

HE HAD A GLIMPSE OF WHAT
LOOKED VERY MUCH
LIKE A MAN.

WHO'S GOT THE TURKEY?

by Percy Wilson

The Eagle Eye and the Head Shack Discover the Difference Between Lark and Larceny.

NO. 65, the through freight, west; Engineer Rowland and Conductor Gillip, lay in the siding at Welsh Creek, waiting for the Chesapeake Despatch, the fast freight, to pass east. It was a raw, drizzly afternoon in late November, and Skeeter Cook, the front shack, having dutifully ridden out on the train for the last fifteen miles, had come ahead to join the little company in the engine-cab; not that he had any particular desire for comradeship, but merely that he might dry some of the

moisture from his garments and warm his chilled person.

Skeeter was not in a companionable mood. That morning he notified his wife that he had secured permission to be off duty on Thanksgiving Day, that he might enjoy one of her incomparable turkey dinners. Mrs. Cook—treasurer of the Skeeter household, and chairman of the board as well—had tartly reminded him that he had been bringing her home very skimpy pay-envelopes for the past several months, and

that, if he expected the national fowl to grace his table, he would have to provide it himself—or else eat pork.

Being short of funds, and knowing no kind friend who would donate a bird, Skeeter was the allegory of depression. His condition was trebly aggravated by the continued melody from a neighboring farm building—the angry “gobble, gobble, gobble!” of a disturbed turkey-cock.

“Shut up!” muttered Skeeter acidly.

“What’s the matter, Skeet?” inquired the engineer, taking smiling note of the circumstance. “Don’t you like to hear that turkey’s call? It sounds to me like he was inviting us to dinner, with Thanksgiving only three days off. Um-m-m-m!” The engineer rolled his eyes and patted himself comfortably in pleasant anticipation.

“You shut up, too!” retorted Skeeter, scowling. “I reckon I know Thanksgiving’s only three days yet, and Patchen promised to let me off. But, what’s the use? My old woman says it’s hog meat for me—turkeys is too high. Hog meat on Thanksgiving’!”

Howland chuckled. “Too high?” he repeated, winking across at Gillip, who sat on the fireman’s side. “They must be roosting on balloons then, Skeet, if that’s your trouble. I swear you’d climb to the top of a California redwood to steal one.”

“Oh! would I?” retorted Skeeter. “Would I? If I did, I’d more’n likely meet you comin’ down with it.”

This referred to an incident in Howland’s firing days, when, on a marauding expedition with several others, he was coming down a tree with a fine bird and unexpectedly met the legitimate owner, whom he was compelled to reimburse at a fancy price. It was a body blow, and Skeeter permitted himself a grim smile.

“That’s right; tell him about it, Skeet,” urged Gillip. “Ha, ha! That’s one on

you, Howland. You’d better attend to your bright-works and let Skeeter alone. I’d sooner trust him than you, anyhow, for you’ve been caught at it, and I’ve never heard that Skeeter was.”

“I never done it,” declared Skeeter piously.

“All that I ever did myself,” said Howland, “I did just for the fun of it.”

“If I can’t buy what I want to eat,” went on Skeeter, taking a high moral stand, “I can go hungry. That’s me.”

“Good boy!” said the engineer with laughing approval. “Never steal because you’re hungry, Skeet. When you go after the birds just for the fun of it, it’s only a lark; but when you take them because you need them, it’s larceny. That’s the difference.”

“I believe you,” declared Skeeter.

“Guff!” broke in Gillip. “Neither of you are any too good to rob a roost. If I was old man Wentzel back there” —pointing toward the farm buildings— “I’d be patrolling that flock with a shotgun every night from now till New Year’s.”

Skeeter and Howland turned their eyes in the direction. “By George!” exclaimed Howland, “they’re a nice bunch, aren’t they? Does he let them roost there under the barn bridge?”

“Ah, ha!” cried Gillip. “You’re figuring how to get one, are you?”

Skeeter, who had been eying the fascinating sight greedily, started guiltily at the question and was about to retort indignantly. Seeing that it was the engineer who had been addressed, he wisely held his peace.

“No, Gillip,” Howland replied, shaking his head. “No. My days for such tricks are over. I’m getting too heavy to handle myself, like I used to. I’m a down-and-outer, I reckon. Those were good old days, though,” he added regretfully.

"There comes the 'Peake." put in the heretofore silent fireman. Thus reminding them of their duties, he got down to take a look at his fire. Howland gave a light burnish to the throttle and the lever with a handful of waste and tried his sand.

Gillip pulled out his time-table and watch and made a mental calculation, while Skeeter, buttoning his coat and turning up the collar against the weather, swung down and started toward the switch.

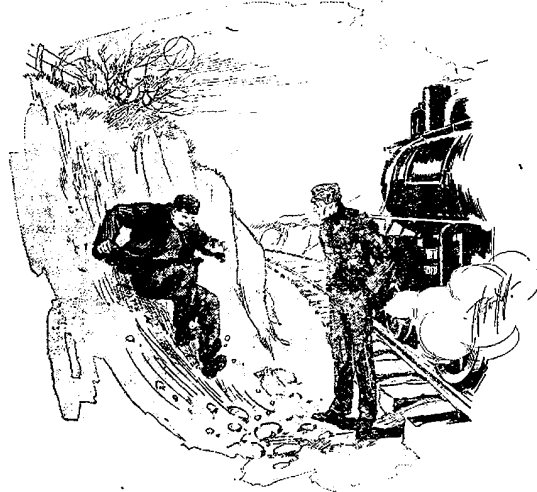
When he reached the front of the engine he stepped between the rails, where he could not be observed from the cab, and looked longingly toward the barn. How he did hunger for a Thanksgiving turkey! Old man Wentzel could easily spare him one out of that bunch, and scarcely miss it. But old man Wentzel didn't know of Skeeter's wants, and the Despatch rolled by, and Skeeter let his own train out at the switch and went on with it.

Gillip and his crew should have made their return trip by daylight the following day; but having been held at their western terminal for freight delayed behind a wreck on the connecting division, it was almost ten o'clock at night when they were nearing Bonita, the passing siding first west of Welsh Creek.

If the longing of Skeeter for a festal bird to adorn his Thanksgiving board suffered any diminution when he realized how hopeless a prospect it was, it became intensified when he saw that they would pass through Welsh Creek eastward in the still hours of the night. The rain of the previous day had ceased and given way to colder weather without entirely clearing; and when night came on, heavy-clouds obscured the moon.

This, of course, was greatly in Skeeter's favor; but what was almost insuperably against him was the general

avoidance at Welsh Creek siding by east-bound freights on account of the difficulty in starting from that point with a heavy train. If the passing siding next east, that at Markley, could not be reached, it was policy to go in at Bonita rather than run the risk of having to seesaw out of Welsh Creek hole.



WHEN HOWLAND CAME LUMBERING OVER THE EDGE OF THE CUT, HALF ROLLING AND HALF SLIDING TO THE BOTTOM, SKEETER WAS WAITING FOR HIM.

But even this difficulty Skeeter finally planned to overcome. From the time they were making, he figured that they could not reach Markley to clear the night express, No. 11, and would have to go in at Bontia. While they were in there, he designed to arrange a little "brake trouble" that would act as a drag when they tried to go up the hill east of Welsh Creek, and thus compel them to back to the siding and lie there for time freight No. 87.

This would give him all the time he needed; and as a salve to his conscience for abstracting a turkey from Farmer Wetzel's flock without mutual arrangement, he persuaded himself that he would forward the value of it anonymously from his next pay—and sincerely hoped he might succeed.

With everything thus planned, he came confidently ahead on nearing Bonita to be ready to open the switch. "We can hardly make Markley, I reckon, Howland," he heard

the conductor say. "Better go in here, hadn't we?"

Holland looked at his watch. Skeeter looked at his. Noting once more that the time was scant, and knowing the engineer's usual aversion to taking risks, he was dumfounded to hear Howland reply: "We ought to be able to do it. We can, if the old boat hangs together. Let's try."

The lights of Bonita were far to the rear before Skeeter began to recover from the effects of this death-blow. Life seemed a vale of gloom until, turning a baleful look on Howland, whom he held to be the cause of all his griefs, he noticed that the engineer was beginning to act strangely.

Easing his bar: hanging out the window; trying the throttle at various notches; listening with sharp ear to every click of the machinery, all the while muttering to himself, Holland's actions indicated that the "old boat" was not hanging together.

When, turning to the conductor, he said, "We'll have to go in at Welsh Creek, Gillip. That right crosshead key's working loose." Skeeter could scarcely restrain himself. "Hang it! I told Corcoran, when he was putting the stud-bolt in, that he was stripping the thread." the engineer went on, "I'm afraid to hit the hill with it the way it knocks. Don't you hear it?"

Gillip hadn't heard. The unmentionable old kettle knocked so unmentionably all over that he couldn't tell one knock from another. He supposed he'd have to take Howland's word. All he knew was that, at this rate, they wouldn't get home for a week.

Skeeter, however, came to the engineer's support with the declaration that he had been hearing it very distinctly and had been on the point of mentioning it when he saw that Howland heard it, too. "Pretty

bad, ain't it?" asked Skeeter.

Howland made no reply. His look even intimated that he didn't believe Skeeter knew what he was talking about. But Skeeter did, for he was talking to get twenty minutes or more in Welsh Creek siding, regardless of how it was brought into effect.

Stopping the train, as soon as the rear end was well into clear, Howland dropped off with hammer and wrench; and he was tapping the head of the key, when Skeeter and Gillip appeared to learn how long it would take to make the repair. They could follow No. 11 close, Howland said, if Gillip would go to the telegraph office and get the block held for them immediately after the express had passed.

By backing out of the siding and taking that much of a run at the hill, he thought they should be able to get over it without having to double. "And you had better look over your brakes carefully, Skeet," he suggested, "for we don't want to hang up."

At any other time Skeeter would have retorted that the brakes were all right, that that was his business, and he attended to it; that if the air was handled the way it should be, there wouldn't be any trouble with the brakes. In the present instance, however, he merely waited until the conductor had gone ahead toward the office, and then started dutifully back along the train.

With some concern he noticed that the sky was growing lighter. With the wind beginning to sweep the lower, heavier clouds before it, there was need of haste. Moreover, as the engine was standing nearly opposite the barn, every step took him farther from his point of attack.

When he had gone about seven car-lengths, he glanced over his shoulder and, seeing nothing of Howland or his torch, stepped between two cars and jerked out his

light. Then, looking out, and still seeing no sign of the engineer, he hung his lamp on an uncoupling-lever and stepped down the low bank.

With the sound of his footsteps drowned by the rustle of the wind through the dried leaves of the corn, he made his way in safety across the field. Just as he reached the fence separating the field from the barn enclosure, an edge of the moon shone out. Quickly he dropped down.



"HIS WHOLE FLOCK!" SKEETER WAS ON THE POINT OF EXCLAIMING.

He was not certain if it were the passing shadow of a cloud, or, perhaps, merely his imagination—but he had a glimpse of what looked very much like a man crouching close against the side of the barn bridge.

For nearly a minute, Skeeter remained there undetermined what to do. Being loth to give up, now that he was close to his goal, and the moon being obscured behind a very large and heavy cloud, he crept along the fence, and crawling between the bars, made his way cautiously to the farther side of the bridge.

A glance toward the house showed no light. A moment's intense listening revealed no distinguishable sound but his own breathing. Taking fresh courage he lowered his head and stepped softly into the pitch-

black darkness beneath the incline.

The pungent aroma that attacked his nostrils left him in no doubt of having come to the right place. A fence rail stretching from wall to wall met his hand, but as he felt cautiously along it he experienced something of dismay at finding it unoccupied. He reached anxiously forward and touched another.

His hand was scarcely on this one when something like flesh struck his little finger and immediately another hand made a sweep at his own. It brushed his knuckles as he snatched them away.

It needed nothing more to convince Skeeter that the form revealed, crouching alongside the barn bridge must have been the farmer, who having seen him as he came across the field had thus encouraged him to walk into the trap and be caught.

But he was not caught yet, and backing hurriedly into the open as he heard the other scrambling toward the farther end, he circled around a wagon-shed, made a detour to get behind the house, and raced from there toward the field.

The moon came out before he reached the fence, and as he crawled beside it, scarcely daring to breathe and listening sharply for sounds of pursuit, he saw that the sky was clearing rapidly. From the absence of any sound of footsteps he feared that the farmer, instead of following him, was watching to cut him off. His safest plan was to follow a shallow gully leading eastward of the engine, and to move only when the moon was obscured.

Three times he was compelled to stop in the shadow of a corn-shock. He was about to make his last dash for the railroad and, crossing it, come around the farther side to avoid his mates, when he saw in the beams from the head-light that Gillip was coming up from the office.

Changing his course, he ran up the hill and, as the moon came out once more, look refuge against a shock almost opposite the engine-cab, and about five yards from the edge of the cut in which it stood, just in time to see a burly form stagger out of the moonlight into the shock next ahead. It was Howland.

It required several seconds for Skeeter to grasp the situation. When he did, it was with an outraged feeling of chagrin and disgust. After all his planning and trouble, to have no turkey, and all on account of Howland, was too much.

He'd like to— By cricky! He wondered if Howland had seen him. After a moment's reflection, he felt assured that he hadn't; and the instant there came a shadow, he darted toward the engine-cab and slid down the bank.

When Howland came lumbering over the edge of the cut, half rolling and half sliding to the bottom, Skeeter was waiting for him.

"You're a nice Christian, you are!" he began sarcastically, "You make believe your engine's broke down, don't you? But what you're after is turkeys. I know. Didn't I see you? It's a pity that farmer didn't—"

"Sh-h-h-h!" warned Howland, puffing and blowing. "Here comes—Gillip. Sh-h-h-h!"

"O-ho!" said Skeeter. "You don't want him to know, do you? Well, I'm going to tell him, and—"

"No," urged the engineer, "Don't. Leave him to me. I'll fix it right with you."

"I thought I saw you fellows in a mix-up," said the conductor as he came closer. "And you're all covered with dirt, Holland. What have you been scrapping about now?"

Howland nudged the brakeman to

keep silence. "Just a little friendly wrestle," he panted. "But say!"—staring at the article in the conductor's right hand—"where did you get that?"

"This?" said Gillip, holding up a young hen turkey. "Old man Wentzel gave me this. A fellow from Baltimore's been around here the last two days buying every turkey he could find. Old Wentzel sold his whole flock—"

"His whole flock!" Skeeter was on the point of exclaiming, when he checked himself. Howland's eyes were as big as switch-lights.

"And he's down at the station loading them into a car with the rest for No. 81 to pick up. I helped him rack up his coops, and he opened his heart."

Skeeter nudged Howland and motioned to the turkey very significantly. In fact, it was a threat.

Howland took the hint. "Say, Gillip!" he asked, "how much will you take for that? You've got one at home now. You don't need another."

"Two-fifty," said Gillip.

"Done," said Howland, and the exchange was made. Gillip started to climb up on the engine.

"Here, Skeet," said the engineer loudly; "here's your bird. You won the bet. You threw me fair." And, dropping his voice to a whisper: "Don't you ever say anything—or I'll never hear the last of it."

In giving the fowl into Skeeter's hands, his own hand brushed the brakeman's little finger, and he straightened back with a jerk. "Look here!" he exclaimed in a husky whisper, "you were the fellow on the other side of that—"

Skeeter grinned. "Mebbe I was," he retorted, starting off with his prize; "but you can't prove it."