

The School Commencement.

(Atlantic Monthly.)

I had a sore disappointment the other day. I went to a grammar school commencement. Though it was hot, so hot that my coat clove to the varnished back of my chair; though I could ill spare that particular afternoon; though I had forgotten to provide a graduation present—unheard of in my own era—for the young friend who had honored me with a card, yet I went joyfully, for, be it frankly confessed, I expected to hear the boys "speak pieces."

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,

that a certain freckled urchin in a front seat would wait in breathless ecstasy while one big fellow after another strode, sauntered or shambled to the platform, according to the degree of his courage, and there bowed, bobbed or ducked, according to the measure of his grace.

Then—oh, then! How the conscious globe in the geography corner would shake with the thunderous reminder:

The Omaha World Herald, September 12, 1909, p. 14: Fond memories of reciting "John Maynard, A Ballad of Lake Erie," by Horatio Alger, Jr.

At midnight in his guarded tent,
The Turk was dreaming of the hour
When Greece, her knee in suppliance
bent,
Should tremble at his power.

Or perhaps the young declaimer, his
eye fixed on the upper corner of the
blackboard, breaks into blood-curdling
apostrophe:

Speak, speak, thou fearful guest!
Who, with thy hollow breast
Still in rude armor drest,
Comest to daunt me!

Of course at this modern solemnity I heard nothing of the kind. The children marched up and down and across the platform in a labyrinthine design, as if they had set out to weave a spider's web. Then they arranged themselves in a front row of half-plastered boys, who sat, and a back row of white-frocked girls, who stood. Such were not the manners of my generation. Thus disposed, they sang a patriotic song or two, beating time with small flags which were passed around on a tray like refreshments. One very plump and very flaxen

boy, perspiring freely, inadvertently wiped his face on his. Then we had a staid salutatory and several depressing recitations of commonplace, didactic prose. The reciters did not remember their paragraphs over well, but why should they? And who could? Who can learn "by heart" what does not speak to the heart?

A spiritless youngster obliged us with an extract, apparently from some school history of France, relative to Henry IV. and his change of faith. How the lad would have waked up had he been set to shouting:

Now glory to the Lord of Hosts, from
whom all glories are!
And glory to our sovereign liege, King
Henry of Navarre!

I would rather have heard—should I
blush to own it?—

Woodman! spare that tree,

than the instructive fragment from a Popular Science Monthly article on the gypsy moth; and as for the description of an up-to-date battleship, I escaped

from the monotony of that recital in surging memories of John Maynard, the undaunted helmsman, who was my earliest hero.

Am I the only man alive who, when solitude gives consent, mouths those simple, stirring stanzas through from start to finish?

'Twas on Lake Erie's broad expanse,
One bright midsummer day,
The gallant steamer Ocean Queen
Swept proudly on her way.

I will spare you the rest, editor, though you would love it, too, if you had learned it as I did, simply from hearing the big boys declaim it of a Friday afternoon. Perhaps you say it is not poetry. How can I tell? I know that it made poetry in the heart of a child. But if you do not care for my old-fashioned "pieces," are there no present-day poems to set young blood dancing and nerve young hearts to glorious resolves? Has the be-thumbed, betattered "speaker" gone forever out of commission?