

Fictionalizing the Country School

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Millions of children in the United States and Canada have been encouraged to read fiction set in country schools. For instance, Mark Twain's classic novel *Tom Sawyer* describes a resourceful young boy's efforts to catch and hold the attention of a pretty girl in his country-school classroom. *Anne of Green Gables* narrates the story of a Canadian orphan named Anne who batters the head of a schoolboy who teases her about her red hair. While these narratives are much beloved, they are generally ignored by historians of education, many of whom view fiction as an unreliable source. Allison Speicher challenges this view. Drawing from 130 fictive accounts of country schooling published between 1820 and the turn of the century, she argues that these fictive stories offer a wider range of viewpoints on the extension and reform of schooling than nonfiction accounts. Citing much evidence, she argues further that fictional stories helped Americans navigate the enormous changes in their nation and they were believed to be more effective in shaping viewpoints than nonfiction. In addition, she includes a published story set in a country school and analyzes its plot and characters.

—Ed.

By 1830, schooling played a part in most American childhoods. While urban charity schools, old-field schools, academies, female seminaries, and colleges all played important social roles, the most common form of schooling in the nineteenth century was the appropriately named common school, the historical precursor to the public school.¹ Whether or not they themselves experienced the pleasures and perils of a common school education, Americans were likely to encounter this familiar institution not just in their communities, but also on the pages of their favorite magazines. As common schools proliferated across the country, so too did they proliferate in American literature.

To date, I have recovered over 130 common school narratives, published in periodicals or in book form between 1820 and the turn of the twentieth century.² Not only did fiction about common schooling appear in education periodicals like the *American Educational Monthly*, but also in magazines targeted to a wide variety of audiences: women's magazines, literary periodicals, religious publications, children's magazines, cheap general interest magazines, reform periodicals, and agriculture periodicals. Although schooling developed differently in each region, narratives set in the South, the Midwest, the North, and the West prove strikingly alike, if not equally common. Common school narratives share a protagonist (a teacher), a setting (a rural community and its school), and a series of plotlines. As I show in my book, *Schooling Readers*,³ four major plots dominate the genre: the spelling bee and school exhibition, violence against teachers, student-teacher romance, and teachers adopting their students. Despite their popularity across the country and the century, however, common school narratives have long been lost to literary and education history. This loss has been unfortunate because collectively they offer a different and richer range of viewpoints on the expansion and reform of common schooling than we can gain from nonfiction sources.

These stories respond directly to the changing educational landscape of the period, especially the changes wrought by common school reform. By increasing the length of school terms and the number of years each student attended; improving the quality of teachers, textbooks, and school buildings; lowering the cost of schooling through tax support; and increasing school attendance, common school reformers promised grand social transformation. In a characteristic passage in his *Twelfth Annual Report* (1848), for example, leading school reformer Horace Mann proclaimed that in only two or three generations mass education would inaugurate heaven on earth by alleviating war, intemperance, and dishonesty, inspiring reverence for "institutions of learning and religion," and ensuring that only the best men gained political leadership.⁴ Though Mann's utopian vision never quite came to fruition, the nineteenth century was a period of great educational change. By 1860, thirty years into the reform movement, the once-controversial ideas that "schools should be supported by property taxes, should have greater uniformity, should be nonsectarian, should last for more than six months, and should be taught by trained, professional teachers" were widely accepted, though in the eyes of reformers much work remained to be done, particularly in rural areas.⁵

Fiction, I argue, played a substantive role in helping nineteenth-century Americans navigate these sweeping educational changes, inculcating within readers the spirit of reform or resistance to that reform. Given that their subject matter is education, school stories lend themselves to instruction particularly well: as Beverly Lyon Clark explains in her study of Victorian school fiction, “Schooling is, in part, a metaphor for the effect that the book is supposed to have.”⁶ The context in which common school narratives appeared, a historical moment when popular schooling was being debated and expanded, gives them their educational force. By offering a particular vision of what schooling did, could, or should look like, common school narratives intervened in the conversation surrounding education reform.

The Common School Narrative as Reform Literature

Many contemporary commentators had great faith in the educational potential of school fiction and its substantial impact on real schools. For example, in March 1857 the *American Journal of Education*, the most important education periodical of its time, ran a new feature entitled “The Popular School and the Teacher in English Literature.” This inaugural article was the first of many the journal published over the next nine years reviewing a long history of literary representations of schooling. Literary texts, the author of the article explains, are worthy to appear alongside “elaborate dissertations by the best writers and thinkers of different countries and ages, on the principles and methods of education” for two reasons. First, they are valuable as historical documents: “the character of the school and the teacher at any given period, is to some extent reflected in the popular writings of the day.” But school stories do not just reflect contemporary educational practices, the author continues. To a “still greater extent,” existing educational practices are “perpetuated by such representation,” as fiction normalizes these practices for readers.⁷

Many of his contemporaries shared this author’s sense of the educative nature of school fiction, but while he focuses on the role of fiction in preserving the status quo, others celebrated the ability of literature to challenge and correct existing educational practices. Nineteenth-century schoolchildren had reason to be thankful for school fiction, or so many of their elders believed. In the eyes of one reviewer, school reform was “more speedily advanced” by the circulation of school fiction than by treatises on education.⁸ School fiction was seen as a particularly effective means of disseminating educational thought because it would hold readers’

attention better than nonfiction and thus circulate more widely. Some went so far as to claim school fiction saved lives: one enthusiastic reader of Daniel Pierce Thompson's *Locke Amsden* (1847), for example, thanked the author for the "beautiful manner in which he has illustrated the subject of ventilating school houses," thus saving "thousands of children" from being "sent to a premature grave by diseases contracted, aye, created, in school rooms."⁹ Nor was such thinking restricted to the early days of school reform. Writing in 1892, Edward Eggleston (author of *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*) praised Dickens's *Dombey and Son* for doing more than the "soberest treatises on pedagogy to discourage the ancient mode of education by cramming, the only sort of infanticide permitted in civilized countries."¹⁰ In the eyes of these readers, common school narratives performed what María Carla Sánchez calls the "social work" of American literature, working to "alter the institutions, systems, and processes that order our lives," or, alternatively, to ensure they remain unaltered.¹¹ Fiction's reputed ability to change hearts and minds was particularly useful in the case of school reform, as reformers had little legal power and thus spread their message primarily through campaigns of persuasion.¹²

Case Study: Anna MacDonald's "Our District Schoolmaster" (1856)

To provide a taste of the genre and the insights it offers, I focus my analysis here on a single common school narrative, which is reproduced in full at the end of this article. Common school narratives are diverse, ranging from one-page magazine fictions to 500-page novels, from satires to tragedies to romances to paeans to public education. Although no single example is truly representative, looking closely at a single story allows for in-depth analysis and provides a solid introduction for readers unfamiliar with the genre. Close reading a single exemplar also helps to demonstrate my central claim, that these stories offered their nineteenth-century readers an education on education. "Our District Schoolmaster," written by Anna MacDonald, was published in March 1856 in *Ballou's Dollar Monthly Magazine*, a cheap story paper centered in Boston. The story takes on many of the major educational issues of its time, commenting upon corporal punishment, teacher qualifications, increasing educational opportunity for girls, education's relationship to social class, and the functions of schooling in the life course. In a few short pages, MacDonald manages to weigh in on a number of the major educational questions of her day, all the while offering her readers an amusing Cinderella story populated by a delightful, albeit predictable, cast of country school characters.

The story, narrated retrospectively by a student, opens at the beginning of the reign of a new teacher, Mr. Joseph Gray, about whose character the students are as yet uncertain. The story focuses on the social and extracurricular aspects of schooling, as opposed to curriculum and instruction, which is typical of the common school narrative, as is the question of discipline the story immediately raises. During a particularly raucous game at recess, the students upset the teacher's desk, including a bottle of ink, which spills all over the floor and the teacher's books. The students tremble in fear of their teacher's response when he returns to the classroom, which speaks volumes about the disciplinary methods employed by their previous instructors. In this way, MacDonald's story responds implicitly to contemporary discussions about corporal punishment, which was hotly debated starting in the 1840s.¹³ School reformers argued that corporal punishment should be used as little as possible; teachers should instead motivate and govern their students by engaging their "social and filial affections."¹⁴ Rather than coercing students to behave through the use of physical violence, moral suasion, as this technique was called, coaxed students to do so out of affection for their teacher and fear of losing that affection.¹⁵ Mr. Gray's response to his students' actions aligns him, and, by extension, MacDonald, closely with these reformist views. Rather than punishing the students, he forgives them, recognizing that the damage was accidental, and counsels them to be more careful in the future. This reaction stuns the students, who expect him to administer whippings. Mr. Gray's act of kindness even wins over their ringleader, a student who is nearly grown and "usually as stubborn as a mule." This student's transformation speaks to the power of moral suasion to subdue rebellious students without violence. With a single act, Mr. Gray "marched triumphantly into the affections and confidence" of all his students.¹⁶

Not only is Mr. Gray a model disciplinarian, but he is also a content expert, a relative rarity at this time. As late as 1910, more than one-third of all teachers had not completed high school, and both literature and the historical record reveal that many classrooms were staffed by poorly qualified individuals with little more (and, indeed, sometimes less) education than their students.¹⁷ Rather than reflecting this historical reality, MacDonald chooses to idealize her teacher-protagonist, offering a vote of confidence in common schooling. When he applies for his position and is examined by the school committee, Mr. Gray proves to be "[r]eady on every subject, prompt and clear with an answer to the most far-fetched question."¹⁸ Nor is intellect his only perfection. All the members of the community adore him, "for he had a kind word and a

cordial smile for all, from the old grandmamma” to “the innocent baby creeping about the floor.”¹⁹ At this time many teachers came into conflict with the communities they served because they were seen as educated outsiders interfering in local communities, harbingers of state intervention into local affairs. Indeed, one of the most common plotlines of school fiction is violence directed against teachers. But MacDonald instead presents Mr. Gray’s relationship with those he serves as peaceful and affectionate, thoroughly idealizing his bond not just with his students, but also with their families. Boarding around the community, he is treated as an honored guest, a sign of the high valuation of education.

But Mr. Gray offers this community more than just his kindness and intellect: he is also devastatingly attractive, at least in the eyes of his students. The narrator gushes, it “was a perfect delight to look at him,” with his “broad intellectual brow, from which masses of raven hair were carelessly thrown back; eyes, glorious with the light of enthusiasm and feeling; a mouth which for sweetness we thought could not be surpassed.”²⁰ All the young women in the story fantasize about him, much like the narrator does, but this story is not just a fantasy for schoolgirls: it’s a fantasy for schoolmen too. In an era when many a schoolmaster was a drifter, part-time laborer, or impecunious college student, MacDonald offers a flattering portrait of the schoolmaster as an independently wealthy man who teaches because he wants to, not because he needs to, bringing the benefits of his wealth and education to rural children. His character serves as a vote of confidence in teacher quality, working to entice parents to send their children to schools where they will be in such good hands. Many schoolmasters in mid-century fiction share Mr. Gray’s good looks and charm, and this seems striking, given that the feminization of teaching was occurring rapidly. Stories like MacDonald’s reassure readers that men can maintain their masculinity in the schoolroom, highlighting the role teaching could play in a young man’s path to happiness and success.

The story also offers a positive portrait of the role schools could play in the lives of young women. The expansion of common schooling, which was coeducational, meant the expansion of educational opportunities for girls and women. In an era of starkly differentiated gender roles, girls’ increasing educational attainments occasioned considerable anxieties. In 1790, men’s literacy rates were double women’s, but by the middle of the next century, literacy rates were roughly equal. This change, which has been attributed largely to girls’ increased access to schooling, accelerated over time: by 1870 girls aged ten to fourteen had surpassed boys in both

literacy and academic achievement.²¹ Could these educational attainments cause women to challenge their subservient social position and idealized domestic role? MacDonald's story assuages this anxiety, reassuring readers that girls can become educational achievers without deviating from a narrow ideal of femininity. Over the course of the story, Mr. Gray falls in love with his strongest student, Agnes Foster, "the pet and delight of the whole school."²² Like her teacher, Agnes is a wholly idealized figure, intelligent, empathetic, resourceful, retiring, and beautiful. Agnes is the smartest girl in school, and she is also the most desirable, still modest and chaste for all her book learning. Schooling has not compromised her femininity, as opponents of female education feared it might; rather, it has enhanced it, allowing her to build a bond with her teacher that is based on intellectual companionship, not the exercise of womanly wiles.

As I discuss in my book, *Schooling Readers*, romances like this one abound in nineteenth-century fiction, which suggests that such relationships were socially acceptable at the time. In many ways, the historical context differentiates common school romances from contemporary "hot for teacher" pop cultural texts and crisis-laden news coverage. The focus of common school narratives is on marriage, not solely on sex. Because schooling was not yet associated with credentialing, teachers were yet to become gatekeepers to prestige and employment.²³ Teachers were often quite young: the mean age of beginning teachers in rural schools in antebellum America was a mere fifteen; this rose only to age twenty by 1910.²⁴ During this time period most teachers did not have special training. They boarded around the community and socialized under community surveillance. Furthermore, their positions were short-term, and their tenure was maintained only at the community's pleasure. Therefore, there was significantly less social distance between teachers and their students in the nineteenth century than there is today. These differences help to explain the surprising acceptance of student-teacher romance. And even in the nineteenth century, some limitations were imposed on such relationships. Those school romances that have happy endings, as Agnes and Mr. Gray's does, follow strict rules. Both the teacher and student must be paragons and they must share an intellectual and emotional companionship, not an overtly erotic bond.²⁵ Neither partner manipulates or imposes feelings on the other, but the two come to a silent understanding that is eventually voiced, usually at the end of the school term.

As Agnes and Mr. Gray's romance fits these parameters, their love story prospers and, in turn, allows Agnes and her family to prosper. Agnes's mother loses her savings when a bank

fails, leading Mr. Gray to reveal that he is actually independently wealthy and only posed as a teacher to “see if I could be loved and esteemed for myself alone.”²⁶ Agnes is overjoyed by this turn of events, but feels unworthy of his love, as a “simple country girl” who “know[s] nothing of the world.” Mr. Gray assuages her anxieties, and the day following his proposal, the whole community is abuzz with the fact that “Agnes would live in a magnificent house, and need not lift a finger.” All “rejoiced at Agnes’s good fortune,” which, conveniently enough, includes an actual fortune.²⁷ Thanks to her exemplary character and academic prowess, Agnes is rewarded with financial security for herself and her family as well as true love. Though the plot is cliché, MacDonald uses it to offer subtle commentary not only on schooling’s effects on gender but also its role in the class system. Agnes’s marriage to her teacher is a reward for her personal and academic accomplishments: because she is a good student and a good girl, she will get to marry up. This marriage figures as an acceptable form of class-climbing, diverting readers’ potential concerns about the ability of the lower classes to use education to advance their social status by displacing class mobility onto a nonthreatening female character. Agnes uses love to advance her class status, but she does not do so on purpose, and as such her social mobility does not challenge the class system, as some nineteenth-century Americans feared the democratization of education would. Through the character of Agnes, MacDonald also allays fears that schooling will defeminize girls or lead them to pursue paths outside of domestic life. Due to the love of her teacher, Agnes will be safely shepherded from the schoolroom to the altar. In this way, MacDonald reinforces the dominant reformist rationale for girls’ education, that schooling provided preparation for wife- and motherhood.

In sum, this simple narrative has much to tell us about MacDonald’s perceptions of common schooling. The story communicates a clear pro-school message: the school is a site of personal growth and romantic love, the setting of Agnes’s Cinderella story. Under the guise of a love story, MacDonald builds a convincing case for the virtues of the common school and assuages fears about discipline, the feminization of teaching, the democratization of schooling, teacher qualifications, and female education. She does so while entertaining the reader, offering her version of a sentimental love story, so that the reader might imbibe her educational ideas without being entirely aware of doing so. Common school narratives often educate their readers in just this way: rather than overtly proclaiming its allegiance to common school reform and the expansion of coeducation, the story demonstrates the positive effects of both through the

narrative action and the characterization. This combination of implicit didacticism and popular appeal is precisely why many nineteenth-century commentators believed fiction could be a more powerful agent for spreading reformist ideology than treatises produced by reformers: many a reader who would never have picked up Horace Mann's *Twelfth Annual Report* would have read the affordable and widely circulated *Ballou's Dollar Monthly Magazine*.

MacDonald's story also exemplifies the nuance commonly present in the common school narrative. Her complex approach to schooling's relationship to class climbing, for example, offers a measured endorsement of education's ability to help individuals improve their class standing because Agnes's schooling does so only indirectly: she is not a young male upstart ready to use his educational attainments to challenge a more privileged peer for employment or prestige, a far more threatening figure to many nineteenth-century Americans. The same can be said of MacDonald's endorsement of female education. While the narrative celebrates Agnes's intellect and educational achievements and ultimately rewards them, the ending also reinscribes this bright young woman into the domestic role many viewed as ideal for women. The ending focuses on what Agnes *won't* have to do—"lift a finger"—not what she *will* do, or could do with her brains and character.

Reading the Common School Narrative in the Twenty-First Century

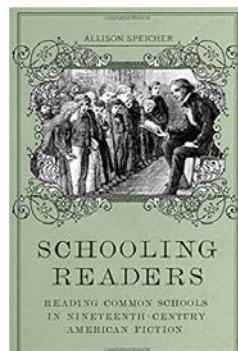
Because their authors navigate educational issues with nuance, common school narratives offer unique insights into the ways common school reform was negotiated by individuals whose daily lives the reforms affected. Fiction writers replace the amorphous school, teacher, and students present in the writings of reformers with *particularized* classrooms populated by teachers and students with names and narratives. Picturing school life on a daily basis in a single community dissolves generalizations, and thus the image of schooling that fiction offers is decidedly messier than that offered in nonfictional sources. Rarely offering straightforward resistance or unthinking approbation, fictions engage with common schooling and the work of reformers in complex ways, allowing today's reader to imagine what it was like to live through an era of significant educational change. Common school narratives offer portraits of an institution in flux, and they capture the thought process of nineteenth-century Americans attempting to make sense of what mass education would mean in the lives of individuals, communities, and the nation.

As I hope my reading of “Our District Schoolmaster” makes clear, common school narratives offer us insights not only into nineteenth-century schooling, but also into abiding educational concerns. These stories dramatize the effects of widespread public education on individuals and communities, reflecting hopes and fears about schooling that did not disappear as schooling expanded. While assembling my archive, I was continually struck by the fact that fictions so deeply rooted in the nineteenth-century educational landscape still seem so timely. Assessment, school violence, student-teacher romance, the teacher as parent-substitute: the four major plots of the common school narrative could just as easily be torn from contemporary headlines as from nineteenth-century fiction. The anxieties these stories raise—about gender and sexuality, class mobility and social stability, local needs and state imperatives, individual advancement and collective uplift—likewise remain familiar. Both their historical insights and their contemporary resonances make these stories worthy of our attention, and they are also a pleasure to read. These nineteenth-century stories still have much to teach us in the twenty-first, if only we are willing to learn.



Allison Speicher is an assistant professor of English at Eastern Connecticut State University, where she has worked for four years since earning her PhD in nineteenth-century American literature. At Eastern, she teaches American and children’s literature and works closely with future teachers. Her first book, *Schooling Readers: Reading Common Schools in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*, was published in 2016 by the University of Alabama Press.* She has also published articles about schools as depicted in literature in *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, the *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, *Partial Answers*, and *Connecticut Explored*. She serves as the co-editor of the *Country School Journal*.

*The research included in this article was conducted by Professor Speicher for her book, *Schooling Readers: Reading Common Schools in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*, a summary of which was presented at the 2017 Country School Association of America’s annual conference in Fredericksburg, TX. The University of Alabama Press has granted Professor Speicher permission to include research for her book in this article. To purchase the book, visit <http://www.uapress.ua.edu/product/Schooling-Readers,6424.aspx>



Notes

¹ Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 4.

² For a complete list, see the appendix to Allison Speicher, *Schooling Readers: Reading Common Schools in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016), 179-184. Although common schools appeared in both rural and urban locations, I found very few stories depicting urban schools, and most of these appeared late in the century. Accounts of common school history routinely separate their discussions of urban and rural schooling, as these two systems evolved rather differently, so I focus largely on rural country schools.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Horace Mann, “Report for 1848,” in *Annual Reports on Education* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1872), 708.

⁵ John L. Rury, *Education and Social Change: Themes in the History of American Schooling* (Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2009), 80.

⁶ Beverly Lyon Clark, *Regendering the School Story: Sassy Sissies and Tattling Tomboys* (New York: Garland, 1996), 7.

⁷ “The Popular School and the Teacher in English Literature,” *The American Journal of Education* 3, no. 8 (1857): 155.

⁸ “Literary Notices,” *The New-York Mirror: A Weekly Gazette of Literature and the Fine Arts*, July 27, 1833, 26.

⁹ “Ventilation Essential to Health,” *Christian Register*, December 9, 1848, 100.

¹⁰ Edward Eggleston, introduction to *The Schoolmaster in Literature*, ed. Hubert M. Skinner (New York: American Book Company, 1892), 6.

¹¹ María Carla Sánchez, *Reforming the World: Social Activism and the Problem of Fiction in Nineteenth-Century America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 4-5.

¹² Lawrence Cremin, *American Education, the National Experience, 1783-1876* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 136.

¹³ Rury, *Education and Social Change*, 81.

¹⁴ Horace Mann, quoted in Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 24.

¹⁵ Ibid., 17-19.

¹⁶ Anna MacDonald, “Our District Schoolmaster,” *Balou’s Dollar Monthly Magazine*, March 1856, 256.

¹⁷ Gerald Grant and Christine E. Murray, *Teaching in America: The Slow Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 85-86.

¹⁸ MacDonald, “Our District Schoolmaster,” 287.

¹⁹ Ibid., 286.

²⁰ Ibid., 287.

²¹ David B. Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Learning Together: A History of Coeducation in American Schools* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 1-2, 31, 116.

²² MacDonald, “Our District Schoolmaster,” 286.

²³ Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 152-53.

²⁴ Geraldine Joncich Clifford, “Man/Woman/Teacher: Gender, Family and Career in American Educational History,” in *American Teachers: Histories of a Profession at Work*, ed. Donald R. Warren (New York, Macmillan, 1989), 318.

²⁵ The idealization of both the hero and the heroine of this story, which is echoed in many other school romances, reveals the debt authors like MacDonald owe to the highly popular sentimental novel. The schoolgirls are the kind of flawless character that Nina Baym has identified as central to sentimental fiction. Like the “conventional hero” of the sentimental novel, each schoolmaster is an “admirer and respecter of women who likes the heroine as much or more than he lusts for her.” The likeness of these characters to those in sentimental fiction gives an ample hint of their source and helps explain why romance was so widely employed in school fiction: both the plot and the characters are familiar from a highly successful genre.

Nina Baym, *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and About Women in America, 1820-1870* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 35, 41.

²⁶ MacDonald, “Our District Schoolmaster,” 288.

²⁷ Ibid., 289.

Appendix

Anna MacDonald's "Our District Schoolmaster"

Originally published in Ballou's Dollar Monthly Magazine, March 1856, pages 285-289.

Grammar and spelling reflect the original text.

Many years have passed, since I went to school in that dear, old, comical-looking, brown school house, under the shadow of the hill. But the memories of those winters and summers when I trudged merrily to and fro over the shortest quarter of a mile ever known in my experience, seem yet very fresh, pleasant and beautiful. I always carried my dinner, and O, the splendid times we children looked forward to at noon-time, which was generally an hour long. Our dinners despatched with speed, and the sweeping of the school room achieved, we were then all ready for "Puss in the Corner," "Blindman's Buff," etc., which all who have played them know are very exciting games, and highly productive of bumped heads, torn pantalettes, loss of breath, and physical exhaustion generally; besides being very convenient arrangements for those who are particularly pleased with having their toes trodden upon.

I remember one day when we were in the full glory of a game of "Puss in the Corner," that John Sykes, one of the big boys, in a headlong dash for a corner, made a slight miscalculation in the definition of a straight line, and brought up with a crash against the master's desk, and as a natural consequence, over it went, and its miscellaneous contents lay scattered on the floor.

Hostilities were immediately suspended, and we stood aghast. There lay books, slate, a pile of corrected compositions, three rosy apples, a present to Mr. Gray from bright-eyed Lizzie Adams, rolling innocently about under the benches. But worse than all, the inkstand had had the insufferable impudence to empty its ebony-colored contents all over the floor, the new register, containing all our names, and the new copy-book, in which the master had just set new copies. Nothing had escaped, and what to do we knew not.

This was the first week of the winter school; we had a new teacher, and we did not yet know what his disposition was, whether pacific or pugnacious, and we were rather doubtful as to the consequences of the noon's performance. However, the overturn of the desk was a fixed fact, and there was nothing for it but to prepare and arrange matters as well as we could for the advent

of the master in the afternoon. John Sykes, rubbing his side, and looking rather solemn, wiped up the ink with the papers that could be gathered from our dinner baskets, we all the while rating him soundly for being so careless.

Before it drew near the time for the master to arrive, everything was prepared; the desk was in its place, its lid concealing the dreadful sight within; the black stains on the floor alone betrayed us. Never did the schoolmaster behold a more meek, well-behaved set of scholars than we were, when Mr. Gray rapped on the window with his ferule that afternoon to call the school to order. He sat down before his desk, not an eye but was riveted to the book; we dreaded to look that way, and I imagined John Sykes's feelings must be something like those of John Rogers at the stake.

The master's clear voice broke the spell. "I find my desk in rather a more disorderly state than when I left it. You played 'Puss in the Corner,' this noon, did you not? Some one ran against this desk and overturned it. It was an accident, and I freely forgive whoever did it, with a request that you will be more careful in future."

We were thunderstruck. The reaction was overwhelming. Forgiveness with a mild reproof, when we expected stern questionings, and a whipping for the most guilty one! We had been taught to look for very different proceedings, by the experience of former administrations in the Millwood district. It was too much for poor John Sykes, who was as tall as the master, and who had always been the bravado of the school. The kind voice, and the gentle manner, touched a tender chord in his heart, and he could not study his algebra lesson in peace, till he had been to Mr. Gray, told him that he was the unintentional author of the mischief, and begged his pardon for his carelessness. It was an astonishing condescension for John Sykes, he was usually as stubborn as a mule, and possessed the "don't care" spirit to perfection, and we all looked at him with perfect amazement, when he went up with such a penitent expression to the master's desk. Mr. Gray spoke to him with such a beautiful smile, that John was his firm friend ever after, and Mr. Gray marched triumphantly into the affections and confidence of us all, on the bridge of that simple act. It was the first time in our lives that a schoolmaster of Millwood district had behaved in such a manner about so serious a matter, accident or not, and children as we were, it gave us new opinions upon the system of moral government. After that, Mr. Gray had the respect and love of us all, from little Amy Foster, just learning to spell cat, up to John Sykes, and Dick Mansfield, studying algebra, and geometry.

There were about thirty scholars in “our district,” of all sizes and ages. I was fourteen that winter, and quite a tall girl for my age, but there were several girls in school, older than I. Bessie Allen, Carrie Mansfield, Mary Ellis, and Cora Linn. Bessie was a merry girl of sixteen, the veriest witch I ever saw, the heroine of merry makings, and the most ingenious of fun-contrivers. We called her our attorney general. (We had a class in United States government that winter.) Carrie Mansfield was postmaster general, because she had been appointed to transact all business of weight and importance connected with the post-office, an edifice consisting of three books built up together, and covered with a pocket-handkerchief, which was lifted for the deposition of inch-square letters, postage twenty-five cents, *paid*. Mary Ellis, queen of the spelling contests, was elected secretary of state. Cora Linn, a fair haired angel, whom we all loved, acted as secretary of the home department, while I was named secretary of war, an appointment which I stoutly declined, till I found I was reduced to “Hobson’s choice, that or none,” for secretary of the navy did not mean anything and ditto of the treasury would have been splendid, but unfortunately there was no money to be taken care of.

My office was a responsible one I can tell you, for on me devolved the task of arranging amicably, all little squabbles, and of being a mediator between contending parties, excepting all cases in which I was a party myself, then, of course I could not act. Was not ours an august cabinet, gentle reader? But I have not told you about the president yet. She was dear, lovely Agnes Foster, the pet and delight of the whole school. Not a girl that did not trust and look up to her, nor a boy, but would give up the best sliding-place, and resign the swiftest sled to her. She was sixteen, fresh and lovely as the roses of June. She and her little sister Amy were the only children of their widowed mother. They were very poor, now, and Agnes was striving to gain an education sufficient to qualify her for the situation of teacher in some academy or select school. To her we went for sympathy in childish troubles, to her we carried a knotty question in grammar, or a puzzling sum in fractions; the same kind smile always comforted us, and her calm mind and patient skill helped us speedily to overcome the difficulty.

Agnes was beautiful, though she seemed perfectly unconscious of it, and that was the greatest charm of all. The girls were always praising her, calling her eyes “blue violets,” and her hair “braided sunbeams,” her cheeks “damask roses,” and her teeth “pearls set in coral.” But she always laughed, and told us we need not imagine she believed our nonsense, that we must see her through green spectacles, etc. Mary Ellis said, “sure enough, the glasses are love, and the

bridge and bows are made of your goodness." We called this very smart of Mary Ellis, and admired it enthusiastically. We used to imagine that Mr. Gray stayed at her desk longer when he wrote her copies, or explained her geometry propositions, from some unaccountable reason, than he did to any of ours, and Mary Ellis actually declared that Mr. Gray's eyes had a peculiar expression when Aggie Foster was reciting, but of course it was all imagination, we thought. Mr. Gray "boarded round," and great were the preparations at home, and great the joy of the delegation from the family, when it came their turn to escort the master home with them from school.

The tea-table was set with mince and pumpkin pie, doughnuts, cheese, dried beef, pickles, and from two to five kinds of preserves. The more viands of the table could be made to contain, the better, for no precious culinary stores were spared when Mr. Gray came. The parents admired him as much as the scholars, for he had a kind word and a cordial smile for all, from the old grandmamma, holding her knitting work in the corner, with thin and withered fingers, to the innocent baby creeping about the floor. He could talk of politics and agricultural improvements with the fathers, with as much ease, and to as perfect satisfaction, as he could invent new games, and tell little stories for the children. In short, all regarded him as a paragon of teachers, and the most charming of men. Joseph Gray was indeed a pattern young man. He had come into town the week before school was to commence, and stopped at the village inn. None knew from whence he came or whither he was going, he did not take pains to gratify any one's curiosity on these points. When school-meeting night came, and the committee men of Millwood district assembled into the old school-house, Joseph Gray presented himself there as a candidate for the office of teacher. He declined presenting testimonials, acknowledged himself a stranger to all in the town, but he asked for a month's trial, and if at the end of that period the district were not satisfied, he would resign the situation, and require no compensation for the month's time. This was rather a singular proposal, but it was a very generous one certainly; and after some consultation, Deacon Sykes and Squire Ellis agreed to install Mr. Gray lord and sovereign over our seven by nine brown school-house. Mr. Gray had informed the committee that he was as well qualified for the post as district school teachers are generally expected to be, and expressed himself ready for the examination. Armed with a formidable array of geography and arithmetic, Mr. Ellis and Major Thornton commenced operations. They considered themselves an examining committee "par excellence," "*au fait*" at all puzzling questions, and attacks upon points least expected. Many a

poor youth had they led into an arithmetical or grammatical quagmire, in which he floundered, and vainly endeavored to escape. This time they found their match. Mr. Gray was a little more than enough for both of them. Ready on every subject, prompt and clear with an answer to the most far-fetched question, the committee vainly tried to trip him up with an arithmetical problem, or turn a geographical stumbling block in his way. Major Thornton's great gun, the famous plaster sum, among the miscellaneous questions in Adams's arithmetic, was fired off in such an expert and masterly manner, that it provoked an emphatic expression of admiration from that gentleman, and the proposition of Euclid, the triangle described in a circle, another bugbear, was vanquished in an equally sure and speedy manner. Squire Ellis took off his spectacles, Major Thornton looked at Squire Ellis, and that gentleman returned the compliment. The looks said as plainly as words, "*I am perfectly satisfied, are not you?*" In fact they were both delighted, and decided that if Mr. Gray's governing talents were as good as his book-learning, Millwood district had gained a treasure indeed. The school went on as I have before described it. Dismiss Mr. Gray indeed! Every day he increased in value, and every day we loved him better.

It was a perfect delight to look at him, for he was very handsome. A broad intellectual brow, from which masses of raven hair were carelessly thrown back; eyes, glorious with the light of enthusiasm and feeling; a mouth which for sweetness we thought could not be surpassed, and you have his portrait. Mr. Joseph Gray and his perfections formed a subject for perpetual discussion in the councils of that august body, "our cabinet." We might start upon themes as far removed from it, as the Black Sea is from Lake Superior, but by some strange and irresistible influence we always came round to Mr. Gray at last.

How amused he would have been if he had heard our nonsense. We used to wonder if his right ear ever troubled him with a certain burning sensation which the old sign declares one to experience, when people are saying good things of them; but we were never ascertained the truth of the matter in regard to Mr. Gray.

From some inexplicable cause, we never could get Agnes Foster to say one word in praise or blame of Mr. Gray. She listened with a smile to our talk, but in vain we tried to extract any sort of an opinion of him, from her. One day Carrie Mansfield, fairly out of patience, broke forth: "Why, Agnes Foster, I do think you are the strangest girl I ever saw in my life. I've been trying here half an hour to get you to talk about Mr. Gray, and you won't even acknowledge that he's handsome. You think him a fright, I suppose. Pray tell me if you consider him at all to be

compared in beauty to old Daddy Dickman, who carries the mail, and who wears a gray wig, and smells of whiskey?"

The tears came into Agnes's eyes. Carrie was melted in an instant, and begged pardon for her sneering tone.

"Indeed," said Aggie, "you do me injustice; those that say the least, sometimes think the most. Because I do not lavish praises on Mr. Gray so enthusiastically as you do, or talk myself breathless in admiration of his talents or his fine face, do you think I dislike him, or do not appreciate him? You are famously mistaken. He has not a warmer friend in school than myself, and I do not consider it necessary to say more. There he comes now."

We were in our seats and studying our lessons as demurely as possible—with a most unconscious air—when he entered the room.

December, January and February fled by, and it was the first of March, just a week before the close of school. How we dreaded to give up Mr. Gray. School had been a delightful place, and the winter had seemed so short. Where had the days and weeks gone?

One morning, two or three days before examination, Agnes Foster came to school with a very sad expression on her beautiful face, and her eyes looked as if she had been weeping. With eager questionings we gathered around our favorite, and in a faltering voice, she told us that her mother had the evening before received news that the bank in which her little all was invested had failed, and she had lost every farthing she possessed, and they had not enough money left to pay their rent. They must leave Millwood and go to the far west, where they had relatives in moderate circumstances, who would lend them the money to pay for travelling expenses. What they were to do there she knew not. Poor Agnes, our hearts bled for her. Generous Cora Linn cried: "O, if I only had money of my own, I would make up all you have lost. In the midst of the sorrowful scene, Mr. Gray came in. Agnes flew to her seat, and bent her head over her book, to hide her tears from him; we all remained standing by the desk, undecided what to do. The master looked inquiringly from one to another. "What is the matter?" said he, at length; "and why do I see such sad faces? what has happened?"

Carrie Mansfield, without seeing Agnes's agonized telegraphings to her to stop, told Mr. Gray the story in a low tone. He changed color, and looked more agitated than we had ever seen him. He went and sat down by her side at once.

“Dear Agnes,” said he, possessing himself of her hand, spite of her gentle opposition, “what is this that Carrie has been telling me? Is it indeed true?” Agnes bowed tearfully. “I feel for you deeply,” said he, “tell your mother I will call on her this evening, perhaps I can be of service to you in your distress.”

Agnes gave him one grateful, admiring look, and took refuge in her open geometry, lying upon her desk, to hide her blushes and tears. Mr. Gray said no more. We fancied he looked unusually happy all that day, but never did he seem so absent-minded. We did not know what had possessed the man. He sent out little Sammy Jones after an armful of wood, and when he appeared with it, told him to bring it to the desk and he would show him how to spell it. In our history class, he said “very well,” when stupid Sarah Wright put the Norman conquest in Queen Anne’s reign, and smiled at Mary Jones when she told him that William Carlton was the author of the Gunpowder plot.

Mr. Gray’s eyes looked at Agnes, when she passed out of the school-room, that afternoon to go home, with an intense expression that brought the crimson blush to her forehead. You may imagine we felt interested in Mr. Gray’s movements that evening. Carrie Mansfield, at whose house he was boarding for a day or two, promised to watch his operations and report to the cabinet the next day.

Joseph Gray came home to Squire Ellis’s from school, and went straight to his room, staying there till tea-time. Carrie told us his behaviour at table was as mysterious as it had been at school. Nobody could get him to talk. His cup of tea was untouched, and all he did was to keep up appearances with a piece of biscuit and butter in one hand, and pretend to eat preserved plums with the other. Tea over, that gentleman, telling Carrie with a bland smile he was going out, asked her for his hat. As soon as she had brought it, he seized it with nervous haste, and escaped from the house. Carrie began to guess at the state of matters, and she rightly guessed, Mr. Gray was in love with our Agnes. No wonder he was absent-minded, poor man. Young gentlemen in his state of mind are apt to be, and Carrie went about washing the tea-dishes, wishing Mr. Gray success, and fancying how happy Agnes would be with him.

Mr. Gray made the best of his way to Mrs. Foster’s abode, and his hand trembled as he knocked at the door. Agnes opened it; “How kind you are, Mr. Gray,” she said; “my mother will be very glad to see you.”

Stooping his head to enter the low door of the sitting-room, he took a chair beside Mrs. Foster, who thanked him with earnestness for his kindness in coming to them.

“Listen to me a few moments, Mrs. Foster,” said he, “and perhaps you will alter your opinion of the disinterested benevolence you say I possess. I am come, not to restore you a treasure, but to ask one of you. You know the scripture proverb, ‘from him that hath not, shall be taken away, even that which he hath.’”

Mrs. Foster was speechless with astonishment. Mr. Gray’s eyes looked for Agnes. She was sitting the other side of the room leaning her elbow on the table, the color coming and going on her sweet face. Mr. Gray continued: “Allow me to tell you a short story. I came to Millwood an utter stranger to all its good people. I came, seeking to escape from the emptiness of fashionable life. I wanted to find a rest, and a refreshing change, in a quiet, simple life, in a country village, and see if I could be loved and esteemed for myself alone. Why should my wealth and position forever be my only title to public favor? I presented myself as a district school teacher, and was accepted. No time in my life has been happier to me than this winter, for I have felt a thousand times repaid for the sacrifice I have made, in assuming a humbler capacity than I ever dreamed I could fill contentedly, by the love I feel sure my beloved pupils have felt for me, and the kindness I have found everywhere. And my dear madam,” Mr. Gray’s voice became more earnest, “I seek your daughter, and I ask you to give her to me as the richest treasure I ever can possess. If I can teach her to love me,” and he turned with a passionate glance to Agnes, who sat transfixed with astonishment, “I promise to devote my life to make her happy. Will you give her to me, if she herself is not averse to the transfer?”

The widow sat silent. She could not speak. At last she said: “You are too kind, too generous. I cannot realize all this. Agnes must decide. If she loves you as you desire, we are *too* happy;” and she left the room to hide her emotion.

“Agnes,” said Mr. Gray, “you have heard my story. I have sometimes fancied that as a schoolmaster I could win your love; shall I fail to do so in my *new* capacity?” and again his eyes seemed to read her very soul.

Agnes made a brave effort to speak calmly. “Mr. Gray,” she said, “how could I help loving you long ago? But I am not fit to be your bride—I am simply a country-girl—I know nothing of the world, and should disgrace you in your own rank. I am not worthy of you.”

“Let *me* be the judge of that,” said Joseph Gray, holding fast both her hands. “If you can love me, that is all I ask. To be loved for myself alone, is the proudest joy that could ever come to my heart. Dear Agnes, you have made me happier than I ever dreamed I could be.”

The next day the story went flying all over the village, “how the school teacher had turned out to be a very rich man, who had only taught school because he liked it, and not at all for the eighteen dollars a month.” “How he had offered himself to sweet Agnes Foster, and been accepted, and her mother had ‘concluded not to go west at present,’” and “how Agnes would live in a magnificent house, and need not lift a finger.” Everybody rejoiced at Agnes’s good-fortune. You can imagine there was quite an exciting time at the next meeting of the cabinet, and many significant looks were launched from roguish eyes at poor Aggie, who endured them with the patience of a martyr.

School closed and Mr. Gray went away. In two or three days came a thick letter directed to “Miss Agnes Foster, Millwood,” in the same graceful hand that wrote the copies in our writing books.

In June, Mr. Gray came back to Millwood, what for, we could guess without the slightest difficulty. The roses that twined her hair were not so fresh and beautiful as “our Agnes,” when she stood by Mr. Gray’s side, on her wedding morning.

Cora Linn and Mary Ellis were bridesmaids, and they said so, and we all believed them, of course. Mr. Gray took Agnes away from us to his splendid home, and so the cabinet lost its president.