Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen

O. Henry · 1907

Every Thanksgiving for nine years, Stuffy Pete has waited on the third bench in Union Square, and every year the Old Gentleman has come to take him to dinner. It is almost an Institution. This year Stuffy has already eaten. O. Henry's Thanksgiving story, complete, with the turkey, the two dinners, the ambulance and the last line.

The story is performed exactly as O. Henry published it, every word. Nothing is cut or modernised.

LISTEN FOR

— The word Institution keeps coming back. Listen for who is building it, and who it is costing.

— Each man keeps the custom for the other's sake. Listen for the moments when either could say so, and does not.

— Stuffy is too hot in the snow; the Old Gentleman shivers and turns his back to the wind. Keep both details in mind until the last line.

— The narrator starts with jokes about England and American tradition. Notice where the jokes stop.

THE PEOPLE, AS THE BOOK NAMES THEM

The Narrator	O. Henry's storyteller
Stuffy Pete	of the third bench in Union Square
The Old Gentleman	thin and tall and sixty
A Waiter	at the restaurant
A Young Doctor	at the hospital

CHAPTERS, WITH THEIR TIMES IN THE VIDEO

0:00	One day that is ours
1:17	The third bench
3:50	The Old Gentleman
5:36	The speech
8:42	The restaurant
10:23	The first corner
10:55	Two dinners

WORDS AND THINGS, FROM THE MARGIN

President Roosevelt Theodore Roosevelt, president 1901–1909. Presidents proclaimed Thanksgiving every year from Lincoln's proclamation of 1863 on.

The Turkey Trust A joke on the great "trusts" of the day, such as Standard Oil and the Beef Trust, which Roosevelt's government took to court. There was no turkey trust.

The last Thursday Thanksgiving stayed on the last Thursday in November until 1939; since 1941 the law has set it on the fourth Thursday.

Union Square The park between Fourteenth and Seventeenth Streets, where Broadway meets Fourth Avenue.

Dickensy After Charles Dickens, whose Christmas books made the charitable feast a fixture of the season.

Salvation fingers The Salvation Army, at work in New York since 1880, mended and gave away clothes.

The beginning of Fifth avenue Fifth Avenue begins at Washington Square, whose north side was lined with the red brick houses of old New York families.

Seneschals The stewards of a medieval lord's household.

Industrial insurance Small life policies whose premiums, a few cents a week, an agent collected at the door.

$1.30 Roughly forty-five dollars in today's money; the three nickels, fifteen cents, were the waiter's tip.

PASSAGES TO HEAR AGAIN

"I am glad to perceive that the vicissitudes of another year have spared you to move in health about the beautiful world."
The Old Gentleman on Union Square: the speech he gives every year.

"In memory of my father."
The words the Old Gentleman imagines a son saying after he is gone.

"he had not the heart to see it wane"
Stuffy at the restaurant table, deep into his second dinner.

"He told me he hadn't eaten a thing for three days."
A young doctor at the hospital: the last line.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does the narrator say about Thanksgiving, America and England in the opening paragraphs?
2. Describe Stuffy Pete on the bench, in the text's words. Why is he not hungry?
3. Who are the two old ladies near Fifth avenue, and what is their custom?
4. Describe the Old Gentleman: his looks, his rooms, and what he does in each season.
5. Why does the Old Gentleman speak his speech sadly?
6. What does Stuffy do at the restaurant, and what reason does the text give for it?
7. What happens to each man after they part at the door?
8. What does the young doctor tell the nurse? Where earlier in the story is the Old Gentleman's own state shown?
9. The narrator calls Stuffy a hero who wielded only weapons of iron, badly silvered, and tin. What does he mean?
10. Both men keep the custom at a cost to themselves. Is it a tradition, or two people being kind to each other?
11. Why might O. Henry tell this story as a joke about American tradition?

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