

Apr

My note in the January number of the JOURNAL referring to the important part played by Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, in spreading correct ideas in the profession on the subject of puerperal fever, and the question which I broached whether he would rather have written his essay on this subject or certain of his beautiful poems, has elicited from the Autocrat himself the following characteristic reply:

"I have rarely been more pleased than by your allusion 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 on which I 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 one year after life, and it therefore escaped the wide notice it would have found if it had been printed in the American Journal of the Medical Sciences. A lecturer at one of the great London Hospitals referred to it the other day and coupled with it 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 often of the "Chambered Nautilus", which was a favorite poem of mine, if I 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 those two professors - learned men both of them - skilled 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, a higher state of mental exaltation, and the most crystal 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 a more selfish pleasure to be had out of the poem, perhaps a nobler satisfaction from the life-saving labor."

(William Osler)