Classic Poetry Series

Oliver Wendell Holmes

- poems -

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A Familiar Letter

YES, write, if you want to, there's nothing like trying;
Who knows what a treasure your casket may hold?
I'll show you that rhyming's as easy as lying,
If you'll listen to me while the art I unfold.

Here's a book full of words; one can choose as he fancies,
As a painter his tint, as a workman his tool;
Just think! all the poems and plays and romances
Were drawn out of this, like the fish from a pool!

You can wander at will through its syllabled mazes,
And take all you want, not a copper they cost,--
What is there to hinder your picking out phrases
For an epic as clever as "Paradise Lost"?

Don't mind if the index of sense is at zero,
Use words that run smoothly, whatever they mean;
Leander and Lilian and Lillibullero
Are much the same thing in the rhyming machine.

There are words so delicious their sweetness will smother
That boarding-school flavor of which we're afraid,
There is "lush"is a good one, and "swirl" is another,--
Put both in one stanza, its fortune is made.

With musical murmurs and rhythmical closes
You can cheat us of smiles when you've nothing to tell
You hand us a nosegay of milliner's roses,
And we cry with delight, "Oh, how sweet they do smell!"

Perhaps you will answer all needful conditions
For winning the laurels to which you aspire,
By docking the tails of the two prepositions
I' the style o' the bards you so greatly admire.

As for subjects of verse, they are only too plenty
For ringing the changes on metrical chimes;
A maiden, a moonbeam, a lover of twenty
Have filled that great basket with bushels of rhymes.

Let me show you a picture--'t is far from irrelevant--
By a famous old hand in the arts of design;
'T is only a photographed sketch of an elephant,--
The name of the draughtsman was Rembrandt of Rhine.

How easy! no troublesome colors to lay on,
It can't have fatigued him,-- no, not in the least,--
A dash here and there with a haphazard crayon,
And there stands the wrinkled-skinned, baggy-limbed beast.

Just so with your verse,-- 't is as easy as sketching,--
You can reel off a song without knitting your brow,

As lightly as Rembrandt a drawing or etching;
It is nothing at all, if you only know how.

Well; imagine you've printed your volume of verses:
Your forehead is wreathed with the garland of fame,
Your poems the eloquent school-boy rehearses,
Her album the school-girl presents for your name;

Each morning the post brings you autograph letters;
You'll answer them promptly,-- an hour isn't much
For the honor of sharing a page with your betters,
With magistrates, members of Congress, and such.

Of course you're delighted to serve the committees
That come with requests from the country all round,
You would grace the occasion with poems and ditties
When they've got a new schoolhouse, or poorhouse, or pound.

With a hymn for the saints and a song for the sinners,
You go and are welcome wherever you please;
You're a privileged guest at all manner of dinners,
You've a seat on the platform among the grandees.

At length your mere presence becomes a sensation,
Your cup of enjoyment is filled to its brim
With the pleasure Horatian of digitmonstration,
As the whisper runs round of "That's he!" or "That's him!"

But remember, O dealer in phrases sonorous,
So daintily chosen, so tunefully matched,
Though you soar with the wings of the cherubim o'er us,
The ovum was human from which you were hatched.

No will of your own with its puny compulsion
Can summon the spirit that quickens the lyre;
It comes, if at all, like the Sibyl's convulsion
And touches the brain with a finger of fire.

So perhaps, after all, it's as well to he quiet
If you've nothing you think is worth saying in prose,
As to furnish a meal of their cannibal diet
To the critics, by publishing, as you propose.

But it's all of no use, and I'm sorry I've written,--
I shall see your thin volume some day on my shelf;
For the rhyming tarantula surely has bitten,
And music must cure you, so pipe it yourself.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

A Farewell to Agassiz

How the mountains talked together,
Looking down upon the weather,
When they heard our friend had planned his
Little trip among the Andes
How they'll bare their snowy scalps
To the climber of the Alps
When the cry goes through their passes,
"Here comes the great Agassiz!"
"Yes, I'm tall," says Chimborazo,
"But I wait for him to say so,--
That's the only thing that lacks,-- he
Must see me, Cotopaxi!"
"Ay! ay!" the fire-peak thunders,
"And he must view my wonders
I'm but a lonely crater
Till I have him for spectator!"
The mountain hearts are yearning,
The lava-torches burning,
The rivers bend to meet him,
The forests bow to greet him,
It thrills the spinal column
Of fossil fishes solemn,
And glaciers crawl the faster
To the feet of their old master!
Heaven keep him well and hearty,
Both him and all his party!
From the sun that broils and smites,
From the centipede that bites,
From the hail-storm and the thunder,
From the vampire and the condor,
From the gust upon the river,
From the sudden earthquake shiver,
From the trip of mule or donkey,
From the midnight howling monkey,
From the stroke of knife or dagger,
From the puma and the jaguar,
From the horrid boa-constrictor
That has scared us in the picture,
From the Indians of the Pampas
Who would dine upon their grampas,
From every beast and vermin
That to think of sets us squirmin',
From every snake that tries on
The traveller his p'ison,
From every pest of Natur',
Likewise the alligator,
And from two things left behind him,
(Be sure they'll try to find him,)
The tax-bill and assessor,--
Heaven keep the great Professor!
May he find, with his apostles,
That the land is full of fossils,

That the waters swarm with fishes
Shaped according to his wishes,
That every pool is fertile
In fancy kinds of turtle,
New birds around him singing,
New insects, never stinging,
With a million novel data
About the articulata,
And facts that strip off all husks
From the history of mollusks.

And when, with loud Te Deum,
He returns to his Museum
May he find the monstrous reptile
That so long the land has kept ill
By Grant and Sherman throttled,
And by Father Abraham bottled,
(All specked and streaked and mottled
With the scars of murderous battles,
Where he clashed the iron rattles
That gods and men he shook at,)
For all the world to look at!
God bless the great Professor!
And Madam, too, God bless her!
Bless him and all his band,
On the sea and on the land,
Bless them head and heart and hand,
Till their glorious raid is o'er,
And they touch our ransomed shore!
Then the welcome of a nation,
With its shout of exultation,
Shall awake the dumb creation,
And the shapes of buried aeons
Join the living creature's paeans,
Till the fossil echoes roar;
While the mighty megalosaurus
Leads the palaeozoic chorus,
God bless the great Professor,
And the land his proud possessor,--
Bless them now and evermore!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Æstivation

An Unpublished Poem, by my late Latin Tutor.

In candent ire the solar splendor flames;
The foles, languescent, pend from arid rames;
His humid front the cive, anheling, wipes,
And dreams of erring on ventiferous ripes.

How dulce to vive occult to mortal eyes,
Dorm on the herb with none to supervise,
Carp the suave berries from thc crescent vine,
And bibe the flow from longicaudate kine!

To me, alas! no verdurous visions come,
Save yon exiguous pool's conferva-scum,--
No concave vast repeats the tender hue
That laves my milk-jug with celestial blue!

Me wretched! Let me curr to quercine shades!
Effund your albid hausts, lactiferous maids!
Oh, might I vole to some umbrageous clump,--
Depart,--be off,-excede,--evade,--crump!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Bill and Joe

COME, dear old comrade, you and I
Will steal an hour from days gone by,
The shining days when life was new,
And all was bright with morning dew,
The lusty days of long ago,
When you were Bill and I was Joe.

Your name may flaunt a titled trail
Proud as a cockerel's rainbow tail,
And mine as brief appendix wear
As Tam O'Shanter's luckless mare;
To-day, old friend, remember still
That I am Joe and you are Bill.

You've won the great world's envied prize,
And grand you look in people's eyes,
With H O N. and L L. D.
In big brave letters, fair to see,--
Your fist, old fellow! off they go!--
How are you, Bill? How are you, Joe?

You've worn the judge's ermined robe;
You've taught your name to half the globe;
You've sung mankind a deathless strain;
You've made the dead past live again:
The world may call you what it will,
But you and I are Joe and Bill.

The chaffing young folks stare and say
"See those old buffers, bent and gray,--
They talk like fellows in their teens
Mad, poor old boys! That's what it means,"--
And shake their heads; they little know
The throbbing hearts of Bill and Joe!--

How Bill forgets his hour of pride,
While Joe sits smiling at his side;
How Joe, in spite of time's disguise,
Finds the old schoolmate in his eyes,--
Those calm, stern eyes that melt and fill
As Joe looks fondly up at Bill.

Ah, pensive scholar, what is fame?
A fitful tongue of leaping flame;
A giddy whirlwind's fickle gust,
That lifts a pinch of mortal dust;
A few swift years, and who can show
Which dust was Bill and which was Joe?

The weary idol takes his stand,
Holds out his bruised and aching hand,
While gaping thousands come and go,--

How vain it seems, this empty show!
Till all at once his pulses thrill;--
'T is poor old Joe's "God bless you, Bill!"

And shall we breathe in happier spheres
The names that pleased our mortal ears;
In some sweet lull of harp and song
For earth-born spirits none too long,
Just whispering of the world below
Where this was Bill and that was Joe?

No matter; while our home is here
No sounding name is half so dear;
When fades at length our lingering day,
Who cares what pompous tombstones say?
Read on the hearts that love us still,
Hic jacet Joe. Hic jacet Bill.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Brother Jonathan's Lament

SHE has gone,-- she has left us in passion and pride,--
Our stormy-browed sister, so long at our side!
She has torn her own star from our firmament's glow,
And turned on her brother the face of a foe!

Oh, Caroline, Caroline, child of the sun,
We can never forget that our hearts have been one,--
Our foreheads both sprinkled in Liberty's name,
From the fountain of blood with the finger of flame!

You were always too ready to fire at a touch;
But we said, "She is hasty,-- she does not mean much."
We have scowled, when you uttered some turbulent threat;
But Friendship still whispered, "Forgive and forget!"

Has our love all died out? Have its altars grown cold?
Has the curse come at last which the fathers foretold?
Then Nature must teach us the strength of the chain
That her petulant children would sever in vain.

They may fight till the buzzards are gorged with their spoil,
Till the harvest grows black as it rots in the soil,
Till the wolves and the catamounts troop from their caves,
And the shark tracks the pirate, the lord of the waves:

In vain is the strife! When its fury is past,
Their fortunes must flow in one channel at last,
As the torrents that rush from the mountains of snow
Roll mingled in peace through the valleys below.

Our Union is river, lake, ocean, and sky:
Man breaks not the medal, when God cuts the die!
Though darkened with sulphur, though cloven with steel,
The blue arch will brighten, the waters will heal!

Oh, Caroline, Caroline, child of the sun,
There are battles with Fate that can never be won!
The star-flowering banner must never be furled,
For its blossoms of light are the hope of the world!

Go, then, our rash sister! afar and aloof,
Run wild in the sunshine away from our roof;
But when your heart aches and your feet have grown sore,
Remember the pathway that leads to our door!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Cacoethes Scribendi

If all the trees in all the woods were men;
And each and every blade of grass a pen;
If every leaf on every shrub and tree
Turned to a sheet of foolscap; every sea
Were changed to ink, and all earth's living tribes
Had nothing else to do but act as scribes,
And for ten thousand ages, day and night,
The human race should write, and write, and write,
Till all the pens and paper were used up,
And the huge inkstand was an empty cup,
Still would the scribblers clustered round its brink
Call for more pens, more paper, and more ink.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Contentment

"Man wants but little here below."

LITTLE I ask; my wants are few;
I only wish a hut of stone,
(A very plain brown stone will do,)
That I may call my own;
And close at hand is such a one,
In yonder street that fronts the sun.

Plain food is quite enough for me;
Three courses are as good as ten;--
If Nature can subsist on three,
Thank Heaven for three. Amen!
I always thought cold victual nice;--
My choice would be vanilla-ice.

I care not much for gold or land;--
Give me a mortgage here and there,--
Some good bank-stock, some note of hand,
Or trifling railroad share,--
I only ask that Fortune send
A little more than I shall spend.

Honors are silly toys, I know,
And titles are but empty names;
I would, perhaps, be Plenipo,--
But only near St. James;
I'm very sure I should not care
To fill our Gubernator's chair.

Jewels are baubles; 't is a sin
To care for such unfruitful things;--
One good-sized diamond in a pin,--
Some, not so large, in rings,--
A ruby, and a pearl, or so,
Will do for me;--I laugh at show.

My dame should dress in cheap attire;
(Good, heavy silks are never dear;) -
I own perhaps I might desire
Some shawls of true Cashmere,--
Some marrowy crapes of China silk,
Like wrinkled skins on scalded milk.

I would not have the horse I drive
So fast that folks must stop and stare;
An easy gait--two forty-five--
Suits me; I do not care;--
Perhaps, for just a single spurt,
Some seconds less would do no hurt.

Of pictures, I should like to own
Titians aud Raphaels three or four,--
I love so much their style and tone,
One Turner, and no more,
(A landscape,--foreground golden dirt,--
The sunshine painted with a squirt.)

Of books but few,--some fifty score
For daily use, and bound for wear;
The rest upon an upper floor;--
Some little luxury there
Of red morocco's gilded gleam
And vellum rich as country cream.

Busts, cameos, gems,--such things as these,
Which others often show for pride,
I value for their power to please,
And selfish churls deride;--
One Stradivarius, I confess,
Two Meerschaums, I would fain possess.

Wealth's wasteful tricks I will not learn,
Nor ape the glittering upstart fool;--
Shall not carved tables serve my turn,
But all must be of buhl?
Give grasping pomp its double share,--
I ask but one recumbent chair.

Thus humble let me live and die,
Nor long for Midas' golden touch;
If Heaven more generous gifts deny,
I shall not miss them much,--
Too grateful for the blessing lent
Of simple tastes and mind content!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Daily Trials by a Sensitive Man

Oh, there are times
When all this fret and tumult that we hear
Do seem more stale than to the sexton's ear
His own dull chimes.
Ding dong! ding dong!
The world is in a simmer like a sea
Over a pent volcano, -- woe is me
All the day long!
From crib to shroud!
Nurse o'er our cradles screameth lullaby,
And friends in boots tramp round us as we die,
Snuffling aloud.

At morning's call
The small-voiced pug-dog welcomes in the sun,
And flea-bit mongrels, wakening one by one,
Give answer all.

When evening dim
Draws round us, then the lonely caterwaul,
Tart solo, sour duet, and general squall, --
These are our hymn.

Women, with tongues
Like polar needles, ever on the jar;
Men, plugless word-spouts, whose deep fountains are
Within their lungs.

Children, with drums
Strapped round them by the fond paternal ass;
Peripatetics with a blade of grass
Between their thumbs.

Vagrants, whose arts
Have caged some devil in their mad machine,
Which grinding, squeaks, with husky groans between,
Come out by starts.

Cockneys that kill
Thin horses of a Sunday, -- men, with clams,
Hoarse as young bisons roaring for their dams
From hill to hill.

Soldiers, with guns,
Making a nuisance of the blessed air,
Child-crying bellman, children in despair,
Screeching for buns.

Storms, thunders, waves!
Howl, crash, and bellow till ye get your fill;
Ye sometimes rest; men never can be still
But in their graves.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Dorothy Q.

GRANDMOTHER's mother: her age, I guess,
Thirteen summers, or something less;
Girlish bust, but womanly air;
Smooth, square forehead with uprolled hair;
Lips that lover has never kissed;
Taper fingers and slender wrist;
Hanging sleeves of stiff brocade;
So they painted the little maid.

On her hand a parrot green
Sits unmoving and broods serene.
Hold up the canvas full in view,--
Look! there's a rent the light shines through,
Dark with a century's fringe of dust,--
That was a Red-Coat's rapier-thrust!
Such is the tale the lady old,
Dorothy's daughter's daughter, told.

Who the painter was none may tell,--
One whose best was not over well;
Hard and dry, it must be confessed,
Fist as a rose that has long been pressed;
Yet in her cheek the hues are bright,
Dainty colors of red and white,
And in her slender shape are seen
Hint and promise of stately mien.

Look not on her with eyes of scorn,--
Dorothy Q. was a lady born!
Ay! since the galloping Normans came,
England's annals have known her name;
And still to the three-hilled rebel town
Dear is that ancient name's renown,
For many a civic wreath they won,
The youthful sire and the gray-haired son.

O Damsel Dorothy! Dorothy Q.!
Strange is the gift that I owe to you;
Such a gift as never a king
Save to daughter or son might bring,--
All my tenure of heart and hand,
All my title to house and land;
Mother and sister and child and wife
And joy and sorrow and death and life!
What if a hundred years ago
Those close-shut lips had answered NO,
When forth the tremulous question came
That cost the maiden her Norman name,
And under the folds that look so still
The bodice swelled with the bosom's thrill?
Should I be I, or would it be
One tenth another, to nine tenths me?

Soft is the breath of a maiden's YES:
Not the light gossamer stirs with less;
But never a cable that holds so fast
Through all the battles of wave and blast,
And never an echo of speech or song
That lives in the babbling air so long!
There were tones in the voice that whispered then
You may hear to-day in a hundred men.

O lady and lover, how faint and far
Your images hover,-- and here we are,
Solid and stirring in flesh and bone,--
Edward's and Dorothy's-- all their own,--
A goodly record for Time to show
Of a syllable spoken so long ago!--
Shall I bless you, Dorothy, or forgive
For the tender whisper that bade me live?

It shall be a blessing, my little maid!
I will heal the stab of the Red-Coat's blade,
And freshen the gold of the tarnished frame,
And gild with a rhyme your household name;
So you shall smile on us brave and bright
As first you greeted the morning's light,
And live untroubled by woes and fears
Through a second youth of a hundred years.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

For the Moore Centennial Celebration

I

ENCHANTER of Erin, whose magic has bound us,
Thy wand for one moment we fondly would claim,
Entranced while it summons the phantoms around us
That blush into life at the sound of thy name.

The tell-tales of memory wake from their slumbers,--
I hear the old song with its tender refrain,
What passion lies hid in those honey-voiced numbers!
What perfume of youth in each exquisite strain!

The home ot my childhood comes back as a vision,--
Hark! Hark! A soft chord from its song~haunted room,--
'T is a morning of May, when the air is Elysian,--
The syringa in bud and the lilac in bloom,--

We are clustered around the "Clementi" piano,--
There were six of us then,-- there are two of us now,--
She is singing-- the girl with the silver soprano--
How "The Lord of the Valley" was false to his vow;

"Let Erin remember" the echoes are calling;
Through "The Vale of Avoca" the waters are rolled;
"The Exile" laments while the night~dews are falling;
"The Morning of Life" dawns again as of old.

But ah! those warm love-songs of fresh adolescence!
Around us such raptures celestial they flung
That it seemed as if Paradise breathed its quintessence
Through the seraph-toned lips of the maiden that sung!

Long hushed are the chords that my boyhood enchanted
As when the smooth wave by the angel was stirred,
Yet still with their music is memory haunted,
And oft in my dreams are their melodies heard.

I feel like the priest to his altar returning,--
The crowd that was kneeling no longer is there,
The flame has died down, but the brands are still burning,
And sandal and cinnamon sweeten the air.

II

The veil for her bridal young Summer is weaving
In her azure-domed hall with its tapestried floor,
And Spring the last tear-drop of May-dew is leaving
On the daisy of Burns and the shamrock of Moore.

How like, how unlike, as we view them together,
The song of the minstrels whose record we scan,--
One fresh as the breeze blowing over the heather,

One sweet as the breath from an odalisque's fan!

Ah, passion can glow mid a palace's splendor;
The cage does not alter the song of ths bird;
And the curtain of silk has known whispers as tender
As ever the blossoming hawthorn has heard.

No fear lest the step of the soft-slippered Graces
Should fright the young Loves from their warm little nest,
For the heart of a queen, under jewels and laces,
Beats time with the pulse in the peasant girl's breast!

Thrice welcome each gift of kind Nature's bestowing!
Her fountain heeds little the goblet we hold;
Alike, when its musical waters are flowing,
The shell from the seaside, the chalice of gold.

The twins of the lyre to her voices had listened;
Both laid their best gifts upon Liberty's shrine;
For Coila's loved minstrel the holly~wreath glistened;
For Erin's the rose and the myrtle entwine.

And while the fresh blossoms of summer are braided
For the sea-girdled, stream-silvered, lake-jewelled isle,
While her mantle of verdure is woven unfaded,
While Shannon and Liffey shall dimple and smile,

The land where the staff of Saint Patrick was planted,
Where the shamrock grows green from the cliffs to the shore,
The land of fair maidens and heroes undaunted,
Shall wreathe her bright harp with the garlands of Moore!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Martha

SEXTON! Martha's dead and gone;
Toll the bell! toll the bell!
Her weary hands their labor cease;
Good night, poor Martha,-- sleep in peace!
Toll the bell!

Sexton! Martha 's dead and gone;
Toll the bell! toll the bell!
For many a year has Martha said,
"I'm old and poor,-- would I were dead!"
Toll the bell!

Sexton! Martha's dead and gone;
Toll the bell! toll the bell!
She'll bring no more, by day or night,
Her basket full of linen white.
Toll the bell!

Sexton! Martha's dead and gone;
Toll the bell! toll the bell!
'Tis fitting she should lie below
A pure white sheet of drifted snow.
Toll the bell!

Sexton! Martha's dead and gone;
Toll the bell! toll the bell!
Sleep, Martha, sleep, to wake in light,
Where all the robes are stainless white.
Toll the bell!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

My Aviary

THROUGH my north window, in the wintry weather,--
My airy oriel on the river shore,--
I watch the sea-fowl as they flock together
Where late the boatman flashed his dripping oar.

The gull, high floating, like a sloop unladen,
Lets the loose water waft him as it will;
The duck, round-breasted as a rustic maiden,
Paddles and plunges, busy, busy still.

I see the solemn gulls in council sitting
On some broad ice-floe pondering long and late,
While overhead the home-bound ducks are flitting,
And leave the tardy conclave in debate,

Those weighty questions in their breasts revolving
Whose deeper meaning science never learns,
Till at some reverend elder's look dissolving,
The speechless senate silently adjourns.

But when along the waves the shrill north-easter
Shrieks through the laboring coaster's shrouds "Beware!"
The pale bird, kindling like a Christmas feaster
When some wild chorus shakes the vinous air,

Flaps from the leaden wave in fierce rejoicing,
Feels heaven's dumb lightning thrill his torpid nerves,
Now on the blast his whistling plumage poising,
Now wheeling, whirling in fantastic curves.

Such is our gull; a gentleman of leisure,
Less fleshed than feathered; bagged you'll find him such;
His virtue silence; his employment pleasure;
Not bad to look at, and not good for much.

What of our duck? He has some high-bred cousins,--
His Grace the Canvas-back, My Lord the Brant,--
Anas and Anser,-- both served up by dozens,
At Boston's Rocher, half-way to Nahant.

As for himself, he seems alert and thriving,--
Grubs up a living somehow-- what, who knows?
Crabs? mussels? weeds? Look quick! there's one just diving!
Flop! Splash! his white breast glistens-- down he goes!

And while he's under-- just about a minute--
I take advantage of the fact to say
His fishy carcase has no virtue in it
The gunning idiot's wortless hire to pay.

He knows you! "sportsmen" from suburban alleys,
Stretched under seaweed in the treacherous punt;

Knows every lazy, shiftless lout that sallies
Forth to waste powder-- as he says, to "hunt."

I watch you with a patient satisfaction,
Well pleased to discount your predestined luck;
The float that figures in your sly transaction
Will carry back a goose, but not a duck.

Shrewd is our bird; not easy to outwit him!
Sharp is the outlook of those pin-head eyes;
Still, he is mortal and a shot may hit him,
One cannot always miss him if he tries.

Look! there's a young one, dreaming not of danger
Sees a flat log come floating down the stream;
Stares undismayed upon the harmless stranger;
Ah! were all strangers harmless as they seem!

Habet! a leaden shower his breast has shattered;
Vainly he flutters, not again to rise;
His soft white plumes along the waves are scattered;
Helpless the wing that braved the tempest lies.

He sees his comrades high above him flying
To seek their nests among the island reeds;
Strong is their flight; all lonely he is lying
Washed by the crimsoned water as he bleeds.

O Thou who carest for the falling sparrow,
Canst Thou the sinless sufferer's pang forget?
Or is thy dread account-book's page so narrow
Its one long column scores thy creatures' debt?

Poor gentle guest, by nature kindly cherished,
A world grows dark with thee in blinding death;
One little gasp-- thy universe has perished,
Wrecked by the idle thief who stole thy breath!

Is this the whole sad story of creation,
Lived by its breathing myriads o'er and o'er,--
One glimpse of day, then black annhilation,
A sunlit passage to a sunless shore?

Give back our faith, ye mystery-solving lynxes!
Robe us once more in heaven-aspiring creeds!
Happier was dreaming Egypt with her sphinxes,
The stony convent with its cross and beads!

How often gazing where a bird reposes,
Rocked on the wavelets, drifting with the tide,
I lose myself in strange metempsychosis
And float a sea-fowl at a sea-fowl's side;

From rain, hail, snow in feathery mantle muffled,
Clear-eyed, strong-limbed, with keenest sense to hear
My mate soft murmuring, who, with plumes unruffled,
Where'er I wander still is nestling near;

The great blue hollow like a garment o'er me;
Space all unmeasured, unrecorded time;
While seen with inward eye moves on before me
Thought's pictured train in wordless pantomime.

A voice recalls me.-- From my window turning
I find myself a plumeless biped still;
No beak, no claws, no sign of wings discerning,--
In fact with nothing bird-like but my quill.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Old Ironsides

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see
That banner in the sky;
Beneath it rung the battle shout,
And burst the cannon's roar; --
The meteor of the ocean air
Shall sweep the clouds no more.
Her deck, once red with heroes' blood,
Where knelt the vanquished foe,
When winds were hurrying o'er the flood,
And waves were white below,
No more shall feel the victor's tread,
Or know the conquered knee; --
The harpies of the shore shall pluck
The eagle of the sea!

Oh, better that her shattered hulk
Should sink beneath the wave;
Her thunders shook the mighty deep,
And there should be her grave;
Nail to the mast her holy flag,
Set every threadbare sail,
And give her to the god of storms,
The lightning and the gale!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Poem (Halleck monument dedication)

SAY not the Poet dies!
Though in the dust he lies,
He cannot forfeit his melodious breath,
Unsphered by envious death!
Life drops the voiceless myriads from its roll;
Their fate he cannot share,
Who, in the enchanted air
Sweet with the lingering strains that Echo stole,
Has left his dearer self, the music of his soul!

We o'er his turf may raise
Our notes of feeble praise,
And carve with pious care for after eyes
The stone with "Here he lies;"
He for himself has built a nobler shrine,
Whose walls of stately rhyme
Roll back the tides of time,
While o'er their gates the gleaming tablets shine
That wear his name inwrought with many a golden line!

Call not our Poet dead,
Though on his turf we tread!
Green is the wreath their brows so long have worn,--
The minstrels of the morn,
Who, while the Orient burned with new-born flame,
Caught that celestial fire
And struck a Nation's lyre!
These taught the western winds the poet's name;
Theirs the first opening buds, the maiden flowers of fame!

Count not our Poet dead!
The stars shall watch his bed,
The rose of June its fragrant life renew
His blushing mound to strew,
And all the tuneful throats of summer swell
With trills as crystal-clear
As when he wooed the ear
Of the young muse that haunts each wooded dell,
With songs of that "rough land" he loved so long and well!

He sleeps; he cannot die!
As evening's long-drawn sigh,
Lifting the rose-leaves on his peaceful mound,
Spreads all their sweets around,
So, laden with his song, the breezes blow
From where the rustling sedge
Frets our rude ocean's edge
To the smooth sea beyond the peaks of snow.
His soul the air enshrines and leaves but dust below!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Sun and Shadow

As I look from the isle, o'er its billows of green,
To the billows of foam-crested blue,
Yon bark, that afar in the distance is seen,
Half dreaming, my eyes will pursue:
Now dark in the shadow, she scatters the spray
As the chaff in the stroke of the flail;
Now white as the sea-gull, she flies on her way,
The sun gleaming bright on her sail.

Yet her pilot is thinking of dangers to shun,--
Of breakers that whiten and roar;
How little he cares, if in shadow or sun
They see him who gaze from the shore!
He looks to the beacon that looms from the reef,
To the rock that is under his lee,
As he drifts on the blast, like a wind-wafted leaf,
O'er the gulfs of the desolate sea.

Thus drifting afar to the dim-vaulted caves
Where life and its ventures are laid,
The dreamers who gaze while we battle the waves
May see us in sunshine or shade;
Yet true to our course, though the shadows grow dark,
We'll trim our broad sail as before,
And stand by the rudder that governs the bark,
Nor ask how we look from the shore!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Boys

HAS there any old fellow got mixed with the boys?
If there has, take him out, without making a noise.
Hang the Almanac's cheat and the Catalogue's spite!
Old Time is a liar! We're twenty to-night!

We're twenty! We're twenty! Who says we are more?
He's tipsy,-- young jackanapes!-- show him the door!
"Gray temples at twenty?"-- Yes ! white if we please;
Where the snow-flakes fall thickest there's nothing can freeze!

Was it snowing I spoke of? Excuse the mistake!
Look close,-- you will see not a sign of a flake!
We want some new garlands for those we have shed,--
And these are white roses in place of the red.

We've a trick, we young fellows, you may have been told,
Of talking (in public) as if we were old:--
That boy we call "Doctor," and this we call "Judge;"
It's a neat little fiction,-- of course it's all fudge.

That fellow's the "Speaker,"-- the one on the right;
"Mr. Mayor," my young one, how are you to-night?
That's our "Member of Congress," we say when we chaff;
There's the "Reverend" What's his name?-- don't make me laugh.

That boy with the grave mathematical look
Made believe he had written a wonderful book,
And the ROYAL SOCIETY thought it was true!
So they chose him right in; a good joke it was, too!

There's a boy, we pretend, with a three-decker brain,
That could harness a team with a logical chain;
When he spoke for our manhood in syllabled fire,
We called him "The Justice," but now he's "The Squire."

And there's a nice youngster of excellent pith,--
Fate tried to conceal him by naming him Smith;
But he shouted a song for the brave and the free,
Just read on his medal, "My country," "of thee!"

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!

Yes, we're boys, --always playing with tongue or with pen,--
And I sometimes have asked,-- Shall we ever be men?
Shall we always be youthful, and laughing, and gay,
Till the last dear companion drops smiling away?

Then here's to our boyhood, its gold and its gray!
The stars of its winter, the dews of its May!

And when we have done with our life-lasting toys,
Dear Father, take care of thy children, THE BOYS!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Chambered Nautilus

THIS is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,
Sails the unshadowed main,--
The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren sings,
And coral reefs lie bare,
Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair.

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;
Wrecked is the ship of pearl!
And every chambered cell,
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
Before thee lies revealed,--
Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

Year after year beheld the silent toil
That spread his lustrous coil;
Still, as the spiral grew,
He left the past year's dwelling for the new,
Stole with soft step its shining archway through,
Built up its idle door,
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old no more.

Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee,
Child of the wandering sea,
Cast from her lap, forlorn!
From thy dead lips a clearer note is born
Than ever Triton blew from wreathèd horn!
While on mine ear it rings,
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings:--

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Deacon's Masterpiece Or, The Wonderful "One-Hoss Shay": A Logical Story

Have you heard of the wonderful one-hoss shay,
That was built in such a logical way
It ran a hundred years to a day,
And then, of a sudden, it -- ah, but stay,
I'll tell you what happened without delay,
Scaring the parson into fits,
Frightening people out of their wits, --
Have you ever heard of that, I say?

Seventeen hundred and fifty-five.
Georgius Secundus was then alive, --
Snuffy old drone from the German hive.
That was the year when Lisbon-town
Saw the earth open and gulp her down,
And Braddock's army was done so brown,
Left without a scalp to its crown.
It was on the terrible Earthquake-day
That the Deacon finished the one-hoss shay.

Now in building of chaises, I tell you what,
There is always somewhere a weakest spot, --
In hub, tire, felloe, in spring or thill,
In panel, or crossbar, or floor, or sill,
In screw, bolt, thoroughbrace, -- lurking still,
Find it somewhere you must and will, --
Above or below, or within or without, --
And that's the reason, beyond a doubt,
A chaise breaks down, but does n't wear out.

But the Deacon swore (as Deacons do,
With an "I dew vum," or an "I tell yeou")
He would build one shay to beat the taown
'N' the keounty 'n' all the kentry raoun';
It should be so built that it could n' break daown:
"Fur," said the Deacon, "'t 's mighty plain
Thut the weakes' place mus' stan' the strain;
'N' the way t' fix it, uz I maintain,
Is only jest
T' make that place uz strong uz the rest."

So the Deacon inquired of the village folk
Where he could find the strongest oak,
That could n't be split nor bent nor broke, --
That was for spokes and floor and sills;
He sent for lancewood to make the thills;
The crossbars were ash, from the straightest trees,
The panels of white-wood, that cuts like cheese,
But lasts like iron for things like these;
The hubs of logs from the "Settler's ellum," --
Last of its timber, -- they could n't sell 'em,
Never an axe had seen their chips,
And the wedges flew from between their lips,

Their blunt ends frizzled like celery-tips;
Step and prop-iron, bolt and screw,
Spring, tire, axle, and linchpin too,
Steel of the finest, bright and blue;
Thoroughbrace bison-skin, thick and wide;
Boot, top, dasher, from tough old hide
Found in the pit when the tanner died.
That was the way he "put her through."
"There!" said the Deacon, "naow she'll dew!"

Do! I tell you, I rather guess
She was a wonder, and nothing less!
Colts grew horses, beards turned gray,
Deacon and deaconess dropped away,
Children and grandchildren -- where were they?
But there stood the stout old one-hoss shay
As fresh as on Lisbon-earthquake-day!

EIGHTEEN HUNDRED; -- it came and found
The Deacon's masterpiece strong and sound.
Eighteen hundred increased by ten; --
"Hahnsum kerridge" they called it then.
Eighteen hundred and twenty came; --
Running as usual; much the same.
Thirty and forty at last arrive,
And then come fifty, and FIFTY-FIVE.

Little of all we value here
Wakes on the morn of its hundreth year
Without both feeling and looking queer.
In fact, there's nothing that keeps its youth,
So far as I know, but a tree and truth.
(This is a moral that runs at large;
Take it. -- You're welcome. -- No extra charge.)

FIRST OF NOVEMBER, -- the Earthquake-day, --
There are traces of age in the one-hoss shay,
A general flavor of mild decay,
But nothing local, as one may say.
There could n't be, -- for the Deacon's art
Had made it so like in every part
That there was n't a chance for one to start.
For the wheels were just as strong as the thills,
And the floor was just as strong as the sills,
And the panels just as strong as the floor,
And the whipple-tree neither less nor more,
And the back crossbar as strong as the fore,
And spring and axle and hub encore.
And yet, as a whole, it is past a doubt
In another hour it will be worn out!

First of November, 'Fifty-five!

This morning the parson takes a drive.
Now, small boys, get out of the way!
Here comes the wonderful one-horse shay,
Drawn by a rat-tailed, ewe-necked bay.
"Huddup!" said the parson. -- Off went they.
The parson was working his Sunday's text, --
Had got to fifthly, and stopped perplexed
At what the -- Moses -- was coming next.
All at once the horse stood still,
Close by the meet'n'-house on the hill.
First a shiver, and then a thrill,
Then something decidedly like a spill, --
And the parson was sitting upon a rock,
At half past nine by the meet'n-house clock, --
Just the hour of the Earthquake shock!
What do you think the parson found,
When he got up and stared around?
The poor old chaise in a heap or mound,
As if it had been to the mill and ground!
You see, of course, if you're not a dunce,
How it went to pieces all at once, --
All at once, and nothing first, --
Just as bubbles do when they burst.

End of the wonderful one-hoss shay.
Logic is logic. That's all I say.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Dorchester Giant

THERE was a giant in time of old,
A mighty one was he;
He had a wife, but she was a scold,
So he kept her shut in his mammoth fold;
And he had children three.

It happened to be an election day,
And the giants were choosing a king;
The people were not democrats then,
They did not talk of the rights of men,
And all that sort of thing.

Then the giant took his children three,
And fastened them in the pen;
The children roared; quoth the giant, "Be still!"
And Dorchester Heights and Milton Hill
Rolled back the sound again.

Then he brought them a pudding stuffed with plums,
As big as the State-House dome;
Quoth he, "There's something for you to eat;
So stop your mouths with your 'lection treat,
And wait till your dad comes home."

So the giant pulled him a chestnut stout,
And whittled the boughs away;
The boys and their mother set up a shout.
Said he, "You're in, and you can't get out,
Bellow as loud as you may."

Off he went, and he growled a tune
As he strode the fields along
'Tis said a buffalo fainted away,
And fell as cold as a lump of clay,
When he heard the giant's song.

But whether the story's true or not,
It isn't for me to show;
There's many a thing that's twice as queer
In somebody's lectures that we hear,
And those are true, you know.

. . . . . .

What are those lone ones doing now,
The wife and the children sad?
Oh, they are in a terrible rout,
Screaming, and throwing their pudding about,
Acting as they were mad.

They flung it over to Roxbury hills,
They flung it over the plain,

And all over Milton and Dorchester too
Great lumps of pudding the giants threw;
They tumbled as thick as rain.

. . . . .

Giant and mammoth have passed away,
For ages have floated by;
The suet is hard as a marrow-bone,
And every plum is turned to a stone,
But there the puddings lie.

And if, some pleasant afternoon,
You'll ask me out to ride,
The whole of the story I will tell,
And you shall see where the puddings fell,
And pay for the punch beside.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Flaâneur

I love all sights of earth and skies,
From flowers that glow to stars that shine;
The comet and the penny show,
All curious things, above, below,
Hold each in turn my wandering eyes:
I claim the Christian Pagan's line,
Humani nihil, -- even so, --
And is not human life divine?
When soft the western breezes blow,
And strolling youths meet sauntering maids,
I love to watch the stirring trades
Beneath the Vallombrosa shades
Our much-enduring elms bestow;
The vender and his rhetoric's flow,
That lambent stream of liquid lies;
The bait he dangles from his line,
The gudgeon and his gold-washed prize.
I halt before the blazoned sign
That bids me linger to admire
The drama time can never tire,
The little hero of the hunch,
With iron arm and soul of fire,
And will that works his fierce desire, --
Untamed, unscared, unconquered Punch!
My ear a pleasing torture finds
In tones the withered sibyl grinds, --
The dame sans merci's broken strain,
Whom I erewhile, perchance, have known,
When Orleans filled the Bourbon throne,
A siren singing by the Seine.

But most I love the tube that spies
The orbs celestial in their march;
That shows the comet as it whisks
Its tail across the planets' disks,
As if to blind their blood-shot eyes;
Or wheels so close against the sun
We tremble at the thought of risks
Our little spinning ball may run,
To pop like corn that children parch,
From summer something overdone,
And roll, a cinder, through the skies.

Grudge not to-day the scanty fee
To him who farms the firmament,
To whom the Milky Way is free;
Who holds the wondrous crystal key,
The silent Open Sesame
That Science to her sons has lent;
Who takes his toll, and lifts the bar
That shuts the road to sun and star.
If Venus only comes to time,

(And prophets say she must and shall,)
To-day will hear the tinkling chime
Of many a ringing silver dime,
For him whose optic glass supplies
The crowd with astronomic eyes, --
The Galileo of the Mall.

Dimly the transit morning broke;
The sun seemed doubting what to do,
As one who questions how to dress,
And takes his doublets from the press,
And halts between the old and new.
Please Heaven he wear his suit of blue,
Or don, at least, his ragged cloak,
With rents that show the azure through!

I go the patient crowd to join
That round the tube my eyes discern,
The last new-comer of the file,
And wait, and wait, a weary while,
And gape, and stretch, and shrug, and smile,
(For each his place must fairly earn,
Hindmost and foremost, in his turn,)
Till hitching onward, pace by pace,
I gain at last the envied place,
And pay the white exiguous coin:
The sun and I are face to face;
He glares at me, I stare at him;
And lo! my straining eye has found
A little spot that, black and round,
Lies near the crimsoned fire-orb's rim.
O blessed, beauteous evening star,
Well named for her whom earth adores, --
The Lady of the dove-drawn car, --
I know thee in thy white simar;
But veiled in black, a rayless spot,
Blank as a careless scribbler's blot,
Stripped of thy robe of silvery flame, --
The stolen robe that Night restores
When Day has shut his golden doors, --
I see thee, yet I know thee not;
And canst thou call thyself the same?

A black, round spot, -- and that is all;
And such a speck our earth would be
If he who looks upon the stars
Through the red atmosphere of Mars
Could see our little creeping ball
Across the disk of crimson crawl
As I our sister planet see.

And art thou, then, a world like ours,

Flung from the orb that whirled our own
A molten pebble from its zone?
How must thy burning sands absorb
The fire-waves of the blazing orb,
Thy chain so short, thy path so near,
Thy flame-defying creatures hear
The maelstroms of the photosphere!
And is thy bosom decked with flowers
That steal their bloom from scalding showers?
And hast thou cities, domes, and towers,
And life, and love that makes it dear,
And death that fills thy tribes with fear?

Lost in my dream, my spirit soars
Through paths the wandering angels know;
My all-pervading thought explores
The azure ocean's lucent shores;
I leave my mortal self below,
As up the star-lit stairs I climb,
And still the widening view reveals
In endless rounds the circling wheels
That build the horologe of time.
New spheres, new suns, new systems gleam;
The voice no earth-born echo hears
Steals softly on my ravished ears:
I hear them "singing as they shine" --
A mortal's voice dissolves my dream:
My patient neighbor, next in line,
Hints gently there are those who wait.
O guardian of the starry gate,
What coin shall pay this debt of mine?
Too slight thy claim, too small the fee
That bids thee turn the potent key
The Tuscan's hand has placed in thine.
Forgive my own the small affront,
The insult of the proffered dime;
Take it, O friend, since this thy wont,
But still shall faithful memory be
A bankrupt debtor unto thee,
And pay thee with a grateful rhyme.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Flower of Liberty

WHAT flower is this that greets the morn,
Its hues from Heaven so freshly born?
With burning star and flaming band
It kindles all the sunset land:
Oh tell us what its name may be,--
Is this the Flower of Liberty?

It is the banner of the free,
The starry Flower of Liberty!

In savage Nature's far abode
Its tender seed our fathers sowed;
The storm-winds rocked its swelling bud,
Its opening leaves were streaked with blood,
Till lo! earth's tyrants shook to see
The full-blown Flower of Liberty!

Then hail the banner of the free,
The starry Flower of Liberty!

Behold its streaming rays unite,
One mingling flood of braided light,--
The red that fires the Southern rose,
With spotless white from Northern snows,
And, spangled o'er its azure, see
The sister Stars of Liberty!

Then hail the banner of the free,
The starry Flower of Liberty!

The blades of heroes fence it round,
Where'er it springs is holy ground;
From tower and dome its glories spread;
It waves where lonely sentries tread;
It makes the land as ocean free,
And plants an empire on the sea!

Then hail the banner of the free,
The starry Flower of Liberty!

Thy sacred leaves, fair Freedom's flower,
Shall ever float on dome and tower,
To all their heavenly colors true,
In blackening frost or crimson dew,--
And God love us as we love thee,
Thrice holy Flower of Liberty!

Then hail the banner of the free,
The starry FLOWER OF LIBERTY!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Height of the Ridiculous

I WROTE some lines once on a time
In wondrous merry mood,
And thought, as usual, men would say
They were exceeding good.

They were so queer, so very queer,
I laughed as I would die;
Albeit, in the general way,
A sober man am I.

I called my servant, and he came;
How kind it was of him
To mind a slender man like me,
He of the mighty limb.

"These to the printer," I exclaimed,
And, in my humorous way,
I added, (as a trifling jest,)
"There'll be the devil to pay."

He took the paper, and I watched,
And saw him peep within;
At the first line he read, his face
Was all upon the grin.

He read the next; the grin grew broad,
And shot from ear to ear;
He read the third; a chuckling noise
I now began to hear.

The fourth; he broke into a roar;
The fifth; his waistband split;
The sixth; he burst five buttons off,
And tumbled in a fit.

Ten days and nights, with sleepless eye,
I watched that wretched man,
And since, I never dare to write
As funny as I can.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Iron Gate

WHERE is this patriarch you are kindly greeting?
Not unfamiliar to my ear his name,
Nor yet unknown to many a joyous meeting
In days long vanished,-- is he still the same,

Or changed by years, forgotten and forgetting,
Dull-eared, dim-sighted, slow of speech and thought,
Still o'er the sad, degenerate present fretting,
Where all goes wrong, and nothing as it ought?

Old age, the graybeard! Well, indeed, I know him,--
Shrunk, tottering, bent, of aches and ills the prey;
In sermon, story, fable, picture, poem,
Oft have I met him from my earliest day:

In my old Aesop, toiling with his bundle,--
His load of sticks,-- politely asking Death,
Who comes when called for,-- would he lug or trundle
His fagot for him?-- he was scant of breath.

And sad "Ecclesiastes, or the Preacher,"--
Has he not stamped tbe image on my soul,
In that last chapter, where the worn-out Teacher
Sighs o'er the loosened cord, the broken bowl?

Yes, long, indeed, I 've known him at a distance,
And now my lifted door-latch shows him here;
I take his shrivelled hand without resistance,
And find him smiling as his step draws near.

What though of gilded baubles he bereaves us,
Dear to the heart of youth, to manhood's prime;
Think of the calm he brings, the wealth he leaves us,
The hoarded spoils, the legacies of time!

Altars once flaming, still with incense fragrant,
Passion's uneasy nurslings rocked asleep,
Hope's anchor faster, wild desire less vagrant,
Life's flow less noisy, but the stream how deep!

Still as the silver cord gets worn and slender,
Its lightened task-work tugs with lessening strain,
Hands get more helpful, voices, grown more tender,
Soothe with their softened tones the slumberous brain.

Youth longs and manhood strives, but age remembers,
Sits by the raked-up ashes of the past,
Spreads its thin hands above the whitening embers
That warm its creeping life-blood till the last.

Dear to its heart is every loving token
That comes unbidden era its pulse grows cold,

Ere the last lingering ties of life are broken,
Its labors ended and its story told.

Ah, while around us rosy youth rejoices,
For us the sorrow-laden breezes sigh,
And through the chorus of its jocund voices
Throbs the sharp note of misery's hopeless cry.

As on the gauzy wings of fancy flying
From some far orb I track our watery sphere,
Home of the struggling, suffering, doubting, dying,
The silvered globule seems a glistening tear.

But Nature lends her mirror of illusion
To win from saddening scenes our age-dimmed eyes,
And misty day-dreams blend in sweet confusion
The wintry landscape and the summer skies.

So when the iron portal shuts behind us,
And life forgets us in its noise and whirl,
Visions that shunned the glaring noonday find us,
And glimmering starlight shows the gates of pearl.

I come not here your morning hour to sadden,
A limping pilgrim, leaning on his staff,--
I, who have never deemed it sin to gladden
This vale of sorrows with a wholesome laugh.

If word of mine another's gloom has brightened,
Through my dumb lips the heaven-sent message came;
If hand of mine another's task has lightened,
It felt the guidance that it dares not claim.

But, O my gentle sisters, O my brothers,
These thick-sown snow-flakes hint of toil's release;
These feebler pulses bid me leave to others
The tasks once welcome; evening asks for peace.

Time claims his tribute; silence now golden;
Let me not vex the too long suffering lyre;
Though to your love untiring still beholden,
The curfew tells me-- cover up the fire.

And now with grateful smile and accents cheerful,
And warmer heart than look or word can tell,
In simplest phrase-- these traitorous eyes are tearful--
Thanks, Brothers, Sisters,-- Children,-- and farewell!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Last Leaf

I saw him once before,
As he passed by the door,
And again
The pavement stones resound,
As he totters o'er the ground
With his cane.

They say that in his prime,
Ere the pruning-knife of Time
Cut him down,
Not a better man was found
By the Crier on his round
Through the town.

But now he walks the streets,
And he looks at all he meets
Sad and wan,
And he shakes his feeble head,
That it seems as if he said,
"They are gone!"

The mossy marbles rest
On the lips that he has prest
In their bloom,
And the names he loved to hear
Have been carved for many a year
On the tomb.

My grandmamma has said--
Poor old lady, she is dead
Long ago--
That he had a Roman nose,
And his cheek was like a rose
In the snow;

But now his nose is thin,
And it rests upon his chin
Like a staff,
And a crook is in his back,
And a melancholy crack
In his laugh.

I know it is a sin
For me to sit and grin
At him here;
But the old three-cornered hat,
And the breeches, and all that,
Are so queer!

And if I should live to be
The last leaf upon the tree
In the spring,

Let them smile, as I do now,
At the old forsaken bough
Where I cling.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Living Temple

NOT in the world of light alone,
Where God has built his blazing throne,
Nor yet alone in earth below,
With belted seas that come and go,
And endless isles of sunlit green,
Is all thy Maker's glory seen:
Look in upon thy wondrous frame,--
Eternal wisdom still the same!

The smooth, soft air with pulse-like waves
Flows murmuring through its hidden caves,
Whose streams of brightening purple rush,
Fired with a new and livelier blush,
While all their burden of decay
The ebbing current steals away,
And red with Nature's flame they start
From the warm fountains of the heart.

No rest that throbbing slave may ask,
Forever quivering o'er his task,
While far and wide a crimson jet
Leaps forth to fill the woven net
Which in unnumbered crossing tides
The flood of burning life divides,
Then, kindling each decaying part,
Creeps back to find the throbbing heart.

But warmed with that unchanging flame
Behold the outward moving frame,
Its living marbles jointed strong
With glistening band and silvery thong,
And linked to reason's guiding reins
By myriad rings in trembling chains,
Each graven with the threaded zone
Which claims it as the master's own.

See how yon beam of seeming white
Is braided out of seven-hued light,
Yet in those lucid globes no ray
By any chance shall break astray.
Hark how the rolling surge of sound,
Arches and spirals circling round,
Wakes the hushed spirit through thine ear
With music it is heaven to hear.

Then mark the cloven sphere that holds
All thought in its mysterious folds;
That feels sensation's faintest thrill,
And flashes forth the sovereign will;
Think on the stormy world that dwells
Locked in its dim and clustering cells!
The lightning gleams of power it sheds

Along its hollow glassy threads!

O Father! grant thy love divine
To make these mystic temples thine!
When wasting age and wearying strife
Have sapped the leaning walls of life,
When darkness gathers over all,
And the last tottering pillars fall,
Take the poor dust thy mercy warms,
And mould it into heavenly forms!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Old Man Dreams

OH for one hour of youthful joy!
Give back my twentieth spring!
I'd rather laugh, a bright-haired boy,
Than reign, a gray-beard king.

Off with the spoils of wrinkled age!
Away with Learning's crown!
Tear out life's Wisdom-written page,
And dash its trophies down!

One moment let my life-blood stream
From boyhood's fount of flame!
Give me one giddy, reeling dream
Of life all love and fame!

. . . . .

My listening angel heard the prayer,
And, calmly smiling, said,
"If I but touch thy silvered hair
Thy hasty wish hath sped.

"But is there nothing in thy track,
To bid thee fondly stay,
While the swift seasons hurry back
To find the wished-for day?"

"Ah, truest soul of womankind!
Without thee what were life ?
One bliss I cannot leave behind:
I'll take-- my-- precious-- wife!"

The angel took a sapphire pen
And wrote in rainbow dew,
The man would be a boy again,
And be a husband too!

"And is there nothing yet unsaid,
Before the change appears?
Remember, all their gifts have fled
With those dissolving years."

"Why, yes;" for memory would recall
My fond paternal joys;
"I could not bear to leave them all--
I'll take-- my-- girl-- and-- boys."

The smiling angel dropped his pen,--
"Why, this will never do;
The man would be a boy again,
And be a father too!"

. . . . .

And so I laughed,-- my laughter woke
The household with its noise,--
And wrote my dream, when morning broke,
To please the gray-haired boys.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Opening of the Piano

IN the little southern parlor of tbe house you may have seen
With the gambrel-roof, and the gable looking westward to the green,
At the side toward the sunset, with the window on its right,
Stood the London-made piano I am dreaming of to-night!

Ah me! how I remember the evening when it came!
What a cry of eager voices, what a group of cheeks in flame,
When the wondrous box was opened that had come from over seas,
With its smell of mastic-varnish and its flash of ivory keys!

Then the children all grew fretful in the restlessness of joy,
For the boy would push his sister, and the sister crowd the boy,
Till the father asked for quiet in his grave paternal way,
But the mother hushed the tumult with the words, "Now, Mary, play."

For the dear soul knew that music was a very sovereign balm;
She had sprinkled it over Sorrow and seen its brow grow calm,
In the days of slender harpsichords with tapping tinkling quills,
Or carolling to her spinet with its thin metallic thrills.

So Mary, the household minstrel, who always loved to please,
Sat down to the new "Clementi," and struck the glittering keys.
Hushed were the children's voices, and every eye grew dim,
As, floating from lip and finger, arose the "Vesper Hymn."

Catharine, child of a neighbor, curly and rosy-red,
(Wedded since, and a widow,-- something like ten years dead,)
Hearing a gush of music such as none before,
Steals from her mother's chamber and peeps at the open door.

Just as the "Jubilate" in threaded whisper dies,
"Open it! open it, lady!" the little maiden cries,
(For she thought 't was a singing creature caged in a box she heard,)
"Open it! open it, lady! and let me see the bird!"

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Organ-Blower

DEVOUTEST of my Sunday friends,
The patient Organ-blower bends;
I see his figure sink and rise,
(Forgive me, Heaven, my wandering eyes!)
A moment lost, the next half seen,
His head above the scanty screen,
Still measuring out his deep salaams
Through quavering hymns and panting psalms.

No priest that prays in gilded stole,
To save a rich man's mortgaged soul;
No sister, fresh from holy vows,
So humbly stoops, so meekly bows;
His large obeisance puts to shame
The proudest genuflecting dame,
Whose Easter bonnet low descends
With all the grace devotion lends.

O brother with the supple spine,
How much we owe those bows of thine!
Without thine arm to lend the breeze,
How vain the finger on the keys!
Though all unmatched the player's skill,
Those thousand throats were dumb and still:
Another's art may shape the tone,
The breath that fills it is thine own.

Six days the silent Memnon waits
Behind his temple's folded gates;
But when the seventh day's sunshine falls
Through rainbowed windows on the walls,
He breathes, he sings, he shouts, he fills
The quivering air with rapturous thrills;
The roof resounds, the pillars shake,
And all the slumbering echoes wake!

The Preacher from the Bible-text
With weary words my soul has vexed
(Some stranger, fumbling far astray
To find the lesson for the day);
He tells us truths too plainly true,
And reads the service all askew,--
Why, why the-- mischief-- can't he look
Beforehand in the service-book?

But thou, with decent mien and face,
Art always ready in thy place;
Thy strenuous blast, whate'er the tune,
As steady as the strong monsoon;
Thy only dread a leathery creak,
Or small residual extra squeak,
To send along the shadowy aisles

A sunlit wave of dimpled smiles.

Not all the preaching, O my friend,
Comes from the church's pulpit end!
Not all that bend the knee and bow
Yield service half so true as thou!
One simple task performed aright,
With slender skill, but all thy might,
Where honest labor does its best,
And leaves the player all the rest.

This many-diapasoned maze,
Through which the breath of being strays,
Whose music makes our earth divine,
Has work for mortal hands like mine.
My duty lies before me. Lo,
The lever there! Take hold and blow!
And He whose hand is on the keys
Will play the tune as He shall please.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The September Gale

I'M not a chicken; I have seen
Full many a chill September,
And though I was a youngster then,
That gale I well remember;
The day before, my kite-string snapped,
And I, my kite pursuing,
The wind whisked off my palm-leaf hat;
For me two storms were brewing!

It came as quarrels sometimes do,
When married folks get clashing;
There was a heavy sigh or two,
Before the fire was flashing,
A little stir among the clouds,
Before they rent asunder,--
A little rocking of the trees,
And then came on the thunder.

Lord! how the ponds and rivers boiled!
They seemed like bursting craters!
And oaks lay scattered on the ground
As if they were p'taters
And all above was in a howl,
And all below a clatter,
The earth was like a frying-pan,
Or some such hissing matter.

It chanced to be our washing-day,
And all our things were drying;
The storm came roaring through the lines,
And set them all a flying;
I saw the shirts and petticoats
Go riding off like witches;
I lost, ah! bitterly I wept,--
I lost my Sunday breeches!

I saw them straddling through the air,
Alas! too late to win them;
I saw them chase the clouds, as if
The devil had been in them;
They were my darlings and my pride,
My boyhood's only riches,--
"Farewell, farewell," I faintly cried,--
"My breeches! O my breeches!"

That night I saw them in my dreams,
How changed from what I knew them!
The dews had steeped their faded threads,
The winds had whistled through them!
I saw the wide and ghastly rents
Where demon claws had torn them;
A hole was in their amplest part,

As if an imp had worn them.

I have had many happy years,
And tailors kind and clever,
But those young pantaloons have gone
Forever and forever!
And not till fate has cut the last
Of all my earthly stitches,
This aching heart shall cease to mourn
My loved, my long-lost breeches!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Silent Melody

"BRING me my broken harp," he said;
"We both are wrecks,-- but as ye will,--
Though all its ringing tones have fled,
Their echoes linger round it still;
It had some golden strings, I know,
But that was long-- how long!-- ago.

"I cannot see its tarnished gold,
I cannot hear its vanished tone,
Scarce can my trembling fingers hold
The pillared frame so long their own;
We both are wrecks,-- awhile ago
It had some silver strings, I know,

"But on them Time too long has played
The solemn strain that knows no change,
And where of old my fingers strayed
The chords they find are new and strange,--
Yes! iron strings,-- I know,-- I know,--
We both are wrecks of long ago.

"We both are wrecks,-- a shattered pair,
Strange to ourselves in time's disguise
What say ye to the lovesick air
That brought the tears from Marian's eyes?
Ay! trust me,-- under breasts of snow
Hearts could be melted long ago!

"Or will ye hear the storm-song's crash
That from his dreams the soldier woke,
And bade him face the lightning flash
When battle's cloud in thunder broke?
Wrecks,-- nought but wrecks!-- the time was when
We two were worth a thousand men!"

And so the broken harp they bring
With pitying smiles that none could blame;
Alas there's not a single string
Of all that filled the tarnished frame!
But see! like children overjoyed,
His fingers rambling through the void!

"I clasp thee! Ay . . . mine ancient lyre. . .
Nay, guide my wandering fingers. . . There!
They love to dally with the wire
As Isaac played with Esan's hair. . . .
Hush! ye shall hear the famous tune
That Marina called the Breath of June!"

And so they softly gather round:
Rapt in his tuneful trance he seems:
His fingers move: but not a sound!

A silence like the song of dreams. . . .
"There! ye have heard the air," he cries,
"That brought the tears from Marina's eyes!"

Ah, smile not at his fond conceit,
Nor deem his fancy wrought in vain;
To him the unreal sounds are sweet,--
No discord mars the silent strain
Scored on life's latest, starlit page--
The voiceless melody of age.

Sweet are the lips of all that sing,
When Nature's music breathes unsought,
But never yet could voice or string
So truly shape our tenderest thought
As when by life's decaying fire
Our fingers sweep the stringless lyre!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Two Streams

Behold the rocky wall
That down its sloping sides
Pours the swift rain-drops, blending, as they fall,
In rushing river-tides!
Yon stream, whose sources run
Turned by a pebble's edge,
Is Athabasca, rolling toward the sun
Through the cleft mountain-ledge.
The slender rill had strayed,
But for the slanting stone,
To evening's ocean, with the tangled braid
Of foam-flecked Oregon.

So from the heights of Will
Life's parting stream descends,
And, as a moment turns its slender rill,
Each widening torrent bends, --

From the same cradle's side,
From the same mother's knee, --
One to long darkness and the frozen tide,
One to the Peaceful Sea!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Voiceless

WE count the broken lyres that rest
Where the sweet wailing singers slumber,
But o'er their silent sister's breast
The wild-flowers who will stoop to number?
A few can touch the magic string,
And noisy Fame is proud to win them:--
Alas for those that never sing,
But die with all their music in them!

Nay, grieve not for the dead alone
Whose song has told their hearts' sad story,--
Weep for the voiceless, who have known
The cross without the crown of glory!
Not where Leucadian breezes sweep
O'er Sappho's memory-haunted billow,
But where the glistening night-dews weep
On nameless sorrow's churchyard pillow.

O hearts that break and give no sign
Save whitening lip and fading tresses,
Till Death pours out his longed-for wine
Slow-dropped from Misery's crushing presses,--
If singing breath or echoing chord
To every hidden pang were given,
What endless melodies were poured,
As sad as earth, as sweet as heaven!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Under the Violets

HER hands are cold; her face is white;
No more her pulses come and go;
Her eyes are shut to life and light;--
Fold the white vesture, snow on snow,
And lay her where the violets blow.

But not beneath a graven stone,
To plead for tears with alien eyes;
A slender cross of wood alone
Shall say, that here a maiden lies
In peace beneath the peaceful skies.

And gray old trees of hugest limb
Shall wheel their circling shadows round
To make the scorching sunlight dim
That drinks the greenness from the ground,
And drop their dead leaves on her mound.

When o'er their boughs the squirrels run,
And through their leaves the robins call,
And, ripening in the autumn sun,
The acorns and the chestnuts fall,
Doubt not that she will heed them all.

For her the morning choir shall sing
Its matins from the branches high,
And every minstrel-voice of Spring,
That trills beneath the April sky,
Shall greet her with its earliest cry.

When, turning round their dial-track,
Eastward the lengthening shadows pass,
Her little mourners, clad in black,
The crickets, sliding through the grass,
Shall pipe for her an evening mass.

At last the rootlets of the trees
Shall find the prison where she lies,
And bear the buried dust they seize
In leaves and blossoms to the skies.
So may the soul that warmed it rise!

If any, born of kindlier blood,
Should ask, What maiden lies below?
Say only this: A tender bud,
That tried to blossom in the snow,
Lies withered where the violets blow.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Union and Liberty

FLAG of the heroes who left us their glory,
Borne through their battle-fields' thunder and flame,
Blazoned in song and illumined in story,
Wave o'er us all who inherit their fame!

Up with our banner bright,
Sprinkled with starry light,
Spread its fair emblems from mountain to shore,
While through the sounding sky
Loud rings the Nation's cry,
UNION AND LIBERTY! ONE EVERMORE!

Light of our firmament, guide of our Nation,
Pride of her children, and honored afar,
Let the wide beams of thy full constellation
Scatter each cloud that would darken a star!

Up with our banner bright,
Sprinkled with starry light,
Spread its fair emblems from mountain to shore,
While through the sounding sky
Loud rings the Nation's cry,
UNION AND LIBERTY! ONE EVERMORE!

Empire unsceptred! what foe shall assail thee,
Bearing the standard of Liberty's van?
Think not the God of thy fathers shall fail thee,
Striving with men for the birthright of man!

Up with our banner bright,
Sprinkled with starry light,
Spread its fair emblems from mountain to shore,
While through the sounding sky
Loud rings the Nation's cry,
UNION AND LIBERTY! ONE EVERMORE!

Yet if, by madness and treachery blighted,
Dawns the dark hour when the sword thou must draw,
Then with the arms of thy millions united,
Smite the bold traitors to Freedom and Law!

Up with our banner bright,
Sprinkled with starry light,
Spread its fair emblems from mountain to shore,
While through the sounding sky
Loud rings the Nation's cry,
UNION AND LIBERTY! ONE EVERMORE!

Lord of the Universe! shield us and guide us,
Trusting Thee always, through shadow and sun!
Thou hast united us, who shall divide us?
Keep us, oh keep us the MANY IN ONE!

Up with our banner bright,
Sprinkled with starry light,
Spread its fair emblems from mountain to shore,
While through the sounding sky
Loud rings the Nation's cry,
UNION AND LIBERTY! ONE EVERMORE!

Oliver Wendell Holmes