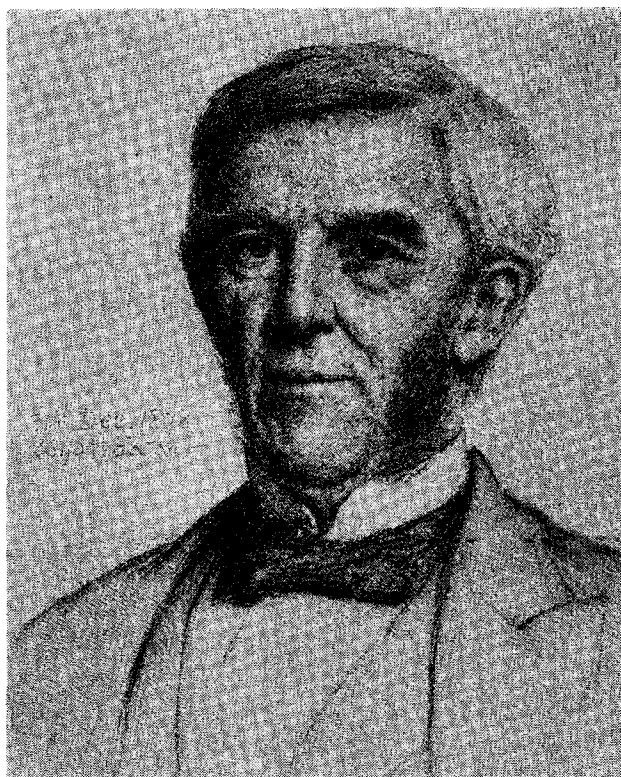


Dr. Holmes: Forerunner of the Moderns

BY VAN WYCK BROOKS

THE founding of *The Atlantic Monthly*, in 1857, marked the high tide of the Boston mind. In the "new magazine," as it was called from Maine to Minnesota, all the established writers appeared together. Lowell, the editor, assembled for the first number contributions from Emerson, Motley, Holmes, Longfellow, Norton, Whittier, and Mrs. Stowe. It seemed, from a distance, like a family party, in spite of the diversity of these minds, and murmurs were heard in other regions against the self-complacency of Boston and the mutual admiration that flourished there. But, as Dr. Holmes remarked of his commensals, if they had not admired one another they would have shown a singular want of taste. It was true that at this moment the New England mind began to reveal signs of degeneration, traits that in later years grieved or vexed those that knew not the Boston Zion, and sometimes did not even wish to know it. The "breaking of the seedling tulip into high-caste colors," as Dr. Holmes described this hour in Boston, was not without unhappy consequences. It destroyed the noble unconsciousness of the past. But the note of *The Atlantic* was not self-conscious, in spite of Lowell's tendency to be so. The magazine was born mature; and the regard of the writers for one another sprang from an impersonal respect for their characters and their work; and, if they over-valued one another, they set a better example than most of the other American writers and artists, who were all too prone to self-depreciation. They increased the self-respect of their fellow-craftsmen; they won for American letters and art the respect that American letters and art had always needed. It was observed, moreover, that, sooner or later, almost everything *The Atlantic* published, essay, poem, and story, found its way into a book and had at least a measure of permanent interest; and, as time went on, and Ticknor and Fields took over the publication, and Fields became the second editor, and the Civil War came, and Howells followed, the scope of the



OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

Engraved by Timothy Cole, from a drawing by Wyatt Eaton.

magazine grew broader and broader. It became a national institution.

Dr. Holmes had named *The Atlantic Monthly*, as Alcott had named *The Dial*; and he was the first contributor. He had had little time for writing prose in his active professional life, but he recalled that many years before he had published two papers entitled "The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table." Nothing could be salvaged from these old essays, but the venture had given him a good idea, to carry a note-book with him and jot down his own conversation. A Boswell writing out himself. . . .

Thus it was that, at the breakfast-table, the Autocrat resumed his seat one morning and found himself addressing his fellow-boarders, the school-mistress, the divinity-student, the landlady's daughter, Benjamin Franklin, all the characters he had known so well, in Boston or the "huckleberry districts," during his lecture-tours. The boarding-house was a microcosm of a larger world, for what American did not find himself suggested in one of the characters? The Autocrat had earned his right to speak; he had

plucked the flowers of life and come to the berries, and who could say that he was not a teacher fit for a great occasion, he who had fed with the fox in the matter of knowledge and used such Machiavellian astuteness in passing on all that he had learned? What was his mission? It was very simple: the mission of conversation. Was it not very bad to have thoughts and feelings, which ought to come out in talk, *strike in*, as people said of certain diseases? There was the great American evil, morbid introspection, class-distinctions that were unconfessed, scruples of conscience, secrets that ought to be exposed to common sense, forms of speech and phrases, ugly and distorted, the outward and visible signs of the twisted life within. Fruits of the old religion of Calvinism, fruits of isolation and provincial conditions, fruits of unconscious living. Out with them, and talk them over! The boarders knew they could trust a family doctor who read them through and through, who saw their maternal

grandfathers in the way they held their tea-cups, and who would never abuse their confidence, a doctor who was used to dealing with secrets and who, without hurting their feelings, could give them the right prescription to set them on the road of mental health.

In his diplomatic way, the Autocrat attacked all the mental habits of his hearers. What was this "logical mind," the fruit of generations of preachers and lawyers, but the One-Hoss Shay of Calvinism? The doctor had no use for Calvinism, and he knew that, while they laughed at the one-hoss shay in Boston and at Harvard, it was no laughing matter in the country. He was determined to break it up,—if laughter failed, by other

Next  Week

GONE WITH THE WIND

By MARGARET MITCHELL

Reviewed by Stephen Vincent Benét

LISTEN FOR A LONESOME DRUM

By CARL CARMER

Reviewed by Allan Nevins

means, by quoting half a dozen sciences, by the use of analogies and comparisons, by every method but controversy, since controversy equalized the foolish and the wise and no one knew this better than the fools. For what was the "logical mind" of Calvinism but the parent of all injustice, the *a priori* and the *parti pris*, narrow judgment, rigid condemnation, all those moral plagues, in other words, from which the American mind so patently suffered? Did he mean to weaken moral obligations by drawing up the blinds of this dark chamber and letting in the light? His object was merely to define them; for the light he let into the dark chamber was the light of common sense, a doctor's view of the problem of cause and effect as it really expressed itself in human nature. Was some question of crime involved? The "logical mind" spoke of original sin and anathematized the doctor. The rational mind spoke of the effect and anathematized the cause. As for the fruits of the old religion, many of the minister's patients were fools and cowards, and all too many of them were also liars. (Immense sensation at the table.)

The Autocrat was prepared for the sensation. The religious weeklies and monthlies, all over the country, began to throw brickbats at him. The doctor was imperturbable. One cannot turn over any old falsehood without a terrible squirming and scattering of the unpleasant little population that dwells under it. No one can ever say anything to make his neighbors wiser or better without being abused for doing so; and, if there is one thing that people detest, it is to have their little mistakes made fun of. The Autocrat continued, with calm good humor, always ready to talk as long as a few boarders remained at the table, twirling their knives, perhaps, balancing their spoons on the edge of their tea-cups or tilting on their chairs against the wall. Was he named Holmes for nothing? A holme is a meadow surrounded by brooks; and, as long as two or three brooks, were they only trickles, fed it with their attention, how could a meadow run dry? Now, these little mistakes, this tilting of chairs against walls, this pronouncing the name of one's town as if one did not know that it ought to be "Norridge," this calling an entry a "hall"

and a buggy a "kerridge," this saying "Yes?" when somebody told one something,—did they think these vulgarisms were trivial matters? Was it not plain enough that a man with a future had to get rid of all these odious tricks? What hope could he have when he said, "How's your health?" when people liked to hear, "How do you do?" Did not Sydney Smith say that no public man in England ever got over a false quantity uttered in early life? And might it not be similarly said that the woman who "calc'lates" is lost? Worldly wisdom, merely, not at all the wisdom of the angels; but surely the woman who "calc'lates" is not an angel, and, since she is given to calculating, she might calculate to better purpose.

Trifles, perhaps, but not unkindly mentioned. Was not the art of living made up of trifles? And were these awkward postures and rustic phrases as merely superficial as one might think? Were they not the signs of inner dislocations, the rigidities, false reserves, distortions, torments that render human relations so difficult and make men so unhappy? Expression was the greatest need of this unexpressed New England, which almost seemed to enjoy its cold and taciturn ways, ways that concealed what tragic

depths! Emotions that can shape themselves in language open the gate for themselves into the great community of human affections. That was why the Autocrat loved words, expressive words, euphonious and pleasing, just as he loved song. As long as a woman could talk, or had some musical utterance, there was nothing that she could not bear. How many a tragedy had found its outlet in a strenuous bravura or a fierce roulade on one of Jonas Chickering's pianos! Therefore the Autocrat loved to hear the all-pervading tum-tum issuing from the window of the unlovely farm-house, with the brown stream flowing beside the door, in which Almira or Louella might have been found floating, face downward, had she not been able, in these harmless discords, to throb her wild impulses away.

The boarders listened, all America listened, as the Autocrat unfolded his amusing wisdom, unrolled that inexhaustible scroll which only those possess who have kept their wits alive by constant use. Never had they heard of such a man for breaking up the ice of mental habits, for harrowing people's minds and planting in them flowers that out-shone even "Macaulay-flowers." They listened round the table, reading *The Atlantic*, drawing virtue from it, as hot water draws the strength of tea-leaves; for society, as the Autocrat said, is a strong solution of books.

For schoolmistresses, Dr. Holmes had a tender feeling. He was well aware of the part they played in a nation and generation in which the men shirked the tasks of culture. Who but the schoolmistress, and usually the New Englander of the species, followed the pioneers wherever they went, even to the remotest corner of the Rocky Mountains, and sowed the furrows they ploughed with the seeds of education which, but for her, would have remained unsown? Well the doctor knew this heroism, and he knew it imposed on the heroine a biological handicap. "The great procession of the Unloved" filled him with compassion, for he was a match-maker on all occasions. Besides, they belonged, as often as not, to the Brahman caste of New England, that mystical brotherhood and sisterhood in which the doctor took a special pride and which he was the first to designate. He

(Continued on page 13)

Symbols

By ISIDOR SCHNEIDER

Soviet Star

UNITY radiant;
bright whole body with venturing limbs;
the core and the rays; the organed, serving fire,
fire unburnt, the flames its feeding hands;
the first, the elemental body,
the crystal gathering life;
face of a flower out of enlivened earth,
proud in sight of the sun, made in his image;
star,—the choice of peoples in their love,
in their strength, the mark, the shape of united aspiring. . . .

Hammer and Sickle

I have walked in the country. I have seen full crops.
No building on earth is fairer, no stone more perfect in its wall
than a grain stalk in its field. Not even in snow
is earth more fitly faced and trimmed.
The heart soars along its sight, yet is quieted.
Soon shall the sickle cut yet not destroy.
All shall be built again, life into life,
the muscle, the bone, in the hand that swings the sickle,
the blood of his children, the bone of the builders,
far off in factories, the comrades with hammers
building him brick, his iron, his cloth, his sickle.

Swastika

The four crippled cat tails, the paralytic cross,
the treadmill legs, the gallows and shadow,—
it moves too, in spasms; revolves
in twists of agony; has an orbit too,
frenzied and narrowing in narrowed life—
sign of the cannibal hunt, shape of murder,
the backs turned, one pursuing,
one in flight.