

LITTLE MARY AND THE BIG BEAR

By Gretchen Woelfle

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ONE BRIGHT MAINE SUMMER MORNING, Mary Townsend jumped out of bed. She was going to the mill with Papa, for they had two bags of grain to grind into flour.

Mary skipped into the kitchen. "Is Major saddled yet?" she asked.

Papa looked up from his hot cakes. "It looks like Buttercup is going to have her calf today," he said, "so I'll need to stay home. We'll go another time."

"Please, Papa," begged Mary, "let me go by myself."

"You're only nine years old," Papa said, "and so small for your age."

"Mary may be small, but she's a dauntless soul," said Mama. Mary didn't know what "dauntless" meant, but it sounded brave.

"Please, Papa?" she said.

"All right," Papa said with a grin. "I know when I'm licked."

After breakfast, he tied the two sacks of wheat together and settled them on the horse's shoulders. Then he lifted Mary onto Major's back.

Soon Mary and Major were deep in the woods. The sun made shimmering shadows through the trees. *Clip, clop, clip, clop.* Old Major shuffled along, and Mary began to sing:

I'll not marry a man that's poor,

He'll go beg from door to door.

I'll not marry at all, at all,

I'll not marry at all.

Major shuffled a little faster, so Mary sang the second verse:

I'll not marry a man that's rich,

He'll get drunk and fall in the ditch.

I'll not marry at all, at all,

I'll not marry at all.

Major suddenly stopped and snorted. His ears stood up, and his neck grew stiff.

“What do you smell, Major?” Mary peered into the shadows. “What’s out there?”

She saw only deep green woods. All was still. Major moved forward, and Mary sang:

I'll not marry a man that's old,

He'll come home to fret and scold.

I'll not marry at all, at all,

I'll not marry at all.

Major snorted again and whirled around. Mary grabbed the reins, and when they faced forward once more, she saw a great black beast lumbering across the path.

A bear!

Major lunged sideways. Mary felt the grain sacks slip and pulled hard on the reins. “If you run away, I’ll fall off,” she moaned.

The bear peered at Mary from the path. He couldn’t see her very well, but he could smell her. He rose slowly on his hind legs. He was taller than Major, and his paws looked as big as frying pans. He growled way back in his throat.

Thump, thump, thump ... Mary felt Major’s heart beat against his ribs. She had to protect both him and herself.

“Oooow!” she bellowed desperately. “Oooow! Oooow!”

Soon her throat hurt, her arms ached from pulling the reins, and her knees shook from hanging on. Finally the bear dropped down on all fours, and Mary gathered her strength for one last bellow.

“OOOOW!”

This time the bear disappeared into the woods, and Mary heard branches snapping as he crashed through the underbrush. When all was quiet, she patted Major’s neck.

“Good boy,” she said.

Major trotted nervously past the spot where the bear had been. The grain sacks had slid lower, and Mary knew she mustn’t lose them. Up ahead she saw a watering trough where someone had set a hollow log to catch water trickling from a spring.

Mary slipped off Major’s back. While the horse drank, she tugged and pulled at the sacks. Mary listened for the bear, then held her hands under the trickle to get a drink.

The cool water soothed her sore throat. She walked Major to a boulder and scrambled back into the saddle.

“Hurry, Major, we’re almost there.” The horse broke into a trot.

At the mill she told Miller Jennings and Mr. Turner her story. “That old bear stood up and grinned at me, but I grinned right back and yelled, ‘Oooow.’ The bear ran off as fast as he could!”

“Mary Townsend, your fancy is playing tricks again.” Miller Jennings chuckled. “I haven’t heard of a bear around here since before you were born.”

“You probably saw a fat porcupine or a raccoon,” said Mr. Turner. “They might look as big as a bear to a little girl like you.” The two men laughed.

Mary walked outside. Sunlight sparkled on the water splashing through the wheel that turned the millstones to grind her flour. The men didn’t believe her just because she was small.

Miller Jennings took a share of flour as payment for his work. Then he set Mary on her horse and turned to his friend. “If a bear is roaming the woods, we can’t let the child risk meeting it again.”

Mary sat as tall as she could. “I may be small, but I’m a dauntless soul.”

“That you are,” admitted Mr. Turner. “Still and all, I’ll ride home with you.”

The sun was high, and the smell of pine filled the air. Major didn’t hurry, even when Mr. Turner’s horse nipped his backside.

When they came to the trough, the horses stopped to drink.

“I met the bear up there,” Mary said, pointing.

Mr. Turner walked ahead and knelt down. There in the mud were the biggest bear tracks he had ever seen.

“Mary Townsend, I declare,” he exclaimed, “you *are* a dauntless soul!”

Mary didn’t say a word. Instead, she started singing:

*I’ll not marry a man that’s young,
He’ll come home with a flatt’ring tongue.
I’ll not marry at all, at all,
I’ll not marry at all.*

* * * * *

This is a true story. Mary Townsend was born July 3, 1819, and when she grew up, she did marry after all. She and her husband, Thomas Smith, had a son and three daughters.

Mary Townsend Smith lived to be seventy-five years old, and even as an old woman, she was said to have “the brightest blue eyes you ever saw,” and she could still sing a tune perfectly in spite of her years.