

LETTERS OF DR. HOLMES TO A CLASSMATE.



THE following extracts are from various letters written by Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes to my father, the Hon. Isaac E. Morse of New Orleans, one of his companions in the class of '29 at Harvard. At the time of the publication of Dr. Holmes's memoirs these letters could not be found; but they afterward came to light, and, it is thought, may be of interest to the general public.

Of this very distinguished class almost all have passed away. Indeed, I believe the Rev. Samuel May is now the sole survivor. They are, in part, thus described in Dr. Holmes's own words:

That boy we call «Doctor,» and this we call «Judge.»

It's a neat little fiction: of course it's all fudge—referred to Holmes himself and Judge B. R. Curtis.

That fellow's the Speaker—the one on the right, indicated Crowninshield.

Mr. Mayor, my young one, how are you to-night? referred to Storow. The «boy with the grave, mathematical look» was Professor Peirce. Others were described as «My-country-'tis-of-thee» Smith; «Bill Gray, one of us millionaires»; Chandler Robbins, «conservative preacher, and amiable in manner as of old»; «our Jo [Angier], who made music with both voice and piano on these blissful occasions» (*i. e.*, class dinners); Devereux, class orator of '29; and «Richardson of Worcester County, very efficient and popular, and spoken of in the highest terms for his humanity»:

You hear that boy laughing—you think he's all fun;

But the angels laugh, too, at the good he has done.
The children laugh loud as they troop to his call,
And the poor man that knows him laughs loudest of all!

George T. Davis was meant by

. . . our «Member of Congress,» we say when we chaff;

and James Freeman Clarke by

. . . the «Reverend» What's his name?—don't make me laugh!

They are all gone, but as long as «fair Harvard» stands, and the «Autocrat of the Breakfast-table» can tell us of the «boys,» their memory will be kept green.

A year or two after leaving college, my father and Dr. Holmes met in Paris, and were much together; and in one of his letters written from there Dr. Holmes refers to him as «my most pleasant and original classmate, Morse of New Orleans.»¹

Later the thread of their old friendship was taken up when Mr. Morse came to Washington as a member of Congress from Louisiana, and from time to time visited Dr. Holmes in Boston or at Pittsfield—visits to which there are references in letters which are not thought to be of interest to the general reader, although they show in a charming light Holmes's unflinching friendship and gaiety, and his generous interest in the pursuits of his friend.

On January 7, 1847, Dr. Holmes writes:

MY DEAR MORSE: I meant this package for your New Year's present, but little matters took up my attention, and I was too late for the season of gifts.

But though it comes late and brings little, let me hope that as a token from your old friend and classmate it will be not wholly unwelcome; and if you should have thought that I was better as a promise-maker than as a promise-keeper, when you have broken the seal of this packet and seen your long-expected trifles blot out the accusation, and set me down among them of sturdy faith and sure memory.

Yours most sincerely,

O. W. HOLMES.

Dr. Holmes's friendship and his sympathy were not weakened by distance or by years. Writing from Pittsfield, he says:

. . . I enjoy this country life beyond anything I ever knew, and the one drawback is that of my ordinary pursuits and habits the very memory seems to lose itself in this new and rapturous state of being. Nothing, I was going to say, holds on but old friendships, and they grow all the greener in the midst of this growing and luxuriant nature. . . .

Yours very truly,

O. W. HOLMES.

And again in 1853, the year of the great yellow-fever epidemic in New Orleans, when,

¹ «Life and Letters of Dr. Holmes," Vol. I, p. 107.

one black Sunday, there was a death for every five minutes, he writes:

. . . I am thankful to hear that you and yours have been, so far, spared. I have often thought of you while we are hearing the sad stories from New Orleans, with anxiety and apprehension lest I should see some of your names in those melancholy lists. It is hard for us who have been living amidst the wholesome mountains of Berkshire to realize the scenes through which you have been passing. I trust by this time you may have had what we receive without thinking it a special blessing, namely, one of those frosts that seem to kill off the pestilence.

On July 17, 1855, Dr. Holmes writes from Pittsfield:

MY DEAR MORSE: I am very glad to hear from you anywhere and anyhow and for any reason. Hooray for the boy of seventeen and a half! My oldest is fourteen; says he is five feet one inch and a half high. I think he stretches the truth and the measure a little, but a very little. He is taller than his mother, anyhow, and can outrun, outswim, and outspatter me. A fair scholar—one of the best, I think, in his school; but loses some scholarship, and gains what is a great deal better, by passing five months in the country with the rest of us. You direct to Boston! Don't you know I am the landlord of a great farm up here in Berkshire County, a hundred and twenty years in my family, with a mile of river running through it, a forest of trees of three and four hundred years' growth, and a meadow big enough to feed all the bulls of Bashan? Don't you know that, hey? Because if you don't, I tell you it is so. Ask Judge Curtis—our old classmate Ben—if it is n't. His house is in sight from my door, two miles perhaps as the bee flies. I don't doubt that I have told all this word for word just so before (*n'épargnant pas un oignon*); perhaps twice before, or oftener. Never mind. The great fact is that I, with mine, enjoy the *opium cum digitalis*, as the retired 'potecary called it, on our broad hereditary maternal acres, which if you shall ever press with your feet, as I hope you may, I will give you draughts of sweet milk, with corn-bread and honey; also a ride, a row, a swim; item, a glass of claret, or, if you like it rather,

The foaming grape of Eastern France,

as Tennyson has it, and finish with a tranquil weed and a cloud of pleasant reminiscences.¹

About commencement, alas and alackaday! I know nothing, except that I received a great card the other day from the president and fellows—very clever fellows, no doubt; but I can't and sha'n't go. I have not been down to the anniversaries for years. Pittsfield is a hundred and fifty miles from Boston, and I don't choose to leave my garrison exposed to the incursion of hostile tribes until my oldest boy is five feet two at least. . . .

Yours always faithfully,

O. W. HOLMES.

¹ See THE CENTURY for August, 1895.

The poems mentioned in the next letters were by a relative of Mr. Morse. After her death the family thought of publishing them, and Mr. Morse asked Dr. Holmes's opinion of them. There is another and much longer criticism, which shows the great pains Dr. Holmes took in reading and expressing an opinion of literary ventures; but of his generosity in that respect there are so many examples in the «Life and Letters» that it has been thought best to omit it. The French quotation—Piron's epitaph upon himself—reminds me that in many of Dr. Holmes's letters to Mr. Morse there are little French expressions and phrases, as if a slight flavor of their old days in France still pervaded the page.

Without agreeing to what has been said of Dr. Holmes, that he is a «Yankee Montaigne,» it must be admitted that this son of Puritan preachers was *doublé* with much of that fine, exact wit of France, which is so brilliant, and so difficult to define. His letters show how he tasted the intellectual pleasure of life in France, and make us wonder what would have been the result if, instead of that too brief sojourn in his youth, it had been his fate to dwell there in his more mature years:

BOSTON, Oct. 25th, 1855.

MY DEAR MORSE: You must not break the third commandment when you see my small sheet and brief lines. My table is strewed with letters, and among the busy men of busy Boston few are more occupied than I am at this time. Occupations: college lectures daily—begin in November; evening lectures (I make more money by them than in any other way) five days in a week almost constantly after November begins; poem-writing for Merc. Lib. Association; address before Pilgrims' Society in N. Y., Dec. 22, looming up in the distance; a correspondence which is frightful to think upon (twenty-six letters one morning a few weeks ago; that will do for one who is not a politician or a man of business, so called, won't it?); besides Rachel to see, children to take care of, and untold immensities of incidentals. In summer I am a gentleman, now I am a drudge. So I don't write long letters. To be sure, it will give me great pleasure to read the poems you speak of, and give you my opinion. Not that I like to promise opinions beforehand on any manuscript. I am fastidious, and, I suspect, slow to accept new forms of genius, so that I always tell young authors who come to me occasionally with their manuscripts not to take my opinion as final.

The presumption is, of course, that where you have been pleased I, too, shall find pleasure. I know your old Shaksperian tastes, and I cannot think that even personal attachment would make you see merit where it did not exist. But if you deliberately ask me my opinion, I shall have to give it to you, whatever it may be—politely, you

know; and delicately as I know how, if it should be different from your own; cordially and gladly if our tastes agree. Do not think too much of my judgment, at any rate, whatever it may be; our Northern standards are different from yours. I don't doubt, if Rouget de l'Isle had asked the opinion of the Academicians of Paris on the «Marseillaise,» they would have had a committee, and reported it stuff.

Remember, then, that I am

. . . rien,
Pas même Académicien,

when you send the MSS.

Nothing but still faithfully your friend,

O. W. HOLMES.

Remember Mrs. Holmes and myself to Mrs. Morse, with our kindest wishes.

BOSTON, Nov. 12th, 1855.

MY DEAR MORSE: I have read the lines you sent me over and over, so that I might, as I promised, give you an opinion about publishing. No one can fail of appreciating the feeling they show; they have the truth which real sorrow crushes out of a sensitive and delicate nature, and which is the stuff that poetry is made of. Nothing can be more natural, and, to those acquainted with all the sad events referred to, more touching, than this outburst of emotion at the thought of parting with a place so endeared by the most tender recollections.

In art the lines are deficient, perhaps too much so to be offered to the surly criticism of the public. You will find this axiom of mine true, I think: the more personal and intimate are the feelings which a poet reveals, the higher art is required to justify their exposure.

I think myself that verses like those you send me are not meant for the public. None but friends should read them. They are too artless, too careless, too much like an extract from a private letter, to be made common property. I should not, therefore, recommend their publication; but I am only one adviser.

I am up to my neck in every possible engagement, or I might perhaps talk longer. I will be as frank with you when you send the volume as now.

Till then good-by.

Yours very faithfully,

O. W. HOLMES.

The quotation in the next letter is a decided contrast. It seems to be from a popular doggerel campaign song in praise of General Jackson, or, according to the refrain, «the hunters of Kentucky.» I can remember hearing a few lines:

And for this opportunity conceive yourself quite lucky,
For 't is n't often that you see a hunter from Kentucky.

We thought you knew geography, but misses in their teens

Could tell you that Kentucky lay, *just then*, below Orleans.

It must have been a favorite student song, and for that reason—certainly not from its intrinsic merits—had stuck in Dr. Holmes's memory. I do not know to what «commercial speculation» reference is made:

BOSTON, Aug. 13th, 1859.

MY DEAR MORSE: Once every few years a good, kindly fit comes over you, and I have the pleasure of hearing from you and reviving the recollection of our old friendship and old friends. I was pleased, and perhaps a little amused, at your commercial speculation. New England likes New Orleans. Too far off to be jealous. Sends a great many of her children there. Loves to have a great city that does not consider itself a mere tributary of New York. Of course there must be some jealousy on the part of neighboring cities of such a great, man-swallowing centre as New York; but really I don't think there is so much evidence of it on the part of Boston as there is on the other side. Witness the late attacks on our trade and sales. The truth is, New York is so enormous that a little place like Boston can't be *very* jealous, whereas a great centre becomes so monopolizing, it is very sore to see any other place holding out as if it felt independent. Don't be scared about merchants being prejudiced against making money by their philanthropy; they are not good enough for that yet. If it would «pay» to send a packet once a week to what-do-you-call-it, down there, for a load of what-do-you-call-ems raised on combustibles instead of comestibles, they would send it every week, wind and weather permitting, from the end of Long Wharf. «Will it pay?» That is all our wicked merchants ask; not whether they agree about this, that, and the other matter with consignors or consignees.

So hurrah for New Orleans, I say!

Should n't I like to go down to «cypress swamp,» where «the ground was,» and I suppose is, «low and mucky,» and see where «Gineral» Andrew Jackson bagged (cotton-bagged) his mortal game and immortal glory! . . .

Truly your friend,

O. W. HOLMES.

The last letter, so kindly and temperate in tone, full of good feeling for old friends and «our brothers of the South,» yet as inflexible in its expression of adherence to the Union as a stanza of his fine poem, «The Voyage of the Good Ship (Union,» was written at the very beginning of the war:

BOSTON, April 15th, 1861.

MY DEAR MORSE: Your letter came most opportunely, for I had been for some time thinking that I would write you a few lines, at least, at my first leisure moment. Your letter (to one of the boys) was read at the last class meeting, and called out many expressions of kind feeling toward you. I

think I promised then that I would write and tell you how kindly you are always remembered among us.

Here we are under two different flags. I do not see that this has anything to do with our personal relations; at any rate, it is no question of political difference that can alienate us here from our old comrades and friends. In point of fact, until within the last few days there has been comparatively little excitement here among us. The firing on Fort Sumter, and its reported surrender, which has just come to us, are beginning to wake up our people. I do not think that there is anything like that hostility to the South which, no doubt, is honestly supposed to exist by many of our Southern compatriots. The violent abolition party does not at all represent our Northern sentiment; yet our democratic and part at least of our Bell and Everett press are always trying to make the South believe it.

We all look upon the Southern movement very much as Mr. Rhett does, as *not an event of a day*, not anything produced by Mr. Lincoln's election or by the non-execution of the fugitive-slave law, but as a matter that has been gathering head for thirty years. That is the way he sees it, and that is the way we do. The plain truth is, our civilizations have been diverging, and the old constitutional joints have worked loose. The slave system and the free-labor system have each come to a consciousness of the differences they had, as the nation has grown. I am afraid our difficulties are not functional, but organic. You may be right; certainly your position seems forced upon you by nature; but unfortunately, as one of the most accomplished ladies of the South wrote the other day to one of our classmates, civilization is against you.

I was exposed to bitter abuse a few years since in New York for reprobating the unkind feelings and language too often used among us toward our brothers of the South. I have never learned to approve the spirit of the language which I then reprobated. But now that the national property is appropriated, and the national flag assailed, the necessity seems to be forced on the government to measure men and money for a while with those whom it is necessarily bound to consider as conspirators. To make the duty of the government perfectly plain, nothing more was necessary than that its capital should be menaced! Henceforth you will find the North a unit.

It is a great grief to all good men on both sides that they may be called upon to spill the blood of those who were their brothers; but there are principles which can only make themselves recognized by trying the souls of their advocates. I have so much confidence in your honesty of purpose that I know you will join in saying, «God speed the right!» however we may differ in its interpreta-

tion. At any rate, if any of the boys of '29 ever meet under hostile banners, I know we should come out, like Glaucus and Diomed between the Greek and Trojan armies, and exchange arms, as did those doughty warriors, instead of fighting each other. Up to this time there has been nothing to show a visitor to Boston that there was any cause interfering with the usual prosperous order of things. *To-morrow* the regiments called out by the governor are to be mustered on the Common; and then, for the first time, our people will begin to realize the great fact which has reached them so slowly. Sooner or later, after thousands of lives and millions of money have been spent, we shall learn, as England and Scotland have learned, that we must live together in peace, in *some* fixed amicable relation. But is not suffering a part of the discipline of nations as much as of individuals? An old lady said long ago: «We want a war here in the North; we have been at peace too long.» No doubt we of the North have become too much like what Napoleon called England—a nation of shopkeepers; too rich, and many of us too lazy and selfish. If it could but have been a foreign enemy against which the steady North and the fiery South could have waved sabers and charged bayonets side by side! But I think the South is deceived in thinking that our commercial habits have in any essential point changed our old manhood.

Let me talk about pleasanter matters. My boy is six feet high within a fraction of an inch, if not quite that. Rather slight, good-looking, gentlemanly, strong on philosophy and art, pretty social; belongs to all imaginable societies—Φ B K, Porcellian, Hasty-Pudding, etc.; is one of the editors of the present Harvard magazine; took the prize for the best essay in the «University Quarterly» (open to all the colleges of the country); does not write much poetry, but chosen class poet almost without opposition. I will make him send you something of his composition. I don't think his poem will be printed; it is not usual to do so.

Hoping that nothing need ever change our old friendship, and that we may live to see peace between our States once more, I am

Always your friend,

O. W. HOLMES.

The friends of so many years never met again. My father died in February, 1866; and in announcing his death to the members of the old class Dr. Holmes wrote:

. . . Another of our companions, college classmate, life classmate, has taken his last degree—missing, but not lost from that

One circle, scarce broken, these waiting below,
Those walking the shores where the asphodels blow.

O. W. H.

Mary Blake Morse.