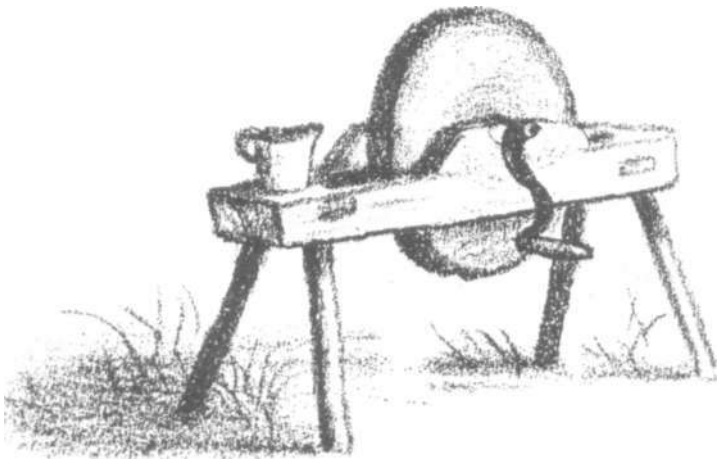


EARLY HARVEST

Now it was haying-time. Father brought out the scythes, and Almanzo turned the grindstone with one hand and poured a little stream of water on it with the other hand, while Father held the steel edges delicately against the whirring stone. The water kept the scythes from getting too hot, while the stone

ground their edges thin and sharp.

Then Almanzo went through the woods to the little French cabins, and told French Joe and Lazy John to come to work next morning.

As soon as the sun dried the dew on the meadows, Father and Joe and John began cutting the hay. They walked side by side, swinging their scythes into the tall grass, and the plumed timothy fell in great swathes.

Swish! swish! swish! went the scythes, while Almanzo and Pierre and Louis followed behind them, spreading out the heavy swathes with pitchforks so that they would dry evenly in the sunshine. The stubble was soft and cool under their bare feet. Birds flew up before the mowers, now and then a rabbit jumped and bounded away. High up in the air the meadowlarks sang.

The sun grew hotter. The smell of the hay grew stronger and sweeter. Then waves of heat began to come up from the ground. Almanzo's brown arms burned browner, and sweat trickled on his forehead. The men stopped to put green leaves in the crowns of their hats, and so did the

boys. For a little while the leaves were cool on top of their heads.

In the middle of the morning, Mother blew the dinner horn. Almanzo knew what that meant. He stuck his pitchfork in the ground, and went running and skipping down across the meadows to the house. Mother met him on the back porch with the milk-pail, brimming full of cold egg-nog.

The egg-nog was made of milk and cream, with plenty of eggs and sugar. Its foamy top was freckled with spices, and pieces of ice floated in it. The sides of the pail were misty with cold.

Almanzo trudged slowly toward the hayfield with the heavy pail and a dipper. He thought to himself that the pail was too full, he might spill some of the egg-nog. Mother said waste was sinful. He was sure it would be sinful to waste a drop of that egg-nog. He should do something to save it. So he set down the pail, he dipped the dipper full, and he drank. The cold egg-nog slid smoothly down his throat, and it made him cool inside.

When he reached the hayfield, everyone

stopped work. They stood in the shade of an oak and pushed back their hats, and passed the dipper from hand to hand till all the egg-nog was gone. Almanzo drank his full share. The breeze seemed cool now, and Lazy John said, wiping the foam from his mustache:

"Ah! That puts heart into a man!"

Now the men whetted their scythes, making the whetstones ring gaily on the steel blades. And they went back to work with a will. Father always maintained that a man could do more work in his twelve hours, if he had a rest and all the egg-nog he could drink, morning and afternoon.

They all worked in the hayfield as long as there was light enough to see what they were doing, and the chores were done by lantern-light.

Next morning the swathes had dried, and the boys raked them into windrows, with big, light, wooden rakes that Father had made. Then Joe and John went on cutting hay, and Pierre and Louis spread the swathes behind them. But Almanzo worked on the hay-rack.

Father drove it up from the barns, and Father

and Royal pitched the windrows into it, while Almanzo trampled them down. Back and forth he ran, on the sweet-smelling hay, packing it down as fast as Father and Royal pitched it into the rack.

When the rack would hold no more he was high in the air, on top of the load. There he lay on his stomach and kicked up his heels, while Father drove down to the Big Barn. The load of hay barely squeezed under the top of the tall doorway, and it was a long slide to the ground.

Father and Royal pitched the hay into the haymow, while Almanzo took the water-jug to the well. He pumped, then jumped and caught the gushing cold water in his hand and drank. He carried water to Father and Royal, and he filled the jug again. Then he rode back in the empty hayrack, and trampled down another load.

Almanzo liked haying-time. From dawn till long after dark every day he was busy, always doing different things. It was like play, and morning and afternoon there was the cold egg-nog. But after three weeks of making hay, all the haymows

were crammed to bursting and the meadows were bare. Then the rush of harvest-time came.

The oats were ripe, standing thick and tall and yellow. The wheat was golden, darker than the oats. The beans were ripe, and pumpkins and carrots and turnips and potatoes were ready to gather.

There was no rest and no play for anyone now. They all worked from candle-light to candle-light. Mother and the girls were making cucumber pickles, green-tomato pickles, and watermelon-rind pickles; they were drying corn and apples, and making preserves. Everything must be saved, nothing wasted of all the summer's bounty. Even the apple cores were saved for making vinegar, and a bundle of oat-straw was soaking in a tub on the back porch. Whenever Mother had one minute to spare, she braided an inch or two of oat-straw braid for making next summer's hats.

The oats were not cut with scythes, but with cradles. Cradles had blades like scythes, but they also had long wooden teeth that caught the cut stalks and held them. When they had cut enough

for a bundle, Joe and John slid the stalks off in neat piles. Father and Royal and Almanzo followed behind, binding them into sheaves.

Almanzo had never bound oats before. Father showed him how to knot two handfuls of stalks into a long band, then how to gather up an armful of grain, pull the band tightly around the middle, twist its ends together, and tuck them in tightly.

In a little while he could bind a sheaf pretty well, but not very fast. Father and Royal could bind oats as fast as the reapers cut them.

Just before sunset the reapers stopped reaping, and they all began shocking the sheaves. All the cut oats must be shocked before dark, because they would spoil if they lay on the ground in the dew overnight.

Almanzo could shock oats as well as anybody. He stood ten sheaves up on their stem ends, close together with all the heads of grain upward. Then he set two more sheaves on top and spread out their stems to make a roof over the ten sheaves. The shocks looked like little Indian wigwams, dotted all over the field of pale stubble.

The wheat-field was waiting; there was no time to lose. As soon as all the oats were in the shock, everyone hurried to cut and bind and shock the wheat. It was harder to handle because it was heavier than the oats, but Almanzo manfully did his best. Then there was the field of oats and Canada peas. The pea vines were tangled all through the oats, so they could not be shocked.

Almanzo raked them into long windrows.

Already it was high time to pull the navy beans. Alice had to help with them. Father hauled the bean-stakes to the field and set them up, driving them into the ground with a maul. Then Father and Royal hauled the shocked grain to the barns, while Almanzo and Alice pulled the beans.

First they laid rocks all around the bean-stakes, to keep the beans off the ground. Then they pulled up the beans. With both hands they pulled till their hands could hold no more. They carried the beans to the stakes and laid the roots against them, spreading the long vines out on the rocks.

Layer after layer of beans they piled around each stake. The roots were bigger than the vines, so the pile grew higher and higher in the middle. The tangled vines, full of rattling bean-pods, hung down all around.

When the roots were piled to the tops of the stakes, Almanzo and Alice laid vines over the top, making a little roof to shed rain. Then that bean-stake was done, and they began another one.

The stakes were as tall as Almanzo, and the vines stood out around them like Alice's hoop-skirts.

One day when Almanzo and Alice came to dinner, the butter-buyer was there. He came every year from New York City. He wore fine city clothes, with a gold watch and chain, and he drove a good team. Everybody liked the butter-buyer, and dinner-time was exciting when he was there. He brought all the news of politics and fashions and prices in New York City.

After dinner Almanzo went back to work, but Alice stayed to watch Mother sell the butter.

The butter-buyer went down cellar, where the butter-tubs stood covered with clean white cloths. Mother took off the cloths, and the butter-buyer pushed his long steel butter-tester down through the butter, to the bottom of the tub.

The butter-tester was hollow, with a slit in one side. When he pulled it out, there in the slit was the long sample of butter.

Mother did not do any bargaining at all. She said, proudly:

"My butter speaks for itself."

Not one sample from all her tubs had a streak in it. From top to bottom of every tub, Mother's butter was all the same golden, firm, sweet butter.

Almanzo saw the butter-buyer drive away, and Alice came skipping to the beanfield, swinging her sunbonnet by its strings. She called out:

"Guess what he did!"

"What?" Almanzo asked.

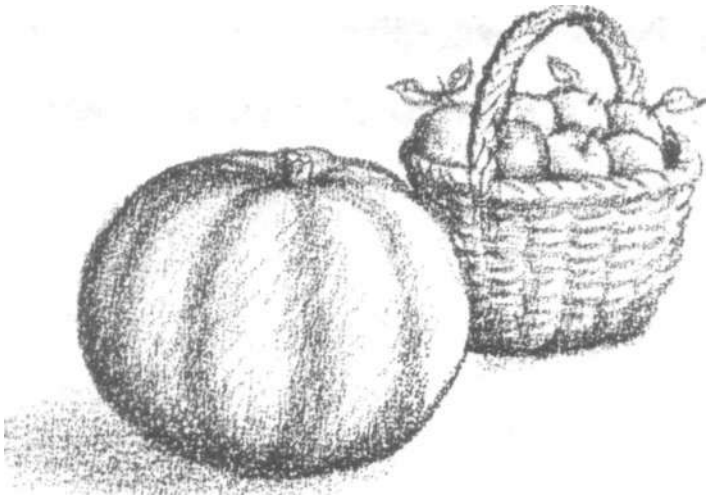
"He said Mother's butter is the best butter he ever saw anywhere! And he paid her— Guess what he paid her! Fifty—cents—a—pound!"

Almanzo was amazed. He had never heard of such a price for butter.

"She had five hundred pounds!" Alice said. "That's two hundred and fifty dollars! He paid her all that money, and she's hitching up right now, to take it to the bank."

In a little while Mother drove away, in her second-best bonnet and her black bombazine. She was going to town in the afternoon, on a week-day in harvest-time. She had never done such a thing before. But Father was busy in the fields, and she would not keep all that money in the house overnight.

Almanzo was proud. His mother was probably the best butter-maker in the whole of New York State. People in New York City would eat it, and say to one another how good it was, and wonder who made it.



LATE HARVEST

Now the harvest moon shone round and yellow over the fields at night, and there was a frosty chill in the air. All the corn was cut and stood in tall shocks. The moon cast their black shadows on the ground where the pumpkins lay naked above their withered leaves.

Almanzo's milk-fed pumpkin was enormous. He cut it carefully from the vine, but he could not

lift it; he could not even roll it over. Father lifted it into the wagon and carefully hauled it to the barn and laid it on some hay to wait till County Fair time.

All the other pumpkins Almanzo rolled into piles, and Father hauled them to the barn. The best ones were put in the cellar to make pumpkin pies, and the rest were piled on the South-Barn Floor. Every night Almanzo cut up some of them with a hatchet, and fed them to the cows and calves and oxen.

The apples were ripe. Almanzo and Royal and Father set ladders against the trees, and climbed into the leafy tops. They picked every perfect apple carefully, and laid it in a basket. Father drove the wagonful of baskets slowly to the house, and Almanzo helped carry the baskets down cellar and lay the apples carefully in the apple-bins. They didn't bruise one apple, for a bruised apple will rot, and one rotten apple will spoil a whole bin.

The cellar began to have its winter smell of apples and preserves. Mother's milk-pans had been

moved upstairs to the pantry, till spring came again.

After the perfect apples had all been picked, Almanzo and Royal could shake the trees. That was fun. They shook the trees with all their might, and the apples came rattling down like hail. They picked them up and threw them into the wagon; they were only cider-apples. Almanzo took a bite out of one whenever he wanted to.

Now it was time to gather the garden-stuff. Father hauled the apples away to the cider-mill, but Almanzo had to stay at home, pulling beets and turnips and parsnips and carrying them down cellar. He pulled the onions and Alice braided their dry tops in long braids. The round onions hung thick on both sides of the braids, and Mother hung them in the attic. Almanzo pulled the pepper-plants, while Alice threaded her darning-needle and strung red peppers like beads on a string. They were hung up beside the onions.

Father came back that night with two big hogsheads of cider. He rolled them down cellar.

There was plenty of cider to last till next apple-harvest.

Next morning a cold wind was blowing, and storm clouds were rolling up against a gray sky. Father looked worried. The carrots and potatoes must be dug, quickly.

Almanzo put on his socks and moccasins, his cap and coat and mittens, and Alice put on her hood and shawl. She was going to help.

Father hitched Bess and Beauty to the plow, and turned a furrow away from each side of the long rows of carrots. That left the carrots standing in a thin ridge of earth, so they were easy to pull. Almanzo and Alice pulled them as fast as they could, and Royal cut off the feathery tops and threw the carrots in the wagon. Father hauled them to the house and shoveled them down a chute into the carrot-bins in the cellar.

The little red seeds that Almanzo and Alice planted had grown into two hundred bushels of carrots. Mother could cook all she wanted, and the horses and cows could eat raw carrots all winter.

Lazy John came to help with the potato-

digging. Father and John dug the potatoes with hoes, while Alice and Almanzo picked them up, and put them in baskets, and emptied the baskets into a wagon. Royal left an empty wagon in the field while he hauled the full one to the house and shoveled the potatoes through the cellar window into the potato bins. Almanzo and Alice hurried to fill the empty wagon while he was gone.

They hardly stopped at noon to eat. They worked at night until it was too dark to see. If they didn't get the potatoes into the cellar before the ground froze, all the year's work in the potato-field would be lost. Father would have to buy potatoes.

"I never saw such weather for the time of year," Father said.

Early in the morning, before the sun rose, they were hard at work again. The sun did not rise at all. Thick gray clouds hung low overhead. The ground was cold and the potatoes were cold, and a sharp, cold wind blew gritty dust into Almanzo's eyes. He and Alice were sleepy. They tried to hurry, but their fingers were so cold that they

fumbled and dropped potatoes. Alice said:

"My nose is so cold. We have ear-muffs. Why can't we have nose-muffs?"

Almanzo told Father that they were cold, and Father told him:

"Get a hustle on, son. Exercise'll keep you warm."

They tried, but they were too cold to hustle very fast. The next time Father came digging near them, he said:

"Make a bonfire of the dry potato-tops, Almanzo. That will warm you."

So Alice and Almanzo gathered an enormous pile of potato-tops. Father gave Almanzo a match, and he lighted the bonfire. The little flame grabbed a dry leaf, then it ran eagerly up a stem, and it crackled and spread and rushed roaring into the air. It seemed to make the whole field warmer.

For a long time they all worked busily. Whenever Almanzo was too cold, he ran and piled more potato tops on the fire. Alice held out her grubby hands to warm them, and the fire shone on her face like sunshine.

"I'm hungry," Almanzo said.

"So be I," said Alice. "It must be almost dinner-time."

Almanzo couldn't tell by the shadows, because there was no sunshine. They worked and they worked, and still they did not hear the dinner horn. Almanzo was all hollow inside. He said to Alice:

"Before we get to the end of this row, we'll hear it." But they didn't. Almanzo decided something must have happened to the horn. He said to Father:

"I guess it's dinner-time."

John laughed at him, and Father said:

"It's hardly the middle of the morning, son."

Almanzo went on picking potatoes. Then Father called, "Put a potato in the ashes, Almanzo. That'll take the edge off your appetite."

Almanzo put two big potatoes in the hot ashes, one for him and one for Alice. He piled hot ashes over them, and he piled more potato tops on the fire. He knew he should go back to work, but he stood in the pleasant heat, waiting for the potatoes to bake. He did not feel comfortable in his

mind, but he felt warm' outside, and he said to himself:

"I have to stay here to roast the potatoes."

He felt bad because he was letting Alice work all alone, but he thought:

"I'm busy roasting a potato for her."

Suddenly he heard a soft, hissing puff, and something hit his face. It stuck on his face, scalding hot. He yelled and yelled. The pain was terrible and he could not see.

He heard shouts, and running. Big hands snatched his hands from his face, and Father's hands tipped back his head. Lazy John was talking French and Alice was crying, "Oh, Father! Oh, Father!"

"Open your eyes, son," Father said.

Almanzo tried, but he could get only one open. Father's thumb pushed up the other eyelid, and it hurt. Father said:

"It's all right. The eye's not hurt."

One of the roasting potatoes had exploded, and the scalding-hot inside of it had hit Almanzo. But the eyelid had closed in time. Only the eyelid and

his cheek burned.

Father tied his handkerchief over the eye, and he and Lazy John went back to work.

Almanzo hadn't known that anything could hurt like that burn. But he told Alice that it didn't hurt—much. He took a stick and dug the other potato out of the ashes.

"I guess it's your potato," he snuffled. He was not crying; only tears kept running out of his eyes and down inside his nose.

"No, it's yours," Alice said. "It was my potato that exploded."

"How do you know which it was?" Almanzo asked.

"This one's yours because you're hurt, and I'm not hungry, anyway not very hungry," said Alice.

"You're as hungry as I be!" Almanzo said. He could not bear to be selfish anymore. 'You eat half," he told Alice, "and I'll eat half."

The potato was burned black outside, but the inside was white and mealy and a most delicious baked-potato smell steamed out of it. They let it cool a little, and then they gnawed the inside out

of the black crust, and it was the best potato they had ever eaten. They felt better and went back to work.

Almanzo's face was blistered and his eye was swelled shut. But Mother put a poultice on it at noon, and another at night, and next day it did not hurt so much.

Just after dark on the third day, he and Alice followed the last load of potatoes to the house.

The weather was growing colder every minute. Father shoveled the potatoes into the cellar by lantern-light, while Royal and Almanzo did all the chores.

They had barely saved the potatoes. That very night the ground froze.

"A miss is as good as a mile," Mother said, but Father shook his head.

"Too close to suit me," he said. "Next thing will be snow. We'll have to hustle to get the beans and corn under cover."

He put the hay-rack on the wagon, and Royal and Almanzo helped him haul the beans. They pulled up the bean-stakes and laid them in the wagon, beans and all. They worked carefully, for a jar would shake the beans out of the dry pods and waste them.

When they had piled all the beans on the South-Barn Floor, they hauled in the shocks of corn. The crops had been so good that even Father's great barn-roofs would not shelter all the harvest. Several loads of corn-shocks had to be put in the barnyard, and Father made a fence around them to keep them safe from the young cattle.

All the harvest was in, now. Cellar and attic and the barns were stuffed to bursting. Plenty of food,

and plenty of feed for all the stock, was stored away for the winter.

Everyone could stop working for a while, and have a good time at the County Fair.