



Cap'n Tom's Christmas Supper

By Harriet Prescott Spofford

With Drawings by Rollin Kirby

CAP'N TOM sat on the poorhouse steps, with his lieges about him. Alas, there were parties in the sad place, and Cap'n Len had his own party—consisting of himself—and he sat somewhat apart. He was of the opinion that the poormaster ought to kill the pigs now; the others held that the rite should take place in the winter weather, in order that headcheese, souse, and sausages might give cheer in the time of the nipping frost.

"Something, you see, to make good with, come Christmas," said Cap'n Tom, brightly.

"I'm alive now," said Cap'n Len, "an' I do 'no' w'at I'll be, come Christmas."

"The pigs," said Mrs. Dolly, "are growing fine. There'll be twice as much of them for us w'en the snow flies. It's only a pig itself would rob us of all that extry for the sake of a bone now."

"Tut, tut, Mrs. Dolly!" said Cap'n Tom.

"It's w'at's left him high an' dry here,"

said Mrs. Dolly. "He ain't no self-denial."

"When he wants a thing he wants it now," said the laughing young girl in the faded and soiled pink frock.

"Most on us do," said Mrs. Barnard, the old woman who sat on the step beside her husband, and kept her hand in his, her feet wrapped in strips of old cloth for want of shoes.

"He's kind o' pindlin'," said Cap'n Tom, lowering his voice. "He ain't no relish for mush an' milk. We was ship-mates to Rio onct, out from Hongkong, an' we was ninety days fightin' 'th wind an' weather—give up for lost. An' the water was soapy, an' the beef—you couldn't jes' call 't beef! An' his digesters was never the same sence. He'd orter be in a house of his own 'stid o' here, where the beef's on'y half as bad—w'en we git it, anyway."

"We'd all orter be in a house of our own," said Mrs. Barnard in a trembling voice.

"This is our own," said her husband,

waking a little. "We paid taxes for it."

"An' I'm thankful for it, ef it ain't like havin' your own sink an' cook-stove," said the gentle little woman.

"An' no poormaster to say you shall an' you sha'n't," said Isabel, putting the pretty locks out of her great blue eyes.

"Some on us needs that," said Mrs. Dolly, severely.

"Some of us needed it long ago!" retorted Isabel.

"Come, come," said Cap'n Tom. "We're all on a footin' here. We've all hed misfort'n', or we wouldn't 'a' come here for a refush. We're glad we've got the refush."

"Speak for yerself!" growled Cap'n Len out of his great red beard.

"Misfort'n's," repeated Mrs. Barnard with a deep sigh, "an' I never rightly unnerstan' w'y. I kep' my house like wax—"

"She did that," said her husband, waking again. "There ain't a better cook in this county!"

"I'd like to make you all some o' my light biscuits, an' brile ye sech birds as he uster shoot on the ma'sh, an' give ye a blueberry puddin' 'th lemon sauce—"

"We'd liketer hev' ye, Mis' Barnard. As 'tis ye're jes' makin' our mouths water."

"So I be," said the old woman, wiping her poor eyes, where the swift-coming tear shone like a spark of fire in the dark depths. "It's a shame. For I guess we're all as tired of mush an' milk as Cap'n Len."

"Wal," said Cap'n Tom, "there's suthin' wuss'n mush an' milk, an' that's not havin' so much as that. I knowed that w'en I broke my leg up in Labrador, an' was on a cake of ice all day an' all night, pushin' out to sea. Cap'n Len here, he come after an' saved me—"

"Didn't either!" growled Cap'n Len. "You saved yerself, wavin' yer red shirt!"

"Hm," said Cap'n Tom. "I guess I know."

"You're here now, anyway," said Mrs. Barnard, gently; "which makes it very pleasant for us."

"There's the new moon!" cried Isabel. "Let's wish."

"Bow nine times," said Mrs. Dolly, "an' say yer wish. Mebbe you'll get it. But certain you'll hev a present 'fore the moon's old."

"Heathens!" said Cap'n Len.

"Wal, hurry now. Bow an' tell. There'll be fairy stories—"

"Before we're called in like school-children!" said Isabel, with a pout.

"Was you ever to school, Isabel?" asked Mrs. Dolly after the solemnity.

"Some. I was a grand speller. I spelled down grown men onct. But I couldn't carry ten; I'd liketer hev kep' on. Too late now."

"'Tain't never too late," said Mrs. Barnard. "Mr. Barnard can show you how to carry ten. He was a great scholar 'fore he merried me. He learned me. W'en he merried me, his folks sort o' cast him off, an' he begun—"

"Goin' down hill," said the old man, resting his chin on his cane and looking into the growing dark, as the young moon dropped its spark of gold behind the woods.

"I s'pose, w'en you go out," said Cap'n Tom to the girl, "you're goin' to turn over a new leaf. Earn yer money on the square, save it, an' go to school 'ith it."

"Wisht I could," said Isabel, hesitatingly, twisting up the unruly hair again while she held the combs between her teeth. "But I do 'no'. I do 'no'."

"The old way's an open door," said Mrs. Dolly. "Other ways has the bars up."

"Wal, ef I was half a man, an' hed the money that belongs to half a man, I'd hev ye put to school where'd you come out fit to be a missionary," said Cap'n Tom.

"That's *her* wish, I guess. W'at's your'n, Mis' Barnard?"

"My wish? Ef 'tain't too late fer me to have wishes, mine's a fairy story, an' no mistake. I jes' wished I hed my little house out there on Berry Hill, my garding, my hens, my bees, my keepin'-room, my garret full o' old thin's, my bake-beans Sa'days, my fish-balls Sunday mornin's—mebbe a boarder. Oh, yes, I wouldn't never hev ast fer more, excep' a dollar a day as long as him an' me lives."

"A dollar a day!" cried Isabel. "If

I hed a dollar a day fer every day in the year, I'd—"

"Mis' Barnard, you want the earth," said Mrs. Dolly.

"An' w'at's your wish, Mrs. Dolly?" said the Cap'n.

"Jes' ter go an' live with Mis' Barnard an' wait on her an' him."

"That's reasonable. And Isabel wants an edication. That's in reason, too. She'd do jestice to it. An' mine's jest a good fire 'ith Cap'n Len one eend the settle an' me the t'other. Pity, pity the world's all askew!"

"Better be thankful fer w'at we got," growled Cap'n Len from the other side of the porch.

"That's so, Len; an' we've got mush an' milk, an' summer weather, an' a brier-

rose sweet'nin' the air, an' the smell o' the hay. An' presently there'll be sech moonlight as the rich can't hev no finer."

"It don't look like the same world w'en the moon shines," said Mrs. Barnard. "Oh, my, my, my!" and her thoughts plainly were back in the mellow evenings when she and her happy lover went strolling down the woody ways together and the gates of Eden seemed wide open for them to enter in.

But here the witless creature who was always asking for a pin came up, and the poormaster was calling for some one to help him with the man who, stumbling on the pauper graves, could not pick himself up, and the babies began to cry inside, and the mistress came out and said it was



"MRS. DOLLY WAS IN OPEN REBELLION"

time for laughing and talking to stop and folks to go to bed.

"It's allus the way w'en you git to enj'yin' yerself," grumbled Cap'n Len, although he had not seemed to be particularly enjoying himself till time was called.

The slow months wore themselves away, and, to Cap'n Len's belated satisfaction, the pigs had become bacon and sausage and salt pork, and the winter winds were whistling wild round the lonely gables of the old poorhouse. Mrs. Barnard had come into possession of some child's shoes, which she had cut open for her own small feet, and she had found a pair of rubber overshoes for her husband to wear over the rags with which his feet were still bound. Isabel was washing the dishes as before, and helping the poor-master's wife in spite of contrary inclinations; Mrs. Dolly was in open rebellion, refusing to work at all; and Cap'n Tom and Cap'n Len, agreeing with her, declared that those who had paid their taxes had a right to much better care than they received, and stamped about on their canes and found all the fault they wished with the management.

Perhaps no one was more surprised than Cap'n Tom himself, one day then, the snow falling, to be told that some one was inquiring for him. "I didn't know there was a soul in the world to ask for me, or to know where I be," said Cap'n Tom, rather angrily.

"Wal, ef ye come to the poorhouse, ye hev ter leave pride behind ye," said Cap'n Len.

"I do' 'no' w'y," said the other. "It's an institution here I helped pay for—leastways I should hev stood in to help pay ef I'd ever been on land taxin' day. I'm on'y havin' my rights. But I'd jest as lieves folks wouldn't know I was a-takin' 'em!"

Cap'n Tom, however, returned to his companion in quite another frame of mind. He was smiling and brushing his hair with his fingers into fantastic shapes. He sat motionless a long while, without regard to Cap'n Len's throaty ejaculations. He rose and went to the window, looking out on the thickening weather and the snow that flew by in playful wreaths. "Wouldn't be bodin' much

good ef we was to sea," he said. "I guess it's goin' ter be a three-decker." He sat down again by the black stove that warmed if it did not cheer. "Strange," he said at last, "what difference some dirty rags they call money makes," and he pulled from his pocket a roll that merited the epithet. "More where that come from," he said.

"Some feasts, while some scurce hev a taste," said Cap'n Len. "All the same, ef you've hed luck I'm glad on it, old man!"

"We've gin'rally gone sheers," said Cap'n Tom, laying the bills out on his knee. Laboriously counting, he divided the number equally, an' put one-half in Cap'n Len's hand. "Baccy, an' so forth," he said.

"No, no," said Cap'n Len. "No, no—"

"You be blest!" said Cap'n Tom, or words to that effect, if opposite in sound. And then both of them hustled their parcels out of sight as Mr. Stoners, the poormaster, came by.

Ten minutes afterwards, evading the watchful eyes and aided and abetted by Isabel, they wrapped their comforters round their throats and sallied out into the snow. "I've took the Bubble into port unner tops'ls in wuss weather'n this," said Cap'n Tom. "Think you're good for ten miles, Len?"

"Good's you be."

"Wal, I ain't. We'll mebbe git a lift inter town an' hire a hoss. Rec'lec' the Bubble? I sailed her straight through the hull fishin' fleet as ef she was sent from a bow. Wal, wal, laid her bones on a reef in the port. Never got another." They trudged on, calling up old memories for a while, the snow and sleet making them remember days and nights on deep water. "Come, come," said Cap'n Tom at last. "I guess you'd like ter know what port we're bound for to-day. Wal, ye see it's this way. 'Tain't best ter tell all ye know w'en ye're where walls has ears. But's it's all outdoors here. My sister-in-law's second cousin's sister-in-law—got that straight? They're dead and gone now, the hull dear bunch on 'em. So. An' she's up an' lef' me her property. Pervidin' I could be found. I was found all right. I was found. I'm pleased,



"'I CALL THIS COMFORT,' SAID CAPTAIN TOM"

though, that she didn't know where. We was keepin' comp'ny in them old days, an' there was those come between us. An' I drifted off an' never drifted back, so 't she'd know of it. She was a pretty thin' them days. Glad I ain't seen her sence—years makes big changes. She had eyes like the leaf of a heartsease, an' w'en she laughed an' showed her little white teeth— Oh, what's the use!" said Cap'n Tom to the gathering gale. "She's lef' me the house; 'twarn't much of a dwellin', but 'twas good enough for her, an' I guess 'twill be good enough for you an' me, Len. An' it's all complete; jes' 's she was took out of it—the sheets on the beds, the chiny on the shelf, the wood in the woodhouse, the pickles an' preserves in the sullar, an' poun' cake an' plum cake in the stone crocks. It's a house for folks to walk right inter. Mebbe for some others. I do' no'. I gotter see that lawyer ag'in, fer probably Stoners won't let 'em out, I not engagin' they sha'n't come back. We'll hurry it up an' see. Git out ourselves fust." And Cap'n Tom

struck a good gait, swinging his arms as if, as Cap'n Len said, he owned both sides of the road. Cap'n Len would not let himself be outstripped, and the lawyer was seen, arrangements made, and a team was found to take them to a little dark cottage under the trees, the driver paid beforehand out of the overflowing pocket, lest he should decline to start at all, an' Cap'n Tom was sped along, revolving in tune with the sleigh-bells the dark ways by which he was going to have his plan appear to be Cap'n Len's own suggestion.

"Kinder lonesome Christmas supper, you an' me in this empty house an' neither on us knowin' how to cook," said he, when the place had been reached, the team dismissed, and the key turned in the lock.

"I useter know how to make lobscouse," said the other. "Guess that'll do for supper. Here's the fire laid ready to light. Got a match? I'll fetch some wood in."

"Lobscouse," said Cap'n Tom, grandly,

"is good 's fur 's it goes at sea. But I guess where there's poun' cake an' black cake, an' hung beef, an' salt fish, an' a half-barrel o' pork, an' a keg o' mackerel, an' crackers an' cheese, an' gingersnaps, an' jells, we'll git along on on them. Le's investigate."

Now if you belong to certain parties and certain principles belong to you, you will not be pleased to think of Cap'n Tom and Cap'n Len, after their satisfaction with the delicacies mentioned, sitting beside the stove with their pipes lighted, and each with a long and steaming tumbler of the rum they had found hid away for emergencies of illness in the cupboard of the sister-in-law's second cousin's sister-in-law. "I call this comfort," said Cap'n Tom, watching his smoke.

"Solid," said Cap'n Len.

"I wisht every one else in the world was as well fixed."

"Certain, certain!"

"Poor old lady Barnard!"

"An' the rest on 'em."

"Now," said Cap'n Tom, "the question is: We'll have 'em all out here to

supper to-morrer night, as you sorter proposed—"

"Me?"

"Warn't it you? Wal, 'tain't neither here nor there. We'll have 'em to supper sure; but—shall we let 'em go home? If we let 'em go back to the place we've come from—thanks be to God! we can manage our tumblers of o'-be-joyful every night; other ways it'll hev ter be milk an' water. We won't hev any women ter fault us for s'lin' the floors, any women ter worr the life out'n us w'en an old shipmate comes out 'ith his long pipe, any women in gray gowns or pink calikers ter say us nay. We can have roast turkey instid o' corn beef ef we let 'em go home; we can go inter town ter the shows instid o' takin' 't out lookin' at the stars an' wishin' by the moon. Eh? What say?"

"I say," said Cap'n Len, "'twill be devilish lonesome 'ith no women round!"

"You're right, mate. You're right," said Cap'n Tom, after a long silence, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "But



"'AS IF WE'D DIED AND GONE TO HEAVEN,' SAID THE OLD MAN AT HER ELBOW "

some thin's are broad as they're long. Women are onsartin, ye know."

"P'r'aps. But 'twas kind o' cheery—that pink caliker."

"She wouldn't be wearin' sech goods in winter weather."

"Ef she hed anythin' else."

"To be sure, ef she was a-livin' here, we'd hev ter make out the proper close fer her."

"The 'Cademy's on'y a mile round the hill from here, ef a gel wanted edication."

"That's so. There's edication. All the same, my feelin's is more consarned with the old lady. I—I've fetched out a lot o' shoes an' slippers I found sence we come, that was my sister-in-law's cousin's sister-in-law—meaning Nancy. She's never seemed to git any on them wore out—"

"Closet's full o' gownds. Almost makes ye feel as if there *was* a woman round."

"There's suthin' goes to the heart 'bout Mis' Barnard."

"About the old man, too."

"Tell ye w'at, Len! I didn't know jest how you'd look at it. But as you've proposed it—your heart allus was in the right place—I say! We'll fetch over the hull lot for keeps, an' Mis' Dolly ter wait on 'em. Eh? What say? That's what Nancy must 'a' meant, whether she sensed it or not. I guess it's w'at she'd like, anyway. I guess it's w'at you an' me 'll like, take it by an' large an' all round."

"Fust rate," said Cap'n Len. "As for Nancy, I do 'no', an' do 'no' as I care. As fer you an' me, I should say—"

"'Twould be sociable. That's so, Len. You allus did haul the line taut."

There was a fire presently in every room of the little house that had a chimney-place, as if the unwonted luxury of sufficient heat in the shed's forehanded big wood-pile could not be sufficiently enjoyed. The storm had blown itself up the coast and overseas, and the stars were like

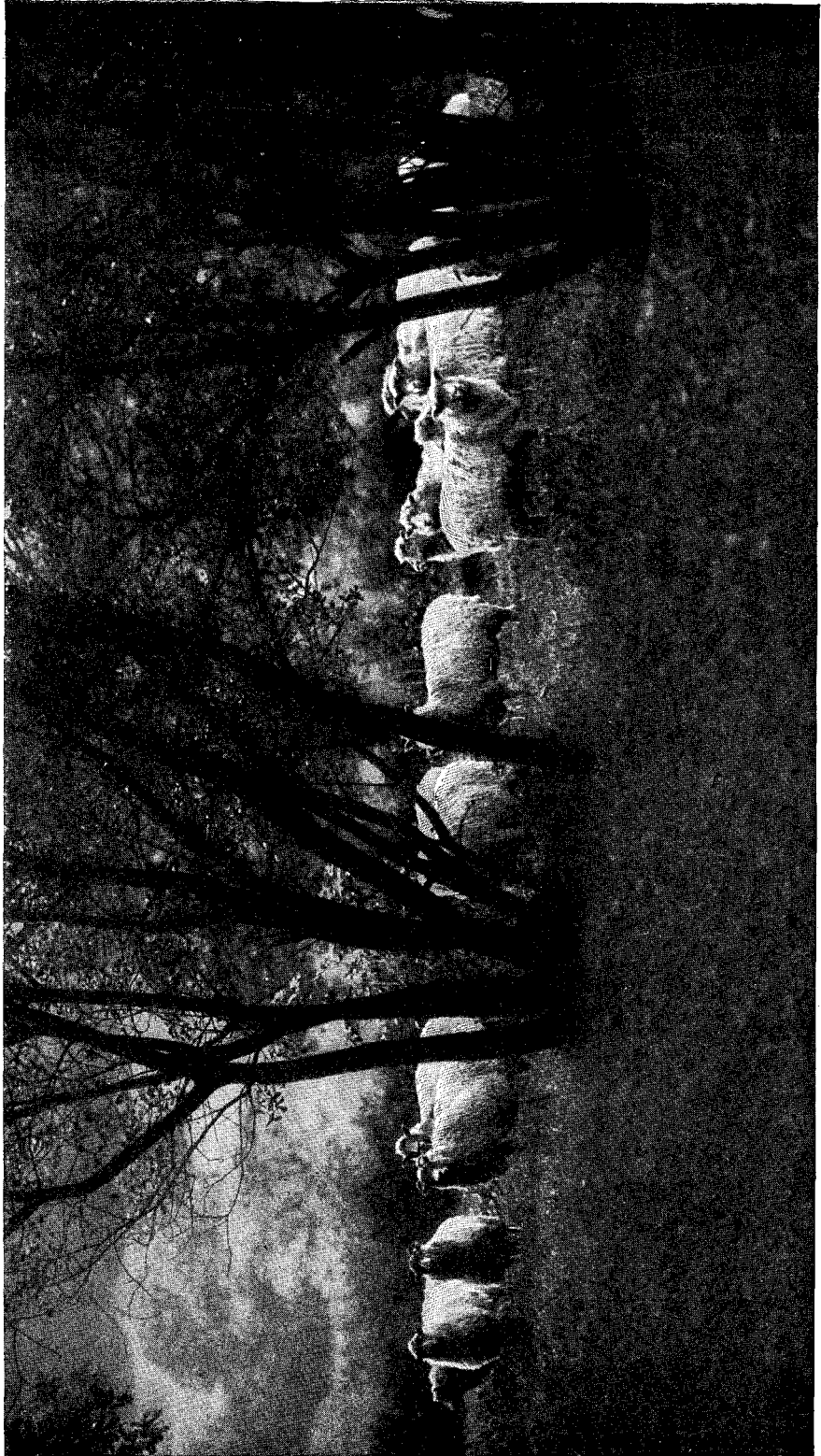
glints of gold in the dark-blue firmament, sparkling over snowy fields and silvered woods, when the big sleigh left its bewildered but happy load at Cap'n Tom's door.

"Come right in!" cried Cap'n Tom. "Come right in! It's perishin' cold. Here, leave me take ye. There! You go straight inter the bedroom, Mis' Barnard. That's your room an' his'n. You'll find thin's in the close-press there ter put on. They're all yours. There's a black silk gownd there'll jest about fit ye," he whispered. "Poor Nancy! Put it on, Mis' Barnard, quick meter. An' them shoes. An', Mis' Dolly, you'll find some thin's ter slick up 'ith upstairs in your room an' Isabel's. Don't waste no time. The turkey's brown as toast a'ready. Come, Cap'n Barnard, I'll lose my guess if suthin' a leetle hot inside wouldn't come near your case!" And the older man, pleased with the misplaced title which so implied respect, and then with the aromatic draught, toddled into his wife's room with the air of having come into his own.

Half an hour afterward Mrs. Barnard, sitting at the head of the table with her husband on her left and Cap'n Len on her right, with Mrs. Dolly and Isabel rivaling each other in waiting on Cap'n Tom at the other end of the table, cleared her throat and half rose from her chair, leaning lightly on both hands. "Being all together here," she said in her sweet and gentle voice, "an' told we are always to be together here, an' taken from that sufferin' life we were livin', makes me feel as if—as if—"

"As if we'd died and gone to heaven," said the old man at her elbow.

"Yes," she assented. "And I was a-goin' to say we're told that in our Father's house are many mansions. And—and somehow I am sure that this is one of them!"



"AS FINE A FLOCK AS EVER GRAZED"