

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Thanksgiving at the Polls

EDWARD EVERETT HALE

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Edward Everett Hale (1822–1909), Unitarian minister, antislavery activist, and for a time chaplain in the United States Senate, was also a prolific author of essays and stories, many on American political subjects. He is best remembered for his story “The Man without a Country” (1863). In this story from 1899, Hale explores the relation between the holiday of Thanksgiving and the practice of generosity. But by building the story around immigrants and polling-booths, Hale also invites us to think about citizenship and the meaning of America, as well as our principles of freedom and equal opportunity.

Why does Frederick Dane first move into the polling place? What moves him to “extend the benefits of his new discovery”? What are the effects of his generosity on those he brings “home” with him? How does he end up with so much abundance for Thanksgiving, and why does he choose to share it beyond “his own” polling-booth? What is the meaning of the fact that the same events are taking place in other polling-booths, or of the final gathering in Faneuil Hall, with the Mayor in attendance? What is the meaning of the story’s title (and especially “at” the polls)? What is the symbolic significance of the fact that the gatherings occur in (at) polling-booths? What is the significance of the fact that most of the characters who take up residence in the polling-booths are wandering homeless immigrants? How is Thanksgiving connected to American citizenship?

I.

Frederick Dane was on his way towards what he called his home. His home, alas, was but an indifferent attic in one of the southern suburbs of Boston. He had been walking; but he was now standing still, at the well-known corner of Massachusetts and Columbus Avenues.

As often happens, Frederick Dane had an opportunity to wait at this corner a quarter of an hour. As he looked around him on the silent houses, he could not but observe the polling-booth, which a watchful city government had placed in the street, a few days before, in preparation for the election which was to take place three weeks afterward. Dane is of an inquiring temper, and seeing that the polling-booth had a door and the door

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had a keyhole, he tried in the keyhole a steel key which he had picked up in Dock Square the day before. Almost to his surprise, the key governed the lock at once, and he found himself able to walk in.

He left the door wide open, and the gaslight streaming in revealed to him the aspect of the cells arranged for Australian voting. The rails were all in their places, and the election might take place the very next day. It instantly occurred to Dane that he might save the five cents which otherwise he would have given to his masters of the street railway, and be the next morning three miles nearer his work, if he spent the night in the polling-cabin. He looked around for a minute or two, and found some large rolls of street posters, which had been left there by some disappointed canvasser the year before, and which had accompanied one cell of the cabin in its travels. Dane is a prompt man, and, in a minute more, he had locked the door behind him, had struck a wax taper which he had in his cigar-box, had rolled the paper roll out on the floor, to serve as a pillow. In five minutes more, covered with his heavy coat, he lay on the floor, sleeping as soundly as he had slept the year before, when he found himself on the lee side of an iceberg under Peary's command.

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This is perhaps unnecessary detail, by way of saying that this is the beginning of the arrangement which a city, not very intelligent, will make in the next century for unsettled people, whose own houses are not agreeable to them. There exist in Boston at this moment three or four hundred of the polling-booths,—nice little houses, enough better than most of the peasantry of most of Europe ever lived in. They are, alas, generally packed up in lavender and laid away for ten months of the year. But in the twentieth century we shall send them down to the shores of islands and other places where people like to spend the summer, and we shall utilize them, not for the few hours of an election only, but all the year round. This will not then be called “Nationalism,” it will be called “Democracy;” and that is a very good name when it is applied to a very good thing.

Dane was an old soldier and an old seaman. He was not troubled by disagreeable dreams, and in the morning, when the street-cars began to travel, he was awaked a little after sunrise, by their clatter on the corner. He felt well satisfied with the success of his experiment, and began on a forecast, which the reader shall follow for a few weeks, which he thought, and thought rightly, would tend to his own convenience, possibly to that of his friends.

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Dane telegraphed down to the office that he should be detained an hour that morning, went out to his home of the day before at Ashmont, paid his landlady her scot, brought in with him his little possessions in a valise to the office, and did not appear at his new home until after nightfall.

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He was then able to establish himself on the basis which proved convenient afterwards, and which it is worth while to explain to a world which is not too well housed. The city had provided three or four chairs there, a stove, and two tables. Dane had little literature, but, as he was in the literary line himself, he did not care for this so much; men who write books are not commonly eager to read books which are worse than their own. At a nine-cent window of a neighboring tinman's he was able to buy himself the few little necessities which he wanted for housekeeping. And not to detain the reader too long upon merely fleshly arrangements, in the course of a couple of hours of Tuesday evening and Wednesday evening, he had fitted up his convenient if not pretty bower with all that man requires. It was easy to buy a mince pie or a cream cake, or a bit of boiled ham or roast chicken, according as payday was near or distant. One is glad to have a tablecloth. But if one have a large poster warning people, a year before, that they should vote the Prohibition ticket, one's conscience is not wounded if this poster, ink down, takes the place which a tablecloth would have taken under other circumstances. If there is not much crockery to use, there is but little to wash. And, in short, as well trained a man of the world as Dane had made himself thoroughly comfortable in his new quarters before the week was over.

II.

At the beginning Frederick's views were purely personal, or, as the preachers say, selfish. Here was an empty house, three miles nearer his work than his hired attic was, and he had taken possession. But conscience always asserts itself, and it was not long before he felt that he ought to extend the benefits of this new discovery of his somewhat further. It really was a satisfaction to what the pulpits call a "felt want" when as he came through Massachusetts Avenue on Thursday evening, he met a boy and a girl, neither of them more than ten years old, crying on the sidewalk. Dane is sympathetic and fond of children. He stopped the little brats, and satisfied himself that neither had had any supper. He could not understand a word of the language in which they spoke, nor could they understand him. But kindness needs little spoken language; and accordingly Frederick led them along to his cabin, and after waiting, as he always did, a minute or two, to be sure that no one was in sight, he unlocked the door, and brought in his little companions.

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It was clear enough that the children were such waifs and strays that nothing surprised them, and they readily accepted the modest hospitalities of the position. Like all masculine housekeepers, Frederick had provided three times as much food as he needed for his own physical wants, so that it was not difficult to make these children happy with the pieces of mince pie and lemon pie and cream cake and eclairs which were left from his unknown festivals of the day before. Poor little things, they were both cold and tired, and, before half an hour was over, they were snugly asleep on and under a pile of Prohibition posters.

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III.

Fortunately for Frederick Dane, for the nine years before he joined Peary, he had lived in the city of Bagdad. He had there served as the English interpreter for the Caliph of that city. The Caliph did most of his business at night, and was in the habit of taking Mr. Dane with him on his evening excursions. In this way Mr. Dane had made the somewhat intimate acquaintance of Mr. Jaffrey, the private secretary of the Caliph; and he had indeed in his own employment for some time, a wide-awake black man, of the name of Mezrou, who, for his "other place," was engaged as a servant in the Caliph's household. Dane was thus not unfamiliar with the methods of unexpected evening visits; and it was fortunate for him that he was so. The little children whom he had picked up, explained to him, by pantomime which would have made the fortune of a ballet-girl, that they were much more comfortable in their new home than they had been in any other, and that they had no wish to leave it. But by various temptations addressed to them, in the form of barley horses and dogs, and sticks of barber's candy, Dane, who was of a romantic and enterprising disposition, persuaded them to take him to some of their former haunts.

These were mostly at the North End of Boston, and he soon found that he needed all his recollections of Bagdad for the purpose of conducting any conversation with any of the people they knew best. In a way, however, with a little broken Arabic, a little broken Hebrew, a great deal of broken China, and many gesticulations, he made acquaintance with two of their compatriots, who had, as it seemed, crossed the ocean with them in the same steerage. That is to say, they either had or had not; but for many months Mr. Dane was unable to discover which. Such as they were, however, they had been sleeping on the outside of the upper attic of the house in Salutation Alley where these children had lodged, or not lodged, as the case might be, during the last few days. When Mr. Dane saw what were called their lodgings, he did not wonder that they had accepted pot-luck with him.

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It is necessary to explain all this, that the reader may understand why, on the first night after the arrival of these two children, the population of the polling-booth was enlarged by the presence of these two Hebrew compatriots. And, without further mystery, it may be as well to state that all four were from a village about nine hundred and twenty-three miles north of Odessa, in the southern part of Russia. They had emigrated in a compulsory manner from that province, first on account of the utter failure of anything to eat there; second, on account of a prejudice which the natives of that country had contracted against the Hebrew race.

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The two North End friends of little Ezra and Sarah readily accepted the invitation of the two children to join in the College Settlement at the corner of the two avenues. The rules of the institution proved attractive, and before a second week was well advanced ten light excelsior mattresses were regularly rolled up every morning as the different inmates went to their duties; while, as evening closed in, eight cheerful companions told stories around the hospitable board.

IV.

It is no part of this little tale to follow, with Mr. Stevenson's magic, or with that of the Arabian Nights, the fortunes from day to day of the little circle. Enough that men of Hebrew race do not prove lazy anywhere. Dane, certainly, gave them no bad example. The children were at once entered in a neighboring school, where they showed the quickness of their race. They had the advantage, when the week closed and began, that they could attend the Sabbath school provided for them by the Hebrews on Saturday and the several Sunday-schools of the Parker Memorial, the Berkeley Temple, and the other churches of the neighborhood. The day before the election, Frederick Dane asked Oleg and Vladimir to help him in bringing up some short boards, which they laid on the trusses in the roof above them. On the little attic thus prepared, they stored their mattresses and other personal effects before the great election of that year began. They had no intention of interfering, even by a cup of cold coffee, with the great wave of righteous indignation which, on that particular day of that particular year, "swept away, as by a great cosmic tidal flood, the pretences and ambitions, etc., etc., etc." These words are cited from Frederick Dane's editorial of the next morning, and were in fact used by him or by some of his friends, without variations, in all the cosmic changes of the elections of the next six years.

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V.

But so soon as this election was well over, the country and the city settled down, with what Ransom used to call “amazin’” readiness to the new order, such as it was. Only the people who “take up the streets” detached more men than ever to spoil the pavement. For now a city election was approaching. And it might be that the pavers and ditchers and shovellers and curbstone men and asphalt makers should vote wrong. Dane and his settlement were well aware that after this election they would all have to move out from their comfortable quarters. But, while they were in, they determined to prepare for a fit Thanksgiving to God, and the country which makes provision so generous for those in need. It is not every country, indeed, which provides four hundred empty houses, every autumn, for the convenience of any unlodged night-editor with a skeleton key, who comes along.

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He explained to his companions that a great festival was near. They heard this with joy. He explained that no work would be done that day,—not in any cigar-shop or sweating-room. This also pleased them. He then, at some length, explained the necessity of the sacrifice of turkeys on the occasion. He told briefly how Josselyn and the fathers shot them as they passed through the sky. But he explained that now we shoot them, as one makes money, not directly but indirectly. We shoot our turkeys, say, at shooting-galleries. All this proved intelligible, and Frederick had no fear for turkeys.

As for Sarah and Ezra, he found that at Ezra’s boys’ club and at Sarah’s girls’ club, and each of her Sabbath-school classes and Sunday-school classes, and at each of his, it had been explained that on the day before Thanksgiving they must come with baskets to places named, and carry home a Thanksgiving dinner.

These announcements were hailed with satisfaction by all to whom Dane addressed them. Everything in the country was as strange to them as it would have been to an old friend of mine, an inhabitant of the planet Mars. And they accepted the custom of this holiday among the rest. Oddly enough, it proved that one or two of them were first-rate shots, and, by attendance at different shooting-galleries, they brought in more than a turkey apiece, as Governor Bradford’s men did in 1621. Many of them were at work in large factories, where it was the custom of the house to give a roasted turkey and a pan of cranberry sauce to each person who had been on the pay-list for three months. One or two of them were errand men in the market, and it was the practice of the wholesale dealers there, who at this season become to a certain extent retailers, to encourage these errand

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men by presenting to each of them a turkey, which was promised in advance. As for Dane himself, the proprietors of his journal always presented a turkey to each man on their staff. And in looking forward to his Thanksgiving at the polls, he had expected to provide a twenty-two pound gobbler which a friend in Vermont was keeping for him. It may readily be imagined, then, that, when the day before Thanksgiving came, he was more oppressed by an embarrassment of riches than by any difficulty on the debtor side of his account. He had twelve people to feed, himself included. There were the two children, their eight friends, and a young Frenchman from Paris who, like all persons of that nationality who are six months in this country, had found many enemies here. Dane had invited him to dinner. He had arranged that there should be plates or saucers enough for each person to have two. And now there was to be a chicken-pie from Obed Shalom, some mince pies and Marlborough pies from the Union for Christian Work, a turkey at each end of the board; and he found he should have left over, after the largest computation for the appetites of the visitors, twenty-three pies of different structure, five dishes of cranberry sauce, three or four boxes of raisins, two or three drums of figs, two roasted geese and eleven turkeys. He counted all the turkeys as roasted, because he had the promise of the keeper of the Montgomery House that he would roast for him all the birds that were brought in to him before nine o'clock on Thanksgiving morning.

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VI.

Having stated all this on a list carefully written, first in the English language and second in the language of the Hebrews, Frederick called his fellow-lodgers together earlier than usual on the evening before Thanksgiving Day. He explained to them, in the patois which they used together, that it would be indecent for them to carry this supply of food farther than next Monday for their own purposes. He told them that the occasion was one of exuberant thanksgiving to the God of heaven. He showed them that they all had great reason for thanksgiving. And, in short, he made three heads of a discourse which might have been expanded by the most eloquent preacher in Boston the next day, and would have well covered the twenty-five minutes which the regulation would have required for a sermon. He then said that, as they had been favored with much more than they could use for their own appetites, they must look up those who were not so well off as themselves.

He was well pleased by finding that he was understood, and what he said was received with applause in the various forms in which Southern Russia applauds on such

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occasions. As for the two children, their eyes were wide open, and their mouths, and they looked their wonder.

Frederick then proposed that two of their number should volunteer to open a rival establishment at the polling-booth at the corner of Gates Street and Burgoyne Street, and that the company should on the next day invite guests enough to make another table of twelve. He proposed that the same course should be taken at the corner of Shapleigh and Bowditch Streets, and yet again at the booth which is at the corner of Curtis Avenue and Quincy Street. And he said that, as time would press upon them, they had better arrange to carry a part at least of the stores to these places that evening. To this there was a general assent. The company sat down to a hasty tea, administered much as the Israelites took their last meal in Egypt; for every man had on his long frieze coat and his heavy boots, and they were eager for the active work of Thanksgiving. For each the stewards packed two turkeys in a basket, filled in as far as they could with other stores, and Frederick headed his procession.

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It was then that he was to learn, for the first time, that he was not the only person in Boston.

It was then that he found out that the revelation made to one man is frequently made to many.

He found out that he was as wise as the next fellow, but was no wiser; was as good as the next fellow, but was no better; and that, in short, he had no special patent upon his own undertaking.

The little procession soon arrived at the corner of Shapleigh and Bowditch Streets. Whoever had made the locks on the doors of the houses had been content to use the same pattern for all. It proved, therefore, that the key of No. 237 answered for No. 238, and it was not necessary to open the door with the “jimmy” which Simeon had under his ulster.

But on the other hand, to Frederick’s amazement, as he threw the door open, he found a lighted room and a long table around which sat twelve men, guised or disguised in much the same way as those whom he had brought with him. A few moments showed that another leader of the people had discovered this vacant home a few weeks before, and had established there another settlement of the un-homed. As it proved, this gentleman was a Mashpee Indian. He was, in fact, the member of the House of

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Representatives from the town of Mashpee for the next winter. Arriving in Boston to look for lodgings, he, not unnaturally, met with a Mohawk, two Dacotahs, and a Cherokee, who, for various errands, had come north and east. A similarity of color, not to say of racial relations, had established a warm friendship among the five, and they had brought together gradually twelve gentlemen of copper color, who had been residing in this polling-booth since the second day after the general election. Their fortune had not been unlike that of Frederick and his friends, and at this moment they were discussing the methods by which they might distribute several brace of ducks which had been sent up from Mashpee, a haunch of venison which had come down from above Machias, and some wild turkeys which had arrived by express from the St. Regis Indians of Northern New York. At the moment of the arrival of our friends, they were sending out two of their number to find how they might best distribute thus their extra provender.

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These two gladly joined in the little procession, and all went together to the corner of Quincy Street and Curtis Avenue. There a similar revelation was made, only there was some difficulty at first in any real mutual understanding. For here they met a dozen, more or less, of French Canadians. These gentlemen had left their wives and their children in the province of Quebec, and, finding themselves in Boston, had taken possession of the polling-booth, where they were living much more comfortably than they would have lived at home. They too had been well provided for Thanksgiving, both by their friends at home and by their employers, and had been questioning as to the distribution which they could make of their supplies. Reinforced by four of their number, the delegation in search of hungry people was increased to fourteen in number, and with a certain curiosity, it must be confessed, they went together to try their respective keys on No. 311.

Opening this without so much as knocking at the door to know if here they might not provide the “annex” or “tender” which they wished to establish, they found, it must be confessed without any amazement or amusement, a company of Italians under the charge of one Antonio Fero, who had also worked out the problem of cheap lodgings, and had established themselves for some weeks here. These men also had been touched, either by some priest’s voice or other divine word, with a sense of the duties of the occasion, and were just looking round to know where they might spread their second table. Five of them joined the fourteen, and the whole company, after a rapid conversation, agreed that they would try No. 277 on the other side of the Avenue. And here their fortunes changed.

For here it proved that the “cops” on that beat, finding nights growing somewhat cold, and that there was no provision made by the police commissioners for a club-room for

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gentlemen of their profession, had themselves arranged in the polling-booth a convenient place for the reading of the evening newspapers and for conference on their mutual affairs. These “cops” were unmarried men, and did not much know where was the home in which the governor requested them to spend their Thanksgiving. They had therefore determined to spread their own table in their club-room, and this evening had been making preparations for a picnic feast there at midnight on Thanksgiving Day, when they should be relieved from their more pressing duties. They also had found the liberality of each member of the force had brought in more than would be requisite, and were considering the same subject which had oppressed the consciences of the leaders of the other bands.

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No one ever knew who made the great suggestion, but it is probable that it was one of these officials, well acquainted with the charter of the city of Boston and with its constitution and by-laws, who offered the proposal which was adopted. In the jealousy of the fierce democracy of Boston in the year 1820, when the present city charter was made, it reserved for itself permission to open Faneuil Hall at any time for a public meeting. It proves now that whenever fifty citizens unite to ask for the use of the hall for such a meeting, it must be given to them. At the time of which we are reading the mayor had to preside at every such meeting. At the “Cops” club it was highly determined that the names of fifty citizens should at once be obtained, and that the Cradle of Liberty should be secured for the general Thanksgiving.

It was wisely resolved that no public notice should be given of this in the journals. It was well known that that many-eyed Argus called the press is very apt not to interfere with that which is none of its business.

VII.

And thus it happened that, when Thanksgiving Day came, the worthy janitor of Faneuil Hall sent down his assistant to open it, and that the assistant, who meant to dine at home, found a good-natured friend from the country who took the keys and lighted the gas in his place. Before the sun had set, Frederick Dane and Antonio Fero and Michael Chevalier and the Honorable Mr. Walk-in-the-Water and Eben Kartschoff arrived with an express-wagon driven by a stepson of P. Nolan. There is no difficulty at Faneuil Hall in bringing out a few trestles and as many boards as one wants for tables, for Faneuil Hall is a place given to hospitality. And so, before six o'clock, the hour assigned for the extemporized dinner, the tables were set with turkeys, with geese, with venison, with mallards and

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plover, with quail and partridges, with cranberry and squash, and with dishes of Russia and Italy and Greece and Bohemia, such as have no names. The Greeks brought fruits, the Indians brought venison, the Italians brought red wine, the French brought walnuts and chestnuts, and the good God sent a blessing. Almost every man found up either a wife or a sweetheart or a daughter or a niece to come with him, and the feast went on to the small hours of Friday. The Mayor came down on time, and being an accomplished man, addressed them in English, in Latin, in Greek, in Hebrew, and in Tuscan. And it is to be hoped that they understood him.

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But no record has ever been made of the feast in any account-book on this side the line. Yet there are those who have seen it, or something like it, with the eye of faith. And when, a hundred years hence, some antiquary reads this story in a number of the “Omaha Intelligencer,” which has escaped the detrition of the thirty-six thousand days and nights, he will say,—

“Why, this was the beginning of what we do now! Only these people seem to have taken care of strangers only one month in the twelve. Why did they not welcome all strangers in like manner, until they had made them feel at home? These people, once a year, seem to have fed the hungry. Would it not have been simpler for them to provide that no man should ever be hungry? These people certainly thanked God to some purpose once a year; how happy is the nation which has learned to thank him always!”