

Our Holiday Story.

FARMER BROWN'S SCHOOL.

BY LOUISE S. HOTCHKISS.

It was the very middle of the Indian summer; the golden skies had reached their height of ripened beauty, all the hills were hung with a vaporous curtain of blue, and the river showed a soft, silvery thread, winding in and out, among the trunks of the leafless trees.

The great hall door had been opened, probably for the last time ere the snows of winter piled their drifts against it; the garret windows were thrown up to air the herbs that hung along the rafters; and grandpa had unbarred the hatchway to let in the sun upon his barrels and bins of winter vegetables. Even grandma had moved her table along to the open window in the pantry.

"I am going to visit the school, grandma," I said; "I must get out of doors, somewhere," and throw down a skirt I had been ripping. Half-an-hour later I stood at the door of Farmer Brown's School.

Should I go in by the boys' side or the girls'? (There were two entries,—one at the right, and the other at the left). The first was hung with sun-bonnets, and the other with straw hats, crownless or brimless, suggesting a long summer of hard-fought battles with butterflies and bees, over the hills and through the meadows.

Dinner-pails were rolling about the floor,—the mouth of one emitting a broken slice of buttered bread, another a piece of pie, and a third an empty egg-shell. A bold rooster had walked in, and was strutting around, making up his mind which mother's cooking was most to his fancy.

Knock! knock! rather timorously; for I never cease to feel transparent in the presence of children, their eyes are so penetrating and their opinions so unconventional.

"Good afternoon!" I said, offering my hand to a tall, gaunt figure, whose heavy frowzy top made one think of Jupiter's lofty crown; "I beg pardon for not coming before, as I promised."

It was a rough, callous hand that welcomed me, and the worn, weather-beaten face of a farmer. Mr. Brown and his seven sons had just wound up the husbandry of a hundred barren, stony acres, carried the last loads of cabbages and potatoes to market, and were now settled in the school-room for winter.

"Good afternoon, children," I said, and looked over thirty faces, I should say.

My greeting was returned with a general giggle; books were hurricaded in front of faces, and one small boy disappeared beneath his seat.

But a shout from the desk, and a flash from under the black mane, brought them out of such ignoble attitudes, and proved what Hill-side folks said, that Brown's school "was governed."

I did not accept the seat on the platform till the schoolmaster assured me that there was another chair for himself, and not then till I had scanned the room for evidence that his politeness had not caused him to equivocate; and in this survey my attention fell upon an object in the corner,—a man fast asleep, head nodding against his breast, feet resting on the stove-heap. A boy was signalled to bring up a stool, and the tall figure of the master lowered upon it, saying, with a nod toward the corner, "It is Parson Mills, the examining committee; he preaches twice Sundays, and runs his farm week days; 'spose he gets pretty much used up. Third class in reading, come up!"

Mr. Brown had taken my parasol, which he laid on the desk, on the top of a dictionary which was upheld by the school register, which in turn was propped up by a water-dipper.

Four orators, two of each sex, marshalled themselves before the rostrum. Two courtesied, two bowed, and all were seated.

"Begin!" and the master nodded to a fat girl who headed the procession.

Now, the mother of this girl had recently died of a disease that medical authority ascribed to an enormous accumulation of adipose and cellular tissue, superinduced, as local gossip said, by long habits of intemperate eating; and not a neighbor had I seen since the event that had not expatiated upon the richness of "that woman's" short cakes, the fatness of "that woman's" chicken-pies, and the general awfulness of "that woman's" epicurean indulgence.

Thus it happened, that my thoughts were controlled for the moment by some reflections upon hereditary descent; and when I

fell to listening, Jane was well under way, her book braced at one end beneath a fat chin, and clasped at the other by two chubby hands. Words were being shoved out of her thick, rosy lips, with about the same effect of time, tone, and expression, as might come from potatoes dropped into a leather bag; while the liberties she took with authors' language were as audacious as the boldest daylight stealing. Pretty was called putty; *heathen*, *heaven*; and *angels*, *angles*. Her teacher corrected her semi-occasionally, when she rolled up her great eyes, seized the word from his lips and swallowed it in good faith, then stumbled into another sea of blunders.

The next, and the next showed some glimmer of conscience struggling now and then to dismember an unknown word. "A—l-i-g—lig—alig—a—uliga—t-o-r—tor—a-lig-a-tor," drawled out John, placing the accent on the antepenult.

"Did you ever see a picture of that animal?" I ventured to ask. "We generally name it an alligator."

John's lower jaw dropped, and what a gaze he fixed upon me! I felt as if I had intruded, and wished I had kept silent.

"No'm," volunteered the other boy. "Tee! hee! hee!"

Then they all began to look in their books and about the room, and under their seats, and out the window; and after returning to their places they were unable to dispossess themselves of the feeling that they had stumbled upon some living object.

"Fourth class, reading!" was the next command; and again a battalion of four marched to the front.

The scene that now followed was lively and reckless. There was only one book owned in the ranks, which was passed up and down the column. Being no longer subject to criticism, there was no apparent reason for meriting it, and every actor rushed through his task like a race-horse. Only once I saw a glance shot toward the master, and heard a whisper, "Give me some chestnuts, will ye?" I, too, turned my head over my right shoulder. The master's eyes were closed, and his head appeared heavy. Starting, he begged pardon. "Our youngest was taken last night with worm-cramp. Mother (Mrs. Brown) gave it turpentine, which fetched it out of it; but being up makes me kinder dozy to-day."

The next and last class in reading was a lone infant, who came up with torn primer, torn apron, and a very dirty face. The master rose, drew a jack-knife from his pocket, turned the subject round, back to front, and laying one arm on each juvenile shoulder, pointed with the blade to *a*, *b*, *c*, down to *x*; when he stopped, and *snap* went the knife.

"Good afternoon, Miss Leigh! You, too, visiting the school?" A heavy pair of boots were trying to walk up the floor; it was the committee-man, partially waked up. "I always sit apart from influence," he said, "when I am on the jury; so I took a seat down by the stove, to record my observations; am afraid you are too near the judge, and will be tempted to accept his opinions."

"I trust I shall be able to preserve an unbiased judgment," was my reply, obliged to offer some response.

Meantime the master's attention was fixed with a steady, frowning command upon the little multitude at the rear of the official's back. Face after face bent over its slate, and busy fingers plied their pencils as merrily as if each had been playing with a row of bright-colored chess-men.

"I suppose I must make a few remarks," announced the committee-man, turning toward the school, "for I've got the West District to visit, and a load of turnips to get in before dark. Such weather as this won't hold many days, you may depend on it. Children, all I've got to say to you is, go ahead in the way you're in. When I see a school keeping still and studying their figures, my mind is made up. The Bible to guide your souls, and figures to light your worldly steps, is what I say will bring a man up to his full stature. When I see a school moving round in their seats, and hitching up and down, and whispering to their neighbors, I say to myself, 'They are not sunk in their figures.' I've heard you in reading, to-day; next time I come I shall look over your sums. Good afternoon."

The master looked as satisfied as if he had received a bank-check for his salary, and the children's pencils were run to their highest speed.

"What are the other exercises for the afternoon?" I asked. It was a sultry day, and every door and window was closed. (Mr. Brown came from a long line of catarrhal ancestors).

"Four classes in arithmetic, and one in diagrams," was the information accorded me.