

## CHAPTER IV.

### SPELLING DOWN THE MASTER.

"I 'LOW," said Mrs. Means, as she stuffed the tobacco into her cob pipe after supper on that eventful Wednesday evening: "I 'low they'll app'int the Squire to gin out the words to-night. They mos' always do, you see, kase he's the peartest' *ole* man in this deestrick; and I 'low some of the young fellers would have to git up and dust ef they would keep up to him. And he uses sech remarkable smart words. He speaks so polite, too. But laws! don't I remember when he was poarer nor Job's turkey? Twenty year ago, when he come to these 'ere diggin's, that air Squire Hawkins was a poar Yankee school-master, that said 'pail' instid of bucket, and that called a cow a 'caow,' and that

\* *Peart* or *peert* is only another form of the old word *pert*—probably an older form. Bartlett cites an example of *peart* as far back as Sir Philip Sidney; and Halliwell finds it in various English dialects. Davies, afterward president of Princeton College, describes Dr. Lardner, in 1754, as "a little *pert* old gent." I do not know that Dr. Davies pronounced his *pert* as though it were *peart*, but he uses it in the sense it has in the text, viz., bright-witted, intelligent. The general sense of *peart* is lively, either in body or mind.

couldn't tell to save his gizzard what we meant by 'low' and by *right smart*.<sup>2</sup> But he's larnt our ways

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Lowell suggested to me in 1869 that this word 'low has no kinship with *allow*, but is an independent word for which he gave a Low Latin original of similar sound. I have not been able to trace any such word, but Mr. Lowell had so much linguistic knowledge of the out-of-the-way sort that it may be worth while to record his impression. Bartlett is wrong in defining this word, as he is usually in his attempts to explain dialect outside of New England. It does not mean "to declare, assert, maintain," etc. It is nearly the equivalent of *guess* in the Northern and Middle States, and of *reckon* in the South. It agrees precisely with the New England *calc'late*. Like all the rest of these words it may have a strong sense by irony. When a man says, "I 'low that is a purty peart sort of a hoss," he understates for the sake of emphasis. It is rarely or never *allow*, but simply 'low. In common with *calc'late*, it has sometimes a sense of purpose or expectation, as when a man says, "I 'low to go to town to-morry."

<sup>2</sup> No phrase of the Hoosier and Southwestern dialect is such a stumbling-block to the outsider as *right smart*. The writer from the North or East will generally use it wrongly. Mrs. Stowe says, "I sold right smart of eggs," but the Hoosier woman as I knew her would have said "a right smart lot of eggs" or "a right smart of eggs," using the article and understanding the noun. A farmer omitting the preposition boasts of having "raised right smart corn" this year. No expression could have a more vague sense than this. In the early settlement of Minnesota it was a custom of the land officers to require a residence of about ten days on "a claim" in order to the establishment of a pre-emption right. One of the receivers at a land office under Buchanan's administration was a German of much intelligence who was very sensitive regarding his knowledge of English. "How long has the claimant lived on his claim?" he demanded of a Hoosier witness. "Oh, a right smart while," was the reply. The receiver had not the faintest notion of the meaning of the answer, but fearing to betray his ignorance of English he allowed the land to be entered, though the claimant had spent but about two hours in residing on his quarter-section.

now, an' he's jest as civilized as the rest of us. You would-n know he'd ever been a Yankee. He didn't stay poar long. Not he. He jest married a right rich girl! He! he!" And the old woman grinned at Ralph, and then at Mirandy, and then at the rest, until Ralph shuddered. Nothing was so frightful to him as to be fawned on by this grinning ogre, whose few lonesome, blackish teeth seemed ready to devour him. "He didn't stay poar, you bet a hoss!" and with this the coal was deposited on the pipe, and the lips began to crack like parchment as each puff of smoke escaped. "He married rich, you see," and here another significant look at the young master, and another fond look at Mirandy, as she puffed away reflectively. "His wife hadn't no book-larnin'. She'd been through the spellin'-book wunst, and had got as fur as 'asperity' on it a second time. But she couldn't read a word when she was married, and never could. She warn't overly smart. She hadn't hardly got the sense the law allows. But schools was skase in them air days, and, besides, book-larnin' don't do no good to a woman. Makes her stuck up. I never knowed but one gal in my life as had ciphered into fractions, and she was so dog-on stuck up that she turned up her nose one night at a apple-peelin' bekase I tuck a sheet off the bed to splice out the table-cloth, which was

ruther short. And the sheet was mos' clean too. Had-n been slep on more'n wunst or twicet. But I was goin' fer to say that when Squire Hawkins married Virginny Gray he got a heap o' money, or, what's the same thing mostly, a heap o' good land. And that's better'n book-larnin', says I. Ef a gal had gone clean through all eddication, and got to the rule of three itself, that would-n buy a feather-bed. Squire Hawkins jest put eddication agin the gal's farm, and traded even, an' ef ary one of 'em got swindled, I never heerd no complaints."

And here she looked at Ralph in triumph, her hard face splintering into the hideous semblance of a smile. And Mirandy cast a blushing, gushing, all-imploring, and all-confiding look on the young master.

"I say, ole woman," broke in old Jack, "I say, wot is all this 'ere spoutin' about the Square fer?" and old Jack, having bit off an ounce of "pigtail," returned the plug to his pocket.

As for Ralph, he fell into a sort of terror. He had a guilty feeling that this speech of the old lady's had somehow committed him beyond recall to Mirandy. He did not see visions of breach-of-promise suits. But he trembled at the thought of an avenging big brother.

"Hanner, you kin come along, too, ef you're a

mind, when you git the dishes washed," said Mrs. Means to the bound girl, as she shut and latched the back door. The Means family had built a new house in front of the old one, as a sort of advertisement of bettered circumstances, an eruption of shoddy feeling; but when the new building was completed, they found themselves unable to occupy it for anything else than a lumber room, and so, except a parlor which Mirandy had made an effort to furnish a little (in hope of the blissful time when somebody should "set up" with her of evenings), the new building was almost unoccupied, and the family went in and out through the back door, which, indeed, was the front door also, for, according to a curious custom, the "front" of the house was placed toward the south, though the "big road" (Hoosier for *highway*) ran along the north-west side, or, rather, past the north-west corner of it.

When the old woman had spoken thus to Hannah and had latched the door, she muttered, "That gal don't never show no gratitude fer favors;" to which Bud rejoined that he didn't think she had no great sight to be pertickler thankful fer. To which Mrs. Means made no reply, thinking it best, perhaps, not to wake up her dutiful son on so interesting a theme as her treatment of Hannah. Ralph

felt glad that he was this evening to go to another boarding place. He should not hear the rest of the controversy.

Ralph walked to the school-house with Bill. They were friends again. For when Hank Banta's ducking and his dogged obstinacy in sitting in his wet clothes had brought on a serious fever, Ralph had called together the big boys, and had said: "We must take care of one another, boys. Who will volunteer to take turns sitting up with Henry?" He put his own name down, and all the rest followed.

"William Means and myself will sit up to-night," said Ralph. And poor Bill had been from that moment the teacher's friend. He was chosen to be Ralph's companion. He was Puppy Means no longer! Hank could not be conquered by kindness, and the teacher was made to feel the bitterness of his resentment long after. But Bill Means was for the time entirely placated, and he and Ralph went to spelling-school together.

Every family furnished a candle. There were yellow dips and white dips, burning, smoking, and flaring. There was laughing, and talking, and giggling, and simpering, and ogling, and flirting, and courting. What a full-dress party is to Fifth Avenue, a spelling-school is to Hoopole County. It is an occasion which is metaphorically inscribed with

this legend: "Choose your partners." Spelling is only a blind in Hoopole County, as is dancing on Fifth Avenue. But as there are some in society who love dancing for its own sake, so in Flat Creek district there were those who loved spelling for its own sake, and who, smelling the battle from afar, had come to try their skill in this tournament, hoping to freshen the laurels they had won in their school-days.

"I 'low," said Mr. Means, speaking as the principal school trustee, "I 'low our friend the Square is jest the man to boss this 'ere consarn to-night. Ef nobody objects, I'll app'int him. Come, Square, don't be bashful. Walk up to the trough, fodder or no fodder, as the man said to his donkey."

There was a general giggle at this, and many of the young swains took occasion to nudge the girls alongside them, ostensibly for the purpose of making them see the joke, but really for the pure pleasure of nudging. The Greeks figured Cupid as naked, probably because he wears so many disguises that they could not select a costume for him.

The Squire came to the front. Ralph made an inventory of the agglomeration which bore the name of Squire Hawkins, as follows:

1. A swallow-tail coat of indefinite age, worn only on state occasions, when its owner was called to fig-

ure in his public capacity. Either the Squire had grown too large or the coat too small.

2. A pair of black gloves, the most phenomenal, abnormal, and unexpected apparition conceivable in Flat Creek district, where the preachers wore no coats in the summer, and where a black glove was never seen except on the hands of the Squire.

3. A wig of that dirty, waxen color so common to wigs. This one showed a continual inclination to slip off the owner's smooth, bald pate, and the Squire had frequently to adjust it. As his hair had been red, the wig did not accord with his face, and the hair ungrayed was doubly discordant with a countenance shrivelled by age.

4. A semicircular row of whiskers hedging the edge of the jaw and chin. These were dyed a frightful dead-black, such a color as belonged to no natural hair or beard that ever existed. At the roots there was a quarter of an inch of white, giving the whiskers the appearance of having been stuck on.

5. A pair of spectacles "with tortoise-shell rim." Wont to slip off.

6. A glass eye, purchased of a peddler, and differing in color from its natural mate, perpetually getting out of focus by turning in or out.

7. A set of false teeth, badly fitted, and given to bobbing up and down.

8. The Squire proper, to whom these patches were loosely attached.

It is an old story that a boy wrote home to his father begging him to come West, because "mighty mean men get into office out here." But Ralph concluded that some Yankees had taught school in Hoopole County who would not have held a high place in the educational institutions of Massachusetts. Hawkins had some New England idioms, but they were well overlaid by a Western pronunciation.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, shoving up his spectacles, and sucking his lips over his white teeth to keep them in place, "ladies and gentlemen, young men and maidens, raley I'm obleeged to Mr. Means fer this honor," and the Squire took both hands and turned the top of his head round half an inch. Then he adjusted his spectacles. Whether he was obliged to Mr. Means for the honor of being compared to a donkey was not clear. "I feel in the inmost compartments of my animal spirits a most happifying sense of the success and futility of all my endeavors to sarve the people of Flat Creek deestrick, and the people of Tomkins township, in my weak way and manner." This burst of eloquence was delivered with a constrained air and an apparent sense of a danger that he, Squire Hawkins,

