

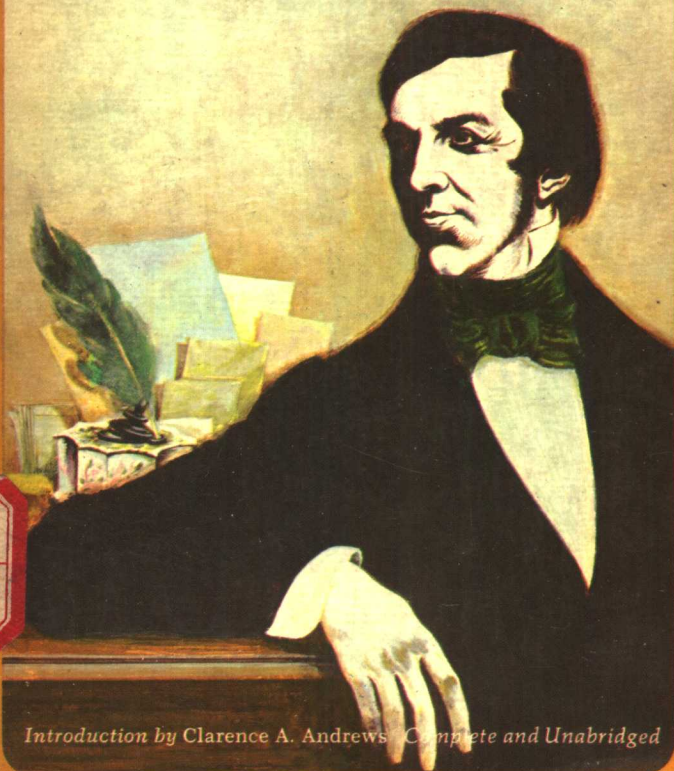


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OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

**THE
AUTOCRAT
OF THE
BREAKFAST-TABLE**



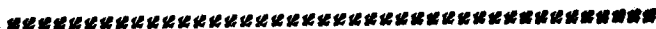
Introduction by Clarence A. Andrews Complete and Unabridged

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THE AUTOCRAT OF THE BREAKFAST-TABLE

Oliver Wendell Holmes



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OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

OF THE BREAKFAST-TABLE



I FIRST MET the Autocrat and came to love him almost forty years ago now in the classroom of Miss Jane Houghton, a teacher who taught me to remember that books were not mere packages of paper and ink, but something more—the eternally living, thinking, sparkling minds of some of the greatest men who ever lived, captured for all time for immediate confrontation with our own minds whenever we so choose.

In the years since the Autocrat first became a friend and his book became a beloved possession, I have read many books. Yet in all those years (and I do not claim this as the sole merit or as the most important merit) I have never read so pleasant a book, a book with such charm and grace as this book possesses. I have read books which tried to be pleasant and charming and graceful, but one soon had the feeling that it was all laid on with a thick brush like whitewash on a rough board fence. In this book the pleasantness and charm and grace *belong*. They emanate from the words and ideas and incidents, from every page.

Latter-day attempts to achieve the same effect are often found in the pages of ladies' magazines. These attempts, I am sure, are sincere and well-intentioned, but somehow they fail to approach the obvious goal. And so we label these products "escape," and put them in a second-class category of literature. We say that there seems to be no awareness in these pieces of racial problems, of the plight of the cities, of

wars and rumors of wars, of human problems. We say these pieces are mostly about "white Anglo-Saxon protestants" who don't use four-letter words when they speak and who have no real problems.

Something of the same kind of charge has been made about this book. Its characters are all white Anglo-Saxon protestants who, for the purposes of the author, are isolated, for the most part, in a boardinghouse dining room. The year is 1857 and in the streets and newspapers there is bitter debate about slavery and abolitionists and the possibility of secession. In the streets men become so bitter over these issues that they often fall back on the four-letter word to express their bitterness. The quarrels and the bitterness of the streets are not in this book, and its author has been criticized on those grounds.

Yet a book cannot be everything, do everything. Contained in this book is a whole world which existed apart from the bitterness that raged outside. But not because the author of this book was not aware of controversy. He was. He was a doctor of medicine who was criticized because he published humorous poems (frivolous poems, his critics would have said); he wrote an essay on puerperal fever which saved hundreds and thousands of lives, but the essay got him into controversy; he rejected the religious beliefs of his family and friends and found himself in controversy for this. Incidentally, in this book you will find what is perhaps the best one of his humorous poems—and if you read it carefully enough you will find that it is on a very controversial subject, indeed.

Oliver Wendell Holmes (who must not be confused with his famous son, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes [1841-1935]) was born at Cambridge, Massachusetts, very near the "Boston State House . . . the hub of the solar system" as Holmes puts it in this book. In prep school and at Harvard he formed and strengthened an aversion to Calvinism. A year out of Harvard he first attracted attention with his poem "Old Ironsides," the poem which begins:

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

Visitors to Boston harbor today can still visit the *Constitution*. The fact that they can and do is a tribute to the power of young Holmes' poem.

He began and gave up the study of law. In 1831-1832, he published some articles entitled *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*. You will find an oblique reference to those articles in the first lines of this book. He continued to write all of his life. Over and over again he was called upon for verses for special occasions; he wrote novels, books of essays, scholarly articles on the subject of medicine. He studied medicine first in Europe, then received his M.D. from Harvard (1836) and began the practice of medicine in Boston. Eleven years later he became Dean of the Harvard Medical School. He lectured on English poets and he helped pioneer in the uses of anesthetics; in fact, it was Holmes who coined the word "anaesthesia." Dr. Holmes achieved a wide fame for his medical knowledge; you will find his picture hanging in many of the halls of medical colleges today, and more than one distinguished American medical man has attempted to pattern his life after Dr. Holmes by combining a career in medicine and literature. His fame as a literary man has not stood up as well; Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, are the people we read and quote and study today.

And that is the way it should be. *Moby Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Leaves of Grass*, Miss Dickinson's poems, are all superior to Holmes' literary output; they "date" better than most of Holmes' work which is too often topical or related to subjects which no longer concern us. Moreover, because of the pressures of modern life—the stress placed on national and international politics, the accent on science and technology,—and because of the travel and entertainment possibilities in modern life, we seem to have less time for the kind of urbane life shown in this book, a way of life where what one read and what one could talk about mattered very much. So we concentrate on the "dynamite" figures and as a consequence overlook the very valuable contributions of those who also lived and wrote and mattered.

But I am becoming an apologist and Dr. Holmes needs none of this. He is well able to defend himself, if you will but give him the chance and turn to the pages which follow these. What you will find there are the reflections of a mind

which was witty, humorously-inclined, urbane, generous, pleasant, critical, and straightforward. "Beware of making your moral staple the negative virtues," he wrote, and he practiced that precept on every page.

Many of Holmes' aphorisms have all of the paradoxical pungency of an Oscar Wilde: "Give us the luxuries of life, and we will dispense with its necessities . . . good Americans, when they die, go to Paris . . . Everybody likes and respects self-made men. It is a great deal better to be made in that way than not to be made at all." His aphorisms also have a great deal of common sense in them: "Memory is a net; one finds it full of fish when he takes it from the brook; but a dozen miles of water have run through it without sticking."

But the Autocrat can do more than create what may be dangerous generalizations. He can express himself on the larger issues; where poetry comes from; the standards for an educated man; the faults of Calvinism; the values of truth; the nature of reality; the passing of time and its result, Age; learning vs. apparent or superficial learning; and many other issues. And despite the fact that he is often critical, yet he is always urbane. The Autocrat has learned how to disagree without being disagreeable. His methods are here for all to follow.

As a genre *The Autocrat* is a most interesting book. Ostensibly, it is a report of a series of conversations. As such they introduce a number of interesting persons: the Professor, the schoolmistress, Ben Franklin (not *the* Ben Franklin, but a schoolboy namesake), the landlady, her daughter, an "old gentleman," the divinity student, a Poet, "John," "the angular female in black bombazine," and others. Despite the "autocracy" of the composition, we see many of these persons up close—the schoolmistress as she walks with the Autocrat and accepts his invitation to walk the "long path" with him; the landlady's daughter as she unwittingly gives the Autocrat a copy of the despised Tupper's poetry; Ben Franklin as he makes public display of his ill-learning in French; the Poet whose contributions often bring a chapter to an end; the Professor whose erudition keeps the Autocrat honest; and so on. But as we read we see that the real purpose of these characters is to maintain a kind of middle-ground; to prevent the Autocrat from being too autocratic—

or even despotic. If he attempts too much learning, the Professor's learning or Ben Franklin's difficulty in following an abstruse point will hold the Autocrat in check; if he attacks Calvinism too strongly or too unwisely he faces the aroused divinity student. And so on.

The notion of the conversation at the breakfast table is a fiction, then, as the Autocrat himself tells us. So at second glance we see that *The Autocrat* is more exactly a series of personal essays presented as conversations. The various characters become, then, Holmes' critics as he anticipates them. The fact that Holmes would bring his critics into his work not only gives the work a lively aspect; it disarms us as well. It is a good rhetorical device.

I cannot close my comments on this book without noting that it contains two of the finer contributions to the corpus of American poetry—"The Chambered Nautilus" and "The Deacon's Masterpiece." How good they are in relation to Holmes' other poetry may be seen by comparing them with the other poems in the book. These latter are not bad poems, per se, but they are presented in too much of the poetic diction of the eighteenth century and they deal too much with idealistic abstractions to be truly pleasing to us. Now and then one finds in them a bright image such as the eleventh stanza in "Spring Has Come"; too often they are constructed of lines such as these:

Wide o'er the clasping arch of day
Soars like a cloud their hoary chief;

If we are not moved by images of these sorts, we are likely to be disappointed in the poetry.

Holmes makes it clear in this book that he believes in associations and analogies; he would have found Freudian psychology much to his liking. A third of the way through the book we come upon the best presentation of this belief which he has constructed. We begin to read, perhaps just slightly bored by the encyclopedia-like information about the nautilus just before it:

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign
Sails the unshadowed main,—

and just like that we find ourselves caught up in a sustained development of an image as well done as almost anything in

English. There is no point in picking out lines or phrases; they all ring and ring true, despite the occasional inversion of words. There is no rhetoric, no hyperbole, no bombast. The image of the nautilus, its development in the sea, call for just this heightened language. So well is the poem put together that at the end we assimilate the inevitable *Holmsian* moral with no awareness of the pedantry involved. The association, the analogy is perfect—for we too came from the sea, and the rhythms of those ancient aboriginal days surely flow in our veins and respond to the ebb and flow of the rhythms of Holmes' lines.

"The Deacon's Masterpiece, or, The Wonderful 'One-Horse-Shay'" is a horse of another color, if I may mix my metaphors just a trifle. There have not been many comic poets in our history; old Geoffrey Chaucer was one; Alexander Pope was another. And here is Holmes to match his wits against his predecessors, and succeeding in what must be one of the great bits of comedy of American literature in an almost perfect mix of rhythm, language, wit, good humor and satire:

Seventeen hundred and fifty-five.

Georgius Secundus was then alive,—

Snuffy old drone from the German hive!

with lines made up of almost improbable technical terms—

Step and prop-iron, bolt and screw,
Spring, tire, axle, and linchpin too,
Steel of the finest, bright and blue;
Thoroughbrace, bison-skin, thick and wide
Boot, top, dasher, from tough old hide
Found in the pit when the tanner died.

I invite you to read this poem and avoid laughing if you can.

Is it all then merely a congeries of impressions put down as it came to the mind of a garrulous old man? No, for it is the mind of that man which integrates it all, provides a unified work. What we have revealed at last is the mind and heart and soul of an eighteenth-century gentleman, the kind of man who in the nineteenth century not only made Boston the "hub of the universe" but also made America the center of the universe; for it was that same Boston which brought to full growth some of the greatest minds of history: Holmes,

Emerson, and Thoreau. To see what helped make Boston and America the center of that world which had once been Europe's plaything, to see the kind of Yankee mind that the new nation had produced, you have only to turn to the following pages. It is all there—sparkling, urbane, witty, charming, critical and fun—the kind of a book that will not be written again in my lifetime or yours. The world that produced this book is gone. It was a wonderful world—and it is all yours because a book is not a mere package of paper and ink.

Clarence A. Andrews
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The Autocrat's Autobiography

THE INTERRUPTION referred to in the first sentence of the first of these papers was just a quarter of a century in duration.

Two articles entitled "The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table" will be found in the "New-England Magazine," formerly published in Boston by J. T. and E. Buckingham. The date of the first of these articles is November, 1831, and that of the second February, 1832. When "The Atlantic Monthly" was begun, twenty-five years afterwards, and the author was asked to write for it, the recollection of these crude products of his uncombed literary boyhood suggested the thought that it would be a curious experiment to shake the same bough again, and see if the ripe fruit were better or worse than the early windfalls.

So began this series of papers, which naturally brings those earlier attempts to my own notice and that of some few friends who were idle enough to read them at the time of their publication. The man is father to the boy that was, and I am my own son, as it seems to me, in those papers of the "New-England Magazine." If I find it hard to pardon the boy's faults, others would find it harder. They will not, therefore, be reprinted here, nor, as I hope, anywhere.

But a sentence or two from them will perhaps bear reproducing, and with these I trust the gentle reader, if that kind being still breathes, will be contented.

—"It is a capital plan to carry a tablet with you, and, when you find yourself felicitous, take notes of your own conversation."—

—"When I feel inclined to read poetry I take down my Dictionary. The poetry of words is quite as beautiful as that of sentences. The author may arrange the gems effectively, but their shape and lustre have been given by the attrition of ages. Bring me the finest simile from the

whole range of imaginative writing, and I will show you a single word which conveys a more profound, a more accurate, and a more eloquent analogy.”—

—“Once on a time, a notion was started, that if all the people in the world would shout at once, it might be heard in the moon. So the projectors agreed it should be done in just ten years. Some thousand shiploads of chronometers were distributed to the selectmen and other great folks of all the different nations. For a year beforehand, nothing else was talked about but the awful noise that was to be made on the great occasion. When the time came, everybody had their ears so wide open, to hear the universal ejaculation of *Boo*,—the word agreed upon,—that nobody spoke except a deaf man in one of the *Fejee* Islands, and a woman in *Pekin*, so that the world was never so still since the creation.”—

There was nothing better than these things and there was not a little that was much worse. A young fellow of two or three and twenty has as good a right to spoil a magazine-full of essays in learning how to write, as an oculist like *Wenzel* had to spoil his hat-full of eyes in learning how to operate for cataract, or an *elegant* like *Brummel* to point to an armful of failures in the attempt to achieve a perfect neck-tie. This son of mine, whom I have not seen for these twenty-five years, generously counted, was a self-willed youth, always too ready to utter his unchastised fancies. He, like too many young American people, got the spur when he should have had the rein. He therefore helped to fill the market with that unripe fruit which his father says in one of these papers abounds in the marts of his native country. All these by-gone shortcomings he would hope are forgiven, did he not feel sure that very few of his readers know anything about them. In taking the old name for the new papers, he felt bound to say that he had uttered unwise things under that title, and if it shall appear that his un-wisdom has not diminished by at least half while his years have doubled, he promises not to repeat the experiment if he should live to double them again and become his own grandfather.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

Boston, November 1, 1858

To the Readers of *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS more have passed since the silence of the preceding twenty-five years was broken by the first words of the self-recording personage who lends his title to these pages, in the "Atlantic Monthly" for November, 1857. The children of those who first read these papers as they appeared are still reading them as kindly as their fathers and mothers read them a quarter of a century ago. And now, for the first time for many years I have read them myself, thinking that they might be improved by various corrections and changes.

But it is dangerous to tamper in cold blood and in after life with what was written in the glow of an earlier period. Its very defects are a part of its organic individuality. It would spoil any character these records may have to attempt to adjust them to the present age of the world or of the author. We have all of us, writer and readers, drifted away from many of our former habits, tastes, and perhaps beliefs. The world could spare every human being who was living when the first sentence of these papers was written; its destinies would be safe in the hands of the men and women of twenty-five years and under.

This book was written for a generation which knew nothing or next to nothing of war, and hardly dreamed of it; which felt as if invention must have exhausted itself in the miracles it had already wrought. To-day, in a small sea-side village of a few hundred inhabitants, I see the graveyard fluttering with little flags that mark the soldiers' graves; we read, by the light the rocks of Pennsylvania have furnished for us, all that is most important in the morning papers of

the civilized world; the lightning, so swift to run our errands, stands shining over us, white and steady as the moonbeams, burning, but unconsumed; we talk with people in the neighboring cities as if they were at our elbow, and as our equipages flash along the highway, the silent bicycle glides by us and disappears in the distance. All these since 1857, and how much more than these changes in our everyday conditions! I can say without offence to-day that which called out the most angry feelings and the hardest language twenty-five years ago. I may doubt everything to-day if I will only do it civilly.

I cannot make over again the book and those which followed it, and I will not try to mend old garments with new cloth. Let the sensible reader take it for granted that the author would agree with him in changing whatever he would alter, in leaving out whatever he would omit, if it seemed worth while to tamper with what was finished long ago. The notes which have been added will not interrupt the current of the conversational narrative.

I can never be too grateful for the tokens of regard which these papers and those which followed them have brought me. The kindness of my far-off friends has sometimes overtaxed my power of replying to them, but they may be assured that their pleasant words were always welcome, however insufficiently acknowledged.

I have experienced the friendship of my readers so long that I cannot help anticipating some measure of its continuance. If I should feel the burden of correspondence too heavily in the coming years, I desire to record in advance my gratitude to those whom I may not be able to thank so fully and so cordially as I could desire.

BEVERLY FARMS, Mass., *August 29, 1882*

Preface to the New Edition

ANOTHER DECADE has nearly closed since the above Preface was written. The Autocrat still finds readers, among the young as well as among the old. The children of my early readers were writing to me about my books, especially *The Autocrat*, as I mentioned in that other Preface. Now it is the grandchildren who are still turning to these pages, which I might well have thought would be voted old-fashioned, outworn, an unvalued bequest to posterity with Oblivion as residuary legatee. I have nothing of importance to add in the way of prefatory remarks. I can only repeat my grateful acknowledgments to the reading public at home and abroad for the hospitable manner in which my thoughts have been received. The expressions of personal regard, esteem, confidence, sympathetic affinity, may I not add affection, which this book has brought to me have become an habitual experience and an untiring source of satisfaction. I have thanked hundreds, yes, thousands, and many thousands of these kind correspondents, until my eyes have grown dim and I can no longer read many of their letters except through younger eyes. If my hand does not refuse to hold the pen or to guide it in the form of presentable characters, an occasional cramp of a little muscle which knows its importance and insists on having it recognized by *striking*, after its own fashion, is a hint that I must at length do what I have long said I ought to do, content myself with an encyclical of thanks and write no more letters except to a few relatives and intimates.

A single fact strikes me as worth mentioning. Ten years ago I said that there had been a feeling at the time when this book was written as if mechanical invention had exhausted itself. I referred in the Preface of 1882 to the new

miracles of the telephone and of electric illumination. Since then a new wonder has been sprung upon us in the shape of the electric motor, which has already familiarized itself among us as a common carrier. It is not safe to speculate on what the last decade of the century may yet bring us, but it looks as if the wasted energies of the winds and the waters were to be converted into heat, light, and mechanical movement, in that mysterious form which we call electricity, so as to change the material conditions of life to an extent to which we can hardly dare to set limits. As to what social and other changes may accompany the altered conditions of human life in the coming era, it is safer to leave the question open to exercise the ingenuity of some as yet youthful, perhaps unborn Autocrat.

O. W. H.

BEVERLY FARMS, Mass., *July 28, 1891*