OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

NOTE OF A CONVERSATION WITH HIM, SEPTEMBER 13TH, 1893.

By ERNEST HART.

It was on a warm and brilliant morning of September of last year that I found myself standing under the pleasant garden verandah of Dr. Holmes's residence at Beverley Farms, near Boston. I had arrived on the previous day at the hub of the American universe, one of a party of visitors to the Pan-American Medical Congress at Washington. Congress had, at considerable outlay, with characteristic but fitful generosity, proffered to us the courtesy of a special "palace" train, provided with all the luxuries of munificent hospitality for a three weeks' tour, which included the principal cities of America, much of its finest scenery, and ended at the World's Fair at Chicago. On hearing through a mutual friend of my arrival at Boston, Dr. Holmes sent to me most graciously a message to the effect that "he should be glad to renew our old acquaintance, and to take his part in the reception which America was giving to the medical delegates of that Continent and of Great Britain, and he hoped I should not think an hour wasted in visiting an octogenarian in his quiet retreat." Such an invitation was more precious than the public receptions which were awaiting our party. As the well-remembered, gentle, and smiling face beamed a welcome when I stepped from the garden walk, I was keenly sensible of the privilege accorded to me, and rejoiced at the alertness, gaiety, and effusive kindness which bespoke the almost perpetual youth of his beloved personality. I saw with concern that his face bore severe marks of a recent bruise. "Yes," he said gaily, "like a true son of Adam, I have had a fall, but I am not yet driven out of my little paradise. My sight is dim; I was tempted to walk out alone, and I took insufficient heed unto my footsteps."

HIS EARLY MEDICAL FRIENDS.

And then he led me into his pleasant sanctum, a bright library filled with pictures and books, and bade me give him news of his friends in England, who, he said, were, alas, "growing year by year greater in distinction but fewer in number." Especially he spoke of Paget; of Gairdner, of Glasgow; and of Henry Thompson, who had been his host when he was last in England. And so we fell to talking of his visit to London in 1886, and of our meetings together and our mutual friends. He recalled a brilliant dinner party at the Reform Club on the night of his arrival, and spoke sympathetically of his host, Sir Morell Mackenzie, and some others of the party who were now no more, and of his daughter who had charge of him, whom also he had lost.

A LESSON IN ENGLISH.

Laughingly he reminded me of the "lesson in English" he had received in the hall. During dinner the talk had turned on provincial and American slang. Speaking of one of his latest poems, of which he recited a passage, he had said in banter that he did not think it his worst, adding: "I tried it on a dog, and the dog didn't die." He confessed that the "American language," about which there was some discussion, was not always identical with the English, but "it was none the worse for that." At any rate, he prided himself on talking pure English. As we came away and were taking leave, he said to me; *apropos* of an engagement for the next day, when he was coming to lunch with me:

"But you must give me your ticket." In handing it to him I could not help saying: "We English call it a card." He answered: "I don't know that it is a better word." "I did not quite relish then," he said to me, "being taught English by a cockney on the first day of my arrival, and I have not forgotten it; but you see I bear no malice."

ROBERT BROWNING.

Then he spoke of Browning, who was of the party, and whom he compared to "Ben Jonson come back," but who did not always "take enough pains to make his meaning clear." Of his personality and of his pleasure in meeting him he spoke with warm appreciation, but he added that "There was a little tinge of resulting disillusion if not disappointment; there was something of the *bourgeois* in his talk—nothing aristocratic; a grand specimen of a middle-class Englishman, whose inspiration was loftier than his bearing."

I quote these precise phrases from my tablet, for early in our talk he had said "we may never meet again, and you are to carry my greetings to English friends, and if you like to make a note it will not disturb me." Following my notes I find that next he spoke again of his early medical studies in Europe.

A STUDENT IN PARIS.

"It was in the days of Louis Philippe," he said, "in 1833-35, that I followed the classes of Louis, who was the loadstone of all the young American students, and there I first met Gairdner, of Glasgow, with whom I still sometimes correspond." "Bigelow," he said, "used to go over once a week to London to hear a lecture, but that was uniquely enterprising." He claimed for Bigelow, afterwards a medical professor in Boston, that he was one of the greatest of modern physicians, and that "a single lecture which he had published on 'Self-limited Disease' made 'a revolution in medicine.' It anticipated Gull's doctrine of 'Expectant Medicine,' and laid bare the secret of the temporary success but the self-evident folly and failure of homeopathy." When a practitioner boasted to him that he had "cured a disease," he would say: "Young man, take care; are you sure that you cured? if so, perhaps to-morrow you may kill, but then you will only say the patient died."

WALSHE, WATSON, AND PAGET.

Dr. Walshe, of University College, an early contemporary, he thought "the most philosophic of the physicians of our day," Watson "the most eloquent," but Paget "the most persuasive." "Persuasive," he added, "but not always convincing. He is truly the Gladstone of Medicine, and left often in my mind a doubt whether his reservations and distinctions might not to-morrow lead him to a variation from the conviction to which almost he persuaded you to-day. . . . But that is the infirmity perhaps of my dim perception rather than of his circumspect intellect."

A MEETING WITH GLADSTONE: THE EVE OF THE HOME RULE BILL.

And then he fell to talking of Gladstone and of a memorable dinner at which we were both present at the house of a celebrated London Amphytrion of our profession—Sir Henry Thompson. It happened to fall on the day after the rejection by the House of Commons of the Home Rule Bill, about which there was much political excitement. The

guests were Mr. Gladstone, Mr. Morley, Sir James Paget, Robert Browning, David Masson (who had come expressly from Edinburgh), the judges Hannen and Butt, James Knowles, Alma Tadema, Holmes, and myself. "Yes," he said, "Gladstone was in great form that day—enormous form, notwithstanding all his cares of empire and troubles of State, and I was not myself. I had been sleepless all night with asthma and never lay down, and he at the very moment of that great crisis was gay and sprightly, impressive and full of exuberant energy, able to throw off all the cares of State."

DE SENECTUTE.

"You know, Gladstone and Tennyson, Darwin, Lincoln, and my humble self came into the world in the same year, for I am 84. I remember our talk *De Senectute*, and how we agreed, from our individual experience, and Paget confirmed it, that one of the signs of old age was inability to work in the evening. I reminded Gladstone of his nightly Parliamentary efforts, and I think he said 'that, Mr. Holmes, I most often feel as the recreation which sweetens work.' I am not sure those were the exact words, for my memory sometimes fails me, but that is my recollection of it."

"It was a great night. You remember I tried him all round; on trees he was *facile princeps*, although tree lore is one of my hobbies; of horses he professed to know little, except of Homeric horses, but he knew more than any of us, and corrected me as to the speed of Eclipse; he described to me the method of Cumberland jumping." Presently Holmes said, with a blush and a smile, "You are good not to remind me of my *faux pas*. I grow hot when I think of it. I made bold to ask him, *more Americano*, 'Are you not sorry at the rejection of the Home Rule Bill?' He threw his head back as if in thought, and answered in stately fashion: 'As a politician I am grieved; as a statesman I can hardly regret that this country will think yet again before it takes this great onward step; but I have no ultimate fear.' And then I pressed him indiscreetly. 'What do you intend? Shall you dissolve?' He bent his brow as if in reproof, and then his face lighted up with fun, and, with an almost boyish enjoyment of the position, he laughed. 'I can only answer to you as to an ambassadress who asked me the same question to-day, that, "Under similar circumstances, such things have been done."' And so the position was saved, and I have never been sure whether I ought to have been ashamed of or pleased with myself. But when I asked the question, I saw a look of concern on the faces of those around the table, as though I were skating on too thin ice."

And so with much and varied chat, and many reminiscences and criticisms of men and things, chiefly literary, and which would hardly be in place here—talk of Emerson ("pure transcendental") and Longfellow ("sweet and loving") and Whittier ("grand and stately") and Russell Lowell ("our most learned scholar on *belles lettres*") and Governor Andrews, and his other friends and contemporaries of the famous Saturday Club—the day wore on.

A FAREWELL.

Before I took my leave, with spontaneous and characteristic kindness he said: "I must try and give you something to

remind you of to-day's pleasant talk, which made me feel younger again;" and, writing his name on his favourite edition of *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*: "That is for your dear wife, with my love; and tell her to come and see me on her way home from her Irish Village at Chicago." "And that," putting his autograph to a recently-composed Congregational hymn, "you must give to your sister-in-law, Mrs. Barnett, of Toynbee Hall, of whose good work I have heard." "And these," signing for me an engraved portrait of himself, taken in earlier days, and a recent photograph which is reproduced on this page, "these are for your Editor's room in the BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL office; and let it hang facing your desk. One day, when we are both gone, they may perhaps find a place on the walls of the house of the British Medical Association. Give my love to our English friends, and especially to our doctor friends, for I have passed the best years of my life as a doctor, and I hope they are not ashamed of me, and do not reproach me for choosing to tread the flowery path of very light literature," laughing, and repeating the phrase, "rather than chain myself for ever to the heavy tasks of medicine."

Of many other things that he said I may hope to give some note elsewhere, but especially I should like to record our talk on telepathy and psychological research, on which he made merry with quaint and gentle humour, telling me one of the most surprising stories of his experience concerning "the long arm of coincidence" which many might have called "thought transference." But this I must defer for another time if not another place.

And so I passed away from the presence of one of the most lovable and notable figures of modern medicine, a personality pregnant with the perfume of ripe and sweet old age, and leaving recollections of a rarely perspicuous and sympathetic insight, a playful and pungent but not caustic humour, and a pervasive benevolence which was far reaching but discriminating.

SMALL-POX AND VACCINATION IN ITALY.

UNDER the Law of 1888, the chief Public Health Act of Italy, special arrangements were made for the prevention of small-pox and the extension of vaccination. The kingdom was at that time suffering from a severe epidemic of the disease, the number of reported cases in 1888 being 64,070, and of deaths, 18,110.

The Law of 1888, which is that now in force, made vaccination compulsory; and required the local authorities to provide themselves with a continuous supply of suitable lymph. Children are required to be vaccinated before attaining the age of 6 months, unless they have already suffered from the disease or are in a state of health which renders vaccination inadvisable. In the latter case vaccination is made obligatory during the second year of life. It is further provided that no child shall be admitted to a public or private school, or to a charitable institution, or to a workshop, unless a certificate of vaccination can be produced. Further, at any time when a sanitary authority, in view of a threatened epidemic prevalence, makes a special order, no person can refuse to be vaccinated.

Owing to the difficulties and uncertainties attending the supply of lymph from private sources, a State Vaccine Institution was established at the end of 1888 in Rome. The arrangements are of a very complete kind, and the greatest care is exercised to prevent any contamination of the lymph, which is obtained from calves kept in the stables of the institute under the supervision of a special veterinary officer.