

OLD TOM'S THANKSGIVING DINNER

by William
Thomas Whitlock

EARLY ONE MORNING, while Old Tom and I were prospecting along the eastern slopes of the Maricopa Range, a shiftless, half-grown waif named Hank, whom I had at times befriended, stalked into camp and demanded something to eat. He had learned of our expedition and had stealthily followed our trail across the desert until he was sure that we would not send him back to the settlements. “Ain’t had nothin’ to eat but cactus pears and some berries since I left Barstown,” he said, grinning impudently.

The presence of the boy enraged Old Tom. “We’ve only brought grub enough fer two,” he said. “With another mouth to feed, we’ll have to cut our trip short.” He turned to me. “Give him a good square meal and provisions for three days and tell him to vamoose back to where he came from.”

To my astonishment, Hank’s bold eyes suddenly filled with tears. “Ain’t got no place nor nobody to go to,” he said. “And I want to be with him.” He nodded toward me.



His attitude touched me, for all I had ever given him were some old clothes, a few coins, and a meal now and then. "Oh, all right," I said hastily. "But you must do your share of the work to pay for your keep."

We traveled for weeks without discovering any outcroppings of minerals. Old Tom worked diligently over the plateaus and gulches of the foothills and often would return to camp, weary and dejected; but the next morning, he would always rise with renewed vigor and hope. "I shore do want to find somethin' this trip," he declared. "I'm gettin' too old to be rangin' over these hills much longer."

Two weeks later, we crossed the foothills and arrived at the rugged inclines of the Maricopas. The old prospector was looking haggard and worn over his failure to discover traces of minerals. "Do you happen to know what day of the month this is?" he asked one night.

"Must be the twenty-sixth of October," I replied.

"Humph. Four weeks to Thanksgivin'."

"What do you know about Thanksgiving?" I inquired, laughing.

"Warn't I born and raised in old Vermont? Reckon a feller ever fergits them feasts of turkey an' stuffin', pumpkin pies an' mincemeat? 'Bout time to knock off work and hit the trail for the cabin," he added musingly.

"The cabin?" I asked in wonder.

But he had lapsed into one of his long, tight-lipped silences. He did not mention the subject again for several days, until one night he ordered Hank to round up the pack burros early the next morning and to strike the tent while breakfast was being prepared. He routed me from my blankets before daybreak, and soon after the sun came peeping up over the distant peaks, we were on the march.

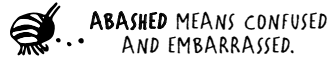
For ten days we traveled to the north and west, through chaparral thickets and along the crest of an apparently endless spiny ridge. Old Tom made frequent halts to hunt for game, and he continued to grumble over the amount of food Hank ate.

The old prospector was an excellent cook, and he refused to allow either Hank or me to aid in preparing the meals.

"Go 'long away from here, you hungry coyote cub!" Old Tom said one night as Hank squatted near the fire, observing him closely.

A CHAPARRAL
THICKET IS A CLUMP
OF DWARF OAKS
AND LOW, THORNY
SHRUBS.





Hank retreated, somewhat abashed, but I noticed with amusement that he continued to watch Old Tom's preparations as if the mere sight of food had made him ravenous.

Late in the afternoon of a hard day's march, Old Tom paused on a little stony shelf and waited until Hank and I had brought up the pack animals.

"That's the cabin," he announced, pointing to a wider ledge a short distance farther up the mountains. "Built that shack ten years ago—hailed the logs from the cedar strip on burros' backs and laid the stonework myself. Every year I come up here for my Thanksgivin' feast."

Half an hour later we had scrambled up to the stony bench and were gazing about us. Away in the distance to the south and east lay the desert. To the north rose a chain of snowcapped peaks. To the south and west the bare, serrated ridge of the Maricopas extended for miles. The cabin, a rude building with a huge fireplace, sat near the center of the bench. It would be hard to imagine a more isolated, lonely spot.

A few yards from the front door, a precipitous canyon dropped to a mountain stream, and on the opposite side, the wall rose to another bench. Although the stream was only a tiny trickle among the rocks, I knew from the marks on the walls of the canyon that more than once terrific floods had poured through the gorge.

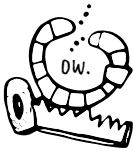
On entering the cabin, Old Tom began to rummage among some shelves in one corner of the room. "Guess we've got plenty with what's here," he said at last. "I've brought cranberry jelly and canned pumpkin, and I managed to save a few potatoes from Hank. Now all we need is a turkey."

"A turkey!" I exclaimed in surprise.

"I have shot 'em wild down in the cedar groves. That's one reason I built my cabin here. Some years I fail to discover 'em and have to go without; but Thanksgivin' is two weeks off, and now I intend to put in every day until I either find one or know they ain't to be found."

For a week Old Tom searched the cedar strips without bringing home even a partridge. One night he returned home with an especially worried and dejected air. "Nary a sight nor sign of a turkey, nor a grouse,

SERRATED MEANS
NOTCHED OR
TOOTHED LIKE A
SAW.



nor a quail neither,” he said. “And we’re going to have company for Thanksgivin’, too.”

“Company!” I cried.

“Thar’s a little minin’ settlement about ten miles to the southwest,” he explained. “When I told them about hunting a turkey, two or three of the mine bosses hinted they’d like to come up to the cabin Thanksgivin’ Day just to break the monotony of livin’ in a minin’ camp. They’ll bring canned stuff and dishes, but we’ve just got to have a turkey or fresh meat of some sort.”

“If we had another gun, I might go out and hunt, too,” Hank suggested timidly.

“Huh! You wouldn’t find nothin’ and you’d come back with an appetite like a bear.”

On the following morning, however, Hank pleaded so earnestly that I allowed him to take my rifle and depart while I remained at the cabin. He returned at nightfall, empty-handed; so did Old Tom.

“Reckon it must be the weather that makes birds so scarce in these parts,” said the prospector. “Never saw it so warm this time of year. When grouse and quail get on their winter coat o’ feathers, they can’t endure much heat.

“Day after tomorrow is Thanksgivin’,” he continued moodily. “I’d ought to stay home and bake my pumpkin pies, but I’m going to cross the canyon, climb up to the edge of the snowfields, and see if the grouse and quail ain’t migrated to a colder climate. If I don’t find none today, I reckon we’ll have to make out on canned salmon instead of a big, fat gobbler.”

Old Tom failed to return at sunset. Hank and I sat up until midnight waiting for him. Then, somewhat worried, we went to bed.

When I awoke the next morning, Hank had disappeared, and my rifle was missing from the rack on the wall. The weather was uncomfortably warm; the burning sun glared upon the stony slope and ridges. The day wore on, but neither of my companions returned. When the mountain twilight had deepened into dusk, I built a rousing fire in the dooryard. Toward morning I must have fallen asleep.





At daybreak a loud, rumbling roar that seemed to come from the canyon roused me. Creeping to the brink of the ledge, I peered down. The gorge was half-filled with a torrent of swirling, muddy water! I was creeping cautiously back from the dizzying sight when a shout made me glance across the gulch.

Old Tom was standing on the opposite rim, brandishing two small quail with an air of disgust. “No chance to git across!” he shouted above the roar of the flood. “Mile-wide down below—snow still meltin’ up on the peaks—may last for days—” He paused and stared blankly at something on my side of the canyon.

I turned to see Hank stumbling up the trail to the cabin. In his arms he clasped what I first mistook for a bear cub; then I saw that it was a big, black wild turkey gobbler!

Hank staggered across the bench and dropped the bird at my feet. “Shot him over in cedar grove on west ridge,” he panted. “Found a turkey roost about sunset. Been all night luggin’ this big fellow over the hills and gulches. Where’s Old Tom?”

I nodded to the solitary figure on the opposite bench. The old prospector was striding back and forth and waving his arms wildly. “Bird like that—company for dinner—nobody to cook—”

Hank made a megaphone of his hands. “Don’t worry about that,” he shouted. “I’ll cook the dinner!”

The old man threw out his hands and sank upon a boulder in an attitude of despair.

Our guests arrived on a relay of saddle ponies late in the forenoon. Mr. Fink, the owner of the mines, and three of his employees brought their wives. When I had explained what had happened, the men turned their attention to the prospector, and the women hastened into the cabin to help Hank prepare the meal.

But the boy rejected all offers of assistance. “I’m cookin’ this dinner,” he declared with the irritable manner of Old Tom when anyone disturbed him in his culinary labors.

Old Tom was wandering restlessly along the bench on the opposite wall of the canyon, examining the formation of the ledge.

“He is probably prospecting to keep his mind off the dinner,” said Fink, laughing.

“He is getting ready to roast his quails,” replied one of the miners. “And perhaps we can save something for him to eat after the flood goes down.”

About two o’clock, Hank opened the cabin door. “I’ve thought of something,” he announced eagerly. “We can tie a string to a bullet and shoot it over to Old Tom. Then we can hitch on a heavier string and then a rope until we have a cable across the canyon. I’ll fill one of the pack canisters with grub, ring it on the rope, and let it slide to the opposite rim—”

Fortunately, there were several balls of twine in the cabin. We took the bullet and part of the charge from a rifle cartridge and replaced them with two or three solid wads. Then we nested the string carefully on the ground and, tying one end of it to a cleaning rod, slipped the rod into the barrel of the gun. The arrangement reminded me of a whaler’s harpoon gun that I had once seen.

Shooting the string across the gorge was a simple affair, but getting a cable long enough to bridge the canyon was not so easy; we hunted up and spliced together every foot of lariat, hobble rope, and other rope around the cabin.

At last everything was ready. Old Tom wound his end of the line around a boulder, and we fastened our end to the logs of the cabin. Hank placed the canister in a canvas bag and attached a large harness ring to it so that it would slip along the rope. We hooked on a towline and signaled for Tom to haul away. Would the cable hold? Was the towline strong enough?

We held our breath as the harness ring slid over the spliced places in the rope. The canvas bag with its precious contents seemed to hover for hours above the roaring, hissing flood, but at last Old Tom reached out a long arm and grasped it. We gave a hearty cheer and then rushed into the cabin for our own feast.

Well, that was the best Thanksgiving dinner I ever ate. The turkey was roasted to a turn, and there were mashed potatoes and gravy,



oyster dressing, fried corn, cranberry jelly, and pumpkin pies. Hank had even baked a batch of hot biscuits in a camp skillet.

“Where in the world did you learn to cook?” I asked him.

“From watching Old Tom about the campfire,” he replied. “I like good things to eat, and I’ve always wanted to know how to cook. So I took lessons from one of the finest cooks in the land.”

“You never saw him roast a turkey or bake pumpkin pies!”

“No, but we’ve both heard him dozens of times tell how he did it,” replied Hank, laughing.

When we could eat no more, we sauntered out into the yard to hear what Old Tom thought of the dinner. The prospector had finished his meal and once more was striding thoughtfully back and forth along the ledge. To our astonishment he had driven three stakes at regular intervals into the crevices of the rock. He glanced up and saw us assembled on the opposite bank.

“Struck it at last!” he shouted above the rumble of the flood. “Outcroppin’s of the richest silver veins in the whole country! Right here across from my cabin all these years—while I was searchin’ everywhere else!”

“Stake out claims for the rest of us, Tom,” the miners yelled excitedly.

Old Tom pointed impressively in turn to each of the stakes. “One fer me, one fer my partner, and one fer Hank! Boy who can cook a meal like that! Almost as good as I could do myself!” 🦋

