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You Can't Pitch Hay

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You Can't Pitch Hay

by Jim Avey

IN THE still morning air, the short grass crackled and crunched as the wagon wheels bit down through the thick frost. The big work horses tossed their heads and snorted explosively through extended nostrils, flinging white tendrils of moisture before them. There was a shine, a polish on the world that morning, a feeling that everything was made of burnished glass. To the Boy, the air was like a sharp, clear liquid, spreading its tang over the countryside.

By the barn, the cows were standing in a congenial group, chewing their cuds and digesting their morning feed. As the wagon began to move across the pasture, the Boy saw Lady, the boss cow, lift her head and look at him and his grandfather. The morning sun glinted from the tips of her up-swept horns. Her gold and white hair glistened. Lady tossed her head and started out to meet them, the rest of the herd stringing out behind her, following obediently.

In the wagon, the Boy spread his legs wide, fighting for balance on the load of soft, slippery hay. He looked at his grandfather and envied the way he stood, effortlessly, rolling

gently with the wagon as it bumped over the clumps of frozen grass.

The Old Man slipped the knotted reins over a projecting board, turned, and jabbed his pitchfork into the hay. The Boy, eager to do his part, reached for his fork. There was no change in the steady movement of the wagon as the two bay mares plodded on, carving a sweeping circle in the frosty white pasture.

The Old Man had started flinging great bunches of hay over the side of the wagon. They lay like islands on the frost, piles of greenish-brown etched against the white. Lady led her herd to the first pile, sniffed it scornfully, and hurried on to a more appetizing pile ahead. Behind her, the cows fanned out and began to eat, flinging their heads high and dribbling stray spears of hay from the sides of their mouths. The Boy grinned, laughing at their eagerness.

Suddenly aware of the business at hand, the Boy turned and jabbed his fork into the hay. The wagon jerked, and he fought to keep his balance. Straining, he tried to lift a forkful of hay; the stringy mass resisted. The Boy shot a quick glance at his grandfather. The Old Man was working steadily, driving his fork home and lifting the hay over the side in smooth, easy motions.

The Boy tried again. The hay must be packed down at this end, he thought. He wrenched his fork free and plunged it in again. No luck. A trickle of sweat started working its way down the back of his neck. The chaff rising from the hay got into his eyes and tickled his nose. He could feel it settle inside his collar. Soon little pin pricks began to run around his neck and down his back.

The Boy worked as hard as he could, straining on the fork handle until his fingers ached and little fluttery shapes moved behind his eyes. Suddenly the fork jerked free, and a tiny clump of hay arched into the air. Dejectedly, he leaned against his fork, staring at the few strands of hay on the ground.

"Whoa." The wagon stopped. The Boy lurched forward, then caught himself. He looked at his grandfather.

The Old Man's eyes were a clear deep blue, and they reached inside the Boy, making his heart flutter and his pulse pound in his ears.

"You're fightin' it, Boy." The old man's brittle voice cracked across the stillness. "You'll never get anywhere fightin' it. You can't pitch hay you're standin' on."

To demonstrate, he lifted his fork and drove it into the hay. The Boy watched. A great mound of hay rose and was dumped.

"See? Like that." The two looked at each other for a moment, then the Old Man turned to his horses. "Bird. Mollie." The two mares started walking again.

The Boy tried again. He reached his fork out tentatively, slid it into the hay, and lifted. Nothing happened. "You can't pitch the hay you're standin' on." The words rang in his mind. He pulled his fork back, looked at his feet, and aimed for a clump of hay a few feet away. He lifted. The hay came free; dazed, he flung it from the wagon and looked back at it admiringly. It's as big as his, almost, he thought.

The wagon emptied quickly. The Boy worked eagerly, lifting the hay over the side in big clumps. By the time their forks scraped the floor of the wagon the mares had circled the pasture and were heading for the barn. When they stopped at the gate the Boy jumped down to open it.

When the wagon passed through, the Boy looked up into his grandfather's eyes. He thought he saw a shining respect there, and the Old Man's lips twitched in a faint smile. The rattle of the wagon wheels was a voice in the Boy's head that said, over and over again, "You can't pitch hay you're standin' on."

