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THE MEDICAL LIFE OF OLIVER WENDELL  
HOLMES.

By J. H. MASON KNOX, JR., M. D.



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## THE MEDICAL LIFE OF OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.<sup>1</sup>

By J. H. MASON KNOX, JR., M. D.

The birth of Oliver Wendell Holmes into the medical world [45] was hardly a spontaneous one, but was rather the result of a protracted labor and took place after a long period of uncertainty and doubt.

At the age of nineteen, when a junior at Harvard, he writes to his boyhood's friend, Phineas Barnes, that he is totally undecided what to study; "it will be law or Physic, for I cannot say that I think the trade of authorship adapted to this meridian."

While at college Holmes showed in formation many of the convivial charms that so graced his later life. He was popular, the center of much of the social life of his class, and was often called upon at various society and class functions to exercise his ready rhyming pen in descriptive verse. He contributed several articles to the college magazine, the "Collegian." It was here he suffered, as he said, his first attack of "author's lead poisoning."

His father, a clergyman of rather liberal views for that period and latitude seems to have interposed no serious objections to the moderate indulgence of his son's convivial proclivities.

His mother was Sarah Wendell, a sprightly and lovable woman, from whom Holmes inherited many of his genial traits.

He describes himself at college as a "plumeless biped of

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<sup>1</sup> Much of material for this sketch was obtained from the "Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes," edited by John T. Morse, Jr., 1896.



[45] exactly five feet three inches when standing in a pair of substantial shoes, having eyes which I call blue." "I am rather lazy than otherwise, and certainly do not study as hard as I ought to. I am not dissipated and I am not sedate. I stood at the humble rank of 17th scholar." He graduated in June, 1829, in a class noted for its high character, and which then and for many years afterwards made Holmes the center of their yearly reunions, which he often celebrated in verse.

After this came the well-known period of doubt as to his work. He studied law for a year, but never seems to have liked it. We find him writing in a few months to a friend: "I am sick at heart of this place (the law school) and at almost everything connected with it. I know not what the temple of the law may be to those who have entered it, but to me it seems very cold and cheerless about the threshold."

So after the first year he entered the Harvard Medical [46] School September 30, 1830, at the age of twenty-one, and began the studies which brought him contentment and influenced all his later life. He writes to Barnes shortly after his "flop" to medicine: "I must announce to you the startling proposition that I have been a medical student for more than six months and am sitting with a stethoscope on my desk and the blood-stained implements of my profession about me. I know I might have made an indifferent lawyer; I think I may make a tolerable physician. I did not like the one, I do like the other, and so you must know that I have been going to the Massachusetts General Hospital and slicing and slivering carcasses of better men and women than I ever was or am like to be. It is a sin for a puny little fellow like me to mutilate one of your six-foot men as if he were a sheep, but 'vive la science.'"

Little is recorded of Holmes' life at the medical school. Undoubtedly he soon came under the influence of that great clinician and teacher, Dr. James Jackson, who was Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine from 1812-1846, and whose son was but a little further on in his medical studies. Dr. Jackson had studied in England and knew the value of the wider experience at the European clinics, and it may well have been at his suggestion that Holmes decided to go abroad



and continue his medical education in Paris, which at that [46] time and for a quarter of a century afterwards was the Mecca which all ambitious followers of the healing art sought to reach.

This French nursing converted the weak and underfed medical infant, whose birth had been attended with so many fears, into a sturdy, self-reliant child, able to sit up and take the strong diet of the many clinics and to do some vigorous, independent thinking.

Holmes was associated with a distinguished group of American students, among whom may be mentioned Jackson and Bigelow, Hooper, Warren, Gerhardt, and Morse. They lived in the Latin Quarter and attended the lectures and demonstrations of such men as Louis and Andral, Dupuytren and Larrey, who were leading the medical world of their day.

Holmes reached Paris April, 1833, and soon after was completely absorbed in his work. After a few months he writes: "I am more and more attached to the study of my profession and more and more determined to do what I can to give to my own country one citizen among others who has profited somewhat by the advantages offered him in Europe. The whole walls of the Ecole de Médecine are covered with notes of lectures, the greater part of them gratuitous. . . . The dissecting rooms are open and the lessons are ringing aloud through all the great hospitals."

He usually began the day at seven o'clock at the hospital of La Pitié, where he attended lectures and clinics until breakfast at about eleven, after which he studied until 5 p. m., when he often dined at some "café" with a company of his fellow students. He speaks approvingly of the tasteful viands and the pleasing wines, very different from the "crude joints, the massive puddings, the depressing pies, and the hard cider which marvelously nourished New England in its era of development."

The period spent by Holmes in Paris was part of an epoch of remarkable progress in the history of medicine. The short but brilliant researches of Bichat had shown the close relationship between symptoms of disease and definite anatomical



[46] conditions and had dissipated many of the philosophical and visionary theories which had been thought sufficient to explain the phenomena of illness.

Following this with the work of Corvesart and Laennec, came the introduction of accurate methods of diagnosis by percussion and auscultation and the insistence by Louis of the statistical method of study; that deductions concerning a diseased state should be made only after carefully tabulating many similar conditions and not from a single instance.

This great teacher, who was just in his prime while Holmes was in Paris, was undoubtedly the most inspiring personality met by the large group of American students. "Louis had," he writes, "in a rare degree the power of attracting youth, so that those who followed him among the beds of the hospitals became filled with an ardent ambition. He was the object of our reverence, I might almost say of idolatry; modest in the presence of nature, fearless in the face of authority, unwearying in the pursuit of truth, he was a man whom any student might be happy and proud to claim as his teacher and friend." Holmes, apparently was admitted, at least during his second year, to some degree of intimacy with Louis. He writes that he had constant access to two wards containing one hundred beds where he can examine patients and that on one occasion at least he had a "tête-à-tête dinner with his great teacher who intrusted to him the analysis of a work which he is going to make use of in a publication."

He became a member of the Society of Medical Observation, of which Louis was perpetual president and which was devoted to the discussion of important cases and the presentation of new work.

Other luminaries whose path he crossed during the precious time abroad he mentions, particularly in his delightful valedictory address to his class at the Harvard Medical School.

He did not have much to do with Andral who, although then a young man, was rapidly rising in fame and overshadowing the passing greatness of Broussais, whose "theories of gastro-enteritis as the cause of disease ran over the field of medicine like flame over the grass of a prairie, and who was in those days like an old volcano which has pretty nearly used



up its fire and brimstone but is still boiling and bubbling in <sup>[46]</sup> its interior and now and then sends up a spurt of lava and a volley of pebbles."

Of the intrepid men who operated in Paris in those anesthetic days, Holmes recalled particularly Lisfranc, whom he describes as a "great drawer of blood and hewer of members and who regretted the splendid guardsmen of the old Empire because they had such magnificent thighs to amputate."

Then there was the short, square, substantial man with iron-grey hair, ruddy face, and white apron. This was Baron Larry, Napoleon's favorite surgeon. He was still strong and sturdy; he adds, "few portraits remain printed in livier <sup>[47]</sup> colors on my memory." "To go around the Hôtel des Invalides with Larry was to live over again the Campaigns of Napoleon, to the last charge of the Red Lancers in the redder field of Waterloo."

He visited frequently l'Hôtel Dieu, where ruled and reigned the Master Surgeon of his day, the illustrious Baron Dupuytren. "No man disputed his reign, some envied his supremacy. He marched through the wards like a lessor kind of deity."

He mentions also the vivacious Ricord, whom he called the "Voltaire of Pelvic literature; a skeptic as to 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."

His time was not spent altogether in work, for he speaks of quite a list of renowned actors and singers and dancers who contributed to his recreation. He delighted to roam about the streets of Paris at night in looking at the shops which he thinks "greatly superior to those of Boston." He took especial pleasure in hunting for old books on the walls of the "Quais" and at the small dealers. He was present at the dinner among the Americans on July 4, 1833, which was also graced by "that inextinguishable old gentleman, Lafayette."

He was in a dreadful state of anxiety lest he should have to come home after his first year. He seems to have been a considerable drain upon the resources of his good parents, as Holmes, although not extravagant, was not willing to live



[47] meanly. He was known as a good dresser. He would come home if he must but he was "not willing to eat a dinner for twenty-five sous and drink sour wine at a cheap restaurant."

However, after several importunate letters he persuaded his father that a "boy is worth his manure as well as a potato patch" and embarked on his second year's work with renewed energy.

In the spring of his second year, with a Swiss who had known successively Jackson and Bowditch, Holmes took a course in operative surgery at a morgue in connection with a large cemetery. "Here at 12 noon every day," he narrates, "you might have seen M. Bizot and myself, like the old gentlemen at market, choosing our day's provisions with the same epicurean nicety. We paid fifty sous a piece for our subject and before evening we had him cut into inch pieces." "In England and America," he says, in contrast, "one may dissect but rarely operate upon the subject."

Holmes spent the summers, after the close of the lectures, in travel. In 1834, with several companions, he visited the Rhine Provinces, the low countries, and England. In London he saw something of the hospitals, but was not weaned from Paris as the city of his choice.

In July, 1835, he packed his accumulated belongings, a select little professional library, a modest stock of instruments, two skeletons and some skulls, and in the autumn, after an extended tour in Switzerland and Italy, he returned home, landing in New York in December. I have dwelt, perhaps, unduly upon the foreign experiences of Dr. Holmes, but it seems to have exerted a controlling influence upon all his subsequent professional life.

He returned to America with high ideals, with well-developed powers, a large amount of professional knowledge and skill, a self-reliance, an independence of thought, and a store of pleasant and useful memories which formed a part of his life's equipment through all the succeeding years.

In 1836 he took his degree of Doctor of Medicine from Harvard University and immediately started to practice. He shortly joined the Massachusetts Medical Society. In actual practice he seems to have had only moderate success. It is



doubtful if he ever cared much for the life of a general practitioner.<sup>[47]</sup> And he admitted that he did not make any strenuous efforts to build up a practice. Probably he did not add many to his list of patients by publishing a book of youthful poems just a year after his return from Europe. He competed successfully for the Boylston Prize in 1836 and 1837, winning three out of the four prizes offered by writing dissertations on "Indigenous Intermittent Fever in New England," "Neuralgia," and "The Utility and Importance of Direct Oral Examination in Medical Practice." The first of these is still a medical classic. In it Dr. Holmes displayed his accurate historical sense and gathered together all that is known of malaria, its distribution, symptoms, etc., in the early settlement of New England.

In 1838 he was appointed Professor of Anatomy and Physiology in Dartmouth College at Hanover, but resigned shortly after. He was married in 1840 to Miss Amelia Lee Jackson, a niece of his old preceptor. Dr. Holmes, in addition to his writings, together with three friends, engaged in teaching at the Tremont Street Medical College, a kind of supplementary institution to the Harvard Medical School, and in association with Dr. Bigelow he edited the American edition of Marshall Hall's text-book on the Theory and Practice of Medicine.

In 1842 he published two lectures on "Homeopathy and its Kindred Delusions." In them various senseless medical fads are playfully reviewed. The reader is introduced to the Royal cure of the King's Evil, the Weapon Ointment, which was applied to the weapon producing the wound for its healing, the Tar Water Mania of Bishop Berkely, and the "metallic tractors" of Mr. Perkins. Homeopathy, which he had doubtless become familiar with in Paris, is discussed in no stinted language in the second lecture. The good doctor hated homeopathy with a whole-souled hatred. He spoke of it as a "pseudo science." He showed its inconsistencies and absurdities. The argument founded on its occasional good results would be just as applicable, he said, to the counter-



[47] fitter who gives base coin on the ground that a spurious dollar had often relieved a poor man's necessities.

The parallel which the homeopaths attempted to draw between the effects of their infinitesimal doses and the production of small-pox from minute quantities of animal vaccine he shatters with the suggestion that the mind advancing this argument could reason that "a pebble may produce a mountain because an acorn can become a forest, or that because a [48] spark will burn down a city a mutton-chop will feed an army."

He refers to the absurdity of the original contention of Hahnemann, the founder of the cult, that seven-eighths of all chronic diseases are the result of psora, a skin affection called the itch.

He points out that to show the axiom "*Similia Similibus Curantur*" (like is cured by like) to be the sole law of nature in therapeutics, it is necessary to establish that drugs are always capable of curing diseases most like their own symptoms and that remedies should be shown not to cure diseases when they do not produce symptoms resembling those presented in these diseases. Neither of these propositions has ever been established. He predicts that the "Semi-Homeopathist will gradually withdraw from the 'rotten half of his business and try to make the public forget his connection with it and the ultra-Homeopaths will either recant or embrace some new and equally extravagant doctrine'; very few will stick to their colors and go down with their sinking ship."

Unquestionably Dr. Holmes' most important contribution to medicine was made in 1843, when he read before the Boston Society for Medical Improvement an essay on the Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever. This appeared in the *New England Quarterly Journal of Medicine and Surgery* for April of that year. The journal soon ceased to be published and the essay can hardly be said to have been brought to the attention of the profession.

It must be recalled that this was long before the days when the nature of contagion was understood and several years be-



fore the extended researches of Semmelweis<sup>2</sup> on the same sub-<sup>[48]</sup>ject. Holmes, in his original essay, which he republished unchanged twelve years later, marshals a startling number of cases of puerperal fever presumably carried to the mother by the attending physician or nurse. He points out clearly the probable connection between erysipelas and child-bed fever. His contention met with violent, almost contemptuous opposition from the leading obstetricians of the day, notably by Drs. Hodge and Meigs, of Philadelphia. The latter wrote in 1852: "I prefer to attribute these cases to accident or Providence, of which I can form a conception, than to a contagion of which I cannot form any clear idea"; and Hodge advises his students to "divest their minds of the overpowering dread that you can ever become the minister of evil, that you can ever convey in any possible manner a horrible virus so destructive in its effects and so mysterious in its operations as that attributed to puerperal fever."

In republishing the essay in 1855, Holmes makes an earnest plea to students for freedom from the trammels of authority, for individual judgment of facts. "Students," he says, "have naturally faith in their instructors, turning to them for truth and taking what they may choose to give them: babes in knowledge, not yet able to tell the breast from the bottle, pumping away for the milk of truth at all that offers were it nothing better than a professor's shrivelled forefinger."

The rules for the guidance of physicians in midwifery practice laid down by Holmes in 1843 need little revision to-day:

"1. A physician holding himself in readiness to attend cases of midwifery should never take any active part in the post-mortem examination of cases of puerperal fever.

"2. If a physician is present at such autopsies, he should

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<sup>2</sup>J. P. S. Semmelweis was born in 1818, and graduated in Medicine in 1846. Shortly after this time he became interested in the study of Child-bed fever. He probably considered it contagious as early as 1849, and defended his contentions in numerous personal letters, written between 1858 and 1860. His first formal publication on the subject, entitled: "Die Aetiologie der Begriff und die Prophylaxis des Kindbettfiebers," appeared in 1861.



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[48] use thorough ablution, change every article of dress, and allow twenty-four hours or more to elapse before attending to any case of midwifery. It may be well to extend the same caution to cases of simple peritonitis.

"3. Similar precautions should be taken after the autopsy or surgical treatment of cases of erysipelas, if the physician is obliged to unite such offices with his obstetrical duties, which is in the highest degree inexpedient.

"4. On the occurrence of a single case of puerperal fever in his practice, the physician is bound to consider the next female he attends in labor, unless some weeks at least have elapsed, as in danger of being infected by him, and it is his duty to take every precaution to diminish her risk of disease and death.

"5. If within a short period two cases of puerperal fever happen close to each other, in the practice of the same physician, the disease not existing or prevailing in the neighborhood, he would do wisely to relinquish his obstetrical practice for at least one month, and endeavor to free himself by every available means from any noxious influence he may carry about with him.

"6. The occurrence of three or more closely connected cases, in the practice of one individual, no others existing in the neighborhood, and no other sufficient cause being alleged for the coincidence, is *prima facie* evidence that he is the vehicle of contagion.

"7. It is the duty of the physician to take every precaution that the disease shall not be introduced by nurses or other assistants, by making proper inquiries concerning them, and giving timely warning of every suspected source of danger.

"8. Whatever indulgence may be granted to those who have heretofore been the ignorant causes of so much misery, the time has come when the existence of a private pestilence in the sphere of a single physician should be looked upon, not as a misfortune, but a crime; and in the knowledge of such occurrences the duties of the practitioner to his profession should give way to his paramount obligations to society."

The earnestness of the writer, to whom hundreds of



mothers owe their lives, is attested by the closing paragraphs <sup>[48]</sup> of the original paper:

"The woman about to become a mother, or with her newborn infant upon her bosom, should be the object of trembling care and sympathy wherever she bears her tender burden, or stretches her aching limbs. The very outcast of the streets has pity upon her sister in degradation, when the seal of <sup>[49]</sup> promised maternity is impressed upon her. The remorseless vengeance of the law, brought down upon its victim by a machinery as sure as destiny, is arrested in its fall at a word which reveals her transient claim for mercy. The solemn prayer of the liturgy singles out her sorrows from the multiplied trials of life, to plead for her in the hour of peril. God forbid that any member of the profession to which she trusts her life, doubly precious at that eventful period, should hazard it negligently, unadvisedly, or selfishly!"

In the "Professor at the Breakfast Table," he said, "I held up to the professional public the damnable facts connected with the conveyance of poison from one young mother's chamber to another's, for doing which humble office I desire to be thankful that I ever lived, though nothing else good should ever come into my life."

Holmes' graceful pen was soon recognized and he was asked to lecture, much to his personal inconvenience, in the many towns about Boston. He kept up his interest in medical history and practice, however, and gave some instruction in the use of the microscope, which instrument he was among the first to use in this country. He had unusual mechanical skill and was interested in the adjustment of the lens almost as much as in the study of the specimen, although he did describe some cells at the ends of long bones in a paper which he read at a medical gathering in 1851. Later he invented a stereoscope for hand use, described as an exceedingly clever device, which if patented might have made him for those times a rich man.

In 1847, at the age of 38, Holmes was elected Professor of Anatomy and Physiology at Harvard Medical School, which position he held continuously for thirty-five years, although the Chair of Physiology was separated in 1871.



[49] As a lecturer in anatomy Holmes became immediately popular. He knew his subject well and loved it, and was able to enliven his lectures with witty allusions which fixed the object in the students' memory. "Gentlemen," he said on one occasion, holding up a female pelvis, "this is the triumphal arch under which every candidate for immortality has to pass." Again, "These, gentlemen," pointing to the lower portion of the pelvic bones, "are the tuberosities of the ischia, on which man was designed to sit and survey the works of Creation."

His lecture-room was in an old building and to reach it Holmes had to climb up a pair of dark, winding stairs, often, because of his asthma, with the help of the janitor.

He lectured five times a week during the session at one o'clock, after the students had had previously four weary hours of continuous talk. Holmes was the only one who could interest them during the last hour.

Dr. Chever, one of his demonstrators, thus vividly describes the scene, so familiar to his students, but strange to those who only knew Holmes as the writer of graceful English:

"It nears one o'clock, and the close work in the demonstrator's 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 curtain, and falls upon a lead floor. The surroundings are singularly barren of ornament or beauty, and there is naught to inspire the intellect or the imagination, except the marvellous 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, and asks, 'What have you for me to-day?' and plunges, knife in hand, into the 'depths of his subject,'—a joke he might have uttered. Time flies, and a boisterous



crowd of turbulent Bob Sawyers pours through the hall to [49] his lecture-room, and begins a rhythmical stamping, one, two, three, and a shout, and pounding on his lecture-room doors. 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 the dusty museum 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, no dumb-waiters in those days. The cadaver is decorously disposed on a revolving table in the small arena, and is always covered, at first, from curious eyes, by a clean, white sheet. Respect for poor humanity and admiration for God's divinest work is the first lesson and the uppermost in the poet-lecturer's mind. He enters, and is greeted with a mighty shout and stamp of applause. Then silence, and there begins a charming hour of description, analysis, simile, anecdote, harmless pun, which clothes the dry bones with poetic imagery, enlivens a hard and fatiguing day with humor, and brightens to the tired listener the details of a difficult though interesting study. We say tired listener because—will it be believed?—the student is now listening to his fifth consecutive lecture that day, beginning at nine o'clock and ending at two; no pause, no rest, no recovery for the dazed senses, which have tried to absorb *Materia Medica*, *Chemistry*, *Practice*, *Obstetrics*, and *Anatomy*, all in one morning, by five learned professors. One o'clock was always assigned to Dr. Holmes because he alone could hold his exhausted audience's attention.

"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 illustration, comparison, and simile he used was unequalled. Hence his charm; you received information, and you were amused at the same time. He was always simple and rudimentary in his instruction. His flights of fancy never shot over his hearers' heads. 'Iteration and reiteration' was his favorite motto in teaching.



[49] "And how he loved Anatomy! as a mother her child. He  
[50] was never tired, always fresh, always eager in learning and teaching it. In earnest himself, enthusiastic, and of a happy temperament, he shed the glow of his ardent spirit over his followers, and gave to me, his demonstrator and assistant for eight years, some of the most attractive and happy hours of my life."

Holmes took the liveliest interest in the Medical School. He was Dean from 1847 to 1853. He was always accessible to the students and ready to give them kindly counsel.

He never was a strict disciplinarian and confessed that when he examined a man who was to live on 25-cent fees he usually confined his questions to the biceps.

President Eliot said of Holmes at a Congratulatory Breakfast: "He was one of the most active and hard-working of our lecturers. I never knew any other mortal exhibit such enthusiasm over an elegant dissection. Perhaps you think it is with the pen that Dr. Holmes is chiefly skillful. I assure you he is equally skillful with the scalpel and microscope. He knows every bone, muscle, artery, and nerve, and describes them with fascinating precision. Traces of his life work occur on every page of his writings."

During Holmes' connection with the school there was a violent discussion in the faculty as to the advisability of admitting women students. He took no decided stand at the time, but a short time afterward, when the smoke of this battle was lifting, if not quite all gone, at the opening of the new building of the Harvard Medical School, Dr. Holmes delivered an address, and Professor Dwight told the following anecdote:

"On this occasion, after speaking in his most perfect style on woman as a nurse, with a pathos free from mawkishness which Dickens rarely reached, he [Holmes] concluded: 'I have always felt that this was rather the vocation of woman than general medical, and especially surgical, practice.' This was the signal for loud applause from the conservative side. When he could resume he went on: 'Yet I myself followed the course of lectures given by the young Madame Lachapelle



in Paris, and if here and there an intrepid woman insists on <sup>[50]</sup> taking by storm the fortress of medical education, I would have the gate flung open to her, as if it were that of the citadel of Orleans and she were Joan of Arc returning from the field of victory.' The enthusiasm which this sentiment called forth was so overwhelming, that those of us who had led the first applause felt, perhaps looked, rather foolish. I have since suspected that Dr. Holmes, who always knew his audience, had kept back the real climax to lure us to our destruction."

He said he was willing to teach women anatomy but not in the same classes or dissecting-rooms with men.

Few members of the profession have been so well versed in medical literature as was Dr. Holmes. He knew the worthies and their writings from Hippocrates down. He said on presenting his loved collection of one thousand volumes and many pamphlets to the Boston Medical Library, an institution largely due to his name and influence, and of which he was president for thirteen years: "These books were very dear to me as they stood on my shelves. A twig from some one of my nerves ran to every one of them." A visitor at his home describes his joy when a copy of the original edition of Vesalius came from New York. He was fond of showing to agents for new anatomical books how superior were the illustrations in the works of some of the old writers.

When James Russell Lowell became editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1857 he persuaded Dr. Holmes to contribute. This resulted in the *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, which immediately placed the author in the first rank of writers of sprightly English.

His literary prominence and the establishment at about the same time of the famous Saturday Club, which included among its members Emerson, Hawthorne, Whittier, Longfellow, Lowell, and Motley, gradually absorbed more and more of Holmes' interest and time.

The demands upon his muse were incessant, but were for the most part complied with. Literature, however, never really weaned him from the science of medicine, although it put a conclusive end to his practice as a physician.

As the years went by Dr. Holmes was called upon to make



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[50] many addresses on occasions before medical meetings and various classes of medical students. These addresses for the most part have been gathered together in his volume of *Medical Essays*. They show the richness of his scholarship and his familiarity with a great variety of scientific topics and with all his kindliness and common sense.

He was a strong believer in expectant treatment, or at least in moderate and definite therapeutics, and in the self-limitation of disease as championed by Dr. James Jackson. "The traditional idea," he declares, "of always poisoning out disease as we smoke out vermin is now seeking its last refuge."

"Young man," he asks, "are you sure you cured your patient? if so, perhaps to-morrow you may kill—but then you say the patient died."

"From the time of Hippocrates," he adds, "to that of our own medical patriarch there has been an apostolic succession of wise and good practitioners who place before all remedies the proper conduct of the patient."

The assertion in a lecture on *Scholastic and Bedside Teaching* delivered in 1867, that the most essential part of a student's instruction is obtained not in the lecture-room but at the bedside, sounds strangely familiar, and comes with good grace from a lifelong lecturer.

His address on "the young practitioner," delivered to the class leaving Bellevue in 1871, deserves to be repeated each year to the graduates of all our medical colleges.

The influence of his professional training was exerted not only in these dissertations but permeated every page he penned. He wrote, he asserted, "medicated novels" and medical terms are frequent in his writings.

"A laugh at an entertainment," he says, "broke out prematurely. It was a sporadic laugh and did not become epidemic."

His interest in psychological problems in the power of [51] heredity and its effect on moral responsibility, appear in many of his works.

The scriptural limit of three score years and ten Dr. Holmes vivifies in these familiar words:

"Our brains are seventy year clocks. The Angel of Life



winds them up once for all, then closes the case and gives the <sup>[51]</sup> key to the Angel of Resurrection. Tic tac! tic tac! go the wheels of thought; our will cannot stop them; they cannot stop themselves; sleep cannot still them; madness only makes them go faster; death alone can break into the case, and, seizing the ever-swinging pendulum, which we call the heart, silence at last the clicking of the terrible escapement we have carried so long beneath our wrinkled foreheads."

Oliver Wendell Holmes stood as a constant protest against the depicting of gross and suggestive quasi-medical scenes in literature. He said that when "Zola and his tribe crossed the borders of science into its infested regions, leaving behind them the reserve and delicacy which the genuine scientific observer never forgets, they disgust even those to whom the worst scenes are too wretchedly familiar."

On retiring from his active teaching in 1882, his thought was not to rest but to devote his time more continuously to writing. He said in a letter that he "had taken off his professor's gown and was in his literary shirt sleeves." Apparently he never again gained the heights reached in the heyday of his genius, but he still wrote acceptably and with much of his old brightness to a large company of appreciative readers.

In 1886, in company with his daughter, Holmes made a hurried trip to Europe, the first since his student days more than a half-century before. His journey through England was a triumphal procession. He received honorary degrees at Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh, and was the recipient of the kindest hospitality wherever he went, as his name had been for years a household one in England. While there, two important medical treatises were dedicated to his honor. He crossed to Paris for a week spent in visiting his old haunts and marked the many changes the political vicissitudes had brought about in that city. He called upon Pasteur in his laboratory, and speaks with the utmost appreciation of the latter's scientific labors and his great benefactions to mankind.

A year or two after his return he lost his wife, who had been his devoted companion for nearly fifty years; who had shielded him in every possible way and made his home his chief delight amid all his unusual pleasures.



[51] His widowed daughter, Mrs. Sargent, who had come to care for him, died the year after her mother, and in 1889 he made his home in the family of his distinguished son, Mr. Justice Holmes.

Dr. Holmes felt keenly the passing away of his friends and contemporaries. He writes to one of his few remaining cronies: "The Keystone of our Arch has fallen; all we can do is to lean against each other until the last stone is left standing alone."

He did indeed live to be nearly "the last leaf upon the tree, in the spring." His physical powers were maintained with almost undiminished vigor to the end. He spent the summers at his cottage at Beverly Farm on the coast. Here he received in the most delightful kindness many visitors who called to do reverence to the genial doctor, the sprightly autocrat, and the best talker in America. They never were disappointed. During a morning spent with the editor of the British Medical Journal who was in this country and made the usual pilgrimage to Beverly Farm, Dr. Holmes, after inquiring after many of his medical friends in England, remarked that he had passed the best years of his life as a doctor, "and I hope," he said, "they are not ashamed of me and do not reproach me for choosing to tread the flowery path of very light literature rather than chain myself for ever to the heavy tasks of medical practice." He needed to have no fears, for he, like William McClure in a very different sphere, was an honor to the profession.

And if for some I keep a nobler place;  
I keep for none a happier than for thee.

—Macaulay.



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