

# Bringing in The Tree by George Horner

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sack was made of a wiry mosquito bar or netting—fashioned rudely into the shape of a stocking—and when ready to be put on the tree contained some four ounces of mixed candy of the most deadly colors. Each child who had been enrolled for three weeks

"As if court injunctions could have kept him away from Main street!"

restless company. He carried a lesson leaf, which he continued to roll and unroll as he spoke. "Can any of you littul boys or girls tell me what day is coming soon?" he asked. "No, don't say it yet; just hold up your hands."

Immediately the air seemed to coagulate with wriggling fingers. Superintendent Buzwell smiled benignly. "Now then, what is the day?" Grand chorus: "Chrismuss!" "That's right, children; Christmas is coming, and—that will do." (This to the eight or ten who still had their hands up.) "Christmas is coming, and in accordance with our usual custom we are to have a Christmas tree." (Profound sensation, as if all of them had not known! A growing murmur of excitement, and sawmill boys arising only to be pulled back into their places.) "Yes, we are going to have a tree, and mebbe old Santy will be with us, if sleighing is good." (General laughter, affecting even the Bible class. Smothered comments of a skeptical nature from the older boys.) "We have held a teachers' meeting and appointed committees to look after the work. I want to say that Squire Sharpley has promised us a tree. That's right, Squire, ain't it?" Squire Sharpley (rising): "You can have the biggest tree on the place."

During the spasm of laughter which greeted this speech the Squire settled back into his corner nest, feeling that he had missed it in not being a platform entertainer.

Superintendent Buzwell: "I will now call on the secretary to read the committees."

Carrie Purvis, in a voice quavering with emotion, read as follows:

Committee to Get the Tree—Ezra Bliss.

Committee on Putting the Tree in Place—Sherman Williams, Gil Thornton.

Committee on Decorating Tree—Mrs. James Buzwell, Mrs. Arthur Bowlds, Carrie Purvis, Clara and Minnie Hutton, Schuyler Colfax Buckley and Clement Hawkins.

Committee on Putting Presents on the Tree—Oliver Dodson, Chad Graves, Joseph Heffenberger, Maude Williamson and Mrs. Ephraim Chisolm.

Committee on Program—Superintendent Buzwell, Mrs. B. F. Buckley, Mrs. Ella Wilson, Serepta Nebeker and Elmer Crane.

Committee on Distributing Presents—Captain G. W. Halsey, Wilson Batchelder, Frank Bowlds, Juanita Simson and Emma Thornton.

Executive Committee — Superintendent Buzwell, Gideon Welborn, Captain G. W. Halsey and the Rev. Ernest Riddle.

Every year these ponderous committees were named, and yet their publication deceived no one, for it was known that Ezra Bliss would get the tree and put it where it belonged, while the Buzwells would absolutely boss all the subsequent ceremonies.

Of course, no one but "Cap" Halsey could call off the presents. He had a deep cavalry voice with a sandpaper rasp in it—the kind of a voice, every boy imagined, that General Phil Sheridan brought with him on the day that he rode down from Winchester, twenty miles away. "Cap" Halsey had been in the Legislature, also, in the army—a lieutenant. Soon after the suspension of hostilities he was made a captain by general consent. Although he never went to Sunday school, and was, in fact, a worldly man, being an auctioneer of wide repute and profane accomplishments, he was so public-spirited and vocally impressive that the public overlooked his shining faults. For instance, usually he returned from a soldier's reunion with his sword hanging from the small of his back.

It was likewise known, weeks in advance, that Ezra Bliss would bring in the tree. At least ten days before Christmas the committee on decorating the tree met at Mrs. Buzwell's to string popcorn and make the candy sacks. Each



"Found him oiling a set of harness."

preceding Christmas was entitled to one sack of this flowery sweetness and one medium-sized orange. The popcorn strung on the threads was meant to be merely decorative, although it was told, one year, that the sawmill boys had pulled down about a hundred yards of it and eaten it, threads and all.

These preliminaries relating to candy sacks, popcorn and cornucopias did not hold any burning interest for "us boys," because we were barred from the semi-social doings at the Buzwell house. But when Ezra Bliss brought in the tree, that was when we began active co-operation.

No doubt, every town of the Antioch description

has an Ezra Bliss. He was the luminous figure in every undertaking of a quasi-public character that called for physical exertion. Buzwell commanded the realms of intellect and spirituality, Bliss did the heavy lifting, and asked for no reward except the word of approval.

Four days before Christmas came a lazy snowfall—big, cottony flakes—that blotted out the black roadways and pine sidewalks and made the lane out to Squire Sharpley's an unbroken trail of the very whitest kind of white. When the snow came we knew that Ezra would get out his sled. It really is a good deal more Christmas-like to have the tree brought in by sled. Ezra had a long-waisted "jumper" that he had made all by himself, using two saplings for the runners. On winter evenings he would take the young people over to Marvin Junction for an oyster supper, and keep them out until nearly midnight. No one ever heard of his charging for this service. That was the trouble with Ezra. He had no business gumption. Busy the year round—could turn his hand to anything and never appeared to be extravagant—and yet it was common talk that even his team of bay horses was mortgaged to old man Rand of the State Bank. They couldn't have a barn-raising, hog-killing or sheep-shearing within five miles of town unless Ezra Bliss was there to superintend and brighten the occasion with rays of expert knowledge. He was a famous hand at locating "veins" of water, far underground, by means of a forked twig of hazel. Did it for the mere fun of the thing and to prove that he knew how. He could feed a threshing machine, do rough carpentering, paint a little, was considered an excellent nurse, and they always sent for him to sit up with the dead.

Clearly there was but one man in Antioch qualified to bring in the tree, and that man was Ezra Bliss.

It being reported that he would go after the tree

against the dashboard, and simulated a calm indifference to the glorious excitement of the expedition. He nodded calmly to the men on Walton's corner, while the boys cheered. Apparently he did not take cognizance of the fact that many boys dashed madly from side streets and "hooked on," so that when he passed the flouring mill at least a dozen were hysterically "wallering" in the straw. And all twelve of them assisted in opening the red gate that led to the avenue of maples that led to the white house where Squire Sharpley lived.

The Squire came out of the back door—the front door had not been opened for years—and was leaning over the fence when Ezra brought his puffing horses to a halt alongside of the pump.

"All of them your boys, Ezra?"

"No, I've just took 'em to raise. Got anything for 'em to do?"

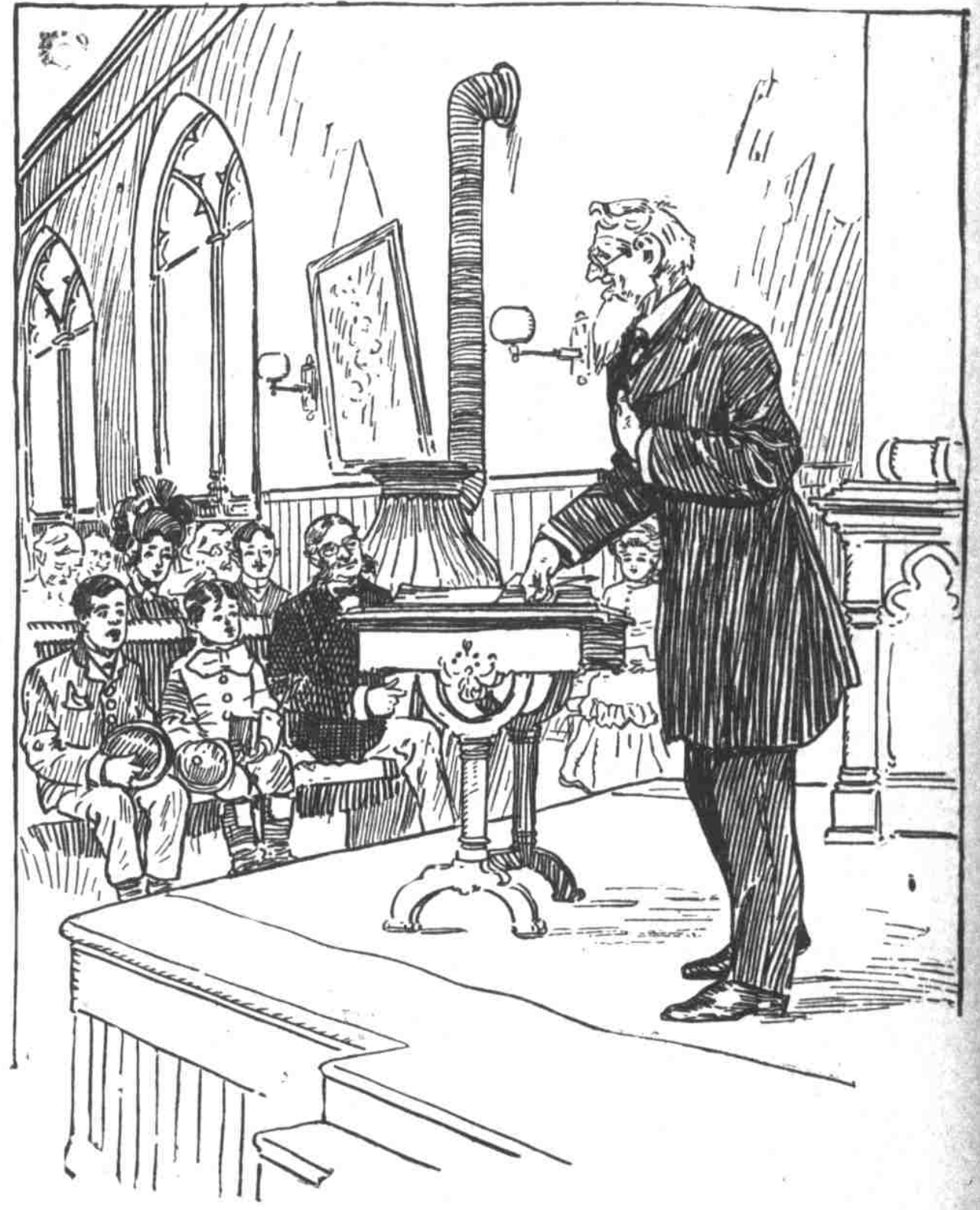
"I reckon I could set 'em to cuttin' chop feed. S'pose you're after that tree?"

"Like as not."

"Well, I'll show you."

The Sharpley place was one of the oldest in the township. When the squire settled there in the 50's he put out four acres of evergreens, which had grown into a high, matted jungle, above the furry tops of which two gable windows looked toward Antioch. The Sharpley place, protected by these gloomy depths, was an unexplored region to most of the boys. They were willing to go there in the daytime with Ezra Bliss, but at night they went past it on a dog-trot.

Ezra found an axe in the woodshed, and then, followed by the Squire, he brushed in among the interlocking trees. The boys trailed Indian fashion, giving loud advice, which was ignored with a majesty that only Ezra Bliss could assume. We voted for a tree that was almost as tall as the courthouse, and openly spoke our disapproval when Ezra and the Squire selected one hardly fourteen feet high. But it



"Can any of you littul boys or girls tell me what day is coming soon?"

on Tuesday morning, a few of us strolled up the alley toward his "barn" on Monday afternoon, and found him oiling a set of harness.

"Are you going after the tree tomorrow, Mr. Bliss?" asked Grant Williams.

The "Mr. Bliss" was an unusual honor, but he knew what ulterior motive prompted this politeness. "May—and then agin may not," he replied, without looking up from his work.

"We're goin' with you," said Philip Sheridan Billings, timidly. It was more of a feeler than an out-and-out confident declaration.

"Mebbe Squire Sharpley don't want a pack of boys tearin' around his place," said Ezra, as he poured some of the black oil into the bowl of his hand. "Aw, he don't care," said every one of us.

"Well, I'll jes think it over."

And all the time he knew what his reward would be—the triumph of coming down Main street with the boys yelling behind his "jumper."

The winters we have nowadays do not bring mornings such as that on which Ezra and the boys started out to Squire Sharpley's place. After the snowfall came a crystal and freezing sunbline. Every hedge and bush lay sagged and sideways under a lumpy hood. The town seemed deathly quiet, with a shroud tucked in about it, and all the wood smoke stood straight up from the chimneys in gray columns.

Ezra had filled the wagon bed with straw. One condition he imposed when the alley scouts caught him in the act of harnessing Frank and Dolly. He said the boys would have to help him hitch up. "Don't know as you can ride back," he said, not hoping to discourage them, but merely testing their zeal for the enterprise. "It's liable to be a big tree."

As if anything could change our purpose. In we tumbled, kicking up the straw. Ezra squatted

was symmetrical, with stout branches, and the Squire assured us that it would be more "sizable" when set up in the "poolpit."

Ezra knelt down under the tree and hacked at the gummy trunk. At last the snowy plume wavered and then came toward us. We scattered, but there was no danger. The tree settled into the close embrace of other green branches, and then we attacked it and lugged it forth and put it on the sled.

Undefined but uncontrollable joy, in the excess of which we were almost overcome, we went gliding back to Antioch.

"Are you goin' up Main street, Ezra?"

In the growing hilarity the formality of "Mister" was now neglected.

"No, I guess not. It's a shorter cut down past the schoolhouse. Besides, I've got to put on a rack before noon, so's I can get an early start to Denny's for a load of wood."

Unanimous appeal: "Aw, Ez, go up Main street."

As if all the court injunctions in Jefferson county could have kept him away from Main street!

How the bells jingled, and didn't the people come running from the stores! And maybe "us boys," half frozen, but still hanging on, didn't shriek all the way from the elevator to the millinery store! And Ezra Bliss trying to let on to be grimly unconscious of his greatness!

At the real festivities we were crowded into the background, but none could rob us of the annual glory of bringing in the tree.

