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Jim Flies the Red Tractor

John Rouse sent Jim up to help me fix fence. Jim wanted to learn how to use a chain saw, so we went over safety rules, and I showed him what the rules meant with the saw in action. Then he took the saw and cut fallen trees off the fence and the road along the fence. I watched him and corrected him as needed.

He asked, "You think I know enough to fall some of those dead trees?"

"Work with me while I drop some, and then we'll see what you can do." I told him how to fall a tree, and I dropped two trees to demonstrate.

He told me how he would fall the next tree, and I said, "That's just right. Let's see you do it."

His saw roared as he cut a notch into the front of the tree, then stepped around and cut from the back toward the notch. The tree tipped and fell, crunch, smashed the fence flat.

Jim stood, saw idling, and looked at the dead tree on the fence, amazed. He said, "What happened?"

I walked over and pointed at the stump. "You let your saw drift off the straight line in the back-cut. The tree started to tip. The thin part of the hinge broke and allowed the tree to turn, like this. Then the rest of the hinge broke, and it fell straight down from here."

"Straight down on the fence. What's the penalty?"

"Penalty is, we have to fix the fence."

"Boy, that sure was stupid."

"I don't call it stupid. That wasn't bad for the first tree you ever dropped, only about five feet off target."

"Far enough off to smash fence."

"We can fix it. We're fence-fixing experts."

We left ready fence behind us every day. We went to work at daylight so we could quit early enough to go swimming or look around the country.

We drove the tractor and wagon down beside the fence, doubled back along the top of the ridge, and loaded rocks to fill the rock jacks we built about every hundred yards to stabilize the fence. The third day up the fence, Jim said, "Why don't we just go straight up the hill for rocks? We'd cut off two miles of

driving.”

“It’s too steep, Jim. People get killed when these wheel tractors tip over backward on them.”

“Naw. Up that swale there ain’t too steep. I’ve drove my mother’s wheel tractor up steeper slopes than that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’m sure.”

I said, “Okay. If you’re confident, you drive it, and I’ll walk up.”

It would have gone all right, but the rear wheels spun in soft ground near the top, and he couldn’t get any forward motion. I said, “If the wheels dig any deeper, it will come over backward. See if you can get it backed out and turned around. Once you head down, you’re okay. These things tip over backward or sideways, but they never tip over going downhill forward.”

He turned around and started down. He held the clutch in, and the tractor picked up speed fast.

I yelled, “Let the clutch out,” but the tractor was bouncing by then, and putting the brakes on or letting the clutch out neither one did any good. The tractor hit, bounced, slewed sideways, and hit and bounced in the other direction. Jim stood up, swung the steering wheel, and kept it headed straight down. Chain saw, fence tools, posts, and wire flew off the wagon in every direction.

Halfway down the hill, Jim started his deep, loud “Haw-Haw-Haw” and kept it up all the way down. The ground leveled out, and the wheels stayed on the ground. Jim got the tractor slowed down and then stopped and sat there a few feet from the fence, “Haw-Haw-Haw.”

I leaped tools and posts and sagebrush, running down the hill. When I got there, he was bent over the steering wheel, laughing hard.

“Have you gone clear nuts? Weren’t you even scared?”

He wiped away tears and said, “I was. I was scared near out of my jeans. I was right at the top of one of them high bounces when what you said up there come into my mind like you was saying it to me right then, ‘These things never tip over going downhill forward.’ Haw-Haw-Haw.”

I never could see that guy laughing hard without getting caught up in it. I started laughing with him, and we laughed so long and hard, we used up our energy for working. We had no energy left for barbed-wire fence. We quit work for the day, picked up Laura and Juniper and Amanda and all kinds of good food and drove to Trout Creek Reservoir and swam in the

reservoir and ate dinner there.

Every time Jim and I looked at each other the rest of the afternoon, we laughed, at the humor of our flying tractor event and with relief that they never do tip over going downhill forward. Laura and the girls looked at us like we were nuts and then got caught up in laughing, too. The afternoon became an afternoon of sunshine, cold water, laughter, and good food.