

Mary's Little Lamb



The minutes before the morning bell rang were a spirited time in the room at the end of the hall. The third-graders filled the classroom with lively chatter. They warmed their hands over the radiator, drew pictures on the steamed-up windows, and inspected the ants swarming over a cupcake left from yesterday's birthday party. Others tested to see if pencils could float in the fish tank, measured how much the bean sprouts had grown overnight, and counted the icicles pointing down from the gutters outside.

Meanwhile, in the third row by the window

sat Mary. With her eyes were fixed on her desktop, she appeared to be doing nothing. Her jaw bobbed up and down as she gnawed on a double wad of chewing gum. Every few seconds she slid an inch farther down in her seat.

Kenneth looked up from the reading corner. “There she goes again,” he said. “I wonder what Mary is daydreaming about today.”

“She’s gone for good this time,” said Clara, combing her hair by the sink. “If the fire alarm went off right now, I doubt she would even hear it.”

In the front of the room, the tall teacher leaned against his desk with his eyes closed. When the morning bell rang, his eyes opened.

“OK, people,” he said, punching a yawn with his fist. “Let’s sit down, settle down, and quiet down. Please take out your homework. I will come around and collect your papers.”

Desks opened and a sheet of paper appeared on every desktop. Every desktop but one—Mary’s. Mary continued to stare at the wooden surface in front of her while sliding farther and farther down in her seat. By the time the tall teacher reached her desk, Mary was on the edge of her chair.

“Mary?” he said. “Mary, where is your homework?”

Mary remained motionless.

The teacher waved a hand in front of her face. “Mary?” he repeated, clicking his fingers.

Mary blinked and champed hard on her gum. “Here,” she called out.

“Mary, you’ve been daydreaming again,” said the tall teacher.

“I guess I was,” she said, pushing herself upward.

“And Mary, you know it is against the rules to chew gum in class,” said the teacher.

Mary removed her gum. “I guess I do,” she said, sticking the wad on the bottom of her desk.

“And Mary, do you have your homework?”

Mary shrugged. “I guess I didn’t hear the homework assignment,” she said.

The tall teacher’s grip tightened on the papers in his hand. The tips of his ears turned crimson. “Mary,” he said, “you must start paying more attention in class. You frequently miss assignments or instructions. You are constantly forgetting things. When are you going to stop daydreaming?”

Meanwhile, Mary had slipped down in her seat again and was staring out the window.

“Mary!” the tall teacher called out.

“Here,” piped Mary.

“Something must be done about your daydreaming.”

Aren't daydreams peculiar things? Who knows where they come from. Those mental pictures, songs, and ideas seem to be stored in a secret closet in our heads and pop out without warning. But we need daydreams, also. How else could we make it through a long car ride or a boring afternoon at school? When else can we see whatever pictures we want to see and change them as we please?

In Mary's case, however, daydreams seemed to pop in her head more frequently and at the worst moments. She tried her best to pay attention to lessons at school, but her own imagined thoughts and pictures were more interesting and refused to go away.

"OK, people, open your reading books to page ninety-three," the tall teacher instructed. "Let's read some poems."

While the rest of the class took out their readers, Mary removed the gum from her desk bottom and stuck it in her mouth. She started staring at her thumb and slid slowly down in her chair.

At that moment the classroom door opened a crack. Everyone besides Mary saw what entered the room. Everyone besides Mary heard *click, click, click* on the tile floor.

"Ahhh!" said everyone but Mary.

Mary continued to contemplate her thumb.

Not until something close by went “Baaah!” did she jolt.

She looked around and saw nothing.

“Baaah!” came the sound again, this time from under her desk. She looked at her feet and saw a little lamb. Its fleece was as white as the snow on the playground. Its pointed ears flicked, and its three-inch tail swished back and forth like a paintbrush. With big black eyes it looked pleadingly up at Mary.

“It’s you again,” Mary said.

“Baaah!” said the lamb.

“Ahhh!” went the class.

The tall teacher rose from his desk. Slowly he stepped to the desk in the third row by the window. He bent over and said, “Mary, what is that little lamb doing in this classroom?”

Mary shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said. “I spotted it this morning by my house. I guess it followed me to school today.”

“To school today?”

“To school today,” said Mary.



“So it followed you to school today, Mary. But that is against the rules,” said the tall teacher.

“What am I supposed to do?” said Mary. “I was just walking along the sidewalk and that lamb started following me. It sat on the playground when I came inside.”

“You should do what other children do when their pets come to school with them,” said the tall teacher. “Take that animal outside and leave it beyond the school fence.”

Mary sighed. “I guess so,” she said, and trudged to the coat closet to get her coat.

Click, click, click went the little lamb’s hooves on the tile floor as it tripped along behind her. *Swish, swish, swish* went its three-inch tail as it followed Mary to the door.

“And please hurry back, Mary,” called the tall teacher. “You’ve already wasted enough class time.”

“In two shakes,” said Mary, stomping out the door.

By the time Mary returned, the class had finished reading poetry and was now writing cursive L’s. Mary took out her pencil and wrote a perfect L, careful to stay between the lines, slanting the proper amount. But in the middle of her second L a sparkle from an icicle outside the window caught her attention. Farther and

farther she slid down in her seat as a mental movie filled with jewels and glittering treasure played in her head.

At that moment the classroom door opened again.

“Aaaah,” said the class as the little lamb stepped nimbly down the aisle toward Mary’s desk.

“Baaah!” went the little lamb, sitting by Mary’s feet.

Mary slid off her chair, nearly landing on the floor. As she pulled herself up, she looked at the fleecy creature under her desk.

“Shoo! Go away! You’re embarrassing me!” she said.

The tall teacher looked up from his desk. “Mary,” he said, “will you please remove that lamb from this classroom.”

Mary trudged to the coat closet a second time.

“This little lamb is getting on my nerves,” she said, and strode out the door with the lamb at her heels.

The lamb reappeared often that morning. Everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go. It followed her into the library and startled her as she daydreamed near the encyclopedias. It followed her into the lunchroom, and while Mary sat deep in thought, with a peanut butter



and jelly sandwich halfway into her mouth, the lamb let out a bleat that almost made her gag.

Even when Mary visited the Girls' Room, the little lamb visited her. While washing her hands she stared blankly into the mirror.

"Baaah! Baaah!" went the lamb, and Mary jumped an inch.

"Enough is enough!" she screamed. "How am I ever going to get rid of you?"

That afternoon the tall teacher did a science experiment by dipping a celery stalk into a jar of red water. Already Mary's mind had drifted off. Being an expert daydreamer, she could daydream in marvelous colors and was now imagining how her classroom would look all blue, then all yellow, then all green.

"Baaah! Baaah!" went the little lamb at her feet.

“Here!” Mary jolted to attention and banged her knees on the bottom of her desk.

The tall teacher glared at the girl in the third row. His red ears told the story.

“Mary,” he said through his teeth, “I told you farm animals are not allowed in this classroom. This one seems to be showing up every hour. Now it is recess time. Will you take that creature outside again and make sure it does not return?”

Head bowed, hands stuffed in her pockets, Mary traipsed out to the playground. She headed to the baseball field, now resting under a foot of snow. “Scram! Get lost!” she shouted to the little lamb, almost invisible against the white snow behind her.

“Baaah!” went the lamb. It bounded from one of Mary’s footprints to the next.

Up and down, up and down Mary tramped, stamping out a giant cursive M in the snow.

“How am I ever going to get rid of you, little lamb?” she said.

“Baaah! Baaah!” cried the lamb.

Next Mary stomped out an enormous A. “What a nuisance you are, little lamb,” she said.

“Baaah!” went the lamb, shaking snow off its back.

“Why are you following me, little lamb?”

said Mary, flattening a giant R.

The lamb leaped into the next footprint. “Baaah! Baaah!” it bleated.

Mary finished her name with a colossal Y. “And why do you keep interrupting my daydreams?” she said.

At the bottom of the Y Mary stooped to pick



a snowball. “You infuriate me, little lamb,” she said. “I never know when you will show up. You keep startling me. I’m a nervous wreck. I haven’t had a peaceful moment all day.” And she smacked the snowball against the outfield fence.

When she got back to the classroom the

tall teacher held up some writing paper. “Now, people, I want you to write a poem,” he said. “It should be a rhyming poem, four lines long. Be creative. You have twenty minutes to finish.”

While the teacher passed out the paper, Mary turned toward the classroom door. Good. No lamb. She leaned over her paper and gripped her pencil tightly. She checked the door again before beginning to write. In one nonstop burst of energy she scribbled a line of poetry about the one thing on her mind—the little lamb.

Again she checked the door.

“That mutton has sure made me mad,” she said, writing the second line. “I just know it’s hanging around the school grounds, waiting to take me by surprise.”

She wrote the third line and again turned toward the door.

“Still no lamb,” she muttered to herself. “But I must stay alert. I’m not going to let it startle me again.”

Mary composed the fourth line of her poem and made it rhyme with the second. The final period was hardly in place, however, when a paper clip on the floor caught her attention.

Mary stared at the paper clip. She had started to drop in her seat when “Baaah! Baaah! Baaah!”—louder than ever—nearly flipped her out of her chair. At her feet sat the little lamb,

ears twitching and three-inch tail swishing merrily.

Mary closed her eyes and said an oath. “That did it!” she shouted. “I’m going to take you some place, little lamb, where you can never startle me again!”

Without waiting for a word from the teacher, she raced to the coat closet and put on her coat. In one swift move, she spun around, scooped up the little lamb, and tucked it under her arm.

“Baaah! Baaah!” went the lamb as Mary stomped out the door.

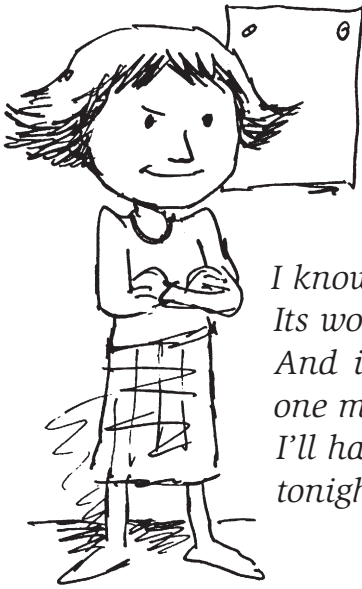
What happened to Mary’s lamb after that, no one in the room at the end of the hall knows for sure. But the next day everyone noticed a change in Mary. Whenever she started to slip down in her seat she suddenly flinched and slid upward. Over and over her head turned toward the door. She was alert. She was constantly on her guard.

“Mary, I see you are paying much better attention today,” said the tall teacher. “And I’m glad we have no more problem with your little lamb.”

The tall teacher had pinned yesterday’s assignment—the four-line poems—to the bulletin board. Of course, few students ever stop to read what’s on a bulletin board; it’s more

important to peel right past it and be the first one out the door at recess time. But if the third-graders in the room at the end of the hall had stopped to read Mary's poem, they might have found it interesting.

This is what it said:



*I know this pesky little lamb.
Its wool is snowy white.
And if it follows me to school
one more time,
I'll have lamb chops for dinner
tonight.*