

1028/85/4

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82

33

NOTES FROM BOOKS

The Autocrat of The Breakfast Table. By Oliver Wendell Holmes.
Leipzig 1883

Letter from O. W. Holmes to W. O.

(Script)

Boston,

Jan. 21st. 1889.

My dear Sir,

I ought to have answered your very kind letter long before this, but I have the usual excuses of over burdened correspondents to offer. I have rarely been more pleased than by your allusions to an old paper of mine. There was a time certainly in which I would have said that the best page of my record was that in which I had fought my battle for the poor poisoned women. I am reminded of that Essay from time to time, but it was published in a periodical which died after one year's life and therefore escaped the wider notice it would have found if printed in the America Journal of the Medical Sciences. A lecturer at one of the great London Hospitals referred to it the other day and coupled it with some fine phrases about myself which made me blush, either with modesty or vanity I forget which.

I think I will not answer the question you put me. I think oftenest of the "Chambered Nautilus", which is a favourite poem of mine, though I wrote wrote it myself. The Essay only comes up at long intervals, the poem repeats itself in my memory and is very often spoken of by my correspondents in terms of more than ordinary praise. I had a savage pleasure, I confess, in handling these two Professors—learned men both of them, skilful experts, but babies, as it seemed to me in their capacity of reasoning and arguing. But in writing the poem I was filled with a better feeling, the highest state of mental exaltation and the most crystalline clairvoyance as it seemed to me that had ever been granted to me. I mean that lucid vision of one's thought and all forms of expression which will be at once precise and musical which is the poet's special gift, however large or small in amount or value. There is some selfish pleasure to be had out of the poem, perhaps a nobler satisfaction from the life-saving labor.

Believe me, dear Sir,
Very truly yours,

Oliver Wendell Holmes.