

“THE SPELLIN’-BEE”

BY

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I never shall furgit that night when father hitched up Dobbin,
An’ all us youngsters clambered in an’ down the road went bobbin’
To school where we was kep’ at work in every kind o’ weather,
But where that night a spellin’-bee was callin’ us together.
‘Twas one o’ Heaven’s banner nights, the stars was all a glitter,
The moon was shinin’ like the hand o’ God had jest then lit her.
The ground was white with spotless snow, the blast was sort o’ stingin’;
But underneath our round-abouts, you bet our hearts was singin’.
That spellin’-bee had be’n the talk o’ many a precious moment,
The youngsters all was wild to see jes’ what the precious show meant,
An’ we whose years was in their teens was little less desirous
O’ gittin’ to the meetin’ so ’s our sweethearts could admire us.
So on we went so anxious fur to satisfy our mission
That father had to box our ears, to smother our ambition.
But boxin’ ears was too short work to hinder our arrivin’,
He jest turned roun’ an’ smacked us all, an’ kep’ right on a-drivin’.
Well, soon the schoolhouse hove in sight, the winders beamin’ brightly;
The sound o’ talkin’ reached our ears, and voices laffin’ lightly.
It puffed us up so full an’ big ‘at I ‘ll jest bet a dollar,
There wa’n’t a feller there but felt the strain upon his collar.
So down we jumped an’ in we went ez sprightly ez you make ‘em,
But somethin’ grabbed us by the knees an’ straight began to shake ‘em.
Fur once within that lighted room, our feelin’s took a canter,
An’ scurried to the zero mark ez quick ez Tam O’Shanter.
‘Cause there was crowds o’ people there, both sexes an’ all stations;
It looked like all the town had come an’ brought all their relations.

The first I saw was Nettie Gray, I thought that girl was dearer
‘N’ gold; an’ when I got a chance, you bet I ainged up near her.
An’ Farmer Dobbs’s girl was there, the one ‘at Jim was sweet on,
An’ Cyrus Jones an’ Mandy Smith an’ Faith an’ Patience Deaton.
Then Parson Brown an’ Lawyer Jones were present—all attention,
An’ piles on piles of other folks too numerous to mention.
The master rose an’ briefly said: “Good friends, dear brother Crawford,
To spur the pupils’ minds along, a little prize has offered.
To him who spells the best to–night—or ‘t may be ‘her’—no tellin’—
He offers ez a jest reward, this precious work on spellin’.”
A little blue–backed spellin’–book with fancy scarlet trimmin’;
We boys devoured it with our eyes—so did the girls an’ women.
He held it up where all could see, then on the table set it,
An’ ev’ry speller in the house felt mortal bound to get it.
At his command we fell in line, prepared to do our dooty,
Outspell the rest an’ set ‘em down, an’ carry home the booty.
‘T was then the merry times began, the blunders, an’ the laffin’,
The nudges an’ the nods an’ winks an’ stale good–natured chaffin’.
Ole Uncle Hiram Dane was there, the clostest man a–livin’,
Whose only bugbear seemed to be the dreadful fear o’ givin’.
His beard was long, his hair uncut, his clothes all bare an’ dingy;
It wasn’t ‘cause the man was pore, but jest so mortal stingy;
An’ there he sot by Sally Riggs a–smilin’ an’ a–smirkin’,
An’ all his children lef’ to home a diggin’ an’ a–workin’.
A widower he was, an’ Sal was thinkin’ ‘at she ‘d wing him;
I reckon he was wond’rin’ what them rings o’ hern would bring him.
An’ when the spellin’–test commenced, he up an’ took his station,
A–spellin’ with the best o’ them to beat the very nation.
An’ when he ‘d spell some youngster down, he ‘d turn to look at Sally,
An’ say: “The teachin’ nowadays can’t be o’ no great vally.”
But true enough the adage says, “Pride walks in slipp’ry places,”
Fur soon a thing occurred that put a smile on all our faces.
The laffter jest kep’ ripplin’ ‘roun’ an’ teacher could n’t quell it,
Fur when he give out “charity” ole Hiram could n’t spell it.

But laffin' 's ketchin' an' it throwed some others off their bases,
An' folks 'u'd miss the very word that seemed to fit their cases.
Why, fickle little Jessie Lee come near the house upsettin'
By puttin' in a double "kay" to spell the word "coquettin'."
An' when it come to Cyrus Jones, it tickled me all over—
Him settin' up to Mandy Smith an' got sot down on "lover."
But Lawyer Jones of all gone men did shorely look the gonest,
When he found out that he 'd furgot to put the "h" in "honest."
An' Parson Brown, whose sermons were too long fur toleration,
Caused lots o' smiles by missin' when they give out "condensation."
So one by one they giv' it up—the big words kep' a-landin',
Till me an' Nettie Gray was left, the only ones a-standin',
An' then my inward strife began—I guess my mind was petty—
I did so want that spellin'-book; but then to spell down Nettie
Jest sort o' went ag'in my grain—I somehow could n't do it,
An' when I git a notion fixed, I 'm great on stickin' to it.
So when they giv' the next word out—I had n't orter tell it,
But then 't was all fur Nettie's sake—I missed so's she could spell it.
She spelt the word, then looked at me so lovin'-like an' mello',
I tell you 't sent a hunderd pins a shootin' through a fello'.
O' course I had to stand the jokes an' chaffin' of the fello's,
But when they handed her the book I vow I was n't jealous.
We sung a hymn, an' Parson Brown dismissed us like he orter,
Fur, la! he 'd learned a thing er two an' made his blessin' shorter.
'T was late an' cold when we got out, but Nettie liked cold weather,
An' so did I, so we agreed we 'd jest walk home together.
We both wuz silent, fur of words we nuther had a surplus,
'Till she spoke out quite sudden like, "You missed that word on
purpose."

Well, I declare it frightened me; at first I tried denyin',
But Nettie, she jest smiled an' smiled, she knowed that I was lyin'.
Sez she: "That book is yourn by right;" sez I: "It never could be—
I—I—you—ah—" an' there I stuck, an' well she understood me.

So we agreed that later on when age had giv' us tether,
We 'd jine our lots an' settle down to own that book together.