

PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION.

ANOTHER decade has nearly closed since the above Preface was written. The Autocrat still finds readers, among the young as well as among the old. The children of my early readers were writing to me about my books, especially *The Autocrat*, as I mentioned in that other Preface. Now it is the grandchildren who are still turning to these pages, which I might well have thought would be voted old-fashioned, outworn, an unvalued bequest to posterity with Oblivion as residuary legatee. I have nothing of importance to add in the way of prefatory remarks. I can only repeat my grateful acknowledgments to the reading public at home and abroad for the hospitable manner in which my thoughts have been received. The expressions of personal regard, esteem, confidence, sympathetic affinity, may I not add affection, which this book has brought to me have become an habitual experience and an untiring source of satisfaction. I have thanked hundreds, yes, thousands, and many thousands of these kind correspondents, until my eyes have grown dim and I can no longer read many of their letters except through younger eyes. If my hand does not refuse to hold the pen or to guide it in the form of presentable characters, an occasional cramp of a little muscle which knows its importance and insists

on having it recognized by *striking*, after its own fashion, is a hint that I must at length do what I have long said I ought to do, content myself with an encyclical of thanks and write no more letters except to a few relatives and intimates.

A single fact strikes me as worth mentioning. Ten years ago I said that there had been a feeling at the time when this book was written as if mechanical invention had exhausted itself. I referred in the Preface of 1882 to the new miracles of the telephone and of electric illumination. Since then a new wonder has been sprung upon us in the shape of the electric motor, which has already familiarized itself among us as a common carrier. It is not safe to speculate on what the last decade of the century may yet bring us, but it looks as if the wasted energies of the winds and the waters were to be converted into heat, light, and mechanical movement, in that mysterious form which we call electricity, so as to change the material conditions of life to an extent to which we can hardly dare to set limits. As to what social and other changes may accompany the altered conditions of human life in the coming era, it is safer to leave the question open to exercise the ingenuity of some as yet youthful, perhaps unborn Autocrat.

O. W. H.

BEVERLY FARMS, MASS., July 28, 1891.

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 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 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

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 unchastised 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 un wisdom 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.

BOSTON, November 1, 1858.

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.