

THE BREAKFAST- TABLE SERIES

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The Breakfast-Table Series by Oliver Wendell Holmes

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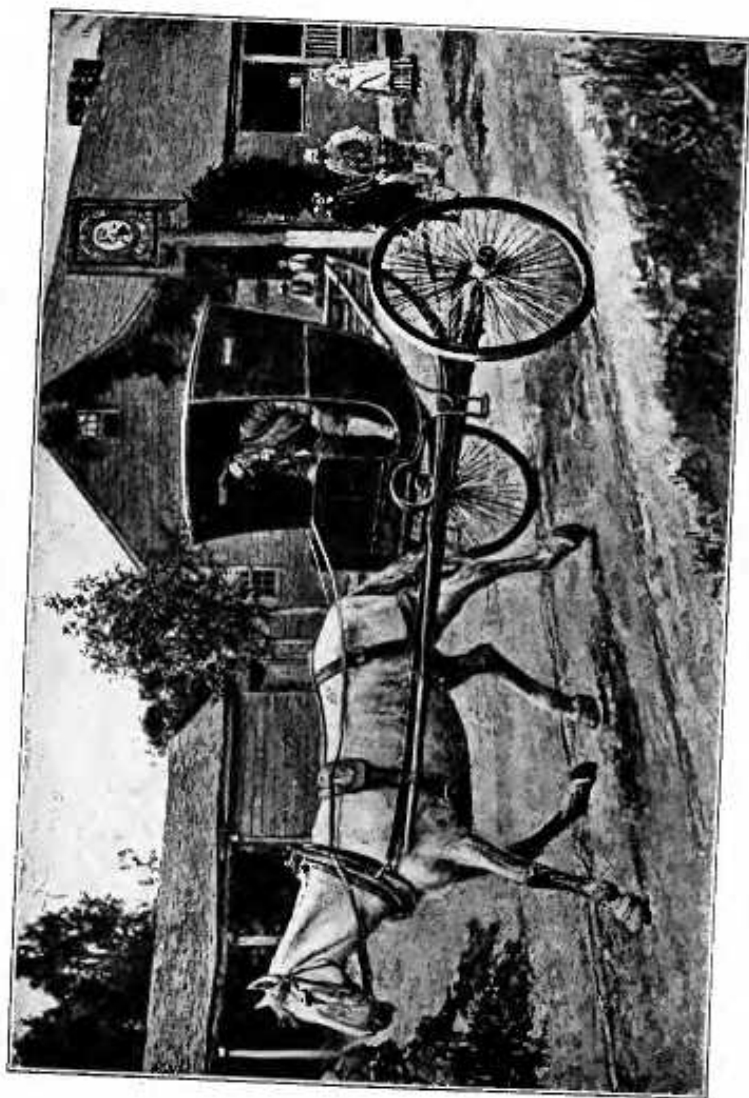
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OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

**THE BREAKFAST-
TABLE SERIES**



THE ONE-HOSS SHAY

THE
BREAKFAST-TABLE SERIES
BY
OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

THE AUTOCRAT
OF THE BREAKFAST-TABLE



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CALIFORNIA

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MAIN

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 every-day 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 over-taxed 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.*

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 wind-falls.

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 Peking, 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