



Sam Waitely.



Harriet Hepner.

"YES, my dear," said Aunt Susan reminiscently. "I remember my school days as though 'twas only yesterday. And the spelling matches we used to have! There was old Squire Hepner, who always took a great interest in our school. He was a peculiar kind of man. Folks would call him cranky in these days, I suppose. He was so gruff and sullen that you'd think he'd snap your head off."

"Education was the old man's hobby. He had no learning himself and used to tell us how he felt the need of it. He thought that people could not be educated unless they could spell clean from b-a, ba, to incommunicability in the spelling."

"Well, Squire Hepner had heard that the Red Haw district folks were making their boasts that they could out-spell ours, and it angered him. His daughter Harriet was the best speller in our school, and they said her father offered her any cow on his place if she'd spell the Red Haw school down."

"One Friday afternoon the old squire came stamping into the schoolhouse when our school was having a spelling match. He was the director of our district, and the boldest scholar would be mute and meek when he appeared. He had two little jet black eyes that seemed to see right through you. He could make almost any scholar wobble in his seat by fastening his eyes upon him."

"The squire was the richest man in Four Mile, but he never gave any money away, and that made it all the more surprising when, just before school let out that night, he got up and in his short, jerky, gruff way said:

"You've spelt pretty well this afternoon, scholars, and I'm glad of it, for, to my thinkin', spellin' is the most important thing a body can learn. In fact, it stands to reason you've got to be good spellers 'fore you can be good readers or real good in anything. It's all well enough to know how to figger correctly, an' I reckon grammar's well enough, though I never took much stock in it. Geography an' algebray an' history an' all that is good enough in its place, but 'ordin' to my notion spellin' beats 'em all."

"An' now, to encourage you in being good spellers an' to stop the braggin' of some districts not far from here, I'm goin' to make it an object for you to study your spellers like sixty for the next few weeks."

"In six weeks from tonight, an' that will be Christmas eve, we'll have a spellin' match in this house, an' I want it circulated round that airy school in this township is free to come an' spell for the prize I'll offer, which is \$25 in gold to the one that spells down everybody."

"Now, take your spellers home with you tonight an' do somethin' else with 'em besides a-chavin' the corners off. And with that the squire made one of his stiff bows to the teacher and walked out."

"I tell you, \$25 was a large sum of money in those days, and when it was known that the prize had been offered there was more studying of our old blue backed spellers than there had ever been before. We used to take them home every night, and our fathers and mothers would give us all the hard words, like 'daguerotype' and 'philiste' and 'receipt' and those with silent letters in them, and we would spell them over and over again."

"The offering of that prize set the whole township in a commotion, and little else was thought of or talked about. The Red Haw and Jack Oak districts let it be known that they would try for the prize, and they had some good spellers in those schools, especially in the Red Haw."

"But none of them had a better record than Harriet Hepner, and they said that in those six weeks she studied her speller night and day. Folks who passed the Hepner house at midnight declared that through the windows from the room they had seen Harriet sitting on a stool up near the fireplace, leaning her head against the wall, and the squire sitting in his old hickory chair, spelling book in one hand and a tallow dip in the other, giving out words to her, and everybody else in bed. No wonder the girl became thin and peaked."

"You see, the squire fairly hated the Red Haw district and about everybody in it. The Red Haw and ours had formerly been one district, and he opposed their being divided, because he owned land in both, and he knew that if they were divided there would be an extra tax for a new schoolhouse and a new school fund."

"The squire had a sister living in the

Red Haw district, but he had not spoken to her for years and would not allow his folks to look at or speak to her or her children."

"The poor woman had, in the first place, married against the squire's wishes. That angered him. Still, he spoke to her when they met, though they did not visit back and forth any."

"Mr. Waitely, the squire's brother-in-law, was the one that first suggested the dividing of the district and did more to bring it about than any other man, which was natural, for the district was so big and the schoolhouse so far off that the Waitely children could not go to school in the winter time."

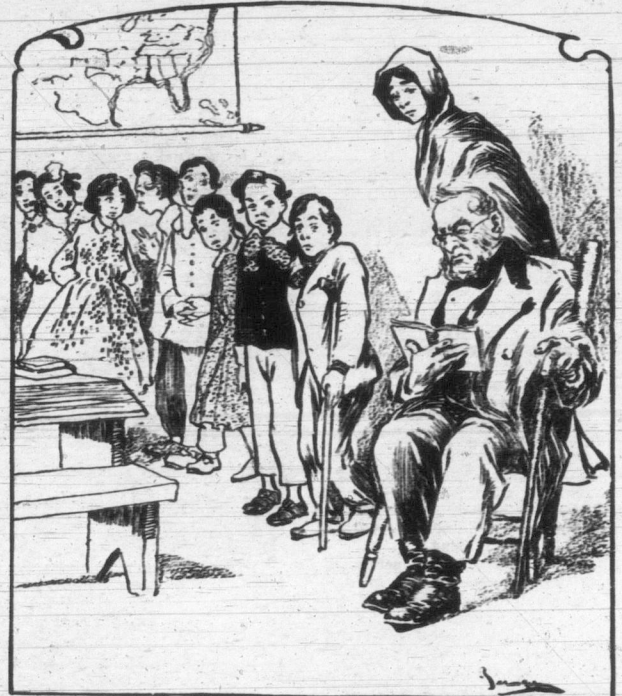
"But that didn't make the least difference to Squire Hepner. He was furiously angry with Waitely, and on town meeting day he and Waitely had some dreadful words."

"Of course Mrs. Waitely sided with her husband, and from that day the squire turned from his own kin. He

the valleys ring. Yes, and the sled up-set, too, and we were all thrown into a ditch. The edge of the wagon bow caught my beau's big feet under it, and I thought I should cry from mortification when he lay there and actually bawled and snifled. I was so put out about it that I wouldn't sit by him after we got into the sled or speak to him afterward."

"When we reached the schoolhouse we found it packed so full that we could not just crowd in. Most everybody had brought a candle to stick up on the logs and some sprigs of evergreen and berries to make the room look Christmasy. There were four different teachers and well known spellers from all over the township."

"Lecta Plumb and I chose up." I got first choice and took Harriet Hepner. She was pale as death and looked nervous and frightened. Lecta took Abimelech Abers, the leading speller from the Red Haw school, and I took



HE STOOD WITHIN A FOOT OF HIS UNCLE HEPNER.

never spoke to them again, not even after Mr. Waitely died. The poor man got caught under a falling tree and was killed, leaving his widow with four children and nothing but a shabby roof over their heads and three or four acres of scrubby land."

"She had a fearfully hard time supporting herself and the children, but the squire never helped her. And, to make matters worse, her oldest child, little Sam, was a cripple, humpbacked and lame in one leg, so that he had to walk with a crutch. Of course he wasn't any help to his mother on the place, but she was trying to educate him, knowing that he never could do any physical work."

"Well, the spelling bee excitement became more and more intense as the time drew near, and when Christmas eve at last came the old Four Mile schoolhouse was a sight to see."

"The night was one of the coldest I ever remember. The stars shone like bright lamps in the sky. The sleighing was good and the air sharp enough to stir the blood and, if possible, still more to stimulate the boys and girls. A lot of the boys had borrowed a pair of sled runners and put a big wagon on them. Then plenty of straw was put in the box, and about twenty of us boys and girls piled in, with lots of quilts and buffalo robes and warm shawls."

"I had my first beau that night. His name was Azrael Whitehead, and of all awkward boys he was the awkwardest. I think I was the first girl he had ever asked to go with him. Anyhow, I know he fell flat on his back trying to help me out of the sled, and he let me go head first into a snow bank."

"I remember that his handkerchief was wet with cinnamon drops and that he gave me a handful of peppermint and cloves. I remember, too, how we all of us went up and down hill singing and laughing at the top of our voices. We made the old woods and

Cindy Patch, the best speller from Jack Oak."

"Then we chose everybody in the room who could spell at all. I think we had more than fifty on a side. We stood in long rows on both sides of the house against the wall, and, much to my disgust, I got my hair full of tallow from a dripping candle."

"We were about ready to commence spelling and everybody had become quiet when the people who sat near the door made way for some one who had come late, and in came little Sam Waitely on his crutch, with his mother behind him in a poor, thin, patched old faded calico dress and a thin cotton shawl, with a faded old red hood on her head. I could see a hole worn in her shoe as she put her foot up on the stove hearth."

"Sam was then about fifteen years old, but not as tall as some boys of nine. He was very thinly dressed for such a sharp night, and they had walked fully two miles."

"I felt sorry for them and spoke up at once and took Sam on my side. It happened to be my turn to choose, and I was bound the poor fellow should not be slighted whether he could spell or not."

"He had half a mind not to try, but I saw his mother reach out her hand and gently push him, and then he hobbled down to the end of the line and stood within a foot of his Uncle Hepner."

"Then the spelling commenced. I blushed to tell it, but I actually missed the very first word given me, and that was 'mermaid.' I spelled it 'murmer.' I knew better, but I was so nervous I could not collect my thoughts. So I had to take my seat, and of course I had a little cry all to myself."

"But I nearly laughed so as to be heard all over the room when Azrael Whitehead missed 'goose.' He spelled it 'guse,' and he had told me in confidence that he half expected to get the

size and had been studying his speller for weeks."

"Electa missed 'emanate.' She spelled it with an 'f' instead of an 'n.' 'Cindy Patch missed 'tranquillize.' I think she knew how to spell it, but she was excited because seven or eight had missed it before her. The Jack Oak scholars looked very sober when Cindy had to sit down."

"But you ought to have seen old Squire Hepner's eyes twinkle and his grim face look grimmer when Abimelech Abers, the best Red Haw scholar, missed 'phytochimy' and Harriet spelled it without hesitation. Bimelech got confused and thought the last letter was 'e' instead of 'y.'"

"The Red Haw people did look mortified, and the Four Mile folks were highly pleased and showed it, too, for all the best spellers were out on both sides, and only Harriet Hepner and five or six others were left. Four of them missed 'micaceous,' and Harriet was just going to spell it when Mis Waitely, in a scared, timid voice that could just be heard, said:

"If you please, teacher, Sammy hasn't spelled yet."

"Sammy stood down at the end of the line, and they had overlooked him. But the teacher replied:

"Oh, indeed! I thought he was done long ago."

"I thought he said it sneeringly, and he gave Sammy the word in a tone that said plainly, 'You can't spell it anyway.'"

"But what did Sammy do but spell it correctly without the slightest hesitation."

"Then the others who were standing missed 'dromedary,' and that left Harriet and Sammy alone. I tell you, you might have heard a pin drop then. Everybody was half crazy with excitement."

"Old Squire Hepner did not move a muscle. He had the money, five gold five dollar pieces, and a fancy purse and was to give them himself to the winner."

"It seemed to me that that poor crippled boy got help from on high that night. I never saw anything like it. At first he was so shy that his voice almost trembled, but when he and the cousin he had never spoken to stood up there alone and his fierce old uncle glared so contemptuously at him the little fellow raised himself to his full height and from that moment never flinched."

"His large eyes glistened, and he threw back his head and looked boldly at his uncle and spelled the words in a loud, clear tone that fairly took people's breath away."

"His mother had quietly slipped through the crowd and taken her seat behind him, and those that sat near said she got one of his hands in hers and held it, while the tears streamed down her face."

"The two spelled against each other for a full half hour, and all the time poor Harriet was as white as a sheet, and I could see that she was trembling from head to foot."

"At last the teacher gave the word 'tyrannously.' Harriet spelled the first syllable, then stopped and stammered, looked imploringly at her father and then tremblingly went on and spelled it with one 'n.'"

"How did you spell it, Harriet? Did you have only 'n'?"

"Squire Hepner had been looking on a spelling book too. Now he turned sharply round to the master and in his hardest, coldest voice said:

"She missed it, sir. Pass it to the next."

"Sam spelled it without hesitating an instant."

"You could have heard a pin drop in that room. It was still as death. Harriet dropped into her seat and buried her face in her hands. Squire Hepner's face never changed. Without a word he rose, reached out his long arm, beckoned to Sam to come to him and then dropped into the lad's outstretched hand the purse. Turning and facing the breathless people, he said:

"I want you all to know that I think this has been a fair and square match, and my nephew deserves the prize."

"Without further words he took his hat and marched out of the house."

"Well, the Red Haw people actually carried Sam home on their shoulders, with Mis Waitely close behind, crying as if her heart would break with joy and nervousness. But she had on a long warm, plaid shawl that I saw Mis Squire Hepner throw over her as she stepped out of the door."

"One of my sisters went home with the Hepners that night, and she said Harriet cried all the way home and was in mortal terror at the thought of meeting her father. She stopped on the doorstep a long while, and when she did finally step into the room, trembling and fairly mourning her father, who was sitting with his head between his hands before the fire, got up and walked over to her and actually kissed her forehead before them all. Then he went to bed without a word."

"But what followed was better still. Christmas day the squire took his big sled put in lots of hay and blankets and drove off like Simsbil himself to his sister's. No one ever knew what happened there, but it ended in Mis Waitely and all the children going home with the squire. And a big Christmas day they had, folks said."

"The squire declared it was an honor to know a boy who could spell like Sam. They say he had that boy spell the dictionary left through that winter and nearly hugged him when he spelled correctly the longest word in it."

"The squire was the strangest man on the subject of spelling that I ever heard of. Nothing but Sam's knowing how to spell so well ever softened his heart toward his sister and her children. And nothing pleased him more than to have Sam and Harriet spell against each other for hours at a

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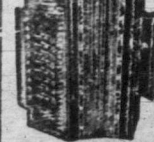
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