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Title: Ezra's Thanksgivin' out West [the thirteenth story in "A Little Book of Profitable Tales"]

Author: Field, Eugene (1850-1895)

Date of first publication: 1889

Edition used as base for this ebook: New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1894

Date first posted: 3 August 2010

Date last updated: 17 June 2014

Faded Page ebook#20100802

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Ezra's Thanksgivin' out West.



EZRA'S THANKSGIVIN' OUT WEST.

Ezra had written a letter to the home folks, and in it he had complained that never before had he spent such a weary, lonesome day as this Thanksgiving day had been. Having finished this letter, he sat for a long time gazing idly into the open fire that snapped cinders all over the hearthstone and sent its red forks dancing up the chimney to join the winds that frolicked and gambolled across the Kansas prairies that raw November night. It had rained hard all day, and was cold; and although the open fire made every honest effort to be cheerful, Ezra, as he sat in front of it in the wooden rocker and looked down into the glowing embers, experienced a dreadful feeling of loneliness and homesickness.

"I'm sick o' Kansas," said Ezra to himself. "Here I've been in this plaguey country for goin' on a year, and—yes, I'm sick of it, powerful sick of it. What a miser'ble Thanksgivin' this has been! They don't know what Thanksgivin' is out this way. I wish I was back in ol' Mass'chusetts—that's the country for *me*, and they hev the kind o' Thanksgivin' I like!"

Musing in this strain, while the rain went patter-patter on the window-panes, Ezra saw a strange sight in the fireplace,—yes, right among the embers and the crackling flames Ezra saw a strange, beautiful picture unfold and spread itself out like a panorama.

"How very wonderful!" murmured the young man. Yet he did not take his eyes away, for the picture soothed him and he loved to look upon it.

"It is a pictur' of long ago," said Ezra, softly. "I had like to forgot it, but now it comes back to me as nat'ral-like as an ol' friend. An' I seem to be a part of it, an' the feelin' of that time comes back with the pictur', too."

Ezra did not stir. His head rested upon his hand, and his eyes were fixed upon the shadows in the firelight.

"It is a pictur' of the ol' home," said Ezra to himself. "I am back there in Belchertown, with the Holyoke hills up north an' the Berkshire mountains a loomin' up gray an' misty-like in the western horizon. Seems as if it wuz early mornin'; everything is still, and it is so cold when we boys crawl out o' bed that, if it wuzn't Thanksgivin' mornin', we'd crawl back again an' wait for Mother to call us. But it *is* Thanksgivin' mornin', an' we're goin' skatin' down on the pond. The squealin' o' the pigs has told us it is five o'clock, and we must hurry; we're goin' to call by for the Dickerson boys an' Hiram Peabody, an' we've got to hyper! Brother Amos gets on about half o' my clo'es, and I get on 'bout half o' his, but it's all the same; they are stout, warm clo'es, and they're big enough to fit any of us boys,—Mother looked out for that when she made 'em. When we go downstairs we find the girls there, all bundled up nice an' warm,—Mary an' Helen an' Cousin Irene. They're goin' with us, an' we all start out tiptoe and quiet-like so's not to wake up the ol' folks. The ground is frozen hard; we stub our toes on the frozen ruts in the road. When we come to the minister's house, Laura is standin' on the front stoop, a-waitin' for us. Laura is the minister's daughter. She's a friend o' Sister Helen's—pretty as a dagerr'otype, an' gentle-like and tender. Laura lets me carry her skates, an' I'm glad of it, although I have my hands full already with the lantern, the hockies, and the rest. Hiram Peabody keeps us waitin', for he has overslept himself, an' when he comes trottin' out at last the girls make fun of him,—all except Sister Mary, an' she sort o' sticks up for Hiram, an' we're all so 'cute we kind o' calc'late we know the reason why.

"And now," said Ezra, softly, "the pictur' changes; seems as if I could see the pond. The ice is like a black lookin'-glass, and Hiram Peabody slips up the first thing, an' down he comes lickety-split, an' we all laugh,—except Sister Mary, an' *she* says it is very imp'lite to laugh at other folks' misfortunes. Ough! how cold it is, and how my fingers ache with the frost when I take off my mittens to strap on Laura's skates! But, oh, how my cheeks burn! And how careful I am not to hurt Laura, an' how I ask her if that's 'tight enough,' an' how she tells me 'jist a little tighter,' and how we two keep foolin' along till the others hev gone an' we are left alone! An' how quick I get my *own* skates strapped on,—none o' your new-fangled skates with springs an' plates an' clamps an' such, but honest, ol'-fashioned wooden ones with steel runners that curl up over my toes an' have a bright brass button on the end! How I strap 'em and lash 'em and buckle 'em on! An' Laura waits for me an' tells me to be sure to get 'em on tight enough,—why, bless me! after I once got 'em strapped on, if them skates hed come off, the feet wud ha' come with 'em! An' now away we go,—Laura an' me. Around the bend—near the medder where Si Barker's dog killed a woodchuck last summer—we meet the rest. We forget all about the cold. We run races an' play snap the whip, an' cut all sorts o' didoes, an' we never mind the pick'rel weed that is froze in on the ice an' trips us up every time we cut the outside edge; an' then we boys jump over the air-holes, an' the girls stan' by an' scream an' tell us they know we're agoin' to drownd ourselves. So the hours go, an' it is sun-up at last, an' Sister Helen says we must be gettin' home. When we take our skates off, our feet feel as if they were wood. Laura has lost her tippet; I lend her

mine, and she kind o' blushes. The old pond seems glad to have us go, and the fire-hangbird's nest in the willer-tree waves us good-by. Laura promises to come over to our house in the evenin', and so we break up.

"Seems now," continued Ezra, musingly,— "seems now as if I could see us all at breakfast. The race on the pond has made us hungry, and Mother says she never knew anybody else's boys that had such capacities as hers. It is the Yankee Thanksgivin' breakfast,—sausages an' fried potatoes, an' buckwheat cakes an' syrup,—maple syrup, mind ye, for Father has his own sugar bush, and there was a big run o' sap last season. Mother says, 'Ezry an' Amos, won't you never get through eatin'?' We want to clear off the table, for there's pies to make, an' nuts to crack, and laws sakes alive! the turkey's got to be stuffed yit!' Then how we all fly round! Mother sends Helen up into the attic to get a squash while Mary's makin' the pie-crust. Amos an' I crack the walnuts,—they call 'em hickory nuts out in this pesky country of sagebrush and pasture land. The walnuts are hard, and it's all we can do to crack 'em. Ev'ry once 'n a while one on 'em slips outer our fingers an' goes dancin' over the floor or flies into the pan Helen is squeezin' pumpkin into through the col'nder. Helen says we're shif'less an' good for nothin' but frivolin'; but Mother tells us how to crack the walnuts so 's not to let 'em fly all over the room, an' so 's not to be all jammed to pieces like the walnuts was down at the party at the Peasleys' last winter. An' now here comes Tryphena Foster, with her gingham gown an' muslin apron on; her folks have gone up to Amherst for Thanksgivin', an' Tryphena has come over to help our folks get dinner. She thinks a great deal o' Mother, 'cause Mother teaches her Sunday-school class an' says Tryphena oughter marry a missionary. There is bustle everywhere, the rattle uv pans an' the clatter of dishes; an' the new kitch'n stove begins to warm up an' git red, till Helen loses her wits an' is flustered, an' sez she never could git the hang o' that stove's dampers.

"An' now," murmured Ezra, gently, as a tone of deeper reverence crept into his voice, "I can see Father sittin' all by himself in the parlor. Father's hair is very gray, and there are wrinkles on his honest old face. He is lookin' through the winder at the Holyoke hills over yonder, and I can guess he's thinkin' of the time when he wuz a boy like me an' Amos, an' useter climb over them hills an' kill rattlesnakes an' hunt partridges. Or doesn't his eyes quite reach the Holyoke hills? Do they fall kind o' lovingly but sadly on the little buryin' ground jest beyond the village? Ah, Father knows that spot, an' he loves it, too, for there are treasures there whose memory he wouldn't swap for all the world could give. So, while there is a kind o' mist in Father's eyes, I can see he is dreamin'-like of sweet an' tender things, and a-communin' with memory,—hearin' voices I never heard an' feelin' the tech of hands I never pressed; an' seein' Father's peaceful face I find it hard to think of a Thanksgivin' sweeter than Father's is.

"The pictur' in the firelight changes now," said Ezra, "an' seems as if I wuz in the old frame meetin'-house. The meetin'-house is on the hill, and meetin' begins at half pas' ten. Our pew is well up in front,—seems as if I could see it now. It has a long red cushion on the seat, and in the hymn-book rack there is a Bible an' a couple of Psalmodies. We walk up the aisle slow, and Mother goes in first; then comes Mary, then me, then Helen, then Amos, and then Father. Father thinks it is jest as well to have one o' the girls set in between me an' Amos. The meetin'-house is full, for everybody goes to meetin' Thanksgivin' day. The minister reads the proclamation an' makes a prayer, an' then he gives out a psalm, an' we all stan' up an' turn 'round an' join the choir. Sam Merritt has come up from Palmer to spend Thanksgivin' with the ol' folks, an' he is singin' tenor to-day in his ol' place in the choir. Some folks say he sings wonderful well, but I don't like Sam's voice. Laura sings soprano in the choir, and Sam stands next to her an' holds the book.

"Seems as if I could hear the minister's voice, full of earnestness an' melody, comin' from way up in his little round pulpit. He is tellin' us why we should be thankful, an', as he quotes Scriptur' an' Dr. Watts, we boys wonder how anybody can remember so much of the Bible. Then I get nervous and worried. Seems to me the minister was never comin' to lastly, and I find myself wonderin' whether Laura is listenin' to what the preachin' is about, or is writin' notes to Sam Merritt in the back of the tune book. I get thirsty, too, and I fidget about till Father looks at me, and Mother nudges Helen, and Helen passes it along to me with interest.

"An' then," continues Ezra in his revery, "when the last hymn is given out an' we stan' up agin an' join the choir, I am glad to see that Laura is singin' outer the book with Miss Hubbard, the alto. An' goin' out o' meetin' I kind of edge up to Laura and ask her if I kin have the pleasure of seein' her home.

"An' now we boys all go out on the Common to play ball. The Enfield boys have come over, and, as all the Hampshire county folks know, they are tough fellers to beat. Gorham Polly keeps tally, because he has got the newest jack-knife,—oh, how slick it whittles the old broom-handle Gorham picked up in Packard's store an' brought along jest to keep tally on! It is a great game of ball; the bats are broad and light, and the ball is small and soft. But the Enfield boys beat us at last; leastwise they make 70 tallies to our 58, when Heman Fitts knocks the ball over into Aunt Dorcas Eastman's yard,

and Aunt Dorcas comes out an' picks up the ball an' takes it into the house, an' we have to stop playin'. Then Phineas Owens allows he can flop any boy in Belchertown, an' Moses Baker takes him up, an' they wrassle like two tartars, till at last Moses tuckers Phineas out an' downs him as slick as a whistle.

"Then we all go home, for Thanksgivin' dinner is ready. Two long tables have been made into one, and one of the big tablecloths Gran'ma had when she set up housekeepin' is spread over 'em both. We all set round,—Father, Mother, Aunt Lydia Holbrook, Uncle Jason, Mary, Helen, Tryphena Foster, Amos, and me. How big an' brown the turkey is, and how good it smells! There are bounteous dishes of mashed potato, turnip, an' squash, and the celery is very white and cold, the biscuits are light an' hot, and the stewed cranberries are red as Laura's cheeks. Amos and I get the drumsticks; Mary wants the wish-bone to put over the door for Hiram, but Helen gets it. Poor Mary, she always *did* have to give up to 'rushin' Helen,' as we call her. The pies,—oh, what pies mother makes; no dyspepsia in 'em, but good-nature an' good health an' hospitality! Pumpkin pies, mince an' apple too, and then a big dish of pippins an' russets an' bellflowers, an', last of all, walnuts with cider from the Zebrina Dickerson farm! I tell ye, there's a Thanksgivin' dinner for ye! that's what we get in old Belchertown; an' that's the kind of livin' that makes the Yankees so all-fired good an' smart.

"But the best of all," said Ezra, very softly to himself,—"oh, yes, the best scene in all the pictur' is when evenin' comes, when the lamps are lit in the parlor, when the neighbors come in, and when there is music an' singin' an' games. An' it's this part o' the pictur' that makes me homesick now and fills my heart with a longin' I never had before; an' yet it sort o' mellows an' comforts me, too. Miss Serena Cadwell, whose beau was killed in the war, plays on the melodeon, and we all sing,—all on us, men, womenfolks, an' children. Sam Merritt is there, an' he sings a tenor song about love. The women sort of whisper round that he's goin' to be married to a Palmer lady nex' spring, an' I think to myself I never heard better singin' than Sam's. Then we play games,—proverbs, buzz, clap-in-clap-out, copenhagen, fox-an'-geese, button-button-who's-got-the-button, spin-the-platter, go-to-Jerusalem, my-ship's-come-in, and all the rest. The ol' folks play with the young folks just as nat'ral as can be; and we all laugh when Deacon Hosea Cowles hez to measure six yards of love ribbon with Miss Hepsy Newton, and cut each yard with a kiss; for the deacon hez been sort o' purrin' round Miss Hepsy for goin' on two years. Then, aft'r a while, when Mary an' Helen bring in the cookies, nutcakes, cider, an' apples, Mother says: 'I don't b'lieve we're goin' to hev enough apples to go round; Ezry, I guess I'll have to get you to go down-cellar for some more.' Then I says: 'All right, Mother, I'll go, providin' some one'll go along an' hold the candle.' An' when I say this I look right at Laura, an' she blushes. Then Helen, jest for meanness, says: 'Ezry, I s'pose you aint willin' to have your fav'rite sister go down-cellar with you an' catch her death o' cold?' But Mary, who hez been showin' Hiram Peabody the phot'graph album for more 'n an hour, comes to the rescue an' makes Laura take the candle, and she shows Laura how to hold it so it won't go out.

"The cellar is warm an' dark. There are cobwebs all between the rafters an' everywhere else except on the shelves where Mother keeps the butter an' eggs an' other things that would freeze in the butt'ry upstairs. The apples are in bar'ls up against the wall, near the potater-bin. How fresh an' sweet they smell! Laura thinks she sees a mouse, an' she trembles an' wants to jump up on the pork bar'l, but I tell her that there sha'n't no mouse hurt her while I'm round; and I mean it, too, for the sight of Laura a-tremblin' makes me as strong as one of Father's steers. 'What kind of apples do you like best, Ezry?' asks Laura,—'russets or greenin's or crow-eggs or bellflowers or Baldwins or pippins?' 'I like the Baldwins best,' says I, 'coz they've got red cheeks just like yours.' 'Why, Ezry Thompson! how you talk!' says Laura. 'You oughter be ashamed of yourself!' But when I get the dish filled up with apples there aint a Baldwin in all the lot that can compare with the bright red of Laura's cheeks. An' Laura knows it, too, an' she sees the mouse agin, an' screams, and then the candle goes out, and we are in a dreadful stew. But I, bein' almost a man, contrive to bear up under it, and knowin' she is an orph'n, I comfort an' encourage Laura the best I know how, and we are almost upstairs when Mother comes to the door and wants to know what has kep' us so long. Jest as if Mother doesn't know! Of course she does; an' when Mother kisses Laura good-by that night there is in the act a tenderness that speaks more sweetly than even Mother's words.

"It is so like Mother," mused Ezra; "so like her with her gentleness an' clingin' love. Hers is the sweetest picture of all, and hers the best love."

Dream on, Ezra; dream of the old home with its dear ones, its holy influences, and its precious inspiration,—mother. Dream on in the far-away firelight; and as the angel hand of memory unfolds these sacred visions, with thee and them shall abide, like a Divine comforter, the spirit of thanksgiving.

[End of *Ezra's Thanksgivin' out West* by Eugene Field]