

Cyrus Pincher's Threshing Bee

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WHEN Cyrus Pincher, my fourth boss in apostolic succession, summoned his hands to a threshing-bee, in 1883, he knew that he was about to metaphorically skin Bill Tomkins, the thresher-man. This was a feat that very few men had ever accomplished, even in a small degree. Boss Pincher did it most scientifically the year he had me in his employ. Tomkins knew the innate cussednesses of the communities round about Jericho as nobody else did, except the parsons and the steer-buyers. But he didn't comprehend the guile of Cy Pincher, who began to scheme for this threshing-bee gamble away back in early July, when we started to haul in the hay.

That year was a fat one on Cy's farm. He never had poor crops except in drouth years. In 1883 his—or I used to say our—hay went two tons to the acre; wheat, 30 bushels; oats, 45; barley, 40.

When we started hauling in hay to his barn I had no idea of the long-headed scheme that was shaping up under his last year's straw hat; the ruse by which he came out ahead on the threshing deal at least \$5.50, which in those days was a big win.

We had ten acres hay, twenty-one wheat, fourteen oats, seven barley. We had no patent contraptions for hauling the crop. Everything then was hand-harvested. We had no hay forks, wheat-slugs, hay-loaders, tedders—nothing more sophisticated than a clumsy hay-rake, three good three-tined pitchforks, one four-tined barley fork, a good hay-rack and Cy Pincher's undefeatable brain.

In the hay-time I pitched on, Cy loaded. He was a great loader. Cy pitched off. I mowed away. He had no boys. Therefore, Cy expended all his fatherhood on me. And the way he taught me to mow that hay convinced me that he was either crazy with the heat or he had some deep, dark scheme up the place on his fuzzly arms where the shirt-sleeves used to be.

"Keep 'er stacked up front o' the mow, Jake," says he, pausing to relieve one side of his nose with one thumb on the other.

"How so?" inquire I.

"Becuz," spat he. "It takes an old crook to ketch a separator gang."

Whereby I twigged his meaning. The ten acres of hay that went into said barn was to look as though it went half up to the beam in one side of the mow. Whereas there was a cave behind the hay where several loads of wheat lay in ambush.

Understand, therefore, that when we hauled in the 21 acres of wheat there was a very large cavern behind the hay parapet that the mind of no thresher-man ever conceived. Seven overbuilt loads Cyrus packed into that mow, piously kneeling on each sheaf as I whopped it to him from the waggon till he had them heads up as concisely as sardines in a tin. Cyrus was a master at this kind of space economy. That was because God had been very economical when he packed so many potentialities

into one small corporation called Cyrus.

Clearly now from the barn floor no man could have surmised that there was a sheaf of wheat in that mow.

"That's seven loads to the good, anyhow," quirked he. "I guess Bill Tomkins wunt figger on them in his estimates."

And he chuckled till one fang tooth showed in great wisdom.

Cyrus never did things by halves. He seemed to have put in his grain with the express purpose of packing that barn so scientifically. He even forecasted the bulk of his crop so well that he decided to build a wheat-stack on the south side of the barn-door bridge.

"Why so?" I inquire, greenly.

"Becuz," he answered. "I want to top the straw-stack with wheat straw and this stack'll be about the last thing thrashed."

By the time the barley was ready the wheat was settled more than a foot. The barley went to the roof on one side right on top of the wheat. Cyrus crawled under the rafters like a squirrel. As long as there was a crack of daylight left he rammed in a sheaf.

Then one day it rained just before oat harvest, and Cyrus betook himself silently up the post ladder to the peak. There for over an hour he made about as much noise as the rain on the roof digging up barley sheaves from one side and cramming them in at the other where the barley had settled away from the rafters.

That left a good-sized cave on one side; which he skillfully filled with a small field of later barley.

And we still had the oats to pack in, fourteen acres. About ten acres went in on top of the stable and granary, cramful to the roof.

Cyrus squinted up at the rafters, and went up to spread out scaffold poles over each end of the threshing-floor beam to beam. Room there normally for about three loads. Barely managed to crowd the four acres in. The last load took a whole hour to pitch off and mow away. The old man jammed the sheaves in so tight that I thought he would break down the scaffold.

"Say, Jake," he remarked, when the last load was up. "I dunno as I ever seen a barn o' that size that hed sich a heap o' grain in 'er. Didju?"

"Never," said I. "There ain't room for even the swallows."

Then we went plowing for fall wheat and cutting clover seed.

ALL this was preliminary to the bee. In those days a threshing outfit was as much of a spectacle on the road as a fire reel is on a city street. Bill Tomkins had the only engine and separator in at least six concessions and five side-roads. If ever we heard at seven a.m. a little high-poop whistle echoing over the bush lots we knew it was Bill Tomkins' engine. Bill was the lord and master of all the farmers. From late summer until snow-fly he made them all wait for him and take him when he came along and haul him from barn to barn because he had no team of his own, saying to any protester,

"Holy mackinaw, I ain't running no horsepower. This is a steam rig, boss."

Bill unconditionally refused to waste time going back over the same road.

"Take me Monday week after next, or you wunt get me for a month," he told Cyrus Pincher, who,

being busy with seeding and picking apples, preferred to wait for two weeks.

"By gob!" says Cyrus, explicitly, "with that nasal twang of his, 'I'll take yeh.'"

That was after dark one Saturday evening, when Bill was driving home in his buggy for over Sunday.

They took a lantern and trailed away to the barn. "How jeh wanta do it—day, bushel, er job?" asked Cyrus.

Big William gazed up by the light of the lantern at the cobwebbed cricket-chirping mows.

"This barn's pretty near full, ain't she, Cy?" he growled over his whiskers.

"Pretty near," drawled Cyrus, chewing a wheat-stalk.



Bill was a master hand at sizing up barnfuls. Being a bit of a gambler he preferred taking most contracts at so much for the job. Poor hardscrabble farmers with shrunken wheat he always did at \$15 a day. The average job he did by the bushel—two cents for wheat, two and a half for barley, and a cent and a half for oats.

"Take 'er by the bushel," he said.

"Nope," said Cyrus. "That ain't sport."

Bill said, "Sixteen dollars."

After a cogitatory pause, Cyrus replied:

"Well, nuthin like playin' safe, Bill. But she's a go"

And he never let on by even a wink at me that he had Bill Tomkins fooled to the eyebrows.

SATURDAY evening Cyrus went down the road after the machine. Man below hauled the separator; Cyrus drove the engine. With a terrible clatter the gang hauled the separator into the barn, with Bill Tomkins steering it up the bridge by the tongue. Then they set the engine when Bill himself drove, because he knew to an inch just how far north or south to get the drive wheel to be in line with the pinion on the end of the cylinder.

A good part of Sunday afternoon I spent alone in the barn just gazing at that mighty silent separator that for weeks now I had heard moaning across the bush lots, and out at the engine that looked even more marvelous than the separator. It was all very wonderful, this high-gear business of threshing by steam power. I had been at threshings before; but never one so big as this of Cy Pincher's. And I could hardly wait till daybreak to watch Bill ram in wood to the firebox while I hauled him water on the stone-boat and a pack of old rails that I was expected to chop into cordwood lengths.

That was to be my chore—wood and water. I was hoping Cy would give me a chance to go into the mow, where all the young tigers went, or even out on the stack among the patriarchs. In fact, I'd rather have carried boxes to the bins; but Cy said he cal'ated it would keep me pretty busy on wood and water and we'd need lots of both before that job was done or he missed his guess.

By seven a.m., after a round of whistlings, the gang was all on the scene; four in the mow—how I envied those four!—six on the strawstack in the barnyard where I had helped Cy haul manure.

I remember having heard some picturesquely profane remarks from the mow hands as they wriggled themselves into the openings left by the sardine tactics of Cy Pincher, whom they gol-blamed and gosh-darned and otherwise treated to compound epithets, wanting to know,

"The old son of a seacock; does he think this is a coon-hunt or a thrashing? Oh how I love them