

AN OLD-FASHIONED THANKSGIVING

Louisa May Alcott - 1882

Louisa May Alcott lived with her family in Walpole, NH, from 1855 to 1857. In *WALPOLE'S LOUISA MAY ALCOTT*, a booklet I published in 2016, I documented their time in Walpole. Many of the stories in Alcott's *LITTLE WOMEN*, published in 1869, are based upon her family's experiences while living in Walpole. The publication of *LITTLE WOMEN* propelled Alcott's writing career. From 1872 to 1882, Alcott wrote six volumes of *AUNT JO'S SCRAP BAG*, with a number of stories in each. The last volume began with "An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving." Harking back "sixty years ago" places the story in 1822. Based on several references in the beginning of this story, the setting is most likely a farm in Walpole, New Hampshire's hills. Thus, here is Thanksgiving, in Walpole, now almost two hundred years ago.

There are two stories within the story. I have deleted those in my reading adaptation of this holiday tale of thanksgiving — Ray Boas, Walpole, NH, November, 2019.

SIXTY years ago, up among the New Hampshire hills, lived Farmer Bassett, with a house full of sturdy sons and daughters growing up about him. They were poor in money, but rich in land and love, for the wide acres of wood, corn, and pasture land fed, warmed, and clothed the flock, while mutual patience, affection, and courage made the old farm-house a very happy home.

November had come; 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 fire-place 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, and hunters flourished. Savory smells were in the air; on the crane hung steaming kettles, and down among the red embers copper sauce-pans simmered, all suggestive of some approaching feast. For Thanksgiving was at hand, and all must be in order for that time-honored day.

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

"Only one more day and then it will be the time to eat," she exclaimed.

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 little arms ached, for all knew how to work, and did so now with a will.

"I think it's real fun to have Thanksgiving at home. I'm sorry Gran'ma is sick, so we can't go there as usual, but I like to mess 'round here, don't you, girls?" asked Tilly, pausing to take a sniff at the spicy pestle.

"It will be kind of lonesome with only our own folks. I like to see all the cousins and aunts, and have games, and sing," cried the twins.

"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.

"Here's a man comin' up the hill lively!" Shouted Sol and Seth.

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, down to Keene, stopped him as he passed, and told him to tell Mrs. Bassett her mother was failin' fast, and she'd better come to-day. He knew no more, and having delivered his errand he rode away.

"We must go right off. Hitch up, and I'll be ready in less'n no time," said Mrs. Bassett to her husband.

A few words told the story, and the children left their work to help her get ready, mingling their grief for "Gran'ma" with regrets for the lost dinner.

"I'm dreadful sorry, dears, but it can't be helped. I couldn't cook nor eat no way now, and if that blessed woman gets better sudden, as she has before, we'll have cause for thanksgivin', and I'll give you a dinner you won't forget in a hurry,"

Mrs. Bassett readied for a long drive, because Gran'ma lived twenty miles away, and there were no railroads in those parts to whisk people to and fro like magic. By the time the old yellow sleigh was at the door 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 to-night, 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 get at the mince-pies, or you'll have them down sick. I shall come back the minute I can leave Mother. Pa will come to-morrer, 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.

They soon forgot poor Granny, and found it great fun to keep house all alone, for Mother seldom left home.

At sunset the boys went out to feed the cattle, bring in heaps of wood, and lock up for the night, as the lonely farm-house seldom had visitors after dark. The girls got the simple supper of brown bread and milk, baked apples, and a doughnut all 'round as a treat. Then they sat before the fire, the sisters knitting, the brothers with books or games.

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.

When they woke it still snowed, but up the little Bassetts jumped, broke the ice in their pitchers, and went down with cheeks glowing like winter apples. 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 hearty children.

"Now about dinner," said the young housekeeper, 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 wont 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 and so on, we don't deserve any dinner," cried Tilly, burning to distinguish herself, and bound to enjoy to the utmost her brief authority.

"Did you ever roast a turkey?" asked Roxy, with an air of deep interest.

"Should you dare to try?" said Rhody, in an awe-stricken tone.

"You will see what I can do. Ma said I was to use my jedgment about things, and I'm going to. All you children have got to do is to keep out of the way, and let Prue and me work."

Both rolled up their sleeves, put on their largest aprons, and got out all the spoons, dishes, pots, and pans they could find, "so as to have everything handy," as Prue said.

"Now, sister, we'll have dinner at five; Pa will be here by that time if he is coming to-night, and be so surprised to find us all ready, for he wont have had any very nice victuals if Gran'ma is so sick," said Tilly, importantly.

"It's all ready but the stuffing, and roasting is as easy as can be. I can baste first rate, 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. "I don't know how much I want, nor what sort of herbs to put in, and he's so awful big, I'm kind of afraid of him."

"I aint! I fed him all summer, and he never gobbled at *me*. I feel real mean to be thinking of gobbling him, poor old chap," laughed Prue, patting her departed pet with an air of mingled affection and appetite.

"I can't remember what flavorin' Ma puts in," Tilly said, when she had got her bread well soaked for the stuffing. "Sage and onions and apple-sauce go with goose, but I can't feel sure of anything but pepper and salt for a turkey."

"Ma puts in some kind of mint, I know, but I forget whether it is spearmint, peppermint, or pennyroyal," answered Prue, in a tone of doubt, but trying to show her knowledge of herbs, or, at least of their names.

"Seems to me it's sweet majoram or summer savory. I guess we'll put both in, and then we are sure to be right. The best is up in the 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 little nose was so full of the smell of the onions she had been peeling, that everything smelt of them. Eager to be of use, she pounded up the herbs and scattered the mixture with a liberal hand into the bowl.

"It doesn't smell just right, but I suppose it will when it is cooked," said Tilly, as she filled the empty stomach, that seemed aching for food, 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.

"Shall we roast the little pig, too? I think he'd look nice with a necklace of sausages, as Ma fixed one last Christmas," asked Prue, elated with their success.

"I couldn't do it. I loved that little pig, and cried when he was killed. I should feel as if I was roasting the baby," answered Tilly, glancing toward the buttery where piggy hung, looking so pink and pretty it certainly did seem cruel to eat him.

It took a long time to get all the vegetables ready. But by noon all was ready for cooking, and the cranberry-sauce, a good deal scorched, was cooking in the lean-to.

The girls, after a short rest, set the table and made all ready to dish up the dinner when that exciting moment came.

"My sakes alive—the turkey is burnt one side, and the kettles have boiled over so the pies I put to warm are all ashes!" exclaimed Tilly.

They were just struggling to get the pudding out of the cloth when Roxy called out: "Here's Pa!"

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

"Lots of 'em! I see two big sleighs chock full," shouted Seth

"It looks like a seminary. Guess Gramma's dead and come up to be buried here," said Sol in a solemn tone.

"If that is a funeral, the mourners are uncommon jolly," said Eph.

"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.

Aint I glad I got dinner, and don't I hope it will turn out good!" exclaimed Tilly.

"Hooray for Pa! Hooray for Thanksgivin'!"

In came Father, Mother, Baby, aunts, and cousins, all in great spirits; and all much surprised to find such a festive welcome awaiting them.

"Aint Gran'ma dead at all?" asked Sol.

"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 to-day, certain sure, he got the message all wrong.

"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.

"What in the world put it into your head we was comin', and set you to gettin' up such a supper?" asked Mr. Bassett.

Tilly modestly began to tell, but the others broke in and sang her praises in a sort of chorus. Great satisfaction was expressed by all, and 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 their pride got a fall; for the first person who tasted the stuffing 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 see 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. 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.

"Blind-man's bluff," "Hunt the slipper," "Come, Philander," and other lively games soon set every one bubbling over with jollity.

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 out 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."

Then Tilly set out the light-stand with the big Bible on it, and a candle on each side, and all sat quietly in the fire-light, smiling as they listened with happy hearts to the sweet old words that fit all times and seasons so beautifully.

Full text - <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/alcott/thanksgiving/thanksgiving.html>

Games and Songs of American Children
by WILLIAM WELLS NEWELL
published in 1884

https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45762/45762-h/45762-h.htm#Page_58

Enjoy play as the Bassett family did
without electricity or screen devices

GAME OF CHASE

Blind-man's Buff (or Blind Man's Bluff)

A blindfolded player is led into the centre of a room, taken by the shoulders, and turned about three times, after which he must catch somebody to replace him. This is a variant of tag best played in a spacious area - outdoors or in a large room. One player, designated as "It", is blindfolded and gropes around attempting to touch the other players without being able to see them. The other players scatter and try to avoid the person who is "it." They are hiding in plain sight and sometimes teasing "it" into changing direction.

LOVE GAME

Philander's March.

The doors of all the apartments of an old-fashioned mansion, with its great chimney in the centre, would be thrown open at an evening party, and the children march through the house, and up and down the staircase, singing the familiar air—

Come, Philanders, let's be a-marching,
Every one choose from his heartstrings;
Choose your true love now or never,
And be sure you choose no other.
O, my dear——, how I do love you!

Nothing on earth do I prize above you!
With a kiss now let me greet you,
And I will never, never leave you.

GUESSING GAME

Hunt the Slipper

All players but one sit in a circle with their feet drawn up and knees raised so a slipper may be passed from hand to hand of each player under his knees. Where both boys and girls are playing it is desirable to have the girls alternate as much as possible with the boys as the slipper is more readily hidden under their skirts. The players pass the slipper or bean bag around the circle under the knees. The object being is to evade the vigilance of the odd player who runs around on the outside of the circle trying to touch the person who holds the slipper. Many devices may be resorted to for deceiving the hunter such as appearing to pass the slipper when it is not in ones hands or holding it for quite a while as though the hands are idle although it is not considered good sport to do this for very long or often. The players will use every means of tantalizing the hunter for instance when he is at a safe distance they will hold the slipper up with a shout or even throw it to some other person in the circle or tap the floor with it. When the hunter succeeds in catching the player with the slipper he changes places with that player. When the circle of players is very large the odd player may take his place in the center instead of outside the circle.