

## CHAPTER II.

### A SPELL COMING.

THERE was a moment of utter stillness; but the magnetism of Ralph's eye was too much for Bill Means. The request was so polite, the master's look was so innocent and yet so determined. Bill often wondered afterward that he had not "fit" rather than obeyed the request. But somehow he put the dog out. He was partly surprised, partly inveigled, partly awed into doing just what he had not intended to do. In the week that followed, Bill had to fight half a dozen boys for calling him "Puppy Means." Bill said he wished he'd licked the master on the spot. 'Twould 'a' saved five fights out of the six.

And all that day and the next, the bulldog in the master's eye was a terror to evil-doers. At the close of school on the second day Bud was heard to give it as his opinion that "the master wouldn't be much in a tussle, but he had a heap of thunder and lightning in him."

Did he inflict corporal punishment? inquires

some philanthropic friend. Would you inflict corporal punishment if you were tiger-trainer in Van Amburgh's happy family? But poor Ralph could never satisfy his constituency in this regard.

"Don't believe he'll do," was Mr. Pete Jones's comment to Mr. Means. "Don't thrash enough. Boys won't l'arn 'less you thrash 'em, says I. Leastways, mine won't. Lay it on good is what I says to a master. Lay it on good. Don't do no harm. Lickin' and l'arnin' goes together. No lickin', no l'arnin', says I. Lickin' and l'arnin', lickin' and larnin', is the good ole way."

And Mr. Jones, like some wiser people, was the more pleased with his formula that it had an alliterative sound. Nevertheless, Ralph was master from this time until the spelling-school came. If only it had not been for that spelling-school! Many and many a time after the night of the fatal spelling-school Ralph used to say, "If only it had not been for that spelling-school!"

There had to be a spelling-school. Not only for the sake of my story, which would not have been worth the telling if the spelling-school had not taken place, but because Flat Creek district had to have a spelling-school. It is the only public literary exercise known in Hoopole County. It takes the place of lyceum lecture and debating club. Sis

Means, or, as she wished now to be called, Mirandy Means, expressed herself most positively in favor of it. She said that she 'lowed the folks in that district couldn't in no wise do without it. But it was rather to its social than to its intellectual benefits that she referred. For all the spelling-schools ever seen could not enable her to stand anywhere but at the foot of the class. There is one branch diligently taught in a backwoods school. The public mind seems impressed with the difficulties of English orthography, and there is a solemn conviction that the chief end of man is to learn to spell. " 'Know Webster's Elementary' came down from Heaven," would be the backwoods version of the Greek saying but that, unfortunately for the Greeks, their fame has not reached so far. It often happens that the pupil does not know the meaning of a single word in the lesson. This is of no consequence. What do you want to know the meaning of a word for? Words were made to be spelled, and men were probably created that they might spell them. Hence the necessity for sending a pupil through the spelling-book five times before you allow him to begin to read, or indeed to do anything else. Hence the necessity for those long spelling-classes at the close of each forenoon and afternoon session of the school, to stand at the

head of which is the cherished ambition of every scholar. Hence, too, the necessity for devoting the whole of the afternoon session of each Friday to a "spelling-match." In fact, spelling is the "national game" in Hoopole County. Baseball and croquet matches are as unknown as Olympian chariot-races. Spelling and shucking<sup>1</sup> are the only public competitions.

<sup>1</sup> In naming the several parts of the Indian corn and the dishes made from it, the English language was put to many shifts. Such words as *tassel* and *silk* were poetically applied to the blossoms; *stalk*, *blade*, and *ear* were borrowed from other sorts of corn, and the Indian tongues were forced to pay tribute to name the dishes borrowed from the savages. From them we have *hominny*, *pone*, *supawn*, and *succotash*. For other nouns words were borrowed from English provincial dialects. *Shuck* is one of these. On the northern belt, shucks are the outer covering of nuts; in the middle and southern regions the word is applied to what in New England is called the husks of the corn. *Shuck*, however, is much more widely used than *husk* in colloquial speech—the farmers in more than half of the United States are hardly acquainted with the word *husk* as applied to the envelope of the ear. *Husk*, in the Middle States, and in some parts of the South and West, means the bran of the cornmeal, as notably in Davy Crockett's verse:

" She sifted the meal, she gimme the hus';  
 She baked the bread, she gimme the crus';  
 She b'iled the meat, she gimme the bone;  
 She gimme a kick and sent me home."

In parts of Virginia, before the war, the word *husk* or *hus'* meant the cob or spike of the corn. "I smack you over wid a cawn-hus'" is a threat I have often heard one negro boy make to another. *Cob* is provincial English for ear, and I have known "a cob of corn" used in Canada for an ear of Indian corn. While writing this note "a cob of Indian corn"—meaning an ear—appears in the report of

So the fatal spelling-school had to be appointed for the Wednesday of the second week of the session, just when Ralph felt himself master of the situation. Not that he was without his annoyances. One of Ralph's troubles in the week before the spelling-school was that he was loved. The other that he was hated. And while the time between the appointing of the spelling tournament and the actual occurrence of that remarkable event is engaged in elapsing, let me narrate two incidents that made it for Ralph a trying time.

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an address by a distinguished man at a recent meeting of the Royal Geographical Society. A lady tells me that she met, in the book of an English traveller, the remarkable statement that "the Americans are very fond of the young grain called cob." These Indian-corn words have reached an accepted meaning after a competition. To *shell* corn, among the earliest settlers of Virginia, meant to take it out of the envelope, which was presumably called the shell. The analogy is with the shelling of pulse.

## CHAPTER III.

## MIRANDY, HANK, AND SHOCKY.

MIRANDY had nothing but contempt for the new master until he developed the bulldog in his character. Mirandy fell in love with the bulldog. Like many other girls of her class, she was greatly enamored with the "subjection of women," and she stood ready to fall in love with any man strong enough to be her master. Much has been said of the strong-minded woman. I offer this psychological remark as a contribution to the natural history of the weak-minded woman.

It was at the close of that very second day on which Ralph had achieved his first victory over the school, and in which Mirandy had been seized with her desperate passion for him, that she told him about it. Not in words. We do not allow *that* in the most civilized countries, and still less would it be tolerated in Hoopole County. But Mirandy told the master the fact that she was in love with him, though no word passed her lips. She walked by him from school. She cast at him what are commonly called sheep's-eyes. Ralph thought them