

AN ATTRACTIVE YOUNG PERSON.

CHAPTER I.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Piggins will have to go," said the rector.

Mr. Sowerbutts, a stout, middle-aged farmer, grunted his dissatisfaction. The other members of the Little Puddington School Board offered no opinion.

"Yes; I think we must give the old lady a quarter's notice, and get rid of her," continued Mr. Dowthwaite. "She is terribly behind the age, there's no doubt of that. The school has earned hardly any grant for the last two years."

Mr. Sowerbutts gave another grunt, meaning to express thereby his contempt alike for Mrs. Piggins' grant-earning powers, the grant, and the Education Department.

"I expect in another year the Inspector will bring down the wrath of the department upon us in earnest. Perhaps they will dissolve the board and order the election of a new one."

"That won't do, nehew," said Mr. Sowerbutts, decisively.

"Then Mr. Sowerbutts moves that the present holder of the office of schoolmistress be invited to resign, and that the Chairman be requested to insert advertisements for a new teacher in the *Church Times* and other newspapers," said Mr. Dowthwaite, making a jutting of the motion as he spoke. "Mr. Wintle seconds the motion," he added, with a glance in the direction of that gentleman. Mr. Wintle, whose eyes had been fixed the whole time on the rector's face, gravely nodded; and the rector rose from his chair to intimate that the meeting was at an end.

Mr. Dowthwaite spent the whole of the afternoon in drafting an advertisement and sending copies of it to various clerical and scholastic newspapers. "Must be a sound churchwoman. One able to play the harmonium preferred," he added to the list of requirements. There was a standing difficulty about getting a not utterly incompetent performer on the harmonium at Little Puddington; and the good rector thought he might as well make the obnoxious Education act useful for once.

The interview with Mrs. Piggins he deferred till the following morning, as being the most unpleasant part of the business. It went off, however, better than he had feared. By degrees he got the old lady to understand that if she sent in her resignation it would be gratefully accepted, and she would be considered as having put the parish and the country generally under an obligation.

"You see, Mrs. Piggins, we are obliged to follow the times," said good-natured Mr. Dowthwaite, in an apologetic tone. "We can't afford to lose the grant another year, we really can't."

"Oh, I suppose not, Sir," said Mrs. Piggins, fixing her eyes on the rector's face. "I've been schoolmistress in this parish for two an' twenty years, an' we've done very well without any grant. I've brought up my children to learn their catechism and do their duty, like their fathers before them. I can't teach French an' drowin', an' such like; and much good it would do them if I could. However, I've saved enough, thank Heaven, to be independent of every one; and—Betsy Jane Pugh, stop talkin' and go on with your sum, or it'll be the worse for ye."

The rector listened in silence, and finally made his escape, thankful that the most disagreeable part of his duty as a reformer was over.

But his difficulties were by no means at an end. The day after his advertisement appeared he received one hundred and twenty-seven applications for the vacant post; the next day brought him two hundred and thirteen; the third day produced ninety-six. All the applicants were able to teach every necessary subject, as well as several which were not necessary, and every one was able to produce testimonials of the highest possible character.

In his despair the rector turned to his sister-in-law, Miss Jordan, who had kept his house since the death of his wife, and humbly sued for her advice and assistance. But Miss Jordan was an elderly lady, with strong, old-fashioned prejudices, and she objected to the new scheme altogether. She sarcastically advised the reinstatement of Mrs. Piggins—a course which was plainly out of the question. Mr. Dowthwaite then turned for help to his curate, the Rev. Augustine Cope, a meek and gentlemanly young man, who acted as unpaid secretary to the rector when there was anything troublesome to be done. Mr. Cope took the mass of papers home to his lodgings and made an attempt to select a few of the most promising applications from the others. At the end of four hours' work, however, he found that his list contained no fewer than

forty-nine names—an obviously impracticable number.

At the next monthly meeting of the board matters were no further advanced. The table of the morning room at the rectory—which served as a board room—was covered with letters of application and copies of testimonials; and the members of the board sat gazing at the piles of documents in helpless dismay.

"Well, gentlemen," began Mr. Dowthwaite with a very vague notion of what the rest of his sentence was to be, when a knock at the door interrupted him.

"Come in," he cried.

"Please, Sir," said Thomas, "there's a lady wishes to see you."

"But I am engaged, Thomas."

"But this lady has called about the School Board."

"An applicant? It is rather irregular, certainly. I particularly mentioned in the advertisements that no personal applications were to be allowed," said the Chairman to his fellow-laborers. "However, since the young person is here, we may as well see her. Show her in, Thomas."

A moment afterward a slim, upright figure, in a dainty Summer costume, appeared in the doorway, and the farmers present rose instinctively to their feet. Only the rector retained his presence of mind.

"Thomas, set a chair," said he.

The young lady bowed with the utmost self-possession, and took the seat which was offered her. She was decidedly pretty. There was no doubt of that, in spite of her paleness and her thin lips. Her fair hair was brought down smoothly over a brow as white as any woman could desire; her features were all delicately formed, her eyes being especially attractive. Her age it might have been difficult to guess; a man would have admitted that she might be over twenty; a woman would have said she did not look thirty.

"Your name is—Miss—ah? Miss Grayling?" asked the rector, referring to the card which Thomas had handed to him.

The young lady bowed. As she lifted her head, she saw that the rector was still scrutinizing the card, and she comprehended the other members of the board in one swift glance, finishing with the curate. Mr. Cope dropped his eyes. Miss Grayling smiled inwardly.

"And you have come about the vacancy in the parish school, I understand?" inquired the rector.

Again Miss Grayling bowed without speaking.

"I particularly requested that no personal applications were to be made," said the rector, in an injured tone.

Miss Grayling gave a little sigh.

"I was afraid I had done wrong," she said, with her eyes on the carpet; "but I was so anxious that my application should not be overlooked. If you would kindly excuse my coming, I think you would find my testimonials satisfactory."

As she spoke, she lifted her eyes to those of the reverend gentleman, dropping them immediately in a very modest and becoming manner.

Mr. Dowthwaite was mollified.

"Where have you been teaching?" he asked.

She mentioned the name of a village in Yorkshire, and Mr. Cope busied himself in hunting up her letter of application and her testimonial from a large bundle of similar documents. Having found them, he laid them before the rector in silence.

"Not very much experience; not so much as we could have wished—only six months," said the rector. "Now, we particularly wanted a certificated teacher."

"I have little doubt that I could pass the examinations if you think it desirable," said Miss Grayling quietly; "but I think I may say I am capable of teaching the village children everything necessary."

It was, indeed, absurd to imagine that this elegant young lady was not capable of acting as preceptor to Betsy Jane Pugh and her companions; and the rector, feeling thus, tossed the rather scanty testimonials aside.

"I ought to tell you," he said, "that this is a very modest appointment. You know the salary is not large, and depends partly on the Government grant earned by the school. The position is not—ah!—not an exalted one. By the way," he exclaimed, suddenly, "can you play the harmonium?"

"Oh, yes, Sir," said Miss Grayling, with a bright and pleasant smile.

"Ah—well—we will consider your application," said Mr. Dowthwaite, shuffling the papers before him rather nervously.

"I beg your pardon, Sir," said Miss Grayling, in a low, earnest tone, as she slowly raised her graceful form from her seat; "but would you allow me to wait in the hall, or the kitchen, or anywhere, till my case is de-

cided on? I have a long journey before me, and if you could—"

She did not finish her sentence; but she glanced at the other members of the board as she spoke. Mr. Sowerbutts and his friends had not, meantime, spoken a word; but now they uttered a half-articulate murmur, and the rector bowed in a stiff but courteous fashion. The modest request was granted, and Miss Grayling withdrew.

Somehow, the young lady had made the board feel that she was, in a sense, awaiting their verdict—that her fate hung in their hands.

"Well, gentlemen," said Mr. Dowthwaite "I don't know that we could do better. This young—ah!—person is recommended, by the—lifting his double eyeglasses to his nose—"the vicar of Little Shenstone. There can be little doubt as to her capability to undertake the duties. And really, if we began hunting through all these papers, we might go further and fare worse."

"Ear, ear," murmured Mr. Sowerbutts, in a hollow, base voice, tapping the point of his stick gently on the floor, and accordingly it was settled that Miss Laura Bill Grayling should be appointed to the vacant office.

CHAPTER II.

In the course of a month the new schoolmistress entered upon her duties. The village children regarded her with mingled admiration and awe as she came into the little schoolroom for the first time in her spotless morning gown. The dress was only of cotton, but it was neatly, even stylishly made. They gazed with wonder and delight as Miss Grayling contemptuously flung poor Mrs. Piggins' cane into the empty fireplace, and they promised themselves golden days for the future.

In that particular, however, they were disappointed. The new teacher, they soon discovered, was not to be trifled with. They had to work harder than they had ever done before; but they did not grumble. They literally worshipped their schoolmistress and would no more have thought of disobeying her than of disputing the authority of the village constable.

When the rector visited the school every Monday morning he was delighted with the order that reigned there. He thought Miss Grayling a very exemplary and superior young woman. He lent her books. He gave her much advice as to her work, with which he had not thought it worth while to trouble good Mrs. Piggins, and his counsels were invariably received with a charming deference.

It was the custom at Little Puddington for the curate to give the school children a lesson in Bible history on Wednesday afternoon; and Mr. Cope looked forward to his first lesson under Miss Grayling's auspices with some inward trepidation. In spite of himself he felt a certain tremor as he addressed the new teacher, and yet he found himself continually desiring to speak to her. By degrees, however, this wore off; and he came to look forward to Wednesday afternoons as pleasant interludes in his rather monotonous weeks. He, too, was solicitous for the new teacher's mental pabulum, and lent her books, beginning with popular history books, going on to Sunday afternoon tales, and finally reaching the stage of undeniable yellow-backed novels. Miss Grayling smiled to herself as she placed Mr. Cope's "Orley Farm" in her desk beside Mr. Dowthwaite's "Chronicles of the Schonberg-Cotta Family."

But everybody liked Miss Grayling. The children's mothers looked on her as a superior being. Even cross old Miss Sowerbutts, at the Mount Farm, liked to have her go over on a Thursday afternoon, when John was at market, drink a cup of tea with her, and enlighten her as to the real fashions as worn in London. The only person who did not join in the chorus of approbation was Miss Jordan, the rector's sister-in-law.

"Don't you think we were very fortunate in getting such a superior mistress in Mrs. Piggins' place?" said the rector to his sister-in-law one Sunday after church.

"I dare say," said Miss Jordan.

"There is a marked improvement in the behavior of the children, both at church and in school," continued the rector, in rather a magisterial way, as if to resent the impeachment of an undue partiality for Miss Grayling, which was visible in Miss Jordan's face.

"The boys don't make half so much noise in going out of church before the sermon as they used to do," continued the parson.

"I've no doubt the young woman is very well fitted for her place," said Miss Jordan.

"Dear me—" said the rector to himself, "it's odd how few women can forgive another woman, in a somewhat lower rank of life, for having a pretty face and an attrac-

tive manner!" Whatever the reason, it was plain that Miss Jordan was not captivated by the new mistress. They avoided each other, as if by mutual consent.

It happened that one afternoon, in early Summer, Miss Grayling had gone up to the Mount Farm, by invitation, to drink tea with Miss Sowerbutts. It was a Thursday—a day when the farmers always attended market at the neighboring town of Groby.

"I must make haste and get home before dark," said Miss Grayling, as the day began to close; and she went up to put on her bonnet. The operation, however, took some little time, as it was diversified by an exhibition of Miss Sowerbutts' mother's wedding dress, and various other pieces of raiment of a quite remote antiquity, in all of which Miss Grayling took keen interest.

"I declare it's getting quite dark," exclaimed the schoolmistress at last, as she threw on her hat in a great hurry and went down stairs with her hostess. Arrived in the garden, however, it was impossible to go without a morsel of Mrs. Sowerbutts' delicious sweet-briar; the peas, too, were in a most interesting state of development, and by the time they had been duly admired, the farmer's burly form was seen slowly advancing between the hedge-rows, borne onward by his gig and his good mare, Jess.

Certainly Miss Grayling looked a pretty figure as she stood at the porch of the farmhouse shaking hands with its mistress.

"Well, Miss, and how are ye?" said Mr. Sowerbutts, with a very red face, as he leaned out of the gig to shake hands with his sister's visitor.

"Very well, thank you. But I must say good evening. I really must get home before dark."

"What's the need for that? Jess and I must see thee home."

"Oh, no, no! I couldn't think of such a thing. You must be so tired, and the poor horse, too. Good-bye." And Miss Grayling took a hasty farewell of her friend, and ran down the roadway with the prettiest little steps in the world.

Meanwhile Mr. Sowerbutts was slowly turning round the unwilling Jess.

"But, John, the mare will be overdone. She can find her way home. Or I'll send Jacob with her," said Miss Sowerbutts, regretting in her heart that she had ever invited the schoolmistress to the farm.

To this John made no reply, and having succeeded in turning the horse and gig he speedily overtook Miss Grayling, who was walking on ahead in the most determined manner.

"Whoa! whoa!" cried Mr. Sowerbutts to the mare. "Now, Miss, will 'ee get in?" And he held back the apron as he spoke.

"Really I can't—I can't take you back to Puddington after your journey," said Miss Grayling, standing hesitating. "No," she said, more firmly, as Mr. Sowerbutts only sat and looked at her without speaking; "there is really no necessity for it."

"If I ask ye to come I mean it," said the farmer, "an' I take it as a favor."

"Oh, if you put it so politely, I shall be very happy," said Miss Grayling, as she held up her little gloved hand and was hoisted into the gig.

It was, after all, only a mile and a half to the village. For the first minute nothing was said.

"You plays that there 'armonium in church beautiful," said Mr. Sowerbutts, at length.

Miss Grayling laughed and turned her smiling face upon her companion.

"Do you think so? I'm not so sure of that myself," said she.

"Beautiful!" responded Mr. Sowerbutts, with emphasis. "And settin' there, in the chancel, with the red window-shining on yer 'ead, you look like a saint in glory!"

"Oh, Mr. Sowerbutts! you really shouldn't be so very complimentary," said Miss Grayling, tranquilly. "And now, tell me how things went at market to-day."

The conversation thus took a more prosaic turn, and Miss Grayling evinced the deepest interest in the price of hay, calves and other agricultural topics, until they reached the cottage in which she lived.

CHAPTER III.

The Government inspection was always one of the events of the year at Little Puddington. It generally took place in the end of August. The Inspector was an elderly gentleman, whose proper name was Christopher Wensley; but whose ordinary name among the teachers of his district was "The Walrus," from the fact that his bald forehead and white mustache pointed downward in a straight line on each side of his mouth gave him a decided resemblance to that creature. Report stated that Mr. Wensley and Miss Jordan had had tender, or some-