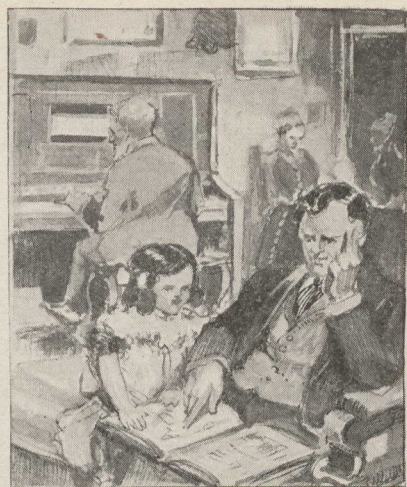


CHRISTMAS ON THE FARM

By Augustus Bridle.



CHRISTMAS in the spirit may be the same as it always was. And of all places in the world the farm is the place where it ought to be the same yesterday, to-day and forever. But a few years has made a large difference to the celebration of this great festival on the farm; a decade or so of progress—and the thing that was is now no more, because something else has taken its place. And the city man who visits the farm for his Christmas holidays is the one who sees this remarkable change, with all the vividness of novelty and all the concentration that naturally comes from the observance of Christmas.

Twenty-some years ago, when young Joe Smiles, at High School, decided to visit the old homestead Christmas time, he went down to the market, where the folk were sure to be with a sleigh-load of things. And he rode home twenty miles or less sitting on the wheat-straw behind the seat with a buffalo-robe over him—or a patchwork quilt. They got home by ten o'clock; horses bedded down and fed and a big supper.

Next day while Dad and brother Tom crosscutted stovewood on the chip-hill, the young man from town strolled over to Ebenezer Church to help the girls decorate up with evergreens, trim the coal-oil lamps and trig up the cedar tree hauled from the swamp. In the evening there was a final rehearsal of the programme for the Christmas Tree. Chording on the organ was a fine art. Sophie Smiles had it down to perfection. She was able to vamp to a mouth-organ in either D or G. A mouth-organ—sometimes called a harmonica—is peculiar that way; at least it used to be. No farmer's son could play a tune on any mouth-organ in any but the key stamped on the tin case. Hence it was a most unexpected muddle when Joe Smiles, with a mouth-piece in D, and Tom Snook, with one in G, essayed to play a duet at the Christmas Tree. Poor Sophie, with all her virtuosity as a vampist, couldn't play in more than one key at a time. Nobody recognized the piece—it was so mauled to smithereens by the two boys and by Sophie, who at last hit on the brilliant expedient of splitting the difference and playing chords in F. Which made it at least a million times worse.

The only other interesting item about the mouth-organs is that they cost fifteen cents apiece at the Tomtown corner store. But as Ma Smiles and Ma Snook swapped butter and eggs for such things as brown duck and gingham and spools of thread and brown sugar and Japan tea—when butter was fourteen cents a pound and eggs eleven cents a dozen, the two mouth-organs were not such an awful extravagance.

THIS brings up the whole delightful category of the commodities and customs that used to make the warp and woof of Christmas to Joe Smiles home from High School for Christmas. Joe was a great hand to sit in the kitchen and watch mother and Sophie prepare for mince pies and plum pudding. There were two grades of brown sugar. One was very dark and was much used for certain kinds of dusky cake and cider apple-sauce. The other went into the Christmas things. Joe had a knack of getting hold of a nice damp lump every once in a while from the bag when Sophie wasn't looking. But if ever he hooked any of the raisins that mother had stoned, he got a wallop with the corn broom and was sent out to lug in the wood.

The Smiles family always had a nice, plump flock of turkeys, that made a practice of roosting in the maple trees along the road—no matter how Dad Smiles kept routing them out. Sometimes they perched on the peak of the drive shed, on the coldest of winter nights. The gobbler did a good

deal to amuse the wood-sawyers by doing naval manoeuvres on the chip-hill with his tail fanned up for a sail and his wings down and his comb flopping red over his pink wattles.

But as Dad said, it was the pride that cometh before destruction. All the Smiles were pretty well versed in Scripture those days; especially Proverbs.

Well, the men folk didn't hurt themselves working in Christmas week. There was too much going on in the kitchen. All up and down the line the main business was wood-sawing, an occasional hog-killing, hauling up drags from the bush, somebody filing a crosscut saw to be ready for the sawlogs.

MOST of the barns had good strawstacks, and none of them very big. But it's well-remembered what a thrifty picture those strawstacks made for a mile and more; how Dad Smiles could tell from the way some neighbour let his cows eat holes into the oat-straw near the bottom and the hogs burrow into the caves of the straw, just what a poor coot that neighbour was. Smiles always had his stack in a pole pen. Thriftily at the beginning of winter he mounted to the peak with the straw-knife and kicked off a patch of snow. Carefully he heaved off the frozen lumps of wheat-straw and cut his way down a ledge to the dry straw that used to have in it a good deal of foxtail and ragweeds and very often chess; for in those days of stump farming it was hard to keep the fields clean. And along about Christmas time quite a few of the folk had started to cut those ledges in the stacks. It was just becoming the custom, too, for the cows to find binder-twine in the straw, though a good many farmers still bound the wheat by hand; and it was a well-to-do farmer that could afford a self-binder all his own. In fact some of the neighbours made a practice of clubbing together, going snooks on a binder; and they kept the old four-rake reapers for cutting clover seed.

I think Dad Smiles still had in his drive-shed the double-seated family cutter that the hens used to lay eggs in of a summertime. It was getting middling rickety twenty-three years ago, however, and he had to drive it out to the Corners blacksmith shop to get new irons and new shoes on the runners and a fresh coat of paint. The light double driving harness had to be cobbled and tinkered a good bit, too; new back-bands and collars and tugs and martingales—in fact about the time Joe went to High School there wasn't much left of the original set but the buckles and the eye-holes. Ma still had the old buffalo robe, but it looked like an old cow that had rubbed off patches of hair on the fence-corners. So far as anybody round that neighbourhood knew there were still lots of buffaloes out west; though there wasn't one left in the whole Saskatchewan valley—and that was a part of the world that the Smiles family knew a good deal less about than they did about Judea and Samaria.

Anyway there was enough of the family cutter and the harness and the buffalo robe left for Dad to hitch up the logging-team and take the family out for a long drive on Christmas afternoon. They went back the side-road through the bush where the boys were popping down black squirrels with ramrod guns, out back to the Corners at Tomtown where there was a shooting match for turkeys and home again.

Seems to me that Christmas twenty-three years ago came pretty close to Sunday. Anyway, the Ebenezer choir and the organist, Sophie Smiles, had made ready a good, hefty service of music—counting, of course, on Joe Smiles, who, since going to High School, had been blowing about being a member of the town choir that sang knotty, big anthems,

full of demi-semi-quavers and incidental solos and all sorts of accidentals.

Joe felt a little dubious about taking his place in the old country choir that was still led in a sort of cantankerous, bull-headed way by Dave Durnan. Dave's real role was sliver-on-a-rail basso; but there were big, doubtful moments on a heavy hymn or a ponderous selection from Excell's Anthem Book when he flung the whole weight of his influence on to the soprano part.

The first hymn that Christmas Sunday morning was one that Joe Smiles had first persuaded the choir to sing on such an occasion—"Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." But before the first verse was half over Joe felt sorry he had done it. The tenor and the alto, such as there were, got lost in the woods of unusual harmony. The soprano part got up around G and went right to pieces. Dave Durnan, pounding out a whole lingo of errors on a bass part he didn't know at all, kept casting vicious glances at Joe, who knew every note of it but hadn't voice enough to keep Dave on the course. So while the preacher—who had two more appointments to preach that day—read the second stanza, Dave nudged Joe in the ribs and said, *sotto voce*:

"Say, you hang on to the bass. I'm goana take a whack at the air. She's goin' plumb to pieces."

He did it. But the high notes got him. On the first lot with the choir in unison he got a frog in his throat. On the second series, one note higher, where the harmony came in, his voice slivered into two parts and slid up into a yodel. Dave turned red as a beet and stopped entirely. The congregation looked up from their books and the preacher actually turned half round to glance over his shoulder; and everybody thought the terrible squawk must have come from Joe Smiles who also blushed and wished he could sneak out of a back door; but to that choir loft there wasn't any such exit.

I don't remember what the anthem was; but the choir had practised that: besides, it had a solo for Dave, who, by that time, had got the kinks out of his voice and gave young Joe an exhibition of how anthem solos could be sung in a country church quite as well as in town.

All of which was very new in those days, and along with the self-binder and the patent hay-fork and the barrel churn, was the beginning of a new era on the farm. And the new era has been developing prodigiously ever since; while Joe worked his way up through the High School, teaching a country school, up through college and on into a salaried job of twenty dollars a week. The Christmases as they came and went marked a long, strange procession of changes even more peculiar in the neighbourhood of Tomtown than in the city.

THE bicycle was one of the most disturbing innovations. Dave Durnan paid over a hundred dollars for a safety that caused Dad Smiles to predict blue ruin for his career. Other lads picked up second-hand wheels in town; and there soon began to be a squad of them desecrating the Sabbath along the line, organizing long runs into rare places, getting back very often too late for church—for by this time Ebenezer had two services a Sunday. When a century road race was run from the High School town to some town fifty miles west and back again, right past Ebenezer—Dave Durnan was in it. But to the great satisfaction of Dad Smiles he got badly beaten by a slimpy young coon from town who sucked some sort of stimulant through a tube without stopping at the corner hotel.

By that time every barn of any account had a patent hay-fork slung in the peak and every farmer worth shucks had a self-binder. Ma Smiles got both a barrel churn and a patent washer.