

Spelling in the High School.

By J. VROOM.

A boy or girl who enters the high school has been pretty well drilled in spelling in the lower grades, and therefore is, or should be, able to spell correctly nearly all the English words in common use. There will be difficult or unfamiliar words still to learn—words unfamiliar in his or her vocabulary. They will not greatly increase in number as the vocabulary grows. New words seldom give much trouble, for the spelling is learned as the word is acquired; but there will always be old uncertainties to overcome, and unexpected difficulties with words that were once thought to have been thoroughly mastered. No one knows better than the high school teacher how many things are possible in the way of forgetting.

A boy, when he has reached the high school age—I will not venture to say how it is with the girls—has developed a pardonable pride which gives him a new incentive to memory in this as in other matters. The same self-respect which leads him to think of his personal appearance and good behavior will make him ashamed to be a poor speller—for it really is a social disgrace to be ignorant of the correct spelling of the ordinary words of our mother tongue, and no amount of other knowledge will at all make up for this ignorance. Let a boy once realize this, and he will not fail to resort to his dictionary for the correct spelling of a word until he has firmly fixed it in his memory.

But the high school boy or high school girl, having begun the study of words and their derivations, no longer needs to depend upon unaided memory of their visible forms, or of those successions of sounds which tell off the names of their letters in oral spelling. The history of a word is often a key to its spelling, and the spelling a key to its history. The pupil has learned how to spell some word in another language, and finds some English word related to it in sound and meaning. It is the same word in a different form. The pleasure of this discovery, and a comparison of the two forms, will help to fix them both in memory. The teacher can now be sure of a new interest in those very useful lists of words that sound alike, but are different in spelling; or that are spelled alike, but differ in pronunciation; and should add to these a list of words both spelled and pronounced alike, but different in their derivation and meaning.

What is a word? Gradually or suddenly, a new answer to this question has reached the mind of the

high school pupil. It was something written or printed—usually printed in a book for him to read—that is, to recognize at sight and to pronounce—to interpret by vocal sounds. The high school way of looking at the matter has made a wonderful change. Now, the spoken word is the thing itself, and the written or printed form is its representation. And words have changed form in passing from one language to another, and still remained the same words. And the words in our own language have changed greatly in the course of time—often changed more in sound than in spelling, and that is how we come to have so many silent letters. Now, too, these silent letters are interesting. He would like to find out what they mean. They were never put there in the first place for nothing. What are the lost sounds, if any, which in such and such a word they represent?

This leads to an interest in the letters of our alphabet and of other alphabets, and opens up a wide subject. Here, by the way, a newly-adopted pronunciation of Latin, much as it may be ridiculed by old-fashioned Latin scholars, in making *c* always hard, removes a little difficulty that has puzzled many a boy. Who ever learned the Greek alphabet in old days without wondering how Latin scholars came to put the *c* in the third place, instead of *g*? But now, when the pupil is told that in ancient days *c* had always a guttural and not a sibilant sound, he finds that those first letters of the alphabet were not so badly mixed until we did it in modern times; and perhaps he can even dimly see how that came about, though this belongs to college days rather than to high school work.

If the same letter in different combinations does not represent always the same sound, it may be that the different sounds were more alike at some earlier time. If the same sound in different words is represented by different letters, it may be that the sound was not always the same. This much the high school pupil will have learned; and he may even have guessed that there must have been some sounds in our language now quite lost, and that some of our curious spellings originated when those sounds were still in use. The teacher who is fond of language may help him to recover some of these lost sounds—supplying, for instance, the lost sound of *gh*, which has hardened in *seek*, and died out in *sought*, or is but faintly heard; has softened and changed so as to be hardly recognizable in *teach*, and grown silent in *taught*; is so completely hidden in *slay* that no one but a grammarian would think of looking for it in the last letter, while its visible