A BACKWOODS CHRISTMAS

Story by
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A HOMELY SKETCH OF HOW CHRISTMAS WAS KEPT IN OLD ONTARIO

DESIGNED AND PRODUCED IN THEIR OWN INTERESTS
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PRINTERS, TORONTO, ONT.

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 1909, 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-kettl and the pots. The shote pigs were in good form from running loose o hickory nuts and oak nuts—and there was still a hundred bushels o 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 'm?"

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."

"Hinh! 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."

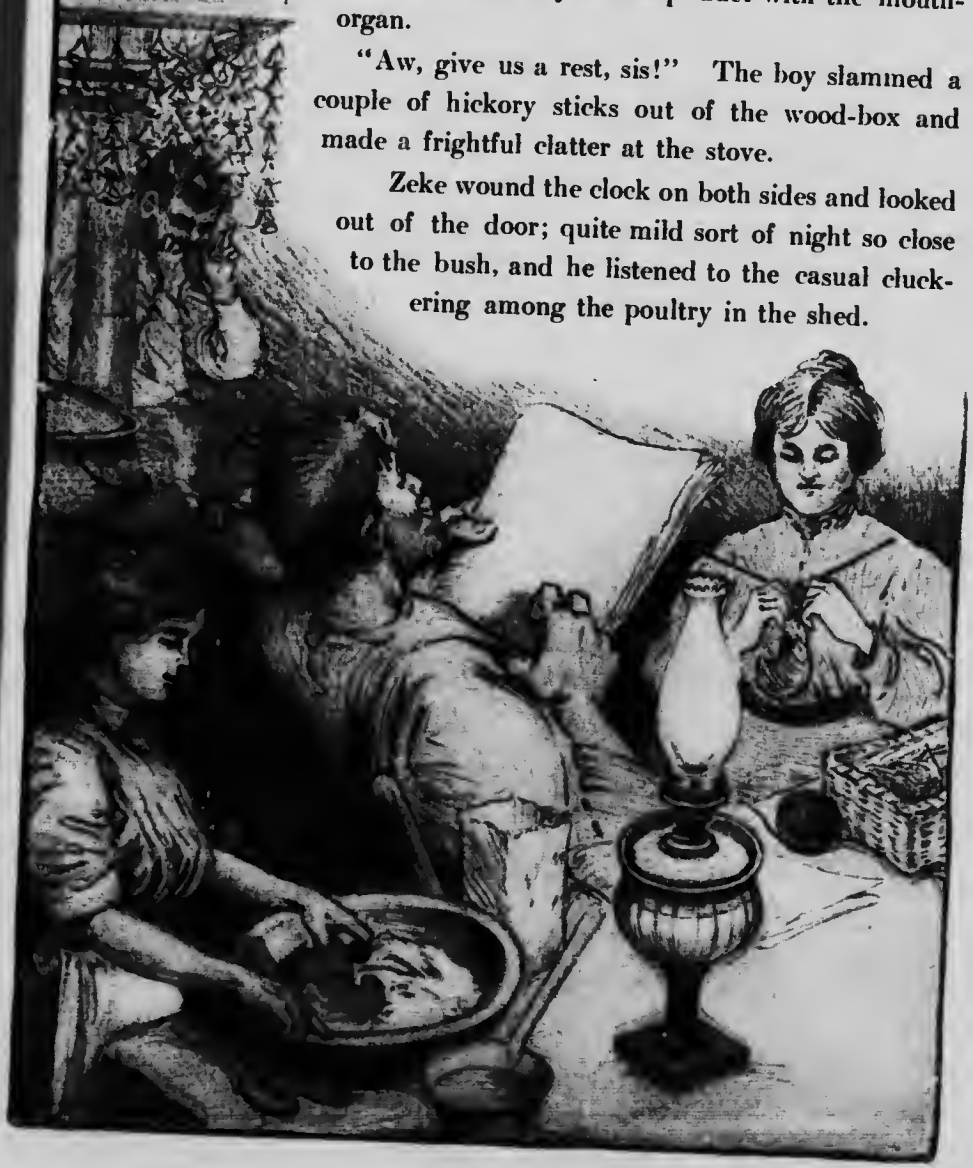
"Pretty good programme, David?" asked mother.

"Good as the wheat. Two mouth-orgin 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."

"Aint 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 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
the old muzzle-loading shotgun on the wall.

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

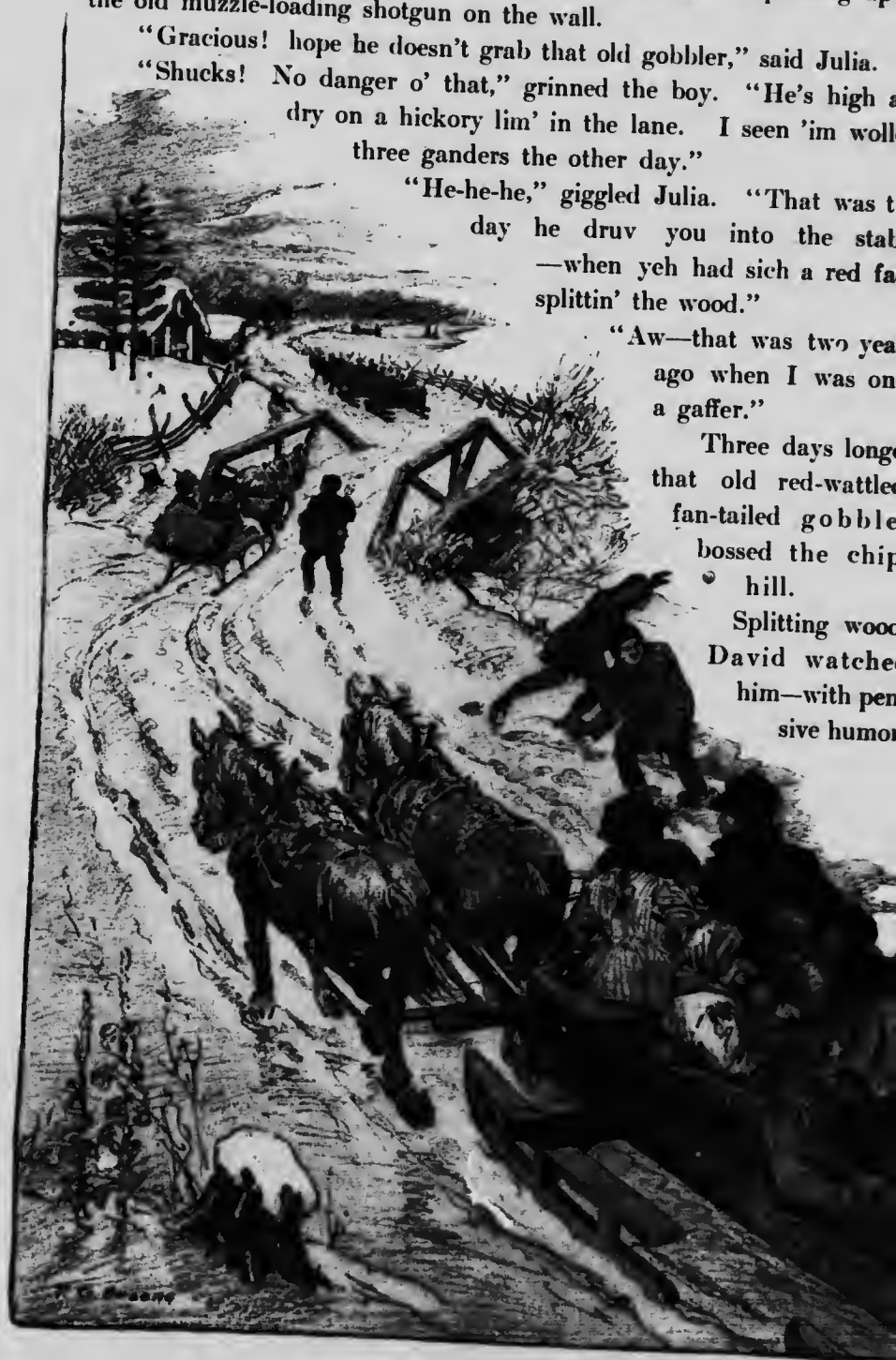
"Shucks! No danger o' that," grinned the boy. "He's high a
dry on a hickory lim' in the lane. I seen 'im woll
three ganders the other day."

"He-he-he," giggled Julia. "That was t
day he druv you into the stab
—when yeh had sich a red fa
splittin' the wood."

"Aw—that was two yea
ago when I was on
a gaffer."

Three days longe
that old red-wattle
fan-tailed gobble
bossed the chip
hill.

Splitting wooc
David watche
him—with pen
sive humor



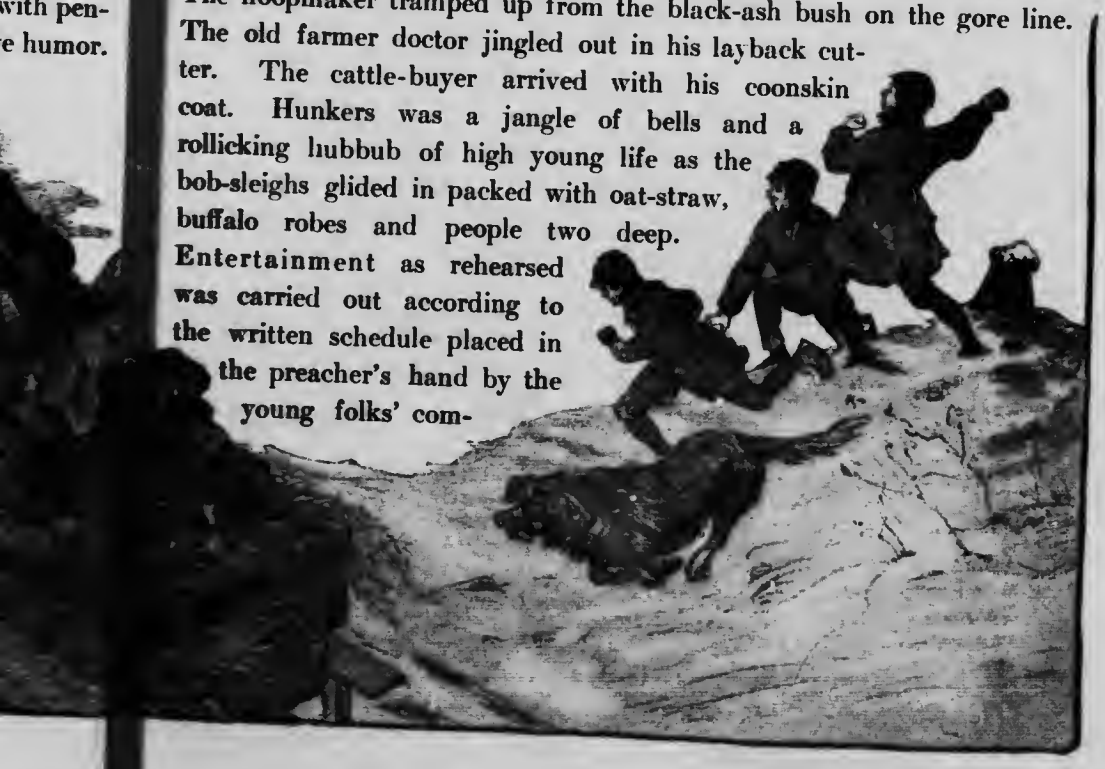
Once, as she came for an armful of wood, mother took a notion to have goose instead.

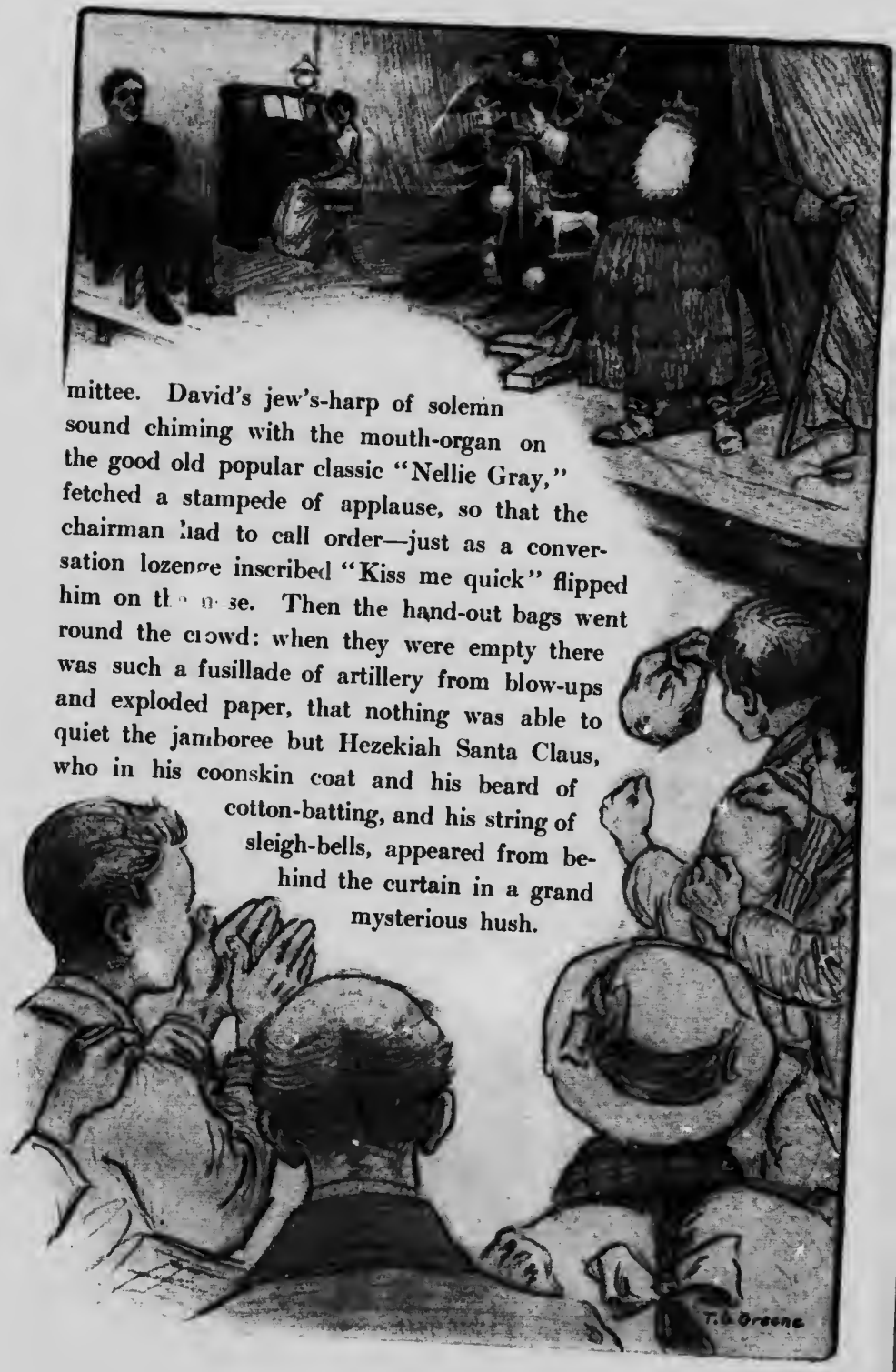
"Jiminy Christmas! I'd as lief have fat pork as goose. Jist you wait, maw. That gobbler's gobble wunt be heard after sunrise to-morra."

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, 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' com-





mittee. 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 hulabaloo 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 get 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 course, be cause in every boy there is something mystical, he was thinking vaguely about the one bright star over which they had argued and the Christmas carols that he had read about, sung by old country folk. There was a music and mystery in the air; in the light that crept and then ran back over the strawstack and the field next, then the cow-chopping, and afterwards the black, silent bush where a mile or so back the Chippewas in their wigwams would be just starting their smokes, not knowing anything about the meaning of Christmas and with no sort of dinner but black squirrels and fox.

By this stage of thinking David had the axe hunted up, and he poked away furtively to the hickory tree in the lane where the old gobbler had roosted for years. He could see him plump and black against the dawn as he went shinning up to the limb; heard him squawk and half gobble in grumbling protest at being disturbed so before sunrise.

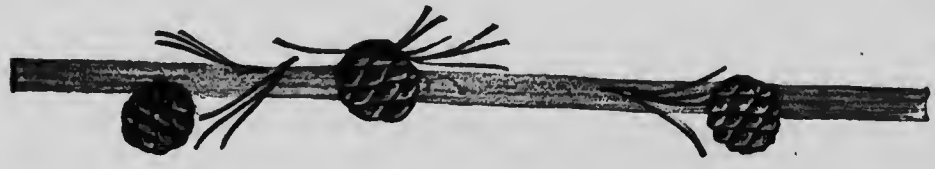
"Can't help it, old boy. Now's y'r las' chance to gobble on earth—if y're goin' to."

Immediately the old bird gobbled so blithering loud that he set all the other fowl into a clack and a flutter, and in the general *melee* David got him hard and fast by the legs. How he got him off the limb and down to the ground and away to the log on the chip-hill, should perhaps be set down in some classic about ancient sacrifices. But in a very little while there was a headless gobbler lying just outside the kitchen door for the dog to smell at suspiciously—when mother and the girls came down to wash.

"Igorry! I got 'im all hunkadory," said David as he hunched away to help dad with the chores.

Then the sun peered out of the neck of woods and the clearing was glorious with cold, clear light.

Breakfast was no sooner over than mother put her pudding into the steamer. The girls went plucking the gobbler in the yard; and long before it was time for Uncle Martin to arrive, that historic bird was sizzling fragrantly in the big top oven.



Along about half-past eleven the folks drove in—sleeked-up team, light driving harness and double-seated cutter with two buffalo robes; for Uncle Martin was a well-to-do man; a bulky, bearded, bush-whacking sort in his younger days, but now very mellow and benign, with Aunt Matilda as red-faced as a peony and jolly as a bed of sunflowers; also three young folk whose names are too long and numerous to mention.

So the stalls were full of horses, and the table with two extra leaves in it was quite surrounded by the two happiest, most uncantankerous families in all the Hunkers land. There was just a fleece of cloud over the bush for a while.

Uncle Martin asked the blessing; and he had one of the simplest ever known, the sort that always seemed sincere, for he took his time to pronounce every word, and that day he seemed to slip in an extra about Christmas—sort of a little prayer about things and people.

Then—without napkins—we sat and waited for dad to administer the old gobbler; girls and women so busy talking that nobody noticed with what fine old mastery the head of the family was doing the job. Uncle Martin talked to David, who was just at the age when words of wisdom from a big clean-lifed man like that were stored up never to be forgotten.

"Now, Aunt Tildy—what's your part?"

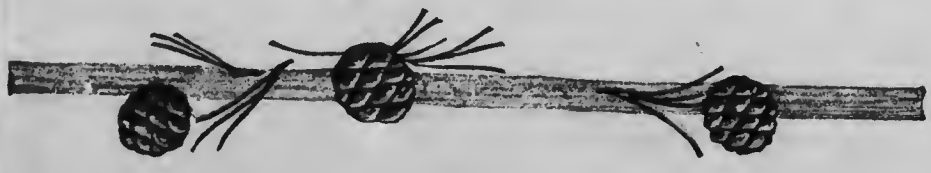
"Oh, a bit o' the breast"—she was going to say, when David broke in with a fine allusion to the good job he had made of the neck; because Julia was telling the other girls in a giggling way about the jew's-harp performance at the church, and he hated to be blunt and shut her up before company.

"Now then, David, I guess you'll have the part that went through the fence last," sniggered dad when he had got round the board—once.

"Huh! That's where you get left, dad. That gobbler aint been able to go through a fence for three years. He allus went over it."

Which in those times was counted a merry jest.

The talk at that dinner would have filled a book; ranging over a vast variety of topics: personal, municipal, political and commercial; markets all reviewed—prices of every living and dead thing for five years



back, even to clover seed and buckwheat; horse talk and family affairs marriages and funerals in two sections; births and other festivals; revival meetings and fights in the township council—Uncle Mart. being a councillor; but there wasn't a word to hurt a living soul, though maybe it was because of the Christmas day and the fine plum pudding that everything seemed to have such a golden edge.

When dinner was over, Uncle lighted his pipe, and Dad took a chaw of tobacco. They fed and watered the horses; when a mackerel sky put a soft benign tone over the crude landscape nibbled from the bush.

When they got in the old boys took down the shotguns.

"Say, maw, we're goin' out to shoot black squirrels. Yup."

But the boy Dave and his sister rummaged out the old rocker wooden skates, and while the old ramrod guns of Uncle and Dad made the bush crack for a mile and a half round the farm house, the young folk gathered on the old pond down on the flats, and they shinnied till the shadows came down.

Such was the Christmas at Hunkers—not so very long ago, when the simple things of strong-hearted folk made all the community life there was, and when we were able to see little things very large in the imagination, because they spelled so much of honest, home-made effort. Good old Christmas of Hunkers Corners!