

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Lost Turkey

SARAH ORNE JEWETT

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In this story from 1902, novelist and short story writer Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909) explores the connection between doing good for others and prospering oneself, as well as the relationship between material wealth and some richer prosperity. Jewett was raised in South Berwick, Maine and was profoundly influenced by her experiences observing local farmers and fishermen, as well as her New England coastal upbringing, elements of which are visible in her writing. In this story, for example, a rupture has occurred between old farmer Jones and his daughter-in-law Sarah and grandson Johnny, after the death of Jones’s son (and Sarah’s husband), leaving the former embittered and the latter impoverished.

Who or what is most responsible for effecting the reconciliation: the doctor with his speech to farmer Jones, the storekeeper who asks Jones to deliver mail to Johnny, Jones’s willingness to drop off the mail, Johnny’s wishful (mis)taking of the turkey, Sarah’s remorse for her part in the rupture, her later offer of hospitality, or Mrs. Jones’s welcoming of her grandson? Was this all just the work of chance, or was there some mysterious power working its way through the unintended acts of generosity? Where, according to this story, does true prosperity lie? Does wealth need to become benefaction for the wealthy to prosper? For what sort of prosperity do we most wish to give thanks?

There were only two persons in the kitchen, a woman and a boy, who had spread his school-books on the table by the window, and set a determined elbow on either side of his slate like buttresses for failing energy. The arithmetic was wide open above the slate at an early page of fractions.

The boy’s mother, a sad-looking, pretty woman, was busy getting supper, but she hovered near the table and cast many a loving glance at her son’s distress. She had been a quick scholar herself, and such sums were as easy as plain knitting. One often hears of the sorrows of hens that have hatched ducks, but Mrs. Sarah Jones knew the more painful solitudes of the duck—the swimming bird who must see her feathered darling balked and landlocked upon the shore.

“I thought they looked easy, Johnny,” she ventured, timidly. “If I didn’t know ’twas best for you to puzzle ’em out alone I’d—”

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“If I can only do this one!” said Johnny, in a dreamy tone, as he figured away with new hopefulness. “There, you see here, mother!” and he held up his slate.

“Yes, you’ve got it!” she cried, joyfully, as her eager eye found its way through a queer maze of stumbling figures. “Yes, that’s all right. Now you’ve got the right idea, you won’t have so much trouble again.” She looked the prouder because he could not see her as she stood over him. Johnny had shown first-rate pluck and courage, and had been pleasant, too, as she reminded her affectionate heart, all through this great emergency.

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“Now you won’t find the rest of them so hard,” she said, as she turned away and stooped down to open the oven door.

“How good my supper’s goin’ to taste!” exclaimed the boy. “Fred Hollis says they’re goin’ to have a lot of folks from out West at his house to spend Thanksgiving.”

Mrs. Jones sighed, and a quick flush of color came into her face; the boy thought she had burned her hand at the oven.

“No, I ain’t hurt,” she said, seeing his troubled face. “No, I was only thinking o’ your Thanksgiving day. I am afraid I ain’t goin’ to have anything nice to give you. I hoped to have some kind of a treat, Johnny, but having to pay for shingling the house has taken every mite o’ money I had, and I’m owin’ four dollars yet. We’ve got to do with what there is in the house.”

“Ain’t we goin’ to have any turkey?” inquired Johnny, ruefully.

“No, nor any chicken, either. I ain’t got ’em, and I can’t go in debt to buy. If I begin to get in debt I can’t ever get out again. But I’ll make you a nice, good cake,” she urged, by way of consolation as she saw his disappointed face. “There’s lots of people that don’t have turkeys.”

Johnny could not bring himself to smile or treat so grave a subject lightly. “Cake alone ain’t enough for dinner!” he said to himself, bitterly. The news of their poverty was harder to bear at this hungry moment than if it were after supper, instead of before it.

“Why don’t we keep turkeys ourselves, mother?” Johnny demanded. “Lots of folks do, and then we could have one whenever we wanted it.”

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“We did keep them, you know, but something has ailed the chicks of late years. I heard to-day that even your grandfather would have to buy, and I’ve known him to raise a flock of sixty. Your Grandma Jones was luckier than anybody, and always got the highest prices.”

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There was a silence. Johnny was now plunged in deep reflection, and his face almost for the first time took on a serious, manly look. “Mother,” he said, “what is it makes us feel so poor? Is it because my father died?”

“Yes, dear,” said Sarah Jones.

She stood still in the middle of the floor, looking at him, and her eyes were filled with tears. The boy’s clothes were faded and outgrown; she could see a great patch on the elbow next her, and his stockings below his short trousers were darned half-way down the leg. Johnny’s face was bright and handsome, but she could hardly bear his honest, questioning look.

“Your grandpa and grandma don’t like me, dear. They didn’t want your father to marry when he did, and he went right against their wishes. ’Twas chiefly because your Grandfather Jones and my father had quarreled, and there was a lawsuit between them. I see now ’twas hard for the old folks; ’twas like having an enemy come among ’em. When your father died they came and offered to take you and bring you up, and I refused ’em. I said I could get along. But they pressed it too far when my heart was ’most broken, anyway, losing o’ your father, and I said things I wish now I hadn’t said and reproached ’em as I shouldn’t now. So that’s why we don’t speak together, and why you’re so poor. If they had you I don’t know but they’d give you every single thing you want. They’d lost their only son; I should have had patience with them,” she continued, reproaching herself, and standing before Johnny.

The boy’s face did not change; he looked away, and then he took his pencil again and made some marks on his slate as if he were going on with his figuring. His grandfather had the same slow, set way of behaving, and the mother’s heart knew a sudden pain. Johnny was nothing but a boy; she ought not to have told him.

“I’d rather live with you,” he said, presently, with great effort. “I belong to you and father most, don’t I? I don’t care if there ain’t a turkey just this once,” and the mother took a step nearer, and kissed him quite unexpectedly.

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“Come, put away your books now; I want the table for supper,” she said to him, trying to speak as if there were nothing the matter.

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It was, as everybody said, real Thanksgiving weather. There was not quite snow enough for sleighing, but the sky was already gray with the promise of more. The mountains on the far horizon looked blue and cold, and the nearer hills were black and dismal, as if even the thick fur of pine-trees that covered them could hardly keep the world from freezing.

Old Mr. Jones was one of the last to untie his horse and start toward home. It was three miles from the village to his farm, and he had spent nearly the whole afternoon in Barton’s store; there had been some business to do with men whom he met there, and an inner pocket was filled with money that had been paid him for some pine timber.

He was a very stern-looking person as he sat in the old armchair by the stove. One could believe that he was possessed of authority as well as wealth, and that he had kept his mind upon a grudge for years together. The loss of his son had seemed harder to him than it might have seemed to most men; he had almost resented it. Whatever cheerfulness had been his in early life was all gone now, and his wife, a timid, affectionate woman, who feared and obeyed him in all things, believed as he did, that they were unjustly treated in the matter of happiness. Each year found them better off in this world’s goods, and poorer in the power of using things to make either themselves or other people happy.

The good old doctor had come into the store late in the afternoon to wait for the mail-carrier, who was due at five o’clock.

“How’s your wife getting on?” he asked, kindly, and was told that she was still ailing, but no worse than common.

“You need a younger woman there to help her, Henry,” said the doctor. “She needs somebody there while you are away at work. I thought the other day that she was drooping from being so much alone, and from brooding over the past,” he added, in a low voice. “I want to have a talk with you some of these days. You know I mean your good as much as hers. Why don’t you let bygones be bygones?”

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“You can’t make believe if the right feelings aren’t there,” said Henry Jones. “If you are alluding to my family, I can only say that that woman my son married has expressed her feelings once for all. She probably feels the same way now.”

“Now, Henry,” said the doctor, pleasantly, “you know that we went to school together and have always been friendly. I’ve seen you through a good many troubles, and before I die I want to see you through this biggest one. That’s a nice boy growing up, and he’s got a good mother. You never showed her any great kindness, and yet you wanted to rob her of all she had to live for. She turned on you that day just as any creature will that fights for her young. You took the wrong way to do the right thing, and only got your pay for it. You must put your pride in your pocket and go and tell her you’re sorry and want her to come right home and bring Johnny and spend the winter. You’ve got a better teacher in your district this year than there is in theirs.”

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The old man shook his head. “You don’t understand nothin’ at all about it,” he began, dolefully. “I don’t see what I can do. I wish there was peace amongst us, but—” And at this point the doctor moved impatiently away.

“I had to buy a turkey for Thanksgivin’ this year,” he heard the old farmer complaining to a fresh arrival. The store was full of neighbors now, who had seen the mail-carrier arrive. “Yes, I had to buy a turkey, first time I ever done such a thing, and there’s nobody but wife and me to set down to it. Seems hard; yes, but ’tis one o’ them Vermont turkeys, and a very handsome one, too; I don’t know’s ’twill equal those we’ve been accustomed to.”

The doctor sighed as he looked over his shoulder and saw Henry Jones’s stolid face, and saw him lift the great turkey with evident pride because it was the best and largest to be bought that year; the doctor could not help wondering what Johnny and his mother would feast upon.

There was a good deal of cheerfulness in the store—jokes and laughter and humorous questioning of newcomers. The busy storekeeper and postmaster was not averse to taking his part in these mild festivities of Thanksgiving eve.

As Mr. Jones approached to take his evening mail of the weekly newspaper and a circular or two he found another small budget pressed into his hand.

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“You’re goin’ right by, an’ I’m goin’ to close early. I expect you’ll be willin’ to leave it. ’Tis for your grandson, Johnny. He’ll want his little paper to read to-morrow. It’s one the doctor sends him,” said the storekeeper, boldly. “You just give a call as you go by, an’ they’ll come right out.”

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If Henry Jones had heard the roar of laughter in the store a moment after he had shut the door behind him, that copy of the paper might have been dropped at once and lain under the fresh-fallen snow until spring. A certain pride and stiffness of demeanor stood the old man in good stead, but he was very angry indeed as he put the great turkey into his wagon and the mail-matter beside it. He drove away up the road in grim fury. Perhaps he should meet some one to whom he could depute the unwelcome errand. But the doctor’s words could not be put out of mind, and his own conscience became more and more disturbed. It was beginning to snow hard, and the young horse was in a hurry to get home. The turkey soon joggled and bumped from its safe place under the seat to the very back of the farm wagon, while the newspaper, which had been in the corner, blew forward out of sight and got under the buffalo-robe.

Just as the reluctant messenger came to a cold-looking little house by the roadside Johnny himself came out to shut the gate, which was blowing in the wind. He was bareheaded, and as warm as a furry squirrel with his good supper of bread and butter and milk and gingerbread, but he looked very small and thin as his grandfather caught sight of him. For years the two had never been so near together,—Johnny and his mother sat far back in the church,—and there was now an unexpected twinge in the old man’s heart, while Johnny was dumb with astonishment at this unexpected appearance.

“That you, John?” said the old farmer, in a businesslike tone, but with no unkindness; his heart was beating ridiculously fast. “There’s something there in the wagon for your folks. The postmaster was in a hurry to get it to you,” he added. But the horse would not stand, and he did not look back again at the boy. Johnny reached up, and seeing nothing but the great turkey, made a manful effort to master the weight of it and get it over the tail-board, and then went triumphantly through the swinging gate as his grandfather, perfectly unconscious of such an involuntary benefaction, passed rattling up the road trying to hold the colt as best he might.

As for Johnny, his face shone with joy as he dumped the great bird on the kitchen floor and bade his mother look.

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“’Twas my grandpa out there, and he said he’d brought something for my folks. Now, sir, ain’t we goin’ to have a turkey for Thanksgivin’!”

Whereupon, to Johnny’s despair and complete surprise, his mother sat down in the little rocking-chair and began to cry.

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“I certain sure put it into the wagon, well under the seat,” said old Mr. Jones to his wife, who had come out through the long shed to the barn to hold the lantern. “I certain sure put it in with my own hands; as nice a gobbler as we ever raised ourselves.”

“Did you pass anybody on the road, or leave the horse so they could have stolen anything out?” asked Mrs. Jones, looking very cold and deeply troubled. “Why, I’ve got the stuffing all made a’ready. I counted on your bringin’ it, and on getting it all prepared to roast to-morrow. I have to divide up my work; I can’t do as I used to,” she mourned, adding her mite of trouble to their general feeling of despair. “There, I don’t care much whether we have a turkey or not. We don’t seem to have as much to be thankful for as some folks.”

The lantern-light shone on her face, and Mr. Jones saw how old and pitiful she looked, and by contrast he thought of the little boy’s cheerful chirp and hearty “Thank you!” as he took the paper. Whether it was what the doctor had said, or whether it was the natural workings of a slow conscience, there was a queer disturbance in his mind. He could not manage to tell his wife about stopping to leave the mail.

“I guess I’ll drive back,” he said, doubtfully. But the snow was falling like a blizzard, faster and faster, as he looked out of the door. “I certain would if I had anybody to go with me, but this colt is dreadful restless. I couldn’t get out and leave him to pick the turkey up if I saw it laying right in the road. I guess we’ve got to let it go and trust to Providence. The road’s rough enough, but I can’t see how that turkey jolted out, either!” he grumbled. “I feel too lame to go afoot.”

“There, I thought when you let Asa go off to-day, ’stead of to-morrow, you’d be liable to need him; you ain’t so young as you used to be, Henry,” said his wife. “I’ll have ye a good cup o’ tea, and we won’t mind about the turkey more than we can help.”

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They passed a solemn evening together, and the great snow-storm raged about their warm house. Many times the old man reproached his own want of spirit in not going back along the road.

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In the morning, very early, there was a loud knocking at the kitchen door. When Mrs. Jones opened it she found a boy standing there with a happy, eager face.

“Are you my grandma?” demanded Johnny. “Mother sent her best respects, and we thank you very much for the turkey, and she hopes you and my grandpa will stop, going home from meeting, and eat dinner. She’d be real glad to have you.”

“What’s all this?” demanded Mr. Henry Jones, who had heard the message with astonished ears, and stood in the doorway behind his wife, with his spectacles on his forehead like a lighthouse. “Where’d you get your turkey, sir? I’d like to know!”

“Why, right out of your wagon,” said Johnny. “That one you brought last night. It’s the handsomest one mother ever had in the house; she cried like everything about it.” The child’s voice faltered, he was so excited with his errand, and so spent with his eager journey through the deep snow.

“Come right in, dear!” cried the grandmother, grateful enough for the sight of him. And when Henry Jones saw her lead him to the fire, and then with a sob take the little fellow right into her arms and hug him, and begin to cry, too, he turned away and looked out of the window. The boy was their very own.

“There, give him some warm breakfast before he goes back; he must have started early,” said the grandfather. “I’ll put the colt in and take him back myself. She must have meant what she said, to start him up here like that, soon as day broke!”

When Johnny’s mother saw the old man and the little boy plowing along in the old sleigh, and saw how they were talking and even laughing together, she thanked Heaven for this sudden blessing. “I wa’n’t going to be slow about taking the next step, when an old man like him had taken the first one,” she said to herself.

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As for the lost turkey, it was already in the oven at that moment; but the true Thanksgiving feast that year was the feast of happiness in all their hearts.

“O my!” exclaimed Johnny early that afternoon, as he leaned back in his chair. “Grandma, aren’t you glad this turkey didn’t wander in the wet grass and die when it was a chick?”

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