

The Stroll-away Sunbeam.

A sunbeam blithe, in the early day,
Left its father and strolled away
To find the dark. But all in vain
It nestled at bedtime back again.

But, father, I could not find the dark,
And the father kissed his child, and said:
'Of course you couldn't, young sleepy-head
Why, 'tis the truth as everyone knows—
There is no dark where a sunbeam goes!

We must treasure our sunbeams each little one,
And think of the words of the father sun,
When care on the home its darkness throws—
'There is no dark where a sunbeam goes.'

—Agnes Lee.

The Widow's Thanksgiving Dinner.

Mrs. Thomson laid down her crochet work and glanced nervously across the table at Martie Trask, her maid and distant cousin.

'Martie, I am going to give a dinner party Thanksgiving.'

'What?'

At that single word, clear-cut and aggressive, the courage of the mistress visibly waned.

'Don't you think it would be nice, Martie, for us to ask some of our relatives to eat dinner with us that day—your ma and Tillie, you know, and Flora's folks?'

No sound broke the stillness for the space of two minutes save the ticking of the clock on the mantel, and the crackling of the open wood fire. Evidently Martie was considering the matter.

She was a tall, buxom girl of twenty with a round, freckled face, blue eyes and an abundance of curly red hair. For four years she had been an inmate of the Thomson home, and had come to look upon her cousin and all her belongings, especially those that pertained to the kitchen, as under the command of Miss Martie Trask.

'Yes,' she said, nodding her head, 'we'll do it. I do get so awfully tired cookin' for just us two. We'll get 'em up a right good meal,' and Martie pushed back the cuffs of her red calico dress, as it about to begin operations at once.

Mrs. Thomson flushed with pleasure. She was a little woman whose dark face was still untouched by time. A rose-pink dyed her cheeks, her brown eyes were limpid, and the grey hair brushed back from her brow made a quaint frame for the expressive countenance.

'I'm real glad you approve, Martie, though, of course, it needn't have made any great difference,' she added, hastily, for she was always asserting her independence in a half-hearted way that deceived no one.

Martie chuckled wisely. 'No, course it needn't, but—' and she paused significantly. The next moment she went on in a more gracious tone, 'Howsomever, 'bout the party. Sixteen is all that can set down to the table when it's stretched, without crowdin'. There's you and me, ma and sister Tillie and her man Tim, and little Tim. That's six. Then I s'pose you'll want Flora Campbell and her family, though I don't know what you see in her, nor'n your other relations. There's five of the Campbell's, five and six, 'leven. Who else?'

'Uncle Leander and Cousin Cyrilla.'

'Course, Thirteen. S'pose Ben Burton and his stylish wife would come clear from Lawton if we should ask 'em?'

'I think so. At least we will try. That is fifteen, and I don't know of anyone else, do you?' and the flush deepened on the cheek of the widow, while she steadily avoided meeting Martie's eye.

'Well, I guess I do. You don't mean to tell me Cousin Sary Thomson, that you'd be mean enough to give a Thanksgiving dinner and not ask Dave Merchant, and him your third cousin, and a miserable old bachelor at that?'

'I do you really think we ought to ask David?'

'Well, I should say so. You write your invites to them as lives off and I'll see 'bout the folks here. One thing, Sary, one turkey won't be 'nough.'

'We will have two turkeys and four chickens. We shall want two chicken pies.'

'Course, and some kind of cold meat. Might have pickled tongue.'

'And a veal loaf. We will have that, for I remember Da—, oh, ah, what was it Martie?'

'Why, I believe you air gittin' frustrated over this, and Martie eyed her companion suspiciously. 'You needn't. I'll tend to things. Have veal loaf if you want it, though I don't set no great store by it. It's lucky we made them fruit cakes last month; they'll just be prim. I'll make that new chocolate cake I learned of Mary Long. That'll be cake 'nough, won't it, with doughnuts and crullers?'

'I will make a pound cake after mother's old recipe,' Mrs. Thomson said dreamily. 'We always had one for Thanksgiving when we were young.'

'Dreadful old-fashioned,' Martie retorted sniffling contemptuously, 'but I don't care.'

Then there must be mince pies and pumpkin pies and cranberry tarts. Oh, we'll have a good dinner. Well, I guess I'll go to bed now, so's to get up early in the mornin' and begin things. You'll want to write your letters, I s'pose.'

'Yes, I think so,' was the absent reply. Martie lighted another lamp and retired into her own room, leaving the mistress of the farmhouse alone. She manifested no desire to set about letter-writing, however, but leaned back in her comfortable rocker, and, as her eyes rested on the mass of glowing embers in the grate, her mind went back to the days of her youth, when she had pledged her troth to this same David Merchant.

That was twenty-five years ago. How happy they had been! But, in a few months they had quarreled over a trifle and David went west. For two years she waited, hoping for a word or sign, but hoping in vain. Then she married James Thomson.

She sighed as she remembered the years that followed. There had been no unkindness from the man whose name she bore. Still there had been a narrowness about their life that had almost strangled her, and at times her heart had cried out for congenial companionship. Ten years ago James Thomson had died. Sarah had remained on in the old home alone, save for hired help.

A few months ago David Merchant had returned to that community—a wealthy man. He had never married. The home of his ancestors had passed into his hands, and he was rebuilding and improving the house.

The years had not greatly changed him. He was erect, and the Western sun had bronzed his once fair face. His head was silvered, although the heavy mustache was of the same golden brown hue that Sarah remembered so well.

She rose suddenly. What had started her on such a train of musing? It was too late for letter writing now, the old clock was striking ten. She hurriedly prepared for bed. As she entered her own room, she lit the lamp and gazed long at the picture of James Thomson, which she dutifully kept hanging over her bureau. She shuddered a little; in the keen grey eyes there was surely a mocking light.

'I most wish I hadn't decided to give the dinner,' she thought. 'Maybe David won't come, anyhow.'

No scruples troubled Martie, however. She was up early the next morning, and entered gayly upon the preparations for the coming feast. The letters were written and despatched. Martie reported the acceptance of each of the verbal invitations.

A few days later, Mrs. Thompson was returning to her home after calling upon a sick neighbour. The early dusk of the short November days was fast gathering around her, and she quickened her steps. As she turned a corner she came face to face with a man. She was startled, but a glance at the broad-shouldered, compact form and her fears fled.

'Did I frighten you, Sarah?' David Merchant asked, turning and falling into step with her. Then without waiting for a reply, he went on hurriedly. 'It was so kind of you to ask me to meet those of my blood and yours at your table. At first, Sarah, I thought I must decline.'

'But Martie said you were coming,' she said wistfully, stealing a look at the strong face that the shadows were fast hiding.

'Yes, I'll come. You see, Sarah, it was something like this. When I first knew that you were married to James Thomson, I hated him, and I fear I have cherished a bit of that old feeling these years. At all events, Martie's words called up something strangely like it. I thought I could never eat a Thanksgiving dinner in his house, his and yours. Then I remembered how the years had changed us both, and felt that I was a villain, not to let bygones be bygones and begin again as cousins.'

She made no reply, and they walked on in silence until they reached the gate of the Thomson farm. Mr. Merchant opened this for his companion, saying as she passed through:

'You understand, don't you, Sarah?'

'Oh, yes, I understand perfectly well,' she said in a voice hoarse with pain. Before he could speak again, she had passed fup the walk.

David Merchant stared blankly after her. Not until he had heard the door open and shut did he turn and retrace his steps down the road. He drew a long breath and shook his head. 'I was an old fool,' he murmured, 'to think it could make any difference. Don't know but I might just as well have stayed in Nevada.'

Mrs. Thomson found Martie chopping mince-meat and singing hymns. The girl stopped both proceedings long enough to ask:

'Wouldn't make mor'n a dozen pies, would you?'

'Oh, I don't care,' was the testy reply. 'I almost wish I had never heard of Thanksgiving.'

'Lands sakes! What ails you?' and Martie held the chopping knife suspended in both hands. 'You air clean tuckered out, runnin' round lookin' after sick folks. You better go to bed early to night, and I'll steep you some boneset.'

Mrs. Thomson passed on into her own room without another word. She laid off her neat black hood and shawl, tied a gingham apron around her waist, and smoothed her hair, all the time keeping her back turned to the picture of her dead husband. Somehow she felt that she could not meet that direct gaze just then.

The preparations for Thanksgiving went on apace. Acceptances came from the Burtons and the Campbells. Uncle Leander had not replied, but Martie declared there was no danger of his missing a chance to get a good meal for nothing. As these guests must come by train, they would remain all night. So Martie and her mistress labored on, and the pantry shelves groaned under the weight of delicacies.

It was not until the Monday morning before Thanksgiving that the first cloud appeared upon the sky of Mrs. Sarah. Two letters came; one from cousin Cyrilla, saying that her father was too ill to attempt even the short journey, the other from Ben Burton. He wrote that since accepting his cousin's invitation his wife and himself had been bidden to a dinner given by an uncle of Mrs. Burton's.

'And as he is a man of wealth and position,' the letter ran, 'one whose friendship will be of real value to me, you will readily understand that I must withdraw the acceptance previously sent you.'

'Glad to hear it,' Martie exclaimed crisply, when Mrs. Thomson had finished reading the letter aloud. 'If that's all Ben Burton cares for us, let him spend his Thanksgiving with his wife's rich relations. We can leave one leaf out of the table, that's all.'

By Tuesday evening the house was in perfect order. The massive family silver had been duly polished and the rose-wreathed china that had been Sarah's mother's as well as the quaint old blue delft of the Thomsons, had been taken down and washed. Martie departed at an early hour that same evening for choir practice, leaving Mrs. Thomson to spend the time alone fully two hours after her usual time.

It was eleven when Martie returned. She lingered a moment at the door before entering, and Mrs. Thomson heard the heavy tones of a man's voice.

'Cousin Sary, I've got somethin' to say,' Martie began as soon as she opened the door. 'It's somethin' surprisin so you better be prepared.'

Mrs. Thomson looked up questioningly. The girl sat down, unbuttoned and threw back her jacket, took off her hat, and holding it in her hand, went on in a slow, hesitating way that was utterly at variance with her usual abrupt manner of speaking.

'That's Tom Kester waitin' out there. He came home from York State to-day, and he is goin' back Friday. Him and me's been engaged to be married nigh 'bout two years, but Tom had bad luck 'bout work, and so we waited. Now he's got a good place, and I'm going to marry him Friday mornin' and start back with him on the noon train, that's all.'

Martie was right. Her news was surprising, so much so that her cousin sat staring at her in speechless astonishment.

'Yes, that's all,' the prospective bride repeated, evidently displeased at the quiet manner in which her information had been received. 'I went home and told ma and Tillie, then I thought I'd have to let you know that I'd quit. I'm goin' back home now, 'cause ma and I air goin' to town right early in the mornin'. Two days hasn't long to buy your weddin' clothes and have 'em made, but we'll have to do the best we can.'

'Why, Martie, I can't get along without you,' Mrs. Thomson cried. 'There's our Thanksgiving dinner and—'

'Oh, yes, that makes me think. Ma and Tillie's folks can't come, 'cause we'll have to work every minute. There won't be any one but the Campbells and Dave Merchant. You can get along. You wouldn't have me give up Tom and all our happiness together for your Thanksgiving dinner, would you?'

'No, no, dear child,' and Mrs. Thomson's resentment vanished before the unusual softness of the other's voice. 'I am glad, so glad that woman's dearest joy has come to you—that of loving and being loved.'

She forgot her own disappointment, and bustled about, aiding Martie in her preparations for departure. The clock struck twelve before the girl was ready. Even Martie was a little affected at the leaving-taking, and she shed a few tears when, in addition to her wages, Mrs. Thomson pressed into her hand a shining eagle.

'For a wedding gift, Martie,' she said. Then she went back to her lonely fireside, and mused over the disastrous fate that seemed to attend upon her plans.

'I do hope Flora's folks will get here before David comes,' she thought. 'It would be so embarrassing, especially after what he said the other night. The train does not reach the village until half-past ten. Well, all I can do is to tell Will to drive fast.'



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Now I must go to bed, for I will have plenty to do to-morrow.

Thanksgiving morning dawned, clear and sunny. The bare branches of the trees that surrounded the Thomson farmhouse were outlined in a delicate silvery tracery against the brilliant sky, while their russet foliage lay heaped along the drive.

Within Mrs. Thompson was moving briskly about. By the time she began to look for the return of the team she had sent to meet the Campbells, all was in readiness. The chicken pies were in the warming closet of the stove, potatoes, cabbage and squash were ready for the kettles and the two great turkeys were browning in the oven which they had shared with a huge Indian pudding, golden-hearted and spicy. Pies, cakes, platters of cold meat, pickles—all were waiting, while the long table in the dining-room was gay in snowy damask, china, silver and glass.

Mrs. Thomson, in a brown merino, cherry ribbons and a large white apron, stood looking eagerly up the road.

'They will be here soon now. Dear me? there will be only seven of 'em, and there is enough cooked for fifty. Perhaps I can coax Flora to stay until next week. Then I—why, there is Will, and he is all alone.'

She ran breathlessly to the door to meet the hired man. He tossed her an envelope, saying laconically:

'This come, but the folks didn't.'

It was a telegram from Flora's husband. With loudly-beating heart, Mrs. Thomson read:

'The children have scarlet fever. Not dangerous, but disappointed.'

'FRANK CAMPBELL.'

She re-read the few words, then looked imploringly around. Will had driven on to the barn, so she was alone. What could she do?

'I can never entertain David Merchant, and no one else,' she said to herself. 'Think of our sitting down to those two enormous turkeys, to say nothing of all the rest. It's too ridiculous, or would be if it was anybody else. It may be that something will happen to keep David at home. Oh, but that would be worse than to have him come!'

She went slowly back to the house. Here the sight of her waiting dinner was too much, and sitting down on the roomy lounge, she buried her face in a cushion and let the tears have their way.

'Why Sarah, what's the matter?' a voice asked a few minutes later.

She glanced up to find David Merchant at her side. He had rapped twice and then, as the hall door stood open, had entered.

At the sight of him, her tears flowed afresh, while his distress increased.

'What is it, Sarah?' he again inquired, taking one of her hands in both his own, sney ones. 'Tell me what is troubling you, and where are all the folks?'

'Oh, David,' she cried hysterically, there are two turkeys, and food for a regiment, but there is no one but you. I would be all alone were it not for you.'

Mr. Merchant's eyes mirrored something of the pleasure that filled his heart. 'Tell me all about it,' he said, soothingly.

She did so. When she had finished, the tears still stood on her lashes, but a smile was lurking around the corners of her mouth.

'So I am the sole guest at this Thanksgiving dinner,' he exclaimed. 'Well, Sarah, I shall go straight home and leave you to dispose of those two turkeys yourself if you do not make me one promise.'

'What is it?' she asked shyly, and the hand he still held trembled.

'Promise to marry me, Christmas.'

'I—oh, I—oh, the turkeys are burning, David; I smell them. Let me go.'

have been a marvel in this respect, as he was in others. He told Max Muller that, as a young man, two hours' sleep was all he wanted, 'but as I grow older I need four. When I was your age,' he said to Muller, 'I simply lay down on the sofa, turned down my lamp, and after two hours sleep I was as fresh as ever. It is a mistake to think that we want seven or eight hours of sleep.' Humboldt died at the ripe old age of 81.

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