

MY FIRST LESSON.

Abby Punderson—yes, that was the name of my first schoolmistress. She was one of the stiffest, nicest, and most thoroughly prim old ladies that ever took care of other people's children. She taught in a little red school-house, in "Shrub Oak," about half a mile at the back of Fall's Hill. I like to be particular in the geography, though I had never opened an atlas in my life when Miss Punderson received me into her alphabet class.

I see her now, sitting so very upright in her high-backed chair—solemnly opening the blue paper covers of our primers and calling me by name. I see the sharp pointed scissors lifted from the chair at her side. I hear the rap, rap, of her thumb against the leather covers of that new spelling-book; yes, I feel myself dropping that bashful little courtesy and blushing under those solemn grey eyes, as she points down the long row of Roman capitals and tells me to read. I remember it all: she had on a brown cotton dress; her hair was parted plainly and done up in a French twist behind; there was a good deal of grey in that black hair, and around her prim mouth any quantity of fine wrinkles; but her voice was low and sweet; she was stiff, but not cross, and the little girls loved her in a degree, though she did give them long stitches of hemming, and over-seams to sow.

My first schoolmistress came from some neighbouring town. She was neither Episcopalian nor Presbyterian; but wore the nicest little Methodist bonnet, made of silver-grey satin, without a bow or bit of lace—a Quaker bonnet cut short. Then she had a dainty silk shawl, tinted like a dove's wing, and always carried her handkerchief folded when she went to prayer-meeting.

The school-house stood upon the banks of a small stream which turned a mill just above; it was so overshadowed by young hemlocks that you could only hear the singing of the waters as they stole by the windows. Some forty feet of meadow lay between the windows and the bank, and a noble pear-tree, full of golden fruit, flung its shadow over the school-house, as we got our lessons. Those great bell pears were cruelly tantalizing as they grew and ripened amid the green leaves! but when they came rushing down from the boughs and fell in the grass directly under us, so plump and mellow, it was really too much for human nature.

But Miss Punderson was strict; she read the golden rule every day, and kneeling at her high-backed chair, prayed diligently night and morning, while we stood mutely around. Indeed her control was so perfect that we hardly ventured to look at the pears when they fell; the idea of touching them never entered our hearts.

But one thing troubled us very much,

just as the fruit grew ripest, Miss Punderson began to take her dinner-basket and cross into the meadow at the back of the school-house, where she would disappear down the hemlock bank, and stay sometimes during the entire hour of noon.

One day I was startled at my lesson by a splendid pear that came rushing from the topmost boughs of the tree, and rolled down towards the mill-stream. Dan Haines, who was sitting on the second class bench close by me, whispered from behind his spelling-book "that the mistress would be after that pear about noon time."

Mary Bell, a little girl in my class, looked suddenly up and nodded her head. We had found it all out; that was why the mistress crossed the bank every noon. She was fond of pears, and wanted them all to herself—greedy old thing! We began to feel very angry and ill-used; no one of us would have thought it. What right had she to the pears? They did not belong to her more than to us. In fact, Mary Bell's father, who owned the mill, and lived in the great house with painted gables, just in sight, was the only person who had a claim on that tree or its fruit.

When the recess came, we were upon the watch. Just as usual, the mistress took her dinner-basket, and, getting over the fence, went towards the hemlock bank. Once she stooped, as if to tie her shoe.

"See, see!" whispered Dan, who was on his knees peeping through the rail fence. "She's making believe to tie her shoe, but she's only picking up a pear! Let's jump over and see the mean old thing eat it!" Dan climbed the fence as he spoke, and we followed, a little frightened, but resolute to find out the truth.

Dan went before, treading very softly and looking everywhere in the grass. Once he stooped, made a dart at a tuft of clover, and up again. I caught a glimpse of something yellow in the hand he was pushing with considerable hurry and trouble into his pocket, that swelled out enormously after. But Dan looked straightforward into the hemlocks and began to whistle, which frightened us half out of our wits, and we threatened to run back again unless he stopped.

Dan grew cross at this, and went back in high dudgeon, trying to cover his pocket with one hand. Mary Bell and I would have gone back too, I think, but at that moment we heard a voice from the hemlock bank.

"Come, come," whispered Mary Bell; "let's see if she has really got it."

We crept forward very softly, and looked over into the stream. It had a dry pebbly shore, broken with a few moss-covered stones, all in deep shadow—for the hemlocks overhung the spot like a tent. Upon one of these stones sat our schoolmistress singing. Her voice was

soft and clear, and joined in with the murmurs of the stream, solemn and sweet.

She sung her little hymn, and, after casting a timid glance up and down, to be sure that she was in solitude, knelt down by the mossy stone, which had been her seat, and began to pray.

The mistress was alone with her God; she had only very simple language in which to tell him her wants, but its earnestness brought the tears into our eyes.

Poor soul! she had been grieving all the time that no one of the scholars ever knelt by her side at prayer. She besought God with such meek earnestness to touch our hearts, and bring us humbly to his feet, kneeling, as she did, for a blessing, or in thankfulness. She told Him, as if he had been her only father, how good and bright and precious we were, lacking nothing but his holy grace. She so humbled herself and pleaded for us, that Mary Bell and I crept away from the bank, crying softly, and ashamed to look each other in the face.

Dan Haines was sitting in a crook of the fence, eating something very greedily; but we avoided him, and went into the school-house quite heart-broken at our own naughtiness. After a little the mistress came in, looking serene and thoughtful, as if she had been comforted by some good friend.

Mary Bell and I were still and serious all the afternoon. Once or twice I saw her beautiful blue eyes looking at me wistfully, over her spelling-book, but we knew that it was wrong to whisper, and for the world would not have disobeyed the mistress then.

At last the classes were all heard. The mistress looked, we thought, sadly around at the little benches, arose, laid her hand on the high-backed chair, and sunk slowly to her knees. The children stood up, as usual. I looked at Mary Bell; she was trembling a little; the colour came and went on her face. My heart beat quick, I felt a glow on my cheek, something soft and fervent stirring at my heart. We both rose hand in hand, walked through the scholars up to that high-backed chair, and knelt softly down by the mistress. She gave a little start, opened her eyes, and instantly they filled with tears; her lips trembled, and then came a burst of thanksgiving to God for having answered her prayer. She laid her hand first upon one head and then upon the other. She called down blessings upon us, she poured forth her whole soul eloquently, as she had done under the hemlock boughs.

I have heard burning prayers since, but never one that entered the depths of my memory like that.

The next day Mary Bell and I followed the mistress down to the mill stream, for we felt guilty till she knew all. But she persisted that God himself had led us to the bank. No matter though Dan Haines