

**HOLMES  
OLIVER  
WENDELL**

THE ONE HOSS SHAY

**Oliver Holmes**  
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*The One Hoss Shay With its Companion Poems How the Old Horse Won the  
Bet & The Broomstick Train:*

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# **Oliver Wendell Holmes**

## **The One Hoss Shay With its Companion Poems How the Old Horse Won the Bet & The Broomstick Train**

### **Preface**

My publishers suggested the bringing together of the three poems here presented to the reader as being to some extent alike in their general character. "The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay" is a perfectly intelligible conception, whatever material difficulties it presents. It is conceivable that a being of an order superior to humanity should so understand the conditions of matter that he could construct a machine which should go to pieces, if not into its constituent atoms, at a given moment of the future. The mind may take a certain pleasure in this picture of the impossible. The event follows as a logical consequence of the presupposed condition of things.

There is a practical lesson to be got out of the story. Observation shows us in what point any particular mechanism

is most likely to give way. In a wagon, for instance, the weak point is where the axle enters the hub or nave. When the wagon breaks down, three times out of four, I think, it is at this point that the accident occurs. The workman should see to it that this part should never give way; then find the next vulnerable place, and so on, until he arrives logically at the perfect result attained by the deacon.

Unquestionably there is something a little like extravagance in "How the Old Horse won the Bet," which taxes the credulity of experienced horsemen. Still there have been a good many surprises in the history of the turf and the trotting course.

The Godolphin Arabian was taken from ignoble drudgery to become the patriarch of the English racing stock.

Old Dutchman was transferred from between the shafts of a cart to become a champion of the American trotters in his time.

"Old Blue," a famous Boston horse of the early decades of this century, was said to trot a mile in less than three minutes, but I do not find any exact record of his achievements.

Those who have followed the history of the American trotting horse are aware of the wonderful development of speed attained in these last years. The lowest time as yet recorded is by Maud S. in 2.08<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>.

If there are any anachronisms or other inaccuracies in this story, the reader will please to remember that the narrator's memory is liable to be at fault, and if the event recorded interests him, will not worry over any little slips or stumbles.

The terrible witchcraft drama of 1692 has been seriously treated, as it well deserves to be. The story has been told in two large volumes by the Rev. Charles Wentworth Upham, and in a small and more succinct volume, based upon his work, by his daughter-in-law, Caroline E. Upham.

The delusion commonly spoken of, as if it belonged to Salem, was more widely diffused through the towns of Essex County. Looking upon it as a pitiful and long dead and buried superstition, I trust my poem will no more offend the good people of Essex County than Tam O'Shanter worries the honest folk of Ayrshire.

The localities referred to are those with which I am familiar in my drives about Essex County.

*O. W. H.*

*July, 1891.*

# The Deacon's Masterpiece

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 doesn'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 *couldn't* 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 jestT' make that place uz strong uz the rest.”

So the Deacon inquired of the village folk  
Where he could find the strongest oak,  
That couldn'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 whitewood, 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 couldn't sell 'em,  
Never an axe had seen their chips,  
And the wedges flew from between their lip

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.”

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