

Posy's Perfect Christmas Dinner

By Sydney F. Grey © 2022

Posy took the small pot of melted butter off the stove and poured it lovingly over the pan of scalloped oysters as if she were pouring claret for Pastor Grimes on an important visit. She had churned this butter herself, along with the rest of the butter needed for everything she made and would make for the family's Christmas Eve feast this year. It was going to be a night to remember if she had anything to do with it.

The holidays always put her in a sentimental mood as memories of her childhood in England before her parents brought her to America inspired her to create the same kind of warmth and joy in her little farm house in Virginia for her own family. And the fact that her dear husband,

Roger, had come home to her at the end of the civil war made the celebrations even sweeter. She would do all she could to give her two children a sense of comfort and security after their years of hardship.

The wild turkey Roger brought home from his hunt was already in the oven. She had given its bottom an affectionate pat after tying up the legs to hold in her cornbread stuffing, seasoned with herbs she and Rachel dried in the late summer. She popped in the pan of oysters, squeezing it in beside the bird, checking the heat and placing another stick of wood into the embers. How she loved Christmas, with all its beauty, delicious flavors and smells, and family and friends gathered together around her simple but welcoming table.

Checking the time on the mantel clock, Posy hurried out to the dining table to see how her eldest, Rachel, was getting along

setting the table with the pewter plates and grandmother's old silverware, polished to a mirror sheen by Michael, her youngest, who was constantly complaining about having to do house work. Posy caught him sneaking a cranberry from the sauce on the larder and gave him a pinch in the ribs.

“Stay out of that, you rascal, or there'll be nothing left for the turkey!” she scolded, but her twinkling eyes told him she wasn't truly angry. Michael kissed her quick on the cheek, then darted away with a mischievous laugh.

“Mother, I've finished setting the table but for the wine glasses. May I go and change my dress now?” cooed Rachel, her impatient blue eyes pleading under the blonde curls peeking out under her white cap. “I'd hate for Mr. Briner to show up early with me still in my apron.”

Ah, the devilishly handsome son of their new neighbors had turned her daughter's head, and Posy's heart warmed. He was just the sort of fellow she envisioned for a son-in-law; hard working, ambitious, and raised by a good Christian family. The only thing missing from his list of agreeable traits was a noticeable lack of any real interest in her beautiful Rachel.

Well, she thought, we'll just have to help him along.

"No, dear. There's still plenty of time. The Briners aren't coming for another hour yet and I need you to stir the peanut soup while I start the potatoes." Posy waved her into the kitchen and handed Rachel the ladle, seeing the crimp in her daughter's brow.

Saying nothing more, Posy poured water over the peeled spuds in the large crock and hoisted it onto the stove. Wiping the back of her hand across her perspiring forehead, she

wished again she had not been so soft hearted to let Lulu go early to spend Christmas with her family and leave her with all the cooking. But her heart smote her, and she repented of her lack of charity quickly.

The kitchen door opened, and the frigid wind burst through the door, blowing in her beloved Roger and Thomas, the hired hand.

“Storm’s coming in,” he called, stomping the dirt from his boots before laying an armload of wood on the pile. “May see snow before the evening’s over.”

Thomas hurried past with a bucket of fresh water while Posy helped Roger off with his coat. “I hope it won’t keep the Briners away,” she worried, dashing a glance over at Rachel. “There’s enough food for an army and we would all be most disappointed.” She winked at Roger and

jerked her white capped head towards her daughter.

Roger winked back with his good eye, the other one covered with a black patch, his worst injury in the war. “Not to worry, my dear. I saw Mr. Briner and his son down at the fence but half an hour ago and they said they’ll brave the walk.”

Posy saw Rachel’s shoulders relax and the corners of her lips lift. Rachel worked so hard on the Christmas Pudding for dessert. It would be a shame if Charles Briner didn’t have a chance to taste it and be impressed with her daughter’s cooking abilities.

“How’s the soup, Rachel?” asked her father, leaning over to sniff. “Give us a taste and I’ll see if it passes muster.”

Rachel giggled and raised a spoon, blowing on it before passing it along. “Oh, father, you know we always make it exactly the same every year,” she teased.

“Mmmm,” Roger purred and smacked his lips. “That’s good enough to eat!”

“I’m off to feed the pigs,” Thomas said over his shoulder as he scooped up the slop pail and left, pulling down his hat before shutting the door behind him.

Posy stirred the potatoes which had started to boil. “Go on now, Roger, and see what Michael’s up to, and both of you stay out of the cranberries!”

The wind was howling as their guests arrived, all bundled up and breathless. Posy fussed over the short, round lady as she helped her out of her things. “Oh, Mrs. Briner! I am so sorry about this wretched weather, and of course, our house is too close to yours to warrant a wagon ride, but too far for a walk on a night like this!”

“My goodness!” Mrs. Briner exclaimed as she emerged from her wraps. “Of all the nights! I’m sure I would not have braved it if it weren’t Christmas Eve, Mrs. Hartford, and I knew you had been slaving away all week on our behalf!”

“We are so glad you have come,” Posy matched the woman’s energy, while the men greeted each other more calmly. “Now, sit yourselves down by the fire and warm up. Michael, is that tray of mulled wine ready yet?”

Michael appeared with the tray and his father directed him to serve their guests first. “Thank you for coming, good neighbors,” announced Roger, lifting his glass to them. “Merry Christmas and many happy returns.”

Everyone chatted as they enjoyed their drink, and Posy looked from the silent but smiling young Charles Briner to Rachel,

standing quiet as a church mouse in the corner of the room.

“Rachel, dear, will you show everyone to their places at the table while I bring out the soup?”

Rachel blushed, looking so pretty in her best blue wool dress, her hair pinned up in a tumble of curls. “Yes, mother. If you would come this way, please,” she smiled shyly and motioned for them to follow.

The kitchen smelled like heaven as Posy poured the Cream of Peanut Soup into the warmed tureen and Thomas came in the kitchen door to join them. She had him carefully carry out the soup to the oos and awes of the company. But before the soup was served, Roger bowed his head and folded his hands in front of his plate, signaling it was time to say grace.

“Gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for the bounty you have set before us and the dear family and friends at our table. And especially for the significance of this night in which we celebrate the greatest gift of all, your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.” Roger ended by lifting his glass with a grin, “And thanks to my dear wife and daughter, whose hard work is about to bless our stomachs!”

“And to the men who raised the crops and shot the turkey,” added Posy enthusiastically.

“And to the one who polished the silverware!” shouted Michael, and everyone laughed.

As the feast progressed and the wind pummeled the little house, Posy continuously prodded young Charles into conversation. “And what is your favorite dish on Christmas, Mr. Briner? Are you a

mashed potato lover, or are oysters to your liking?”

“Oh no!” exclaimed Mrs. Briner on her son’s behalf. “Charles is most fond of my yams in maple sauce, aren’t you, son?”

“Well, I am very happy to eat it all, mother, but yes, I am rather particular to your yams,” the young man looked at his mother, who was pleased with his response.

“I am very sorry the crop was not very good this year, Mr. Briner, or we would have them on the table tonight,” Posy pouted, then redirected. “Rachel, are you fond of yams? I can’t quite remember.”

Rachel wiped her rosy lips with her napkin. “Why mother, you know I am. But my favorite is your cornbread stuffing and I think this is the best you’ve ever made.”

Posy gleamed with pride and puffed up her ample bosom. “Thank you my dear. And is the stuffing to your liking, Mr. Briner?”

Again, Mrs. Briner spoke up, “Oh, Charles is not so particular, I assure you, Mrs. Harford. He is such a good lad and never gives me trouble about what I serve him at home, isn’t that right, Charles?”

Charles adjusted the napkin tucked into his shirt collar uncomfortably. “She is correct, Mrs. Hartford, but your stuffing is delicious.”

There was an awkward pause as Posy lost her way, annoyed at Mrs. Briner’s constant interruptions, and at Charles’s disinterest in Rachel. The silly man barely gave her a glance. She turned to Roger with a pleading look, then gave the most imperceptible nod towards their solemn daughter.

Mr. Hartford could be slow at times, but this time he got the hint right away, much to Posy’s relief. They’d had many a chat about Rachel and Charles Briner before and she

was glad Roger approved of the match as well.

“Ah, well then,” Roger spoke up and took the conversation in the direction of farming and hunting, which kept Mrs. Briner out of the conversation and the Mr. Briners, and even Thomas in.

Posy’s mind turned towards clearing the table and serving the Christmas Pudding Rachel had slaved over when there came a terrible banging at the front door.

The company gasped and the gentlemen stood, Roger and Michael rushing to answer the pounding.

The newly fallen snow blew in as the door opened, revealing a bedraggled old stranger, carrying some kind of bleeding animal in his arms.

Posy’s heart sank, not only at the terrible sight, but that her lovely Christmas dinner

was so abruptly disturbed. All of a sudden, the evening went from calm to chaos. She rushed to Roger's side as he brought the man in and closed the door against the weather.

Everyone came to the doorway and Mrs. Briner quickly worked herself up into a frenzy. "Good heavens! Look at the snow! And who is this? What a sight! What has happened?" She hardly took a breath in her exclamations. "Oh John, we must go at once before we cannot get home at all!"

Posy and Roger could not get a word in edgewise to ask the poor man shivering in his threadbare coat what had happened or who he was before the Briners were all throwing on their things in haste and saying their goodbyes.

"Oh, no! This is dreadful!" Posy cried. "Oh, please won't you stay a moment more and have Rachel's pudding?" Her heart

broke for her daughter, who was the only one with sense enough to bring a blanket to cover the stranger's thin shoulders while Roger took the wounded creature from his arms and laid it before the fireplace.

"I'm afraid Adelia is right, Mrs. Harford," answered Mr. Briner as he tucked in his scarf and pulled up his coat collar. "We must go now before the snow is too deep. Thank you for a lovely dinner, and good luck." He jerked his head towards the figure huddled at the hearth checking the wounds of the animal now bleeding on Posy's best rug.

"Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Hartford," shouted Charles over his shoulder as he took his fretting mother out into the flurry of snow and closed the door. Posy stood motionless staring at it, stunned.

She finally came to her senses when she heard Roger tell Thomas to take the man and

his dog, into the kitchen. Catching Rachel's eye, she noticed the mist of tears there and her heart broke again. "I'm so sorry, my dear—"

Rachel sighed and shook her head sadly. "No, mother. It's all right. I overheard Mr. Briner talking to his mother before dinner. He received a letter today from a lady called Hannah from their former town." Rachel whisked away a tear before heading on into the kitchen.

That explains it, thought Posy as she followed, hearing the whines of the dog now on her kitchen table.

The man was leaning over the creature, gently washing the wounds amongst the thick grey fur, and calming the dog with his wispy, shaking voice. Posy loved animals and would have taken over the nursing of the poor thing at once, but her heart bit with resentment at the sight instead.

“Roger,” she whispered, “who is this man? What has happened?”

Her husband took her aside. “Says his name is Smith and he was trying to find a place to sleep for the night when his dog was attacked by pack of wild ones.”

Posy let the seed of anger grow in her breast. “Well, he can sleep in the barn with that mangy thing. I’ll not have them ruin anymore of our evening,” and before Roger’s look of disapproval could take its effect on her conscience, she walked briskly out to the dining table and began gathering the dirty dishes.

She was glad Roger did not follow her so she could wallow in self-pity alone. Her mind turned from her usually compassionate nature to thinking the Briners were rather rude to leave as they did without even staying long enough to see if they may need help with the stranger. Perhaps he was some

kind of thief who might steal her grandmother's silver. Even as the snow pattered with the gusts against the windows, she made up her mind. That man was not staying in her house tonight, wounded dog or no.

Gathering up her tray and her pride, she marched back into the kitchen and set the dirty dishes into the basin with a clatter. Hands on her hips, she looked over the bloody, furry mess on the table as Michael held the dog's muzzle still and Roger carefully sewed up the worst of the wounds. The dog whined softly as its master spoke loving words in its mangled ear, while Rachel spread her homemade healing salve on the cleaned puncture wounds.

Posy's shield of hurt almost slipped into pity, but she stoked up her anger again at the sight of Rachel's uneaten pudding and huffed out of the kitchen again. He sleeps in

the barn; she reiterated to herself and piled more dishes on her tray. In her haste, she tipped over one of her best wine glasses and it fell to the floor with a crash.

Rachel ran to her side at her cry, and the rest of her patience left her. “Now look what I’ve done! What a terrible night!” she whaled and flung her face into her upturned apron.

Roger came quickly and wrapped his arm over her sobbing shoulder. “What is it, my love? It’s only a bit of broken glass, that’s all—“

Posy turned away from his comfort. “It’s all spoiled! Rachel’s pudding, this blasted snow, a bleeding mongrel on my table and Mr. Charles Briner has a sweetheart in Masonville!”

Roger looked at her in alarm. She was never one to fly at him like this. What was the matter with her?

“There, there, now Posy. It’s all been too much work for you, and you must rest your feet. Please go sit down. The children and I can set things right, and we can make a place by the fire for Mr. Smith and his—“

“No, Roger.” Posy snapped. “I won’t have that man sleeping in my house tonight. He can take that hound of his and sleep in the barn. I insist!”

Roger’s mouth gapped, but he nodded slowly. “As you wish, my dear, only come now and sit by the fire,” he said, then added firmly, “that is what I insist.”

Posy’s heart deflated as Roger lovingly took her hand and led her to a chair. She sat staring into the flames while the others hurried about at Roger’s direction, until she finally heard Thomas take Mr. Smith and his dog out the kitchen door and a pang of guilt hit her heart. But she saw the blood stains on

her lovely rug and pushed the feeling away as her family joined her by the fire.

As was their custom each evening, Roger settled his spectacles on his nose and took up the family Bible. Posy sniffed as he turned to a passage and began to read.

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

Posy’s eyes shifted from the stain on the rug to the crèche on the mantel. The candle light gave it a holy glow. She rose from her chair to look closely at the tiny child in the rough manger, and his mother kneeling beside. Finally, her heart broke.

A sob escaped her as she took the baby from its place and clutched it to her heart, her alarmed family gathering close around her. “Oh, no!” she cried. “What have I done? What is the matter with me?!”

Roger patted her shoulder and handed her his handkerchief. “There, there, my love. What has come over you, Posy? You are usually so happy on Christmas Eve.”

“That’s just it, Roger. I am being a fool!” She turned suddenly and gave the tiny carving to Rachel. “I haven’t made room for the Christ child. I have closed my heart to him!”

She rushed to the row of hooks by the door and threw her wrap around her. “We must make room! We must bring them in!”

Roger smiled at his children with a knowing look and followed his wife, tugging on his coat and hat as Posy rushed through the kitchen and out the back door.

In moments, she made her way through the blowing blizzard to the barn and found the man and his dog, huddled in the cow stall in a pile of blankets.

“My dear sir! Can you ever forgive me? Please, you must come inside and sleep by the fire.” Posy’s eyes met the man’s, round with surprise, his teeth chattering with the cold.

“May God forgive me!” She cried as she helped the man to his feet and Roger took up the softly whining dog gently in his arms.

Soon they were back by the fire, and Posy called for Rachel to serve her Christmas pudding. The man sat on the foot stool near his dog, tears rolling down his weathered cheeks as he ate his pudding and listened to Michael play Christmas hymns on his violin.

Here it is, thought Posy, cooing over the wounded animal at her feet, and I almost missed it. Her eyes turned to Roger, and they conversed without words.

Roger smiled and his eyes misted as he nodded to his wife. She returned it with a sigh of relief. When Michael played Silent Night, they all joined in, even Mr. Smith in a raspy tone.

When the song ended, Posy leaned back in her chair with a dreamy look in her eyes. “Now, this is Christmas.”

The next morning Posy woke early, eager to check on her house guest and find something suitable for the dog to eat, but when she entered the sitting room, they were not there. She looked in the kitchen, but it was empty as well.

Just then, Thomas came in with a load of wood. “Morning, Missus,” he greeted her cheerfully. “Thank ye for the fine dinner last night. What a feast!”

“You are most welcome, Thomas, but have you seen Mr. Smith and his dog? Did he go back out to the barn?”

“No, ma’am. Haven’t seen them all morning,” Thomas called over his shoulder as he went back out to his chores.

“Where is Mr. Smith, Posy,” asked Roger, entering the kitchen.

“I don’t know. Has he gone already?” Posy gave Roger a mystified look and went again to the sitting room.

Roger followed behind and Posy gasped. “Look, Roger, the stain is gone from the rug!”

The family searched high and low, but there was no trace of Mr. Smith and his dog. Not even the soiled rags and patches of clipped dog fur remained. Everything was exactly in its place as if pair had never come.

Posy felt a shiver and sat dazed by the fire. “What can be made of it, Roger? I’ve never seen anything so strange.”

Just then, Roger looked quizzically at the mantel. “Hello, what’s this?” he asked.

Posy rose to join him to look at the crèche. “I’ve never seen this angel before. Where did it come from?” asked Roger, his voice filled with awe.

Taking in a sharp breath, Posy’s body tingled from head to toe. Hanging by a thread from the ceiling above was a beautifully carved white angel, its wings made of downy white feathers with a lovely painted smile on its face. It was hovering directly over the Christ child sleeping on the hay, and next to the manger was a woolly grey dog watching the over the babe.

“Roger,” Posy whispered. “Do you think...” her voice trailed off in wonder.

“Yes, Posy, my love. I do.”

THE END

**Recipe for Cream of Peanut Soup
From the King's Arms Tavern
Williamsburg, Virginia**

2 T. butter

2 ribs of celery sliced

1 medium white or yellow onion, chopped

2 T. flour

2 - 2 ½ quarts chicken stock

1 ¾ c. creamy peanut butter (I use Jiff)

1 - 1 ½ c. whipping cream or half and half

Sauté celery and onion in melted butter in medium pan. Once translucent, stir in the flour.

Place mixture in blender with 2 cups of the broth and blend until smooth. Add to remaining stock in large soup pot and heat to boiling.

Add peanut butter and stir until well blended over medium heat. Reduce heat and add cream, stirring until smooth. **DO NOT BOIL** again.

May be served with crushed peanuts as a garnish.

This recipe is my family's favorite traditional dish during the holidays! Enjoy!