

# CHRISTMAS AT HUNKER'S CORNERS

*A Homely Sketch of How It Was Kept in Old Ontario*

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

BACK on the Hunkers town line—"Where are you going Christmas?"—was very easy to answer. Hezekiah Howe and his family never went anywhere except every other year out to Uncle Martin McDowell's on the gravel road. Next year Uncle Martin and his folk drove in the big two-seated cutter—or the democrat—back to Hezekiah's. That was the general rule. They used to begin the agitation about keeping Christmas long before the last load of corn-fodder was hauled. Of course, in 1911, people like Uncle Martin just step to the "rural phone" and ring up in the commonplace way folk do in town. But even a letter was a roundabout affair in those days before Christmas had begun to be a big hurlyburly of trade and shopping. Writing paper and pens were hard to find and nobody seemed to have any stamps. So we had to begin talking up Christmas when we all drifted together at the township fair in October.

However, three times out of five the Christmas gathering was at our place; somewhat because at Hunkers we had the liveliest lot of young folk in the township—fifty-five children at the school, not counting the big ones in winter—and we were celebrated for our Christmas tree programmes in the church. One of the first symptoms of Christmas around the place was that the junior member of the family bought a jew's-harp upon which he practised all the tunes he knew, sitting back by the wood-box in the evenings, while mother knit mitts and the girls chopped mince-meat for the pies, and dad in his stockinged feet read the weekly paper.

There was an air of great plenty round the farmhouse at that time of the year. Hogs were killed and the pork-barrel was full of hams, shoulders and sides. The strawstack was not yet nibbled into caves by the cattle. Dried pumpkins were upon the rack over the stove and dried apples hung by strings in thrifty festoons over the iron tea-kettle and the pots. The shote pigs were in good form from running loose on hickory nuts and oak nuts—and there was still a hundred bushels of yellow Flint corn in the crib. Well-remembered, too, is that old butter-bowl that the man of the house whittled from a "bump" on a maple log—as fine a bit of natural grain as ever grew; and in that, during the Christmas week, one of the girls chopped the mince-meat, according to directions from mother.

Raisins and brown sugar were very abundant round the kitchen those nights. Between tunes on the jew's-harp, the junior from the wood-box helped himself on the side to the raisins.

"You silly gilly! think I'm stonin' raisins for you to gollop 'em?"

Maw changed the stitch on the wrist of the mitt and smiled as some new melody struck up at the wood-box; and dad at his weekly paper, one thumb in his braces, sprawled back in the light and unconsciously patted his socked foot, not even hearing the clack of the chopping knife in the butter-bowl.

Suddenly he sneezed—jiggling the bread-pan on the wall.

"Mercy me!" said mother. "You ketchin' another cold, Zeke?"

"Hawgs is down agin," he smiled broadly. "Knowed I got mine off in time. Yes, sir. They'll be lower 'fore they're higher, too."

"Well, goodness knows, we kep' some o' them hogs long enough; most gobbled their heads off, I think," said mother, who rose to instruct Julia on the precise admixture of mince, raisins and brown sugar.

"Say, bub, how's that Christmas tree entertainment comin' awn?" dad wanted to know suddenly as he yawned up at the face of the clock.

"All hunkadory. Practise agin to-morra night."

"Hmh! Down at the church, eh? Guess that woodpile's gitt'n low. I'll haul in another load to-morra."

We never bought wood at the Hunkers church.

Cordwood was common those days and the rusty box stove had a big mouth.

"They say you gota be Santy Claus agin, dad."

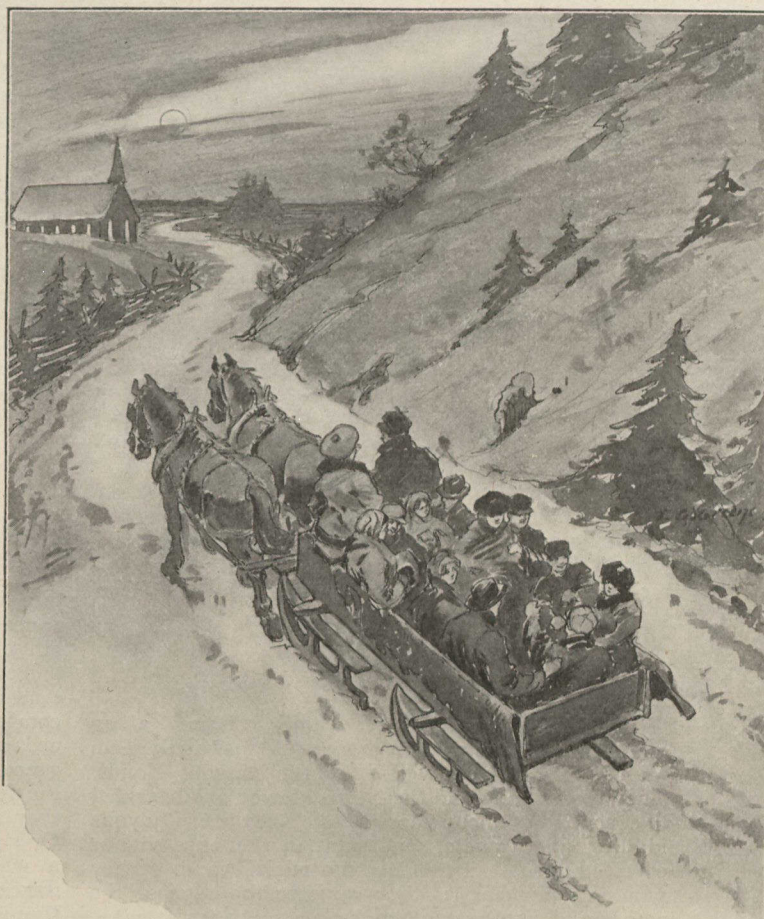
"Shoot. 'Bout time some o' you yunkers done that Santy Claus trick. I been borryin' that coonskin coat five seasons now."

"Pretty good programme, David?" asked mother.

"Good as the wheat. Two mouth-organ solos, maw—three recitations and two dialogues; hull slather o' songs; two er three speeches—lemme see, oh yes! and a couple 'v orgun solos by blind Jimmy Morgan."

"Ain't you forgot something—very important?" asked Julia, who proceeded to "give it away" that David was to perform a jew's-harp duet with the mouth-organ.

"Aw, give us a rest, sis!" The boy slammed a



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Drawn by T. G. Greene

couple of hickory sticks out of the wood-box and made a frightful clatter at the stove.

Zeke wound the clock on both sides and looked out of the door; quite mild sort of night so close to the bush, and he listened to the casual cluckering among the poultry in the shed.

"Guess that fox aint been round lately, hez he?" squinting up at the old muzzle-loading shotgun on the wall.

"Gracious! hope he doesn't grab that old gobbler," said Julia.

"Shucks! No danger o' that," grinned the boy. "He's high an' dry on a hickory lim' in the lane. I seen 'im wollop three ganders the other day."

"He-he-he," giggled Julia. "That was the day he druv you into the stable—when yeh had sich a red face splittin' the wood."

"Aw—that was two years ago when I was on'y a gaffer."

Three days longer that old red-wattled, fan-tailed gobbler bossed the chip-hill.

Splitting wood, David watched him—with pensive humor. Once, as she came for an armful of wood, mother took a notion to have goose instead.

"Jiminy Christmas! I'd as lief have fat pork as goose. Jist you wait, maw. That gobbler's gobble wunt be heard after sunrise to-morra."

This was on Christmas Eve; a mild, cloudy day

of casually flittering snow. That afternoon Dave drove the team and the bob-sleighs out to Hunkers and hauled up a red cedar tree from the swamp. Half the young folk came in sleighs and cutters to the church. They hung paper garlands and festoons of evergreen; they decorated and candled and loaded the tree and put up the red stage curtains—cretonne borrowed from the storekeeper. Also they had a rehearsal in which everything but the Santa Claus role assigned to Zeke Howe was duly gone through, while the girls not on the programme cleaned all the lamps on the seat near the box stove, and filled them from the oil-can kept along with the mop and the broom behind the zinc screen in the corner.

By that time it was dropping dark over the village, and they reluctantly went home to the chores and to tog up for the entertainment.

The only folk that didn't go to the church that night were some old people with rheumatics. Shantymen shoepacked in from the backwoods. The hoopmaker tramped up from the black-ash bush on the gore line. The old farmer doctor jingled out in his layback cutter. The cattle-buyer arrived with his coonskin coat. Hunkers was a jangle of bells

and a rollicking hubbub of high young life as the bob-sleighs glided in packed with oat-straw and buffalo robes and people two deep. Entertainment as rehearsed was carried out according to the written schedule placed in the preacher's hand by the young folks' committee. David's jew's-harp of solemn sound chiming with the mouth-organ on the good old popular classic "Nellie Gray," fetched a stampede of applause, so that the chairman had to call order—just as a conversation lozenge inscribed "Kiss me quick" flipped him on the nose. Then the hand-out bags went round the crowd: when they were empty there was such a fusillade of artillery from blow-ups and exploded paper, that nothing was able to quiet the jamboree but Hezekiah Santa Claus, who in his coonskin coat and his beard of cotton-batting, and his string of sleigh-bells, appeared from behind the curtain in a grand mysterious hush.

When he got done with his benevolences midnight was nigh at hand and the meeting broke up; went the four roads in a hula-baloo of revelry, heard for a mile and a half. By the time the last bob-sleighs turned in and unhooked, some of the "night-hawks" were wishing one another "Merry Christmas!"

Regular bedtime round Hezekiah's place was half-past nine at the latest; but that night it was half-past one before the last one turned in with the last stocking hung up at the door.

All this while there had been very little ado about presents. Indeed we were not overburdened. For a few days or so there had been some little scheming; but there was no one to get presents from us, outside of that farm, and nobody ever thought of sending any in. The postmaster who kept the general store was never known to handle a gift from the mail-bag carried by

the stage driver. He stocked up with a few knick-knacks himself—tin horns and stick candies and boxes of blocks for the children, toy locomotives and jumping-jacks and Punch and Judy boxes. But nobody seemed to have become conscious that Christmastide is a time to get a large number of things that one might wear, or put on the floor or on the walls to be used for furniture and clothes. Nobody ever worried about how much or how little a thing cost. None of them had any real value—except that they served to remind one of somebody in a trifling way. Certainly the ear of corn found in Hezekiah's stocking, and the early Ohio potato that fell out of David's in the light of the creeping dawn, had not caused anybody else much mental anxiety or expenditure of cash.

David was up by starlight. So was Hezekiah. They pulled on their boots at the rear of the kitchen stove.

"Pretty cute trick o' yourn, dad—that potatah. Gosh! hope yeh got the kind o' corn yeh expected."

"Yup, yaller Flint's all right, bub," as he got the lantern. "Say, how 'bout that gobbler?"

"Oh, donchu worry, dad. I'll 'tend to that."

David let his dad boot away to the stable. He went softly over the chip-hill in the creeping light of the Christmas day; silent glimmerings over the bush as the stars faded and flickered out; and of