

The Free Press' Christmas Story

The Turkey Had Four Toes

GWENDOLINE P. CLARKE



OLIN O'BRIEN was not mean—it was just that he had a few queer ideas. That was the way his wife put it, anyway. He was just plain "omeny" at times—that's what she said. "Sure, he was what could you expect," she would add, "when you go mixing up Irish with Scotch that way, there's bound to be trouble. Colin O'Brien indeed! When he was born why this mother didn't finish things up right by giving him a sensible name is what beats me. A name like—like Patrick, for instance."

Whatever the reason for Colin's stubbornness, one thing was certain—once an idea got into his head it certainly stayed there. And that's how it was with the turkeys. Year after year Mrs. Molly O'Brien raised turkeys. She looked after the setting turkey hens, tended the little poulters like so many babies, tramped miles over stubble fields and slushy hunting young turkeys who would insist on wandering from home. So it was only natural when the turkeys were full grown and ready for market that Molly should look them over with justifiable satisfaction. And she would also think how grand it would be to have one of those nice, plump birds on her own table. She could just imagine how good it would be—well stuffed with savory dressing and roasted to a nice, crisp brown.

But that's where Colin's stubbornness came in. "No, Molly, it just can't be done," he would say. "We can't afford to eat turkeys ourselves. You know very well they are delicate birds to raise and by the time you count in your losses and our feed you just have to sell every bird that's fit for market to make any profit on your flock at all."

Of course, if a turkey should break a leg or a wing or had a breast bone like a snake-rail fence, then the O'Briens had turkey for dinner! Otherwise it was the same old argument year after year, and finally Molly gave up the struggle to have it different.

And now it was turkey killing time again. Twenty-nine birds there were altogether, and Colin O'Brien, his wife and the young O'Briens had been picking all day—all of them, that is, with the exception of Desmond, who had been in the Army for the last three months, and, of course, was away from home.

It was nearly five o'clock and young daughter Biddy had been sent to the house to prepare supper. In a little while she came running back to the barn. "Mother, Dad, everybody," she cried excitedly, "Desmond's coming home for Christmas!" Mrs. O'Brien looked up quickly. She was piecing the last pin-feathers on the very last turkey and in her excitement ripped the skin off the turkey's neck—an unforgivable sin!

"Lain, sakes, child, why will you start a body so! And is it Desmond you say is coming?" she asked, trying to keep the eagerness out of her voice. "Yes, Mum. Des said he would be here to-morrow night—Christmas Eve. And he will have forty-eight hours leave, Yippy—ain't it grand?" "Umph! pity he wasn't coming to-night," muttered Colin, "then he could've had a ride back with me after I'd delivered this fowl!"

"Oh, out Des said not to bother about meeting him, Dad. He said he could get a ride out with a chum of his who would be coming this way."

len grew less important. At last a car stopped at the gate and there was Desmond—walking up the lane, whistling cheerily "The Beer Barrel Polka." Then he breezed into the house—Hello, Mum—Hello, Dad, Hi-yer kids!

Dad looked at his soldier son—My, but he's a lad to be proud of! he thought. Mother didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but Michael and Biddy immediately began beseeching their brother with questions. "Gee, Des—didn't they let you bring yer gun home with you?" "Des—what's in that big parcel?" "What's in the parcel, Baby? Something you'll all like—even Dad," he added stily, "unless I miss my guess. Here you are, Mother—it's what you've always wanted. But don't forget the rest of us," he laughed.

Molly unwrapped the ungainly looking parcel and there before their eyes was a fine looking turkey. "Why, Desmond, she exclaimed, "you shouldn't have done that!" "Oh shucks, that's nothing, Mother. I thought maybe it would be a treat for you to eat a bird you hadn't fed and picked and all. So I stopped by at Mackenzie's on my way home and picked up this little bird as a treat for you all."

"Mummy—Daddy—Desmond, look!" Biddy fairly shouted. "It—it's Oddie—it is the turkey that had four toes!" [Author's Note: There has been an amusing sequel to the foregoing story. I chose my title, "The Turkey Had Four Toes" on the assumption that, normally, a turkey has three toes and a spur. And then I began to have my doubts. So I telephoned several poultry raisers and asked them, "How many toes has a turkey?" Not one of them could tell me. I asked our local veterinary surgeon. Even he could not tell me. My encyclopedia had nothing whatever to say about turkeys' toes. So there I leave it. Your guess is as good as mine—and you may have a lot of fun trying it out on your friends. Of course I know a turkey has four something on its feet but whether to call them four toes or three toes and a spur is what I cannot find out.—G.P.C.]

There now, get along with you," said Colin, suddenly embarrassed by the evident gratitude of his family. "I'll be up to the house soon as I've finished my chores," he added. "Do you want to weigh the birds separately, Dad?" inquired his wife. "No, it don't matter. Put 'em in the shed and I'll weigh the lot together."

That's the way they pay me now—know weight, not so much a bird." At long last the birds were done—trimmed, weighed and packed into the back of the old family touring car. Molly O'Brien sighed with relief. It was hard work, picking turkeys. She would like to have called it a day, but she thought she had better keep going. There was Desmond coming to-morrow—not much chance of working them, not with all the hub-bub and excitement there would be. Besides, she wanted time to enjoy her boy—to hear his laughter and listen to his jokes. Happy-go-lucky Desmond! God grant he would still be spared to them when the war was over.

"Michael—Mike," she called to her younger son, spitting kindling in the woodshed. "Bring me in the turkey, will you? I guess I'd better fix it tonight!" Presently Michael appeared at the kitchen door—startled and bewildered. "Mum—it isn't there—the turkey's disappeared!" "Disappeared—listen to the boy! Don't you know that that turkey's dead? It can't walk away—or fly either, for that matter!"

By this time Biddy had her mother by the hand and was pulling her towards the shed. "Look, Mummy, it's true. It is true. My Oddie's gone!" And poor Biddy burst into tears. "Well, of all things," exclaimed Molly O'Brien, "it must have been your father. In his hurry to get away he took all the turkeys. I do declare if I just turn my back a minute in this house there's no telling what's likely to happen. And he'll never know he's got it. Weighing all the birds together he'll never know the difference. Well, that's that," she finished in disgust. "I guess it's roast beef for us again, children, and you'll just have to make the best of it."

The loss of the turkey cast a gloom over the little family all next day. Even O'Brien was disappointed. He scratched his head thoughtfully time after time as he tried to rehearse the time he had made his sale to Butcher Mackenzie. "Come to think of it," he finally admitted, "I did wonder where that extra fifteen pounds come in. But I thought I had made a mistake back home. The weight looked right enough in the store and it wasn't my place to argue with soveraign-tested scales, even if they did make it more than what I did."

Colin O'Brien said his wife, testily, "you'd have argued with those scales, quick enough if the weight had been fifteen pounds short and you know it!" However, no amount of arguing mended matters and as the time drew near for Desmond's arrival the turkey problem grew less important.

WREATHS AND GARLANDS

What a joy it is to come into a home scented with spiny pine and hemlock, no-suggestive-of-Yuletide that each room fairly shouts—"Merry Christmas!" And what a real pleasure, too, to gather the greens and dispose them so that they express all the kindness of the blessed season, intensifying the delights of the "friendliest" period of the year! As garlands, the various types of greens may decorate windows and doors, or they may be massed on mantels or tables. To make a flexible rope of greenery, supply a foundation of heavy twine and to this attach the short sprays of pine, hemlock or spruce, interspersed regularly with clusters of laurel, or for a more decorative effect use the artificial berries with the greens. Fine flexible wire is best for fastening the sprays in place. Another use for greens is in the foundation of window wreaths. Arrange the small sprays on a heavy wire foundation, taking care to keep the wreath symmetrical. Small groups of red berries, regularly placed, give character to such a decoration.

GHOSTLY CHRISTMAS BELLS

Amongst the bells which will ring out to greet the coming Yuletide will be many ghostly peals, heard on no other night in the year; for tradition says that the bells of all buried churches join the chorus every Christmas eve. There are the bells of Raleigh, once a prosperous village in Nottinghamshire, now only a country valley. All sign of habitation was swallowed up many years ago by an earthquake. It is said that every Christmas eve the bells of the old church are heard to ring again. A legend near Preston, the very name of which nobody knows. In Holland the story of the city of Ben is told every Christmas. This wonderful place was famous for its magnificence and beauty, and also for its wickedness and shamefulness. One day the whole city was swallowed up by the sea.

SURE ENOUGH

"Do you remember when we met in the revolving door?" "Goodness, yes! That was when we started going around together, wasn't it?"

HERE'S A NEW ONE

Judge: On what grounds are you applying for a divorce? Mr. Brown—Extravagance, your Honor. Judge—Extravagance, how's that? Mr. Brown—She kept on buying ice after I had installed a refrigerator.

THE THREE WISE MEN

A long time ago three Wise Men lived in the east. An angel told them about the baby Jesus. They wanted to go and see him. The angel told them that they would see a beautiful bright star. It told them to follow the star, and they would find Jesus. The wise men rode in their camels and followed it for many days. After many days the star stopped over the stable of Bethlehem. The Wise Men went in to see the baby Jesus. They knelt down and worshipped Him and gave Him many beautiful presents. They went home. They did not tell King Herod.

HOPELESS

Stenographer: How's spell "sense"? Employer: Dollars and cents or horse sense? Stenographer: Well, like in "I ain't seen him sense."

PEACOCK DINNER ENGLISH CUSTOM

Fashions in Christmas dinners come and go. In olden days at a Christmas feast in England, next in importance to the boar's head as a Christmas dish was the peacock. To prepare the bird for the table was a task entailing no little trouble. The skin was first carefully stripped off with the plumage adhering. The bird was then roasted; when done, and partially cooled it was sewed up again in its feathers, its beak painted with gilt and so sent to the table. Some times the whole body was covered with leaf gold and a piece of cotton, saturated with spirits, placed on its beak and lighted before the carver commenced operations. This "food for lovers and meat for lords" was stuffed with spices and served with plenty of gravy.

The noble bird was not served by common hands; that privilege was reserved for the lady guests most distinguished by birth or beauty. One of them carried it into the dining hall to the sound of music, the rest of the ladies following in due order. The dish was set down before the master of the house, or his most honored guest. The latest instance of peacock eating recorded was at a dinner given by William IV, when Duke of Clarence, by the governor of Grenada.

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Canada's Delegate Meets London's Lord Mayor



Hon. T. A. Cressat, Canadian Minister of Mines and Canada's representative at the Empire Conference being held in London, is shown shaking hands with Sir Frank Bower, Lord Mayor of London, who entertained the delegates at the Mansion House.

British Merchantships Convoys to Safety



Passed by the British ensigns, this picture shows British merchantmen, convoyed by warships' steamers along a seaway off the British coast. On each ship, lookouts scan the waters for signs of subs and mines.

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Mrs. O'Brien looked with sympathetic understanding at her young daughter.

It is believed recently that Naz. planes have been dropping "carbon mine" in E. coast waters. It is believed that this is the only mine in season which Hitler spoke of recently.