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The Harlows' Christmas Dinner

"Breakfast is ready, boys," said Mrs. Harlow. "Can you stop long enough to eat?"

It was Christmas morning and Danny and Jim were still gloating over a bright new jack-knife and a box of water-color paints which their respective stockings had revealed. Each stocking had also contained a pair of thick, warm mittens which their mother had knit, and a package of home-made candy. That was all, but the boys were fully satisfied, for each had received what he most wanted.

Mrs. Harlow was rather quiet during the morning meal, serving the boys in silence while she listened to their merry talk. She was thinking how best to tell them something which was on her mind; for she was loath to spoil their holiday mood.

At length she said: "I am afraid your Christmas dinner will be a disappointment to you. You know we are very poor, and this year it seems as though money has come in more slowly than ever before. For some reason I have found less sewing to do at the village than usual. So it looks as though we will have to get along without any meat this Christmas, for I have no money to buy it with. But we have plenty of vegetables which you raised in the garden, and there are apples and nuts and canned berries. I will do my best with these, and perhaps we shall not have such a bad dinner after all."

The boys' faces fell at first, but before she had finished they had brightened again and Danny said, "Don't worry, mother. It will be a jolly good dinner I know." "Of course it will," echoed little Jim, though he loved chicken dearly. Tears came into Mrs. Harlow's eyes as she said, "Whatever else I lack I have two of the best boys in the world."

Suddenly an idea came to Danny. "Mother," he said, "if you will let Jim and me take father's gun this morning, perhaps we can shoot a rabbit or a partridge. I am sure we can." His mother smiled at his enthusiasm, but shook her head. "You are too young to use it yet," said she. "I am afraid you would shoot yourselves."

"But Dick Purcell showed me how to load and shoot it last summer and I killed a woodchuck with it myself," protested Danny. "Yes," said Jim, "I saw him." It was Jim's province to uphold Danny always. Young Dick Purcell was the Harlows' nearest neighbor. In summer he planted and cultivated their few acres of tillage land, taking half the resultant crops in payment for his labor. As a successful fisherman and mighty hunter he was the boys' ideal. Finally, after

many entreaties and promises to "be careful every minute" from Danny and Jim, Mrs. Harlow consented to their taking the gun. "But you must be home by ten o'clock," she admonished. "That will give you nearly three hours, and I shall worry myself to death if you are gone longer than that."

There was no dallying after this.

in the pouch, B.B.'s, and he put in a generous load of these, determined that whatever came in range should get no farther than the dinner table.

Donning their warmest clothes, including the new mittens, the youthful hunters set off. "Don't worry about us," Danny shouted to his mother, who stood in the doorway. "We shall be back soon with a fat bird." An odd picture they made as they crossed the yard toward the pasture and woodlot beyond, and in spite of her misgivings Mrs. Harlow could not resist a smile as she watched them go. Danny was in the lead, the long gun shouldered and reaching far out behind, while Jim, who had insisted upon carrying something, brought up the rear bravely accoutred with shot pouch and powder horn.

Only a few inches of snow had fallen as yet, and the boys found the walking quite easy. But the morning was a sharp one and their faces smarted with the cold as they crossed the

quickly and pointed at the snow. "See," he said, "one is still here, at any rate." Jim looked down and saw the track made by a single bird walking in the snow. "Good!" he exclaimed. "I'll bet he's an old boomer, too. Those tracks are as big as a hen's." They moved stealthily onward, but had not taken three steps when there was a rustle near at hand and a big cock partridge ran out from behind an old log. Clucking excitedly, it started to cross a little opening just in front of them, its head erect, its tail at full spread, and its dark ruff distended. To the surprised boys it looked as large as a turkey.

Danny was so startled that for an instant he forgot to shoot. Then, collecting himself, he raised the gun with trembling hands, took a quick aim and fired. "Boom!" The old piece went off with a prodigious roar, well-nigh knocking him off his feet. But it was not that which brought tears to his eyes a second later. They were tears of vexation and disappointment. For, mingled with and following the report of the gun, had sounded the whir-r-r of wings as the bird sailed away unhurt.

Slowly Danny turned and looked at Jim. Jim looked back at him. For a long minute neither said anything. It was not a time for words. Disappointment was too strongly written on their faces to need other expression.

At last Danny spoke. "Oh, Jim!" he said, "how did I miss him?"

"I don't know," Jim answered. "I guess we wanted him too bad."

"But he was so big," said Danny. "I could have hit him with a stone." For once Jim had no consolation to offer. The bird had really looked big. He could not deny that.

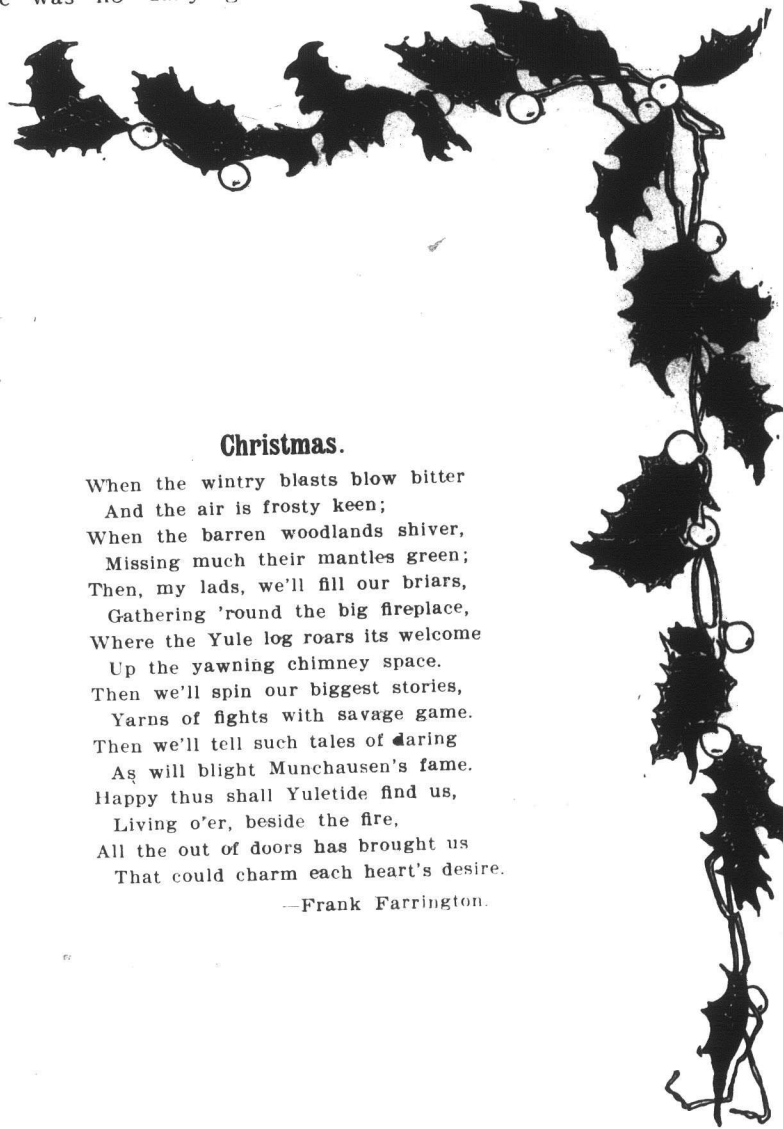
After a while Danny reached for the powder-horn and began half-heartedly to reload. "We may as well go home," he said. "I've had my only chance and thrown it away."

But Jim, who had missed nothing, and was fast regaining his natural cheerfulness, encouraged him as best he could. "There must be other partridges here," he said. "Or perhaps we shall find that one again. We must get something," he added—"for mother."

Unwittingly the little fellow had touched the right chord. Danny said no more about returning, but set his teeth grimly and started on again. They slipped along as silently as wood-sprites or Brownies, peering with sharp eyes into the dark spaces beneath the evergreens and listened intently for the "p-r-r-t, p-r-r-t" of a frightened bird. Once a quick scratching and scurrying startled them and set their hearts beating wildly. But it was only a saucy red squirrel which ran up a nearby spruce and perching on a bow balked its defiance at them, punctuating its remarks with angry flirts of its tail.

They reached the further edge of the copse without seeing other game. Evidently the big cock was sole lord and tenant of this bit of woods, and for the time he had fled, panic-stricken beyond its borders.

Leaving the evergreens, Danny and Jim came out at the top of a long,



Christmas.

When the wintry blasts blow bitter
And the air is frosty keen;
When the barren woodlands shiver,
Missing much their mantles green;
Then, my lads, we'll fill our briars,
Gathering 'round the big fireplace,
Where the Yule log roars its welcome
Up the yawning chimney space.
Then we'll spin our biggest stories,
Yarns of fights with savage game.
Then we'll tell such tales of daring
As will blight Munchausen's fame.
Happy thus shall Yuletide find us,
Living o'er, beside the fire,
All the out of doors has brought us
That could charm each heart's desire.

—Frank Farrington.

The boys swallowed their breakfast almost at a single mouthful. Then Danny went to the closet and took down the old gun. It was a muzzle loader, and of so long a pattern that when resting on the floor it stood much higher than his head. But fortunately the barrel was rolled very thin, so that the piece was really much lighter than it looked. Jim produced a shot pouch and powder horn, and Danny proudly proceeded to load the gun, as he had seen Dick do many times. There was but one size shot

open pasture. Their fingers, too, tingled in spite of the new mittens. Soon, however, they reached the woods and entered a thick copse of small evergreens, dotted here and there with trunks of maples and yellow birch. It was warmer here, and aching fingers were speedily forgotten in the search for game. They had started a large flock of partridges among these spruces the summer before and it seemed that some of them ought still to be about.

As they crept along, Danny stopped