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The Youth's Companion (1827-1929); Feb 3, 1910; 84, 5; American Periodicals
pg. 56

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By HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

THE sound of hurrying feet, but partially muffled in the dust of the country road behind her, caused the new teacher to slacken her pace. In another moment a big, awkward girl, a head taller than herself, was at her elbow.

"I'm Mary Gowan. I'll carry your books, if you like."

"Thank you," said the new teacher, hesitating. "But I'm afraid I'll take you out of your way."

Mary Gowan stared. "Why, I'm going with you. I'm one of your scholars."

"You?" The new teacher looked at her tall pupil with something like dismay. She knew very little of country schools, but she had mentally pictured herself giving instruction to rows of chubby, flaxen-haired children. In comparison with these imaginary pupils, Mary Gowan seemed a veritable giantess.

The girl understood the dismay in the exclamation, the half-frightened expression which momentarily flickered across the little teacher's face. She smiled gravely and reassuringly.

"I'm the biggest of the lot," she said. "And you needn't be afraid of me, bless you! Why, I just love to learn."

With an air of attempting to retrieve her dignity, the teacher murmured her approval of this state of mind, and Mary listened with a respect which did not quite conceal her attitude of kindly protection.

"I had to stop school because my mother was sick," she explained. "I took care of her for seven years. Then she died, and I started in again. I work at Mrs. Coats's for my board. But some day I'm going to be a teacher, too." As she strode along the dusty road, with her chin lifted, she did not look like a girl to be easily beaten.

In the course of these hard, bewildering first days, Elinor Thwaite, the new teacher, discovered that in spite of her inches and breadth of shoulder, Mary was less formidable than many another of her pupils. Her passion for learning could hardly fail to have its effect on her younger schoolmates; her influence, backed up by sturdy muscles, was all on the side of law and order.

One morning, at a prearranged signal, Sam Bentley dropped a marble from his desk. It had hardly rolled to the end of the room before it was followed by another. The dropping of the third marble was a sign for a general giggle, and the teacher rapped sharply. "Less noise, Samuel."

"They get away from me, teacher; they're so slippery," Sam explained; and a fourth marble dropped to the floor. But the fifth stayed in the boy's pocket. For at that moment he had caught the level glance of Mary Gowan's expressive eyes.

Even his obedience to that mute warning did not save him. At recess Mary collared him, and shook him till his teeth chattered. Sam wrenched himself away at last, and faced her with an amusing mixture of timidity and defiance. "You've lost my collar button!" he snorted.

"Next time," Mary promised him, "it'll be worse."

"You ain't the teacher. It's none of your business."

"Yes, it is. I'm here to learn something, and I can't study with that kind of fooling going on. Besides, I'm not going to have you teasing her. So look out." She shook her finger at him warningly, and Sam departed, muttering threats which did not become audible till he was out of her hearing.

Elinor Thwaite realized vaguely that but for her largest pupil her path would be more thorny than it was, and she was not without gratitude. Even with Mary to inspire the indifferent and awe the lawless, she found her position sufficiently trying. She had never been away from her mother before, and her homesickness seemed to increase, rather than to lessen, as the days shortened toward winter. She was not a girl to accommodate herself readily to changes, and the strangeness of her surroundings added to her depression. She fell into the way of making a *confidante* of Mary, as the two walked to school together morning after morning, and Mary, listening attentively, sympathized and encouraged, as if in some mysterious way their rôles had been reversed.

"Isn't it horrid?" Miss Thwaite exclaimed one morning, as she turned the bend in the road and found Mary awaiting her. The big pupil possessed herself of the little teacher's lunch-basket and books before replying. Then she looked up at the brazen sky, under whose light the familiar green of the wayside grass took on a curious, unnatural brilliancy.

"You mean the smoke?" she questioned. "Oh, we folks here get used to it. We have these forest fires every fall."

"I should think the forests would burn up, and that would be the end of them!" the teacher cried. "The smoke was so bad that I coughed all night. It makes me dreadfully nervous." She lifted a face pale from sleeplessness, and Mary, as usual, took the part of comforter. "Oh, it'll get to be an old story in time. If you happened to own any timber land, though, you'd have reason to worry."

"I wish I were home," sighed Miss Thwaite, "or else that nobody would come to school! I'm sure it will be a day thrown away."

Events seemed to justify the teacher's apprehensions. Most of the children were excited by stories of fighting the fires in the county to the north of them. Moreover, the listless, tired teacher was anything but an inspiration. The time dragged monotonously. Only Mary Gowan studied with her usual zest. Sometimes, as her eyes fell on the younger girl's absorbed face, the teacher felt a pang of self-reproach, and made an effort to assume her usual animation.

At quarter of twelve Sam Bentley raised his hand. "Teacher, may I get some fresh water at the pump?"

"It's almost noon, Sam."

"But I'm too thirsty to wait till noon!" whined the boy.

"Very well, then." The teacher turned her attention to the First Reader class, and Sam marched down the aisle in triumph. The droning voice of little Joe Wyman was announcing the important news that the good cat had seen the bad rat, when a shout swept through the room.

"Teacher!"

Every head was turned. A white-faced boy with staring eyes stood panting at the doorway.

"Teacher! The fire! It's across the road! We'll be burned up if we stay here!"

Mary Gowan ran to the door. One glance told her that a change in the wind had sent the flames down upon them, cutting off their way of escape by the road. Through the pall of smoke lurid red flames appeared. Embers were beginning to fall not many rods from the school building.

In a flash the girl's keen mind realized the situation. She turned, her big frame blocking the doorway, and saw Miss Thwaite fall limply into her chair. The frightened children wavered. A panic was imminent.

"Attention! Face front! Face right! Stand!"

Mary's ringing voice gave the familiar commands as if she had no doubt of being obeyed. Twenty-five boys and girls stood at attention. For the instant one peril was over.

"You will pass out through the coat-room, taking your coats and lunch-boxes," Mary announced. "At the steps we will form in line again and march up to Bowers' field. Now. Left! left! left!"

The lines marched in order to the coat-room. The teacher ran down to the door, where Mary stood guard, her face the color of chalk. "I'm going to faint!" she gasped.

Mary seized her arm and shook her with as little ceremony as she had shaken Sam Bentley on an earlier occasion. "You're going to behave yourself!" she snapped. "You've got to lead this line, and help me save these children's lives. If you don't do that, burning up is too good for you."

The teacher blinked and straightened herself. "I'll do whatever you say," she answered.

Mary stood outside, waiting, as the line came out of the building.

"Hay-foot, straw-foot, hay-foot, straw-foot!" she cried, emphasizing the rhythm by beating her hands together. Quavering, uncertain voices took it up. "Now you've got it and don't forget it. Left! left! left!"

The line started off down the road toward the stretch of plowed field, which lay like an oasis in the encircling woods. Was it big enough? That was the question Mary Gowan asked herself as she glanced over her shoulder at that pursuing wall of smoke and flame, and then stopped to lift to its feet some frightened child that had stumbled and fallen. And all the time her big voice rang out like a clarion: "Left! left! left!"

When the column halted in the brown field, it was to Mary that the children looked. And she took command as naturally as if she had held posts of authority all her days. "You give me your lunch-boxes," was her first order. "You see, it won't do for us to eat up everything we've got, all at once, for it isn't likely we can get home to supper."

At that moment Sam Bentley announced in a shrill shout that the schoolhouse was on fire. They looked back over the way they had come, and saw the little building licked up by the hungry flames, which seemed to relish the change from their customary diet. And when only a blazing heap remained of the building, the faces of youngest and oldest alike were pale and tense with foreboding.

Mary broke the spell by announcing luncheon. She lent to the somber occasion all the festive cheer of a picnic. The children sat in rows and ate their rather scanty fare with a zest surprising, considering that the flames hemmed them in and that the sky was heavy with smoke. Then they played games, and the youngest child in school was allowed to choose the first game. "I choose wing awound a wosy," piped Mamie Maria, who had not yet mastered the letter *r;* and her little face was as joyful as if she had not been encircled with peril. Elinor Thwaite hardly knew whether to wonder more at the child or at Mary Gowan.

As the afternoon wore on, the number of refugees in the clearing increased. Rabbits came bounding into the field, and lay down, panting, on the brown earth, apparently indifferent to the presence of the human beings ordinarily so fraught with peril. A fox joined the company after a time, with as matter-of-fact an air as if he had been a stray dog in search of a home. The children looked at his singed red coat, and then at one another, and they lost interest in their games. But they listened to Mary's stories of wonderful dwarfs and beautiful princesses and enchanted castles with a silent, flattering attention.

There was little for supper, but of that little much was left uneaten. The children were all suffering from thirst, aggravated by the condition of the atmosphere. Some of the younger ones were crying pitifully for water and for their mothers. The older boys and girls, imitating Mary Gowan, bore the discomfort and danger with a silent courage that was nothing less than heroic.

The night came on, and blood-red flames shot forked tongues up into the sky, and the lurid light fell on the sleeping children lying on the bare earth, and moaning in their sleep. Once it showed a huge, awkward figure across the field, and Elinor Thwaite clutched Mary's arm.

"What is that?"

"Sh!" Mary warned her. "There's no use frightening the children." She sat white and undaunted, holding Mamie Maria in her arms. "I don't believe," she added, encouragingly, "that he'll hurt us. Bears ain't so very fierce, you know, and now he's as scared as we are."

The teacher fell asleep at last. The strangeness of it all and the consciousness of her peril were powerless beside her physical exhaustion. She lay stretched on the plowed ground, white and motionless. Mamie Maria stirred uneasily in Mary's arms. "I forgot to say my prayers," she complained.

"Then say them now, pet," Mary answered, reassuringly, and the little piping voice began, "Now I lay me down to sleep —"

Mary kissed the child's cheek. "Good night, mama!" Mamie Maria murmured sleepily, and again her head nestled contentedly against Mary's shoulder. The girl sat looking intently at the wonderful panorama which dazzled her eyes, and watching the embers which dropped into the clearing, alert lest one should be carried far enough to set fire to the clothing of some little sleeper.

She was still erect and watchful when the darkness of the night had given place to the pale light of dawn, and a company of pallid-faced and hollow-eyed men came hurrying up the slope which the marching line had ascended in such good order more than twelve hours earlier. Their shouts of relief waked the last sleeper, and bearded cheeks were wet with tears as fathers held to their hearts the children they had mourned as dead.

On the whole, it was a jubilant procession that made its way over a road stripped of every familiar landmark. Teacher and pupils had united in giving Mary Gowan full credit for what she had done, and Mary had heard from lips not given to unadvised speech more words of commendation than had fallen to her lot in all her life before.

But as she walked beside Miss Thwaite on the way home, glancing about at the disfigured landscape and occasionally rubbing her numbed arms, a shadow stole across her face. The teacher noticed it, but was too weary to ask the reason, and Mary explained of her own accord.

"Now that the schoolhouse is burned up," she said, regretfully, "I don't suppose we can have school to-day. I'm sorry. I've lost so much time that I don't like these interruptions."

DRAWN BY A. O. SCOTT

A FOX JOINED THE COMPANY . . . WITH AS MATTER-OF-FACT AN AIR AS IF HE HAD BEEN A STRAY DOG.