

**THE AUTOCRAT OF
THE BREAKFAST
TABLE. VOL. II**

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The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table. Vol. II by Oliver Wendell Holmes

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OF THE
BREAKFAST TABLE

BY
OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES



Author's Edition

VOL. II.

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THE AUTOCRAT
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VII.

THIS particular record is noteworthy principally for containing a paper by my friend, the Professor, with a poem or two annexed or intercalated. I would suggest to young persons that they should pass over it for the present, and read, instead of it, that story about the young man who was in love with the young lady, and in great trouble for something like nine pages, but happily married on the tenth page or thereabouts, which, I take it for granted, will be contained in the periodical where this is found, unless it differ from all other publications of the kind. Perhaps, if such young people will lay the number aside, and take it up ten years, or a little more,

189408

from the present time, they may find something in it for their advantage. They can't possibly understand it all now.]

My friend, the Professor, began talking with me one day in a dreary sort of way. I couldn't get at the difficulty for a good while, but at last it turned out that somebody had been calling him an old man.— He didn't mind his students calling him *the old man*, he said. That was a technical expression, and he thought that he remembered hearing it applied to himself when he was about twenty-five. It may be considered as a familiar and sometimes endearing appellation. An Irishwoman calls her husband "the old man," and he returns the caressing expression by speaking of her as "the old woman." But now, said he, just suppose a case like one of these. A young stranger is overheard talking of you as a very nice old gentleman. A friendly and genial critic speaks of your green old age as illustrating the truth of some axiom you had uttered with reference to that period of life. What I call an old man is a person with a smooth, shining crown and a fringe of scattered white hairs, seen in the streets on sunshiny days, stooping as he walks, bearing a cane, moving cautiously

and slowly ; telling old stories, smiling at present follies, living in a narrow world of dry habits ; one that remains waking when others have dropped asleep, and keeps a little night-lamp-flame of life burning year after year, if the lamp is not upset, and there is only a careful hand held round it to prevent the puffs of wind from blowing the flame out. That's what I call an old man.

Now, said the Professor, you don't mean to tell me that I have got to that yet? Why, bless you, I am several years short of the time when—[I knew what was coming, and could hardly keep from laughing ; twenty years ago he used to quote it as one of those absurd speeches men of genius will make, and now he is going to argue from it]—several years short of the time when Balzac says that men are—most—you know—dangerous to—the hearts of—in short, most to be dreaded by duennas that have charge of susceptible females.—What age is that? said I, statistically.—Fifty-two years, answered the Professor.—Balzac ought to know, said I, if it is true that Goethe said of him that each of his stories must have been dug out of a woman's heart. But fifty-two is a high figure.

Stand in the light of the window, Pro-

fessor, said I.—The Professor took up the desired position.—You have white hairs, I said.—Had 'em any time these twenty years, said the Professor.—And the crow's-foot,—*pes asserinus*, rather.—The Professor smiled, as I wanted him to, and the folds radiated like the ridges of a half-opened fan, from the outer corner of the eyes to the temples.—And the calipers, said I.—What are the *calipers*? he asked, curiously.—Why, the parenthesis, said I.—*Parenthesis*? said the Professor; what's that?—Why, look in the glass when you are disposed to laugh, and see if your mouth isn't framed in a couple of crescent lines,—so, my boy ().—It's all nonsense, said the Professor; just look at my *biceps*;—and he began pulling off his coat to show me his arm. Be careful, said I; you can't bear exposure to the air, at your time of life, as you could once.—I will box with you, said the Professor, row with you, walk with you, ride with you, swim with you, or sit at table with you, for fifty dollars a side.—Pluck survives stamina, I answered.

The Professor went off a little out of humour. A few weeks afterwards he came in, looking very good-natured, and brought

me a paper, which I have here, and from which I shall read you some portions, if you don't object. He had been thinking the matter over, he said,—had read Cicero *De Senectute*, and made up his mind to meet old age half way. These were some of his reflections which he had written down; so here you have

THE PROFESSOR'S PAPER.

There is no doubt when old age begins. The human body is a furnace which keeps in blast three-score years and ten, more or less. It burns about three hundred pounds of carbon a year (besides other fuel), when in fair working order, according to a great chemist's estimate. When the fire slackens, life declines; when it goes out, we are dead.

It has been shown by some noted French experimenters, that the amount of combustion increases up to about the thirtieth year, remains stationary to about forty-five, and then diminishes. This last is the point where old age starts from. The great fact of physical life is the perpetual commerce