

CHAPTER XVII.

COMPOSITION DAY.

"HURRY up, boys, it's three o'clock, and Uncle Fritz likes us to be punctual, you know," said Franz one Wednesday afternoon as a bell rang, and a stream of literary-looking young gentlemen with books and paper in their hands were seen going toward the museum.

Tommy was in the school-room, bending over his desk, much bedaubed with ink, flushed with the ardor of inspiration, and in a great hurry as usual, for easy-going Bangs never was ready till the very last minute. As Franz passed the door looking up laggards, Tommy gave one last blot and flourish, and departed out of the window waving his paper to dry it as he went. Nan followed, looking very important, with a large roll in her hand, and Demi escorted Daisy, both evidently brimful of some delightful secret.

The museum was all in order, and the sunshine among the hop-vines made pretty shadows on the floor as it peeped through the great window. On one side sat Mr. and Mrs. Bhaer, on the other was a little table on which the compositions were laid as soon as read, and in a large semicircle sat the children on camp-stools

which occasionally shut up and let the sitters down, thus preventing any stiffness in the assembly. As it took too much time to have all read, they took turns, and on this Wednesday the younger pupils were the chief performers, while the elder ones listened with condescension and criticised freely.

"Ladies first; so Nan may begin," said Mr. Bhaer, when the settling of stools and rustling of papers had subsided.

Nan took her place beside the little table, and, with a preliminary giggle, read the following interesting essay on

"THE SPONGE.

"The sponge, my friends, is a most useful and interesting plant. It grows on rocks under the water, and is a kind of sea-weed, I believe. People go and pick it and dry it and wash it, because little fish and insects live in the holes of the sponge; I found shells in my new one, and sand. Some are very fine and soft; babies are washed with them. The sponge has many uses. I will relate some of them, and I hope my friends will remember what I say. One use is to wash the face; I don't like it myself, but I do it because I wish to be clean. Some people *don't*, and they are dirty." Here the eye of the reader rested sternly upon Dick and Dolly, who quailed under it, and instantly resolved to scrub themselves virtuously on all occasions. "Another use is to wake people up; I allude to *boys par-tic-u-lar-ly*." Another pause after the long word to enjoy the smothered laugh that went round the room. "Some boys do not get up when called, and Mary Ann squeezes

the water out of a wet sponge on their faces, and it makes them so mad they wake up." Here the laugh broke out, and Emil said, as if he had been hit, —

"Seems to me you are wandering from the subject."

"No, I ain't; we are to write about vegetables or animals, and I'm doing both: for boys are animals, aren't they?" cried Nan; and, undaunted by the indignant "No!" shouted at her, she calmly proceeded —

"One more interesting thing is done with sponges, and this is when doctors put ether on it, and hold it to people's noses when they have teeth out. I shall do this when I am bigger, and give ether to the sick, so they will go to sleep and not feel me cut off their legs and arms."

"I know somebody who killed cats with it," called out Demi, but was promptly crushed by Dan, who upset his camp-stool and put a hat over his face.

"I will *not* be interruckted," said Nan, frowning upon the unseemly scrimmagers. Order was instantly restored, and the young lady closed her remarks as follows: —

"My composition has three morals, my friends." Somebody groaned, but no notice was taken of the insult. "First, is keep your faces clean — second, get up early — third, when the ether sponge is put over your nose, breathe hard and don't kick, and your teeth will come out easy. I have no more to say." And Miss Nan sat down amid tumultuous applause.

"That is a very remarkable composition; its tone is high, and there is a good deal of humor in it. Very well done, Nan. Now Daisy," and Mr. Bhaer smiled at one young lady as he beckoned to the other.

Daisy colored prettily as she took her place, and said, in her modest little voice,—

"I'm afraid you won't like mine; it isn't nice and funny like Nan's. But I couldn't do any better."

"We always like yours, Posy," said Uncle Fritz, and a gentle murmur from the boys seemed to confirm the remark. Thus encouraged, Daisy read her little paper, which was listened to with respectful attention.

"THE CAT.

"The cat is a sweet animal. I love them very much. They are clean and pretty, and catch rats and mice, and let you pet them, and are fond of you if you are kind. They are very wise, and can find their way anywhere. Little cats are called kittens, and are dear things. I have two, named Huz and Buz, and their mother is Topaz, because she has yellow eyes. Uncle told me a pretty story about a man named Ma-ho-met. He had a nice cat, and when she was asleep on his sleeve, and he wanted to go away, he cut off the sleeve so as not to wake her up. I think he was a kind man. Some cats catch fish."

"So do I!" cried Teddy, jumping up eager to tell about his trout.

"Hush!" said his mother, setting him down again as quickly as possible, for orderly Daisy hated to be "interrucked" as Nan expressed it.

"I read about one who used to do it very slyly. I tried to make Topaz, but she did not like the water, and scratched me. She does like tea, and when I play in my kitchen she pats the teapot with her paw, till I give her some. She is a fine cat, she eats apple-pudding and molasses. Most cats do not."

"That's a first-rater," called out Nat, and Daisy retired, pleased with the praise of her friend.

"Demi looks so impatient we must have him up at once or he won't hold out," said Uncle Fritz, and Demi skipped up with alacrity.

"Mine-is a poem!" he announced in a tone of triumph, and read his first effort in a loud and solemn voice:—

"I write about the butterfly,
It is a pretty thing;
And flies about like the birds,
But it does not sing.

"First it is a little grub,
And then it is a nice yellow cocoon,
And then the butterfly
Eats its way out soon.

"They live on dew and honey,
They do not have any hive,
They do not sting like wasps, and bees, and hornets,
And to be as good as they are we should strive.

"I should like to be a beautiful butterfly,
All yellow, and blue, and green, and red;
But I should not like
To have Dan put camphor on my poor little head."

This unusual burst of genius brought down the house, and Demi was obliged to read it again, a somewhat difficult task, as there was no punctuation whatever, and the little poet's breath gave out before he got to the end of some of the long lines.

"He will be a Shakspeare yet," said Aunt Jo, laughing as if she would die, for this poetic gem reminded

her of one of her own, written at the age of ten, and beginning gloomily —

“I wish I had a quiet tomb,
Beside a little rill;
Where birds, and bees, and butterflies,
Would sing upon the hill.”

“Come on, Tommy. If there is as much ink inside your paper as there is outside, it will be a long composition,” said Mr. Bhaer, when Demi had been induced to tear himself from his poem and sit down.

“It isn’t a composition, it’s a letter. You see, I forgot all about its being my turn till after school, and then I didn’t know what to have, and there wasn’t time to read up; so I thought you wouldn’t mind my taking a letter that I wrote to my Grandma. It’s got something about birds in it, so I thought it would do.”

With this long excuse, Tommy plunged into a sea of ink and floundered through, pausing now and then to decipher one of his own flourishes.

“MY DEAR GRANDMA,—I hope you are well. Uncle James sent me a pocket rifle. It is a beautiful little instrument of killing, shaped like this— [Here Tommy displayed a remarkable sketch of what looked like an intricate pump, or the inside of a small steam-engine] —44 are the sights; 6 is a false stock that fits in at A; 3 is the trigger, and 2 is the cock. It loads at the breech, and fires with great force and straightness. I am going out shooting squirrels soon. I shot several fine birds for the museum. They had speckled breasts, and Dan liked them very much. He stuffed them tip-top, and they sit on the tree quite natural, only one

looks a little tipsy. We had a Frenchman working here the other day, and Asia called his name so funnily that I will tell you about it. His name was Germain: first she called him Jerry, but we laughed at her, and she changed it to Jeremiah; but ridicule was the result, so it became Mr. Germany; but ridicule having been again resumed, it became Garrymon, which it has remained ever since. I do not write often, I am so busy; but I think of you often, and sympathize with you, and sincerely hope you get on as well as can be expected without me. — Your affectionate grandson,

“THOMAS BUCKMINSTER BANGS.”

“P.S.—If you come across any postage-stamps, remember me.

“N.B.—Love to all, and a great deal to Aunt Almira. Does she make any nice plum-cakes now?

“P.S.—Mrs. Bhaer sends her respects.

“P.S.—And so would Mr. B. if he knew I was in act to write.

“N.B.—Father is going to give me a watch on my birthday. I am glad, as at present I have no means of telling time, and am often late at school.

“P.S.—I hope to see you soon. Don’t you wish to send for me?
T. B. B.”

As each postscript was received with a fresh laugh from the boys, by the time he came to the sixth and last, Tommy was so exhausted that he was glad to sit down and wipe his ruddy face.

“I hope the dear old lady will live through it,” said Mr. Bhaer, under cover of the noise.

"We won't take any notice of the broad hint given in that last *P.S.* The letter will be quite as much as she can bear without a visit from Tommy," answered Mrs. Jo, remembering that the old lady usually took to her bed after a visitation from her irrepressible grandson.

"Now, me," said Teddy, who had learned a bit of poetry, and was so eager to say it that he had been bobbing up and down during the reading, and could no longer be restrained.

"I'm afraid he will forget it if he waits; and I have had a deal of trouble in teaching him," said his mother.

Teddy trotted to the rostrum, dropped a curtsy and nodded his head at the same time, as if anxious to suit every one; then, in his baby voice, and putting the emphasis on the wrong words, he said his verse all in one breath:—

"Little drops of water,
 Little drains of sand,
 Mate a mighty okum (ocean),
 And a peasant land.
 Little worts of kindness,
 Pokin evvy day,
 Make a home a hebbin,
 And hep us on a way."

Clapping his hands at the end, he made another double salutation, and then ran to hide his head in his mother's lap, quite overcome by the success of his "piece," for the applause was tremendous.

Dick and Dolly did not write, but were encouraged to observe the habits of animals and insects, and report what they saw. Dick liked this, and always had

a great deal to say; so, when his name was called, he marched up, and, looking at the audience with his bright confiding eyes, told his little story so earnestly that no one smiled at his crooked body, because the "straight soul" shone through it beautifully.

"I've been watching dragonflies, and I read about them in Dan's book, and I'll try and tell you what I remember. There's lots of them flying round on the pond, all blue, with big eyes, and sort of lace wings, very pretty. I caught one, and looked at him, and I think he was the handsomest insect I ever saw. They catch littler creatures than they are to eat, and have a queer kind of hook thing that folds up when they ain't hunting. It likes the sunshine, and dances round all day. Let me see! what else was there to tell about? Oh, I know! The eggs are laid in the water, and go down to the bottom, and are hatched in the mud. Little ugly things come out of 'em; I can't say the name, but they are brown, and keep having new skins, and getting bigger and bigger. Only think! it takes them two years to be a dragonfly! Now *this* is the curiousest part of it, so you listen tight, for I don't believe you know it. When it is ready it knows somehow, and the ugly, grubby thing climbs up out of the water on a flag or a bulrush, and bursts open its back."

"Come, I don't believe that," said Tommy, who was not an observing boy, and really thought Dick was "making up."

"It does burst open its back, don't it?" and Dick appealed to Mr. Bhaer, who nodded a very decided affirmative, to the little speaker's great satisfaction.

"Well, out comes the dragonfly, all whole, and he

sits in the sun—sort of coming alive, you know; and he gets strong, and then he spreads his pretty wings, and flies away up in the air, and never is a grub any more. That's all I know; but I shall watch and try and see him do it, for I think it's splendid to turn into a beautiful dragonfly, don't you?"

Dick had told his story well, and, when he described the flight of the new-born insect, had waved his hands, and looked up as if he saw, and wanted to follow it. Something in his face suggested to the minds of the elder listeners the thought that some day little Dick would have his wish, and after years of helplessness and pain would climb up into the sun some happy day, and, leaving his poor little body behind him, find a new and lovely shape in a fairer world than this. Mrs. Jo drew him to her side, and said, with a kiss on his thin cheek,—

"That is a sweet little story, dear, and you remembered wonderfully well. I shall write and tell your mother all about it;" and Dick sat on her knee, contentedly smiling at the praise, and resolving to watch well, and catch the dragonfly in the act of leaving its old body for the new, and see how he did it. Dolly had a few remarks to make upon the "Duck," and made them in a sing-song tone, for he had learned it by heart, and thought it a great plague to do it at all.

"Wild ducks are hard to kill; men hide and shoot at them, and have tame ducks to quack and make the wild ones come where the men can fire at them. They have wooden ducks made too, and they sail round, and the wild ones come to see them; they are stupid, I think. Our ducks are very tame. They eat a great deal, and

go poking round in the mud and water. They don't take good care of their eggs, but let them spoil, and"—

"Mine don't!" cried Tommy.

"Well, some people's do; Silas said so. Hens take good care of little ducks, only they don't like to have them go in the water, and make a great fuss. But the little ones don't care a bit. I like to eat ducks with stuffing in them, and lots of apple-sauce."

"I have something to say about owls," began Nat, who had carefully prepared a paper upon this subject with some help from Dan.

"Owls have big heads, round eyes, hooked bills, and strong claws. Some are gray, some white, some black and yellowish. Their feathers are very soft, and stick out a great deal. They fly very quietly, and hunt bats, mice, little birds, and such things. They build nests in barns, hollow trees, and some take the nests of other birds. The great horned owl has two eggs bigger than a hen's, and reddish brown. The tawny owl has five eggs, white and smooth; and this is the kind that hoots at night. Another kind sounds like a child crying. They eat mice and bats whole, and the parts that they cannot digest they make into little balls and spit out."

"My gracious! how funny!" Nan was heard to observe.

"They cannot see by day; and if they get but into the light, they go flapping round half blind, and the other birds chase and peck at them as if they were making fun. The horned owl is very big, 'most as big as the eagle. It eats rabbits, rats, snakes, and birds; and lives in rocks and old tumble-down houses. They

have a good many cries, and scream like a person being choked, and say, 'Waugh O! waugh O!' and it scares people at night in the woods. The white owl lives by the sea, and in cold places, and looks something like a hawk. There is a kind of owl that makes holes to live in like moles. It is called the burrowing owl, and is very small. The barn-owl is the commonest kind; and I have watched one sitting in a hole in a tree, looking like a little gray cat, with one eye shut and the other open. He comes out at dusk, and sits round waiting for the bats. I caught one, and here he is."

With that Nat suddenly produced from inside his jacket a little downy bird, who blinked and ruffled up his feathers, looking very plump and sleepy and scared.

"Don't touch him! He is going to show off," said Nat, displaying his new pet with great pride. First he put a cocked hat on the bird's head, and the boys laughed at the funny effect; then he added a pair of paper spectacles, and that gave the owl such a wise look that they shouted with merriment. The performance closed with making the bird angry, and seeing him cling to a handkerchief upside down, pecking and "clucking," as Rob called it. He was allowed to fly after that, and settled himself on the bunch of pine-cones over the door, where he sat staring down at the company with an air of sleepy dignity that amused them very much.

"Have you any thing for us, George?" asked Mr. Bhaer, when the room was still again.

"Well, I read and learned ever so much about moles, but I declare I've forgotten every bit of it, except that

they dig holes to live in, that you catch them by pouring water down, and that they can't possibly live without eating very often;" and Stuffy sat down, wishing he had not been too lazy to write out his valuable observations, for a general smile went round when he mentioned the last of the three facts which lingered in his memory.

"Then we are done for to-day," began Mr. Bhaer, but Tommy called out, in a great hurry, —

"No, we ain't. Don't you know? We must give the thing;" and he winked violently as he made an eye-glass of his fingers.

"Bless my heart, I forgot! Now is your time, Tom;" and Mr. Bhaer dropped into his seat again, while all the boys but Dan looked mightily tickled at something.

Nat, Tommy, and Demi left the room, and speedily returned with a little red morocco box set forth in state on Mrs. Jo's best silver salver. Tommy bore it, and, still escorted by Nat and Demi, marched up to unsuspecting Dan, who stared at them as if he thought they were going to make fun of him. Tommy had prepared an elegant and impressive speech for the occasion, but when the minute came, it all went out of his head, and he just said, straight from his kindly boyish heart, —

"Here, old fellow, we all wanted to give you something to kind of pay for what happened awhile ago, and to show how much we liked you for being such a trump. Please take it, and have a jolly good time with it."

Dan was so surprised he could only get as red as the little box, and mutter "Thanky, boys!" as he fumbled

to open it. But when he saw what was inside, his face lighted up, and he seized the long desired treasure, saying, so enthusiastically that every one was satisfied, though his language was any thing but polished, —

“What a stunner! I say, you fellows are regular bricks to give me this; it’s just what I wanted. Give us your paw, Tommy.”

Many paws were given, and heartily shaken, for the boys were charmed with Dan’s pleasure, and crowded round him to shake hands and expatiate on the beauties of their gift. In the midst of this pleasant chatter, Dan’s eye went to Mrs. Jo, who stood outside the group enjoying the scene with all her heart.

“No, I had nothing to do with it. The boys got it up all themselves,” she said, answering the grateful look that seemed to thank her for that happy moment. Dan smiled, and said, in a tone that only she could understand, —

“It’s you all the same;” and making his way through the boys, he held out his hand first to her and then to the good Professor, who was beaming benevolently on his flock.

He thanked them both with the silent, hearty squeeze he gave the kind hands that had held him up and led him into the safe refuge of a happy home. Not a word was spoken, but they felt all he would say, and little Teddy expressed their pleasure for them as he leaned from his father’s arm to hug the boy, and say, in his baby way, —

“My dood Danny! everybody loves him now.”

“Come here, show off your spy-glass, Dan, and let us see some of your magnified pollywogs and annymalcum-

isms as you call ’em,” said Jack, who felt so uncomfortable during this scene that he would have slipped away if Emil had not kept him.

“So I will, take a squint at that and see what you think of it,” said Dan, glad to show off his precious microscope.

He held it over a beetle that happened to be lying on the table, and Jack bent down to take his squint, but looked up with an amazed face, saying, —

“My eye! what nippers the old thing has got! I see now why it hurts so confoundedly when you grab a dorbug and he grabs back again.”

“He winked at me,” cried Nan, who had poked her head under Jack’s elbow and got the second peep.

Every one took a look, and then Dan showed them the lovely plumage on a moth’s wing, the four feathery corners to a hair, the veins on a leaf, hardly visible to the naked eye, but like a thick net through the wonderful little glass; the skin on their own fingers, looking like queer hills and valleys; a cobweb like a bit of coarse sewing silk, and the sting of a bee.

“It’s like the fairy spectacles in my story-book, only more curious,” said Demi, enchanted with the wonders he saw.

“Dan is a magician now, and he can show you many miracles going on all round you; for he has two things needful — patience and a love of nature. We live in a beautiful and wonderful world, Demi, and the more you know about it the wiser and the better you will be. This little glass will give you a new set of teachers, and you may learn fine lessons from them if you will,” said Mr. Bhaer, glad to see how interested the boys were in the matter.

"Could I see anybody's soul with this microscope if I looked hard?" asked Demi, who was much impressed with the power of the bit of glass.

"No, dear; it's not powerful enough for that, and never can be made so. You must wait a long while before your eyes are clear enough to see the most invisible of God's wonders. But looking at the lovely things you can see will help you to understand the lovelier things you can *not* see," answered Uncle Fritz, with his hand on the boy's head.

"Well, Daisy and I both think that if there *are* any angels, their wings look like that butterfly's as we see it through the glass, only more soft and gold."

"Believe it if you like, and keep your own little wings as bright and beautiful, only don't fly away for a long time yet."

"No, I won't," and Demi kept his word.

"Good-by, my boys; I must go now, but I leave you with our new Professor of Natural History;" and Mrs. Jo went away well pleased with that composition-day.

CHAPTER XVIII

CROPS.

THE gardens did well that summer, and in September the little crops were gathered in with much rejoicing. Jack and Ned joined their farms and raised potatoes, those being a good salable article. They got twelve bushels, counting little ones and all, and sold them to Mr. Bhaer at a fair price, for potatoes went fast in that house. Emil and Franz devoted themselves to corn, and had a jolly little husking in the barn, after which they took their corn to the mill, and came proudly home with meal enough to supply the family with hasty-pudding and Johnny-cake for a long time. They would not take money for their crop; because, as Franz said, "We never can pay Uncle for all he has done for us if we raised corn for the rest of our days."

Nat had beans in such abundance that he despaired of ever shelling them, till Mrs. Jo proposed a new way, which succeeded admirably. The dry pods were spread upon the barn-floor, Nat fiddled, and the boys danced quadrilles on them, till they were thrashed out with much merriment and very little labor.

Tommy's six weeks' beans were a failure; for a dry spell early in the season hurt them, because he gave them