

**THE AUTOCRAT OF THE
BREAKFAST-TABLE. EVERY
MAN HIS OWN BOSWELL**

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The autocrat of the breakfast-table. Every man his own boswell by Oliver Wendell Holmes

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OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

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EVERY MAN HIS OWN BOSWELL.

BY

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES,

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"THE POET AT THE BREAKFAST-TABLE."



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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 Feejee 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 hatful 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 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 unchastized fancies. He, like too many American young 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 unwisdom 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.

THE AUTOCRAT
OF
THE BREAKFAST-TABLE.

I.

I WAS just going to say, when I was interrupted, that one of the many ways of classifying minds is under the heads of arithmetical and algebraical intellects. All economical and practical wisdom is an extension or variation of the following arithmetical formula: $2 + 2 = 4$. Every philosophical proposition has the more general character of the expression $a + b = c$. We are mere operatives, empirics, and egotists, until we learn to think in letters instead of figures.

They all stared. There is a divinity student lately come among us to whom I commonly address remarks like the above, allowing him to take a certain share in the conversation, so far as assent or pertinent questions are involved. He abused his liberty on this occasion by presuming to say that Leibnitz had the same observation. —No, sir, I replied, he has not. But he said a mighty good thing about mathematics, that sounds something like it, and you found it, *not in the original*, but quoted by Dr. Thomas Reid. I will tell the company what he did say, one of these days.

— If I belong to a Society of Mutual Admiration?— I blush to say that I do not at this present moment. I once did, however. It was the first association to which I ever heard the term applied; a body of scientific young men in a great foreign city who admired their teacher, and to some extent each other. Many of them deserved it; they have become famous since. It amuses me to hear the talk of one of those beings described by Thackeray—

“ Letters four do form his name ”—

about a social development which belongs to the very noblest stage of civilization. All generous companies of artists, authors, philanthropists, men of science, are, or ought to be, Societies of Mutual Admiration. A man of genius, or any kind of superiority, is not debarred from admiring the same quality in another, nor the other from returning his admiration. They may even associate together and continue to think highly of each other. And so of a dozen such men, if any one place is fortunate enough to hold so many. The being referred to above assumes several false premises. First, that men of talent necessarily hate each other. Secondly, that intimate knowledge or habitual association destroys our admiration of persons whom we esteemed highly at a distance. Thirdly, that a circle of clever fellows, who meet together to dine and have a good time, have signed a constitutional compact to glorify themselves and put down him and the fraction of the human race not belonging to their number. Fourthly, that it is an outrage that he is not asked to join them.

Here the company laughed a good deal, and the old gentleman who sits opposite said: “ That’s it! that’s it ! ”

I continued, for I was in the talking vein. As to clever people’s hating each other, I think *a little* extra