, as he bent forward eagerly at the table, if any one were making an interesting observa-

tion, with his face like a hawk as he took in what was said. You felt how the hawk would be flying overhead and looking down on your thought at the next minute. I remember that I once spoke of "the three great prefaces," and quick as light Emerson said, "What are the three great prefaces?" and I had to tell him.

I. I am sure I do not know what they are. What are they?

Holmes. They are Calvin's to his "Institutes," Thuanus's to his history, and Polybius's to his.

I. And I have never read one of them!

Holmes. And I had then never read but one of them. It was a mere piece of encyclopædia learning of mine.

I. What I shall try to do in my address is to show that Emerson would not have touched all sorts of people as he did, but for this matter-of-fact interest in his daily surroundings—if he had not gone to *conv*-meetings, for instance. Was it you or Lowell who called him the Yankee Plato?

Holmes. Not I. It was probably Lowell, in the "Fable for Critics." I called him "a winged Franklin," and I stand by that. Matthew Arnold quoted that afterwards, and I was glad I had said it.

I. I do not remember where you said it. How was it?

Doctor Holmes at once rose, went to the turning book-stand, and took down volume three of his own poems, and read me with great spirit the passage. I do not know how I had forgotten it.



THE HOUSE IN RUE MONSIEUR LE PRINCE WHERE DOCTOR HOLMES LIVED FOR TWO YEARS WHEN STUDYING MEDICINE IN PARIS.

"Where in the realm of thought, whose air is song,

Does he, the Buddha of the West, belong?
He seems a winged Franklin, sweetly wise,
Born to unlock the secrets of the skies;
And which the nobler calling,—if 'tis fair
Terrestrial with celestial to compare,—
To guide the storm-cloud's elemental flame.
Or walk the chambers whence the lightning came,
Amidst the sources of its subtle fire,
And steal their effluence for his lips and lyre?"

Here he said, with great fun, "One great good of writing poetry is to furnish you with your own quotations." And afterwards, when I had made him

read to me some other verses from his own poems, he said, "Oh, yes, as a reservoir of the best quotations in the language, there is nothing like a book of your own poems."

I said that there was no greater nonsense than the talk of Emerson's time, that he introduced German philosophy here, and I asked Holmes if he thought that Emerson had borrowed anything in the philo-

sophical line from the German. He agreed with me that his philosophy was thoroughly home-bred, and wrought out in the experience of his own home-life. He said that he was disposed to believe that that would be true of Emerson which he knew was true of himself. He knew Emerson went over a great many books, but he did not really believe that he often really read a book through. I remember one of his

phrases was, that he thought that Emerson "tasted books;" and he cited a bright lady from Philadelphia, whom he had met the day before, who had said that she thought men of genius did not rely much upon their reading, and had complimented him by asking if he did so. Holmes said:

"I told her—I had to tell her—that in reading my mind is always active. I do not follow the author steadily or implicitly, but my thought runs off to right and left. It runs off in every

direction, and I find I am not so much taking his book as I am thinking my own thoughts upon his subject."

I. I want to thank you for your contrast between Emerson and Carlyle: "The hatred of unreality was uppermost in Carlyle; the love of what is real and genuine, with Emerson." Is it not perhaps possible that Carlyle would not have been Carlyle but for Emerson?

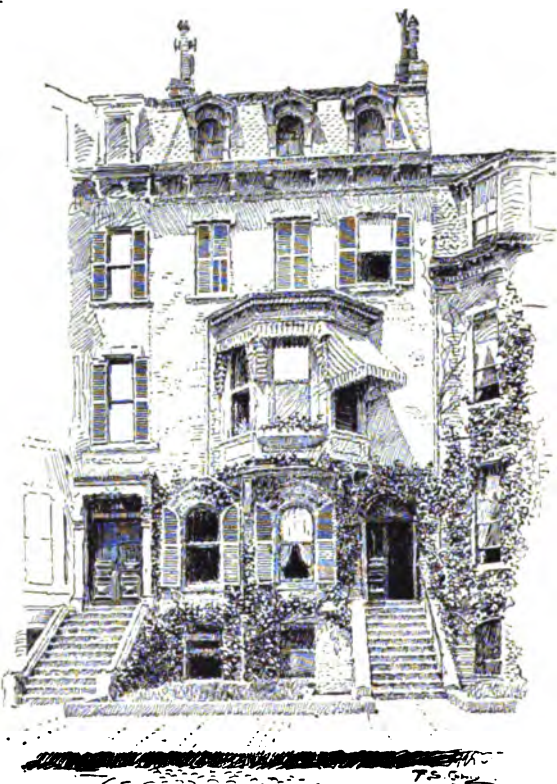
Emerson found him discouraged, and as he supposed alone, and at the very beginning led him out of his darkest places.

I think it was on this that Doctor Holmes spoke with a good deal of feeling about the value of appreciation. He was ready to go back to tell of the pleasure he had received from persons who had written to him, even though he did not know them, to say of how much use some particular line of his

had been. Among others he said that Lothrop Motley had told him that, when he was all worn out in his work in a country where he had not many friends, and among stupid old manuscript archives, two lines of Holmes's braced him up and helped him through:

"Stick to your aim: the mongrel's hold will slip,
But only crowbars loose the bulldog's grip."

He was very funny about flattery. "That is the trouble of having so many



O. W. HOLMES'S RESIDENCE IN BEACON STREET, BOSTON.



THE BAY WINDOW IN DOCTOR HOLMES'S STUDY.

friends, everybody flatters you. I do not mean to let them hurt me if I can help it, and flattery is not necessarily untrue. But you have to be on your guard when everybody is as kind to you as everybody is to me."

He said, in passing, that Emerson once quoted two lines of his, and quoted them horribly. They are from the poem called "The Steamboat:"

"The beating of her restless heart,
Still sounding through the storm."

Emerson quoted them thus :

"The pulses of her iron heart
Go beating through the storm."

I was curious to know about Doctor Holmes's experience of country life, he knows all nature's processes so well. So he told me how it happened that he went to Pittsfield. It seems that, a century and a half ago, his ancestor, Jacob Wendell, had a royal grant for the whole township there, with some small exception, perhaps. The place was at first called Pontoosoc, then Wendelltown, and only afterward got the name of Pittsfield from William Pitt. One part of the Wendell prop-

erty descended to Doctor Holmes's mother. When he had once seen it he was struck with its beauty and fitness



A CORNER IN DOCTOR HOLMES'S STUDY.

for a country home, and asked her that he might have it for his own. It was there that he built a house in which he lived for eight or nine years. He said that the Housatonic winds backwards and forwards through it, so that to go from one end of his estate to the other in a straight line required the crossing it seven times. Here his children grew up, and he and they were enlivened anew every year by long summer days there.

He was most interesting and animated as he spoke of the vigor of life and work and poetical composition which come from being in the open air and living in the country. He wrote, at the request of the neighborhood, his poem of "The Ploughman," to be read at a cattle-show in Pittsfield. "And when I came to read it afterwards I said, 'Here it is! Here is open air life, here is what breathing the mountain air and living in the midst of nature does for a man!' And I want to read you now a piece of that poem, because it contained a prophecy." And while he was looking for the verses, he said, in the vein of the Autocrat, "Nobody knows but a man's self how many good things he has done."

So we found the first volume of the poems, and there is "The Ploughman," written, observe, as early as 1849.

"O gracious Mother, whose benignant breast
Wakes us to life, and lulls us all to rest,
How thy sweet features, kind to every clime,
Mock with their smile the wrinkled front of time!
We stain thy flowers,—they blossom o'er the dead;
We rend thy bosom, and it gives us bread:
O'er the red field that trampling strife has torn,
Waves the green plumage of thy tasselled corn;
Our maddening conflicts sear thy fairest plain,
Still thy soft answer is the growing grain.
Yet, O our Mother, while uncounted charms
Steal round our hearts in thine embracing arms,



DOROTHY Q. FROM THE
PORTRAIT IN DOCTOR
HOLMES'S STUDY.

Let not our virtues in thy love decay,
And thy fond sweetness waste our strength
away.

No! by these hills, whose banners now displayed
In blazing cohorts Autumn has arrayed;
By yon twin summits, on whose splintery crests
The tossing hemlocks hold the eagles' nests;
By these fair plains the mountain circle screens,
And feeds with streamlets from its dark ravines,—
True to their home, these faithful arms shall toil
To crown with peace their own untainted soil;
And, true to God, to freedom, to mankind,
If her chained bandogs Faction shall unbind.
These stately forms, that bending even now
Bowed their strong manhood to the humble plough,
Shall rise erect, the guardians of the land,
The same stern iron in the same right hand,
Till o'er the hills the shouts of triumph run,
The sword has rescued what the ploughshare won!"

Now, in 1849, I, who remember, can tell you, every-day people did not much think that Faction was going to unbind her bandogs and set the country at war; and it was only a prophet-poet who saw that there was a chance that men might forge their ploughshares into swords again. But you see from the poem that Holmes was such a prophet-poet, and now, forty-four years after, it was a pleasure to hear him read these lines.

I asked him of his reminiscences of Emerson's famous Phi Beta Kappa oration at Cambridge, which he has described, as so many others have, as the era of independence in American literature. We both talked of the day, which we remembered, and of the Phi Beta dinner which followed it, when Mr. Everett presided, and bore touching tribute to Charles Emerson, who had just died. Holmes said: "You cannot make the people of this generation understand the effect of Everett's oratory. I have never felt the fascination of speech as I did in hearing him. Did it ever occur to you,—did I say to you the other day,—that when a man has such a voice as he had, our slight nasal resonance is an advantage and not a disadvantage?"

I was fresher than he from his own book on Emerson, and remembered

that he had said there somewhat the same thing. His words are: "It is with delight that one who remembers Everett in his robes of rhetorical splendor; who recalls his full-blown, high-colored, double-flowered periods; the rich, resonant, grave, far-reaching music of his speech, with just enough of nasal vibration to give the vocal sounding-board its proper value in the harmonies of utterance,—it is with delight that such a one recalls the glowing words of Emerson whenever he

Holmes's is one of the few successful Phi Beta poems in the dreary catalogue of more than a century. The custom of having "*the poem*," as people used to say, as if it were always the same, is now almost abandoned.

Fortunately for us both, a tap was heard at the door, and Mr. John Holmes appeared, his brother. Mr. John Holmes has not chosen to publish the bright things which he has undoubtedly written, but in all circles where he favors people with his presence he is



DOROTHY Q'S HOUSE IN QUINCY, MASS.*

refers to Edward Everett. It is enough if he himself caught enthusiasm from those eloquent lips. But many a listener has had his youthful enthusiasm fired by that great master of academic oratory." I knew, when I read this, that Holmes referred to himself as the "youthful listener," and was glad that within twenty-four hours he should say so to me.

So we fell to talking of his own Phi Beta poem. A good Phi Beta poem is an impossibility; but it is the business of genius to work the miracles, and

known as one of the most agreeable of men. Everybody is glad to set him on the lines of reminiscences. The two brothers, with great good humor, began telling of a dinner party which Doctor Holmes had given, within a few days, to a number of gentlemen whose average ages, according to them, exceeded eighty. One has to make allowance for the exaggeration of their fun, but I think, from the facts which they dropped, that the average must have been maintained. One would have given a good deal to be old enough to

* Also called the Peter Butler house. Sewall in his diary speaks of it as Mr. Quincy's new house (1680-85). There Dorothy was born and married.



DOCTOR O. W. HOLMES DELIVERING HIS FAREWELL ADDRESS AS PARKMAN PROFESSOR OF ANATOMY IN THE MEDICAL SCHOOL OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY, NOVEMBER 28, 1882. FROM A PROOF PRINT IN THE POSSESSION OF DOCTOR JAMES R. CHADWICK.

be permitted to be at that dinner. This led to talk of the Harvard class of 1829, for whose meetings Holmes has written so many of his charming poems. He said that they are now to have a dinner within a few days, and named the gentlemen who were to be there. Among them, of course, is Doctor Samuel F. Smith, the author of "America." I noticed that Doctor Holmes always called him "My country 'tis of thee," and so did all of us. And then these two critics began analyzing that magnificent song. "It will not do to laugh at it. People show that they do not know what they are talking about when they speak lightly of it. Did you ever think how much is gained by making the first verse begin with the singular number? Not *our* country, but '*My* country,' '*I* sing of thee'? There is not

an American citizen but can make it his own, and does make it his own, as he sings it. And it rises to a Psalm-like grandeur at the end." "It is a magnificent hold to have upon fame to have sixty million people sing the verses that you have written." John Holmes said: "How good 'templed hills' is, and that is not alone in the poem." Both John Holmes and I plead to be permitted to come to the class dinner, but Doctor Holmes was very funny. He pooh-poohed us both; we were only children, and we were not to be present at so rare a solemnity. For me, I already felt that I had been wicked in wasting so much of his time. But he has the gift of making you think that you are the only person in the world, and that he is only living for your pleasure. Still I knew, as a matter of

fact, that this was not so, and very unwillingly I took myself away.

As I walked home I meditated on the fate of a first-rate book in our time. Holmes had expressed unaffected surprise that I spoke with the gratitude which I felt about his "Life of Emerson." The book must have cost him the hard work of a year. It is as remarkable a study as one poet ever made of another. Yet I think he said to me that no one had seemed to understand the care and effort which he had given to it.

Here is the position in the United States now about the criticism of such work. At about the time that the "North American Review" ceased to review books, there came, as if by general consent, an end to all elaborate criticism of new books here.

I think myself that this is a thing very much to be regretted. In old times, whoever wrote a good book was tolerably sure that at least one competent person would study it and write down what he thought about it; and, from at least one point of view, an author had a prospect of knowing how his book struck other people. Now we have nothing but the hasty sketches, sometimes very good, which are written for the daily or weekly press.

So it happens that I, for one, have never seen any fit recognition of the

gift which Doctor Holmes made to our time and to the next generation when he made his study of Emerson's life for the "American Men of Letters" series. Apparently he had not. Just think of it! Here is a poet, the head of our "Academy," so far as there is any such Academy, who is willing to devote a year of his life to telling you and me what Emerson was, from his own personal recollections of a near friend, whom he met as often as once a week, and talked with perhaps for hours at a time, and with whom he talked on literary and philosophical subjects. More than this, this poet has been willing to go through Emerson's books again, to re-read them as he had originally read them when they came out, and to make for you and me a careful analysis of all these books. He is one of five people in the country who are competent to tell what effect these books produced on the country as they appeared from time to time. And, being competent, he makes the time to tell us this thing. That is a sort of good fortune which, so far as I remember, has happened to nobody excepting Emerson. When John Milton died, there was nobody left who could have done such a thing; certainly nobody did do it, or tried to do it. I must say, I think it is rather hard that when such a gift as that has been given to the people of any country, that people, while boasting of its seventy millions of numbers, and its thousands of billions of acres, should not



O. W. HOLMES'S SUMMER RESIDENCE AT BEVERLY FARMS.



O. W. HOLMES AND E. E. HALE. FROM A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN IN DOCTOR HOLMES'S STUDY, MAY 22, 1893.

have one critical journal of which it is the business to say at length, and in detail, whether Doctor Holmes has done his duty well by the prophet, or whether, indeed, he has done it at all.

When we left Doctor Holmes, he and his household were looking forward to the annual escape to Beverly. Somebody once wrote him a letter dated from "Manchester-by-the-Sea," and Holmes wrote his reply under the date "Beverly-by-the-Depot." And here let me stop to tell one of those jokes for which the English language and Doctor Holmes were made. A few years ago, in a fit of economy, our famous Massachusetts Historical Society screwed up its library and other offices by some fifteen feet, built in the space underneath, and rented it to the city of Boston. This was all very well for the treasurer; but for those of us who had passed sixty years, and had

to climb up some twenty more iron stairs whenever we wanted to look at an old pamphlet in the library, it was not so great a benefaction. When Holmes went up, for the first time, to see the new quarters of the Society, he left his card with the words, "O. W. Holmes. High-story-call Society." We understood then why the councils of the Society had been over-ruled by the powers which manage this world, to take this flight towards heaven.

I ought to have given a hint above of his connection and mine with the society of "People who Think we are Going to Know More about Some Things By and By." This society was really formed by my mother, who for some time, I think, was the only member. But one day Doctor Holmes and I met in the "Old Corner Bookstore," when the Corner had been moved to the corner of Hamilton Place, and he was telling me one of the extraordinary

coincidences which he collects with such zeal. I ventured to trump his story with another; and, in the language of the ungodly, I thought I went one better than he. This led to a talk about coincidences, and I said that my mother had long since said that she meant to have a society of the people who believed that sometime we should know more about such curious coincidences. Doctor Holmes was delighted with the idea, and we "organized" the society then and there; he was to be president, I was to be secretary, and my mother was to be treasurer. There were to be no other members, no entrance fees, no constitution, and no assessments. We seldom meet now that we do not authorize a meeting of this society and challenge each other to produce the remarkable coincidences which have passed since we met before.

There is an awful story of his about the last time a glove was thrown down in an English court-room. It is a story in which Holmes is all mixed up with a marvellous series of impossibilities,

such as would make Mr. Clemens's hair grow gray, and add a new chapter to his studies of telepathy. I will not enter on it now, with the detail of the book that fell from the ninth shelf of a book-case, and opened at the exact passage where the challenge story was to be described. No, I will not tell another word of it; for if I am started upon it, it will take up the whole of this number of Mr. McClure's Magazine. But sometime, when Mr. McClure wants to make the whole magazine thrill with excitement, he will write to Doctor Holmes, and ask him for that story of the "challenge of battle."

As for the story of his hearing Doctor Phinney at Rome, and the other story of Mr. Emerson's hearing Doctor Phinney at Rome, I never tell that excepting to confidential friends who know that I cannot tell a lie. For if I tell it to any one else, he looks at me with a quizzical air, as much as to say, "This is as bad as the story of the 'Man Without a Country';" and I do not know how much to believe, and how much to disbelieve."



O. W. HOLMES IN HIS FAVORITE SEAT AT BEVERLY.