

"Well," said her brother, thoughtfully, "he must have been awful mad."

"He was, James, he was, but that ain't no reason why he should drive by every day, a-looking straight ahead as if he was afraid my lilac bushes and apple trees would sort of poison him if he happened to get sight of 'em. I don't want to marry him, goodness knows—I've had trouble enough as 'tis—but I do like to live friendly-like with all my neighbors."

"Pra'p's he'll come 'round yet," suggested James.

"O, no he won't," said Miss Esther with earnestness. "I know Simon Bushnell through and through. If there should be an earthquake, or some such thing, and I should be shot up into the air, and land in his front yard, then maybe he'd speak, 'cos he'd be so astonished he'd forget he was mad. But nothin' that happened just ordinary like, would make him budge an inch. I believe he'd drive right by a-looking between his horse's ears, if it was my own funeral, and I was being carried out the door."

"You haven't ever spoken to him, Esther?"

Miss Esther's lip curled.

"Speak to him! Well, I should say not, and never will till the crack of doom. I told him it might be 'never for all of me,' and so it may. Not but what 'would have been convenient, with the farms joining the way they do and all, but it will never happen now, never."

"Well," said her brother kindly, "I've got a home for you, Esther, whenever you're a mind to come. If you want to stay here a while longer in the old place why you can, but don't never get to feeling that you are homeless or friendless, 'cos you ain't."

Miss Esther was silent, but she looked at him gratefully.

That was four years ago, and she had struggled on alone, but the time had come now when she must accept her brother's offer. She did rebel against her fate, but she had one aspiration, one keen desire, which it seemed to her that she must gratify. She wanted once, just once, before the property passed out of her hands forever, to have a family party at the old home—to end her solitary life, as it were, in a blaze of glory.

She decided to have it a Thanksgiving party, and she invited her brother and his wife, and their four children, her Uncle Josiah and his wife and her father's cousin who taught school in the neighboring village.

"There'll be ten of us," she said over and over, "and it's lucky there's just ten left of them blue chiny plates."

Her unconscious geese were to provide the feast, not in *propria persona*, but fatted and sold and converted into turkey, cranberry sauce, mince pie, and all other kinds of good Thanksgiving fare.

Miss Esther took a great deal of pride in this her last appearance as a land holder and a hostess.

"I want to let 'em see," she said, "that I ain't coming to them 'cos I'm driv' to it, and clean at the end of my rope. I want 'em all to come here once, and see the planner and the Brussels carpet in the parlor and the new tidies and all, and I'll give 'em such a dinner as they can't get, no—not in New York, for all its style."

So for weeks the thought of her Thanksgiving dinner was uppermost in Miss Esther's mind. She planned for it by day and dreamed of it by night. Every inch of the little farm-house was thoroughly cleaned. She mended whatever a woman's hands could mend, and painted the worn woodwork with careful touch. She had a crock of June butter packed down in the cellar, and an extra fine ham hanging in the coolest corner. Meantime the seventeen geese, which represented the biggest part of the Thanksgiving dinner, grew daily fatter and fatter.

It was about the first week in November when Miss Esther determined one bright sunny morning to go down into her cellar and look over her preserve closet. It was a light, cheerful cellar, kept in spotless order. Miss Esther lifted down all the jars and tumblers, while she wiped off the shelves. Then she placed she commented upon its contents and state of preservation.

"Them strawberries are as lovely as the day they was put up," she said admiringly; "and I never did see such color to raspberry jam, and I declare if here ain't a jar of them o' d brandy cherries. I didn't know there was any of 'em left, it's—why it's three years ago since that old ox-heart tree bore so unexpected. My! They're all mouldy on top! I wonder what's the matter."

She unscrewed the top and smelt of the contents critically.

"Land sakes," she ejaculated, "if they ain't worked! Well I never knew my brandy cherries act like that before, no matter how long they was kept! Well I should think as much! If here ain't a great whole in the cover. Now how did that come? I don't believe there's any use scalding 'em over, they're too far gone for that. I'll just have to throw 'em away."

So she put the jar upon the cellar stairs to be carried up when she went, and resumed her work. "I'll have some peaches for tea Thanksgiving night," she said, "with whipped cream and sponge cake. They won't want anything very hearty after all that dinner."

It was quite late before she finished, and leaving everything in immaculate order went upstairs to cook her solitary dinner.

She used to lie down for a little while each day after dinner, and then take her work and sit in the west window of her little sitting-room where the afternoon sun was coming in.

To-day she was finishing a pillow sham, which was designed as a last crushing piece of elegance for her Thanksgiving guests. But she had hardly threaded her needle when glancing out across the

yard she saw a sight that startled her. There were her geese—her seventeen Thanksgiving geese acting in the strangest manner. Some of them were dead, others were dying, and a few were staggering around helplessly, as if it were only a question of seconds when their end should come too.

She threw a shawl over her head and hurried out to them full of anxiety and alarm.

Some of them rose to their feet at her approach and took a few tottering steps, only to fall again in white, unconscious heaps. Others stretched out their necks and squawked dismally, and they all looked at her with keen reproach.

Miss Esther almost cried.

"Oh!" she gasped, "what ails you, you poor feeble-minded creatures? What's come to you—have you been poisoned, or what?"

But the geese made no answer, though one old gander squawked incoherently as he tried to walk away in his usual stately manner. The effort was too much for him; he sank down helpless and expiring.

"Miss Esther could hardly suppress a scream. Her Thanksgiving dinner seemed to be vanishing before her eyes.

"What shall I do?" she cried, "oh, what shall I do! They've all been poisoned. Oh, what shall I do?"

A bright thought shot across the dark despair that filled her mind. Her geese were dying; it was too late to help them now. But the feathers—she might yet save the feathers and so prevent them from being a total loss. But if they were to be live geese feathers, and that was the only kind Miss Esther considered of any value, they must be secured at once.

She did not hesitate. She seized two of the dying geese and bore them into her little kitchen.

Hastily spreading down a clean sheet upon her spotless floor she began to pluck them hurriedly.

The first goose gave no sign of life, but the second squawked resentfully all through the operation.

The tears stood in Miss Esther's eyes.

"Oh, it seems dreadful," she said, "to pluck them in their dying moments! not even to let them die in peace! Poor things, poor things! But it's got to be done—it's got to be done."

She worked away with nervous, despairing energy, until the entire seventeen denuded corpses were stretched upon the kitchen-door. The sheet was piled with a great snowy mound of fluffy feathers. She gathered it up, by the four corners, and took it up into the wood-house chamber, where she spread the feathers to dry.

Then she came down and looked at the seventeen prostrate geese, wondering what disposition she had better make of them.

Suddenly one of them rose to its feet, gazed at her mournfully, and then staggered with weak, unsteady legs towards the closed door.

Miss Esther watched the supposed corpse with horror. Its breast was quite bare, and it presented the singular appearance that a man would make whose toilet was complete, but for the absence of his shirt.

Miss Esther rushed to the door and opened it, and gazed after the goose, as it slipped weakly forth.

"Land's sake," she said hoarsely, "ain't you dead?"

The goose didn't answer. It walked on, as if it were shaking the dust of her inhospitable house forever from its feet.

Miss Esther turned around, weary and perplexed, only to find that two more of the stricken creatures had arisen, and were feebly moving about.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" she cried, "What's the matter with you? It's worse having you come to life, than it was having you die. What shall I do with you all?"

But these geese, too, walked out in dignified silence. One of them stopped at the door, and putting his head on one side, looked at Miss Esther in a peculiarly silly manner, at the same time uttering a most unseemly squawk.

"Oh, my," she cried, "the creature winked at me! I never saw such goings on in all my born days!"

All the flock but two finally recovered their power of motion, and went out into the yard. These two stretched their necks now and then in a comfortable, rustling sort of way, and then settled back into repose. They seemed to say—do not wake me, let me dream again."

And so Miss Esther left them and followed the other fifteen out, anxious to see what new antics they were performing. They eagerly began to eat, and Miss Esther, drawing a little closer understood it all.

"It's those brandy cherries!" she exclaimed, "whoever would have thought you'd go to gobbling them up! Well, well, so that's what's been the matter with you! Well, I am ashamed of you, I truly am!"

She looked at them severely, but the geese seemed to show no repentance for their recent spree, and continued to eat eagerly all that were left of the cherries.

"Shoo," said Miss Esther, waving her hands, "shoo—shoo. You shan't have another single one, you wicked, guzzlin' creatures!"

She carefully picked up all the remaining cherries.

"Now what am I going to do with you, with your breasts all raw and bleeding? A pretty looking set you are!"

The geese looked mournful. They had never faced a November night with such exposed chests before.

"Well," said Miss Esther, resignedly, "I suppose

you'll have to come into the woodshed and sleep to-night. It's a most monstrous performance, the whole thing."

"Monstrous" was a word she rarely used, and only to express some unprecedented and really dreadful affair.

She had an uncomfortable feeling of responsibility for their condition. She had plucked them herself, in what she believed were their death agonies. She could not let them suffer now, for her act of cruelty. She thought about them all night, and in the morning a brilliant idea came to her.

"What they need is chest protectors," she said to herself, "and I don't see why I shouldn't make 'em some. There's all that battin' left from the quilts, and that ball of green string, I got for the morning glories to run on. I'll just make 'em some comfortable little pads, and tie 'em on."

And so she did—she cut and fitted seventeen chest protectors and tied them on to her denuded geese. Then she opened her kitchen door, and her little flock stalked forth. She was quite excited with the success of her experiment, and stood in the doorway watching them, a bright spot of color glowing on either cheek.

At just that moment Simon Bushnell drove by, but Miss Esther did not see him. If she had she would have noticed how the expression of his face changed from indifference to surprise and then amazement and consternation. He had driven by for many years, his eyes apparently fixed upon the headstall. He had passed her coldly by in her little pleasures, and greater sorrows. But now the unexpected had happened. The sight of seventeen geese in cotton batting chest protectors, tied on with green strings, broke down the reserve of years.

He stopped his horse and looked and looked again.

"Esther," he cried, "Why, Esther, what is the matter?"

She saw him there. "It's nothing, Simon," she answered, "you needn't stop."

Then she went into the house without giving him another glance, but she left the door open behind her.

He hesitated a moment, then he drove up to the old hitching post, which so many horses had chewed that it seemed to be all frayed out. He tied his horse, and passing by the strange looking geese he followed Miss Esther into her little kitchen.

She stood in the middle of the room, as if she was waiting for him. Her heart was fluttering wildly, but her face was firm and fixed.

"Why, Esther," he said again, "what is the matter? What have you got on those geese?"

"Chest protectors," she answered shyly.

"Chest protectors!" he stammered after her. Then he looked at her keenly. Was she going insane?

"I plucked them yesterday," she exclaimed.

"'Cos I thought they was dying. They acted so queer and flapped over on their sides so. But they'd eaten some brandy cherries that I threw out, and they were just intoxicated. And I felt so bad when they came to life, with their chests all exposed, that I just made those little coats and tied them on."

Simon Bushnell looked at her, and then he glanced out of the window at the flock of erring geese. Then he began to laugh—great haw-haws of honest laughter, that convulsed his face and shook his frame.

Miss Esther watched him silently—then a lump came in her throat. She didn't have laughed," she said indignantly, "if those geese was all you had for your Thanksgiving party, and you thought they'd gone and died!"

He stopped laughing quickly.

"Your Thanksgiving party?" he said inquiringly.

"Yes," she answered. She was still indignant, and the tears in her eyes were beginning to glisten upon her cheeks.

"They was all I had to buy my party fix'n's with. I've asked John, and his wife and children, and Uncle Josiah and Aunt Ruth, and Ellen Martin, to dinner, and I calculated to get about fifteen dollars from these geese to buy things with. You see it's my last Thanksgiving here, I'm going to sell the farm, and then I'm going away."

Simon Bushnell was silent for a moment. "You're going away?" he finally repeated.

"Yes," she answered doggedly. "I am."

He drew a little nearer.

"Esther," he said slowly, "have you felt real bad and lonely and miserable all these years?"

"Yes," she answered honestly. "I have."

"Well, so have I," he confessed. "I've been a pig-headed fool. But it isn't too late. 'Spose you keep your farm, Esther, and nine too. 'Spose you let me have the folks to dinner, and let it be my Thanksgiving party. 'Spose you marry me now, Esther?"

She was silent, crying softly.

"Esther," he said gravely, "don't take on so. It's now or never, Esther, for sure this time."

"Oh, Simon," she said, holding out her hands, "let it be now, let it be now!"

He put his arms around her, and kissed her awkwardly.

"I just bless these geese of yours, Esther," he said, "'cos I'd vowed I'd never speak to you again, no matter what happened, but they kinder surprised me into it, 'fore I thought."

"Poor things!" sobbed forth Miss Esther, "I'd kind of hate to kill 'em now!"

But she did, and they helped to furnish part of her Thanksgiving dinner as well as her wedding feast.

THE HOUSEWIFE.