

AN OLD-FASHIONED THANKSGIVING

By Louisa May Alcott

In the Public Domain

NOVEMBER had come to the New Hampshire hills. The crops were in, and barn, buttery, and bin were overflowing with the harvest that rewarded the summer's hard work. The big kitchen was a jolly place just now, for in the great fireplace roared a cheerful fire; on the walls hung garlands of dried apples, onions, and corn; up aloft from the beams shone crook-necked squashes, juicy hams, and dried venison—for in those days deer still haunted the deep forests. Savory smells were in the air; on the crane hung steaming kettles, and down among the red embers copper saucepans simmered.

A white-headed baby lay in the old blue cradle that had rocked seven other babies, now and then lifting his head to look out, like a round, full moon, then subsided to kick and crow contentedly, and suck the rosy apple he had no teeth to bite. Two small boys sat on the wooden settle shelling corn for popping. Four young girls stood at the long dresser, busily chopping meat, pounding spice, and slicing apples; and the tongues of Tilly, Prue, Roxy, and Rhody went as fast as their hands. Farmer Bassett and Eph, the oldest boy, were "chorin' round" outside, for Thanksgiving was at hand, and all must be in order for that time-honored day.

To and fro, from table to hearth, bustled Mrs. Bassett, flushed and floury, but busy as the queen bee of this busy little hive should be.

"I do like to begin seasonable and have things to my mind. 'Thanksgivin' dinners can't be drove, and it does take a sight of victuals to fill all these hungry stomicks," said the good woman, as she gave a vigorous stir to the great kettle of cider applesauce, and cast a glance at the fine pies set forth on the buttery shelves.

Tilly, the oldest girl, a red-cheeked, black-eyed lass of fourteen, was grinding briskly at the mortar, for spices were costly, and not a grain must be wasted. Prue kept time with the chopper, and the twins sliced away at the apples till their arms ached, for all knew how to work, and did so now with a will.

"Come, girls, fly round and get your chores done, so we can clear away for dinner jest as soon as I clap my bread into the oven," called Mrs. Bassett presently, as she rounded off the last loaf of brown bread.

"Here's a man comin' up the hill lively!" shouted Sol and Seth, running to the door.

It was a stranger, who threw himself off his horse and hurried up to Mr. Bassett in the yard, with some brief message that made the farmer drop his ax and look so sober that his wife guessed at once some bad news had come.

The man said old Mr. Chadwick stopped him as he passed, and told him to tell Mrs. Bassett her mother was failin' fast, and she'd better come today. He knew no more, and having delivered his errand he rode away, saying it looked like snow and he must be jogging, or he wouldn't get home till night.

"We must go right off, Eldad. Hitch up, and I'll be ready in less'n no time," said Mrs. Bassett, wasting not a minute in tears and lamentations, but pulling off her apron as she went in. By the time the old yellow sleigh was at the door, the bread was in the oven, and Mrs. Bassett was waiting, with the baby done up like a small bale of blankets.

"Now, Eph, you must look after the cattle like a man, and keep up the fires, for there's a storm brewin', and neither the children nor dumb critters must suffer," said Mr. Bassett, as he turned up the collar of his rough coat and put on his blue mittens, while the old mare shook her bells as if she preferred a trip to Keene to hauling wood all day.

"Tilly, put extry comfortables on the beds tonight, the wind is so searchin' up chamber. Have the baked beans and Injun-puddin' for dinner, and whatever you do, don't let the boys git at the mince pies, or you'll have them down sick. I shall come back the minute I can leave Mother. Pa will come tomorrer, anyway, so keep snug and be good. I depend on you, my darter; use your jedgment, and don't let nothin' happen while Mother's away."

"Yes'm, yes'm—good-bye, good-bye!" called the children, as Mrs. Bassett was packed into the sleigh and driven away, leaving a stream of directions behind her.

The few flakes that caused the farmer to predict bad weather soon increased to a regular snowstorm, with gusts of wind, for up among the hills winter came early and lingered long. But the children were busy, gay, and warm indoors, and never minded the rising gale nor the whirling white storm outside.

Tilly got them a good dinner, and when it was over the two elder girls went to their spinning, for in the kitchen stood the big and little wheels, and baskets of wool-rolls, ready to be twisted into yarn for the winter's knitting.

Eph kept up a glorious fire, and superintended the small boys, who popped corn and whittled boats on the hearth; while Roxy and Rhody dressed corncob dolls in the settle corner.

At sunset the boys went out to feed the cattle, bring in heaps of wood, and lock up for the night, as the lonely farmhouse seldom had visitors after dark. The girls got the simple supper of brown bread and milk, baked apples, and doughnuts as a treat. Then

they sat before the fire, the sisters knitting, the brothers with books or games, for Eph loved reading.

When the moon-faced clock behind the door struck nine, Tilly tucked up the children under the “extry comfortables,” and having kissed them all around, as Mother did, crept into her own nest, never minding the little drifts of snow that sifted in upon her coverlet between the shingles of the roof, nor the storm that raged without.

When they woke it still snowed, but they broke the ice in their pitchers, and went down with cheeks glowing like winter apples, after a brisk scrub and scramble into their clothes. Eph was off to the barn, and Tilly soon had a great kettle of mush ready, which, with milk warm from the cows, made a wholesome breakfast for the seven children.

“Now about dinner,” said Tilly, as the pewter spoons stopped clattering, and the earthen bowls stood empty.

“Ma said, have what we liked, but she didn’t expect us to have a real Thanksgiving dinner, because she won’t be here to cook it, and we don’t know how,” began Prue, doubtfully.

“I can roast a turkey and make a pudding as well as anybody, I guess. The pies are all ready, and if we can’t boil vegetables, we don’t deserve any dinner,” cried Tilly. “All you children have got to do is to keep out of the way, and let Prue and me work. Eph, I wish you’d put a fire in the best room, so the little ones can play there. We shall want the settin’ room for the table,” commanded Tilly, bound to make her short reign a brilliant one.

Now Tilly and Prue were in their glory, and as soon as the breakfast things were out of the way, they prepared for a grand cooking time. They rolled up their sleeves, put on their largest aprons, and got out all the spoons, dishes, pots, and pans they could find.

“Now, sister, we’ll have dinner at five; Pa will be here by that time if he is coming tonight, and be so surprised to find us all ready, for he won’t have had any very nice victuals if Gran’ma is so sick,” said Tilly importantly. “I shall give the children a piece at noon; doughnuts and cheese, with apple pie and cider will please ’em. There’s beans for Eph; he likes cold pork, so we won’t stop to warm it up, for there’s lots to do, and I don’t mind saying to you I’m dreadful dubersome about the turkey.”

“It’s all ready but the stuffing, and roasting is as easy as can be. I can baste first rate. Ma always likes to have me, I’m so patient and stiddy, she says,” answered Prue.

“I know, but it’s the stuffin’ that troubles me,” said Tilly, rubbing her round elbows as she eyed the immense fowl laid out on a platter before her.

“Well, I’ll get the puddin’ off my mind fust, for it ought to bile all day. Put the big kettle on, and see that the spit is clean, while I get ready.”

Tilly attacked the plum pudding. She felt pretty sure of coming out right here, for she had seen her mother do it so many times, it looked very easy. So in went suet and fruit; all sorts of spice, to be sure she got the right ones; and brandy instead of wine. But she forgot both sugar and salt, and tied it in the cloth so tightly that it had no room to swell, so it would come out as heavy as lead and as hard as a cannonball, if the bag did not burst and spoil it all. Happily unconscious of these mistakes, Tilly popped it into the pot, and proudly watched it bobbing about before she put the cover on and left it to its fate.

“I can’t remember what flavorin’ Ma puts in,” she said, when she had got her bread well soaked for the stuffing. “I can’t feel sure of anything but pepper and salt for a turkey. Seems to me it’s sweet marjoram or summer savory. I guess we’ll put both in, and then we are sure to be right. The best is up garret; you run and get some, while I mash the bread,” commanded Tilly, diving into the mess.

Away trotted Prue, but in her haste she got catnip and wormwood, for the garret was darkish, and Prue’s nose was so full of the smell of the onions she had been peeling, that everything smelt of them. She pounded up the herbs and scattered the mixture into the bowl.

“It doesn’t smell just right, but I suppose it will when it’s cooked,” said Tilly, as she filled the turkey and sewed it up with the blue yarn, which happened to be handy. She forgot to tie down his legs and wings, but she set him by till his hour came, well satisfied with her work.

It took a long time to get all the vegetables ready, for, as the cellar was full, the girls thought they would have every sort. Eph helped, and by noon all was ready for cooking, and the cranberry sauce, a good deal scorched, was cooling in the lean-to.

Luncheon was a lively meal, and doughnuts and cheese vanished in such quantities that Tilly feared no one would have an appetite for her sumptuous dinner. But the boys assured her they would be starving by five o’clock.

“Now you all go and coast, while Prue and I set the table and get out the best chiny,” said Tilly, bent on having her dinner look well, no matter what its other failings might be.

Eph took his fiddle and scraped away to his heart’s content in the parlor, while the girls, after a short rest, set the table and made all ready to dish up the dinner when that exciting moment came. It was not at all the sort of table we see now, but would look very plain and countrified to us, with its green-handled knives and two-pronged steel forks; its red-and-white china, and pewter platters, scoured till they shone, with mugs and spoons to match, and a brown jug for the cider. The cloth was coarse, but

white as snow, and the girls had seen the blue-eyed flax grow, out of which their mother wove the linen they had watched and watered while it bleached in the green meadow. They had no napkins and little silver; but Ma's few wedding spoons were set forth in state. Nuts and apples at the corners gave an air, and the place of honor was left in the middle for the oranges yet to come.

"Don't it look beautiful?" said Prue, when they paused to admire the general effect.

"Pretty nice, I think. I wish Ma could see how well we can do it," said Tilly. The short afternoon had passed so quickly that twilight had come before they knew it. They were just struggling to get the pudding out of the cloth when Rosy called out, "Here's Pa!"

"There's folks with him," added Rhody.

"Lots of 'em! I see two big sleighs chock-full," shouted Seth, peering through the dusk.

"I see Aunt Cinthy, and Cousin Hetty—and there's Mose and Amos. I do declare, Pa's bringin' 'em all home to have some fun here," cried Prue, as she recognized one familiar face after another.

"Hooray for Pa! Hooray for Thanksgivin'!"

The cheer was answered heartily, and in came Father, Mother, Baby, aunts and cousins, all in great spirits, and all much surprised to find such a festive welcome awaiting them.

"Ain't Gran'ma dead at all?" asked Sol, in the midst of the kissing and handshaking.

"Bless your heart, no! It was all a mistake of old Mr. Chadwick's. He's as deaf as an adder, and when Mrs. Brooks told him Mother was mendin' fast, and she wanted me to come down today, he got the message all wrong, and give it to the fust person passin' in such a way as to scare me 'most to death, and send us down in a hurry. Mother was sittin' up as chirk as you please, and dreadful sorry you didn't all come."

"So to keep the house quiet for her, and give you a taste of the fun, your pa fetched us all up to spend the evenin', and we are goin' to have a jolly time to judge by the looks of things," said Aunt Cinthy. Tilly and Prue were so elated by the commendation of Ma and the aunts that they set forth their dinner, sure everything was perfect.

But when the eating began, which it did the moment wraps were off, then their pride got a fall; for the first person who tasted the stuffing (it was big Cousin Mose, and that made it harder to bear) nearly choked over the bitter morsel.

“Tilly Bassett, whatever made you put wormwood and catnip in your stuffin’?” demanded Ma, trying not to be severe, for all the rest were laughing, and Tilly looked ready to cry.

“I did it,” said Prue, nobly taking all the blame, which caused Pa to kiss her on the spot, and declare that it didn’t do a mite of harm, for the turkey was all right.

“I never seen onions cooked better. All the vegetables is well done, and the dinner a credit to you, my dears,” declared Aunt Cinthy.

The pudding was an utter failure, in spite of the blazing brandy in which it lay—as hard and heavy as a stone. It was speedily whisked out of sight, and all fell upon the pies, which were perfect. But Tilly and Prue were much depressed, and didn’t recover their spirits till the dinner was over and the evening fun well under way.

When Eph struck up “Money Musk” on his fiddle, old and young fell into their places for a dance. All down the long kitchen they stood, Mr. and Mrs. Bassett at the top, the twins at the bottom, and then away they went, heeling and toeing, and taking their steps.

Apples and cider, chat and singing, finished the evening, and after a grand kissing all round, the guests drove away in the clear moonlight which came just in time to cheer their long drive.

When the jingle of the last bell had died away, Mr. Bassett said soberly, as they stood together on the hearth, “Children, we have special cause to be thankful that the sorrow we expected was changed into joy, so we’ll read a chapter ’fore we go to bed, and give thanks where thanks is due.”