

STRONG AS AN OX

What a great day! The whole event was a complete surprise. It was four days before Christmas when my dad drove Pringle, pulling the pung sleigh, into the yard. I heard the sleigh bells stop ringing and saw the sleigh pull up near the back wood-shed door and heard Dad call,

"Clifford."

I ran out, immediately, because I knew by the way Dad called me there was something special on his mind.

"Get your frock and come to the barn," he called as he clucked to Pringle and started for the barn with the bells jingling.

I ran up the path to open the barn door so Dad could drive the sleigh inside. There was something moving under a big, old robe in the hay in the back of the sleigh. I knew it was something exciting by the way Dad smiled and chewed his lower lip. I was so curious but knew Dad would show me when he was ready after we had unharnessed Pringle. Next to my dad, mother, and brothers that horse was one of the dearest creatures on earth as far as I was concerned. Dad had got him as a colt the year I was born. He gave me an affectionate nuzzle as I led him into his stall and gave him a good full measure of oats.

"Clifford, I've got something here of which you must take the best of care. Help me unload these critters."

I scrambled into the pung and threw off the old robe and could see two white-faced calves. They were snuggled in the hay shivering. They were a matched pair of the cutest little Herefords you ever saw. I just couldn't believe it.

"Are these really for me Dad?" I asked incredulously.

"Son, they are yours as long as you are worthy of them. If you treat them right, they will do anything in the world for you."

George, my ten year old brother, was almost as excited as I was because he had a pair of three year old oxen that Dad had given him when he was seven years old too. Dad and George lifted them down gently onto the barn floor. They started sucking my fingers as I led them over to the calf pen. I ran and got some fresh warm milk. We let them suck our fingers and that way brought their mouths down into the warm milk and it wasn't long before they were drinking by themselves. We put a lot of hay around them and gently made them lie down, and with full stomachs they seemed fully content. I wanted to sleep in the hay right with them all night 'cause I was afraid they might be lonesome for their mother. I wasn't even hungry and I felt so good inside.

I've always liked all kinds of animals and like to talk to them and look into their eyes and smile just like any friends. Dad was shaking out some hay for the cows and making believe he wasn't watching us but I knew he was 'cause he was still smiling and chewing his lower lip and his deep blue eyes were twinkling. It wasn't long before Mama came into the barn carrying my three year old brother Warren.

"Mama, come here quick and see what I've got." She acted surprised and pleased, she exclaimed to Dad,

"Oh, Frank, what a wonderful Christmas present for Clifford!"

She smiled and gave me an affectionate hug. The calves drew back but she began to scratch the hair between their ears and said in a soft voice,

"Don't be scared, nobody here is ever going to hurt you. You are two of the sweetest white-faced babies anybody could ever have. Clifford, always treat them right and you will all work together just fine." Mama was always pleased when we were happy.

We drove George's oxen the next day up to the back pasture to cut a Christmas tree. It was always a big problem to decide which tree was best. We almost came to blows 'cause I thought the tree he picked out was too scrawny but as long as he was bigger than I was I decided I'd better help him chop it and load it on the drag. Anyway, it didn't really matter 'cause Mama and Dad liked the tree and it looked so pretty after it was decorated with popcorn and cranberry strings.

We loved Christmastime - I guess everybody does. One of the nicest things of all was to get all bundled up and ride in the big two-seater sleigh to the church Christmas party. The church tree filled the whole corner next to the pulpit and the candles twinkled like little stars on the branches. Every child got a red gauze bag filled with candy and Santa always had to be hanging onto his stomach so it wouldn't fall down. Coming home, in the still, deep night, looking at the stars and listening to the sleigh bells jingle was the most wonderful thing in the world. Every neighbor's bells had a different jingle.

Under the tree on Christmas morning, there was a small ox yoke with my name on it. It was so light I could lift it all by myself. After our Christmas breakfast of oyster stew and Johnny cake, I carried my little ox yoke to the barn to see if it would fit my oxen. I knew I had to take my time or they might be frightened and resent the yoke. After they had sucked up a good

portion of milk and had licked some dry calf mash from my hand, they began wagging their tails happily.

It was so warm, peaceful, and friendly in the barn. I thought of baby Jesus sleeping in a manger of hay surrounded by animals munching hay, making soft lowing noises and keeping him warm. I felt just like talking to God.

"Thank you, God, for giving us baby Jesus, and for my mother, father, brothers, grandmother, and especially Pringle and my two baby calves. Help everybody all over the world to be as happy as I am."

I laid the yoke very gently on the small shoulders of the calves. They didn't seem to mind, and I talked to them the way I'd heard Dad talk to his colts and George's oxen in a soft unhurried voice. I scratched the hair between their ears and moved my hand slowly over their necks and told them how much I liked them and began to think of what Dad had told me,

"You know, son, people and animals are alot alike. You've got to let them know you like them. Smile at them with your eyes and don't rush them. When they know you want to be a friend to them, they will want to please you."

Tom & Jerry grew very fast and I'd hitch a small log to their chain and drive them around the barnyard. Tom was the nigh ox, and Jerry the off ox. I made a six foot whipstock of an oak pole, shaved down so it was tapered to the tip end to about three eights to one half inch in diameter. When I wanted them to make a left turn I'd first tap Tom lightly on the nose and reach across and tap Jerry on the back, at the same time calling "Gee". The right hand turn was just the reverse calling "Haw". When I tapped them both on the back and called "Wahoosh" they would really pull and go forward. The command to stop was "Whoa".

Tom and Jerry grew so much faster than I did that soon they were much taller than I and I couldn't lift their new bigger yoke so Dad hung a chain from the barn rafter with a ring to hold the yoke the height of the oxen. Often times those oxen were a little ornery and it took some patience and prodding to get them to stand still side by side so I could place the bows around their necks and pin them in the yoke. Sometimes when they were hungry they would start off before I could get the yoke unhitched and their front feet would almost come off the barn floor as they were jerked to a stand-still by the chain. They were young and ready to go many times before I was and when I'd say "Wahoosh!" they could really head out that barn in a hurry. We had to be sure the door was wide open because once they broke a door right off the hinges. Oxen can really run if they have a mind to. They led me many a merry chase, in fact they could run faster than I could and many times they would be in the barn under the chain waiting for me. They would go in the barn sideways. The nigh ox would go ahead and the off ox would put his head over the nigh ox's and in this way turn the yoke sideways so they could go through a narrow door. People who say anyone is as "dumb as an ox" or "as slow as an ox" don't know what they are talking about.

By the time Tom and Jerry had horns that were about two inches long, Dad had Doc Thomas come down and operate on them so they would not grow up to be a pair of ugly, dangerous bulls. They grew the most beautiful pair of horns you ever saw. They curved upward and grew to be almost two feet long. I'd scrape them with a knife and polish them with a piece of flannel until they shone. Their red coats would glisten and their faces were as white as snow. I'd clean them and curry them until they shone.

Sugarin' is the best time of year as far as I'm concerned, I had helped Dad sugar ever since I was real little. Tom and Jerry were three years old and could really earn their keep. In fact, Dad had had rheumatic fever during the winter and was still feeling peaked and had to turn over the sugarin' to George and me. Sabin was the greatest hired hand anybody could ever have and he would help us all he could but he had to keep the farm going. He was fun to have around 'cause he always had a funny song to sing like "Deedle, deedle dumpling", "Old Dog Tray", "a Froggie would a-wooing go", etc. It would have been rough without him that winter. Sugarin' that year was to be our first real business venture as we were to have half the profit.

"Boys, you have got to begin tucking some savings away because it won't be long before you will be ready for some higher learning." Dad took great pleasure in learning and knowing how to fix things. He could fix anything. He even started his own telephone company so most of our neighbors had telephones.

The first job in sugarin' was to get out and wash the sap buckets. We had a few old wooden buckets that had sturdy iron straps that we could still use but most of the buckets were galvanized. It was quite a task to break trails through the snow so we could distribute over three hundred buckets among the trees. Tom and Jerry were three years old now and George's oxen, Matt & Jeff were six. It is surprising how many paths you can make in a sugar woods with two great teams of oxen. After a day in the woods lugging buckets, nobody has to sing you to sleep at night. George was good to work with. He knew how many buckets to leave at each tree 'cause some maples ran alot more sap than others. Two weeks later when it was time to tap he always knew the right spot to drill with the bit. I would follow him and hang the bucket on the spout. We had been working all winter on Saturdays and vacations hauling logs to the sugar

house. You just can't imagine how much wood it takes to keep sap boiling in an evaporator before it turns to syrup.

Dad was able to come up to the sugar woods and supervise the tapping and make sure everything was all set. The first run of sap is the sweetest so we had to be ready to catch it. The gathering tubs were hoisted on the sleds and we were ready. Dad warned us,

"Keep away from the front of the sled and never go in front of the oxen. It may be slippery and there is a lot of heft in a full gathering tub of sap. Never take chances and don't hurry. Don't forget when you are carrying a bucket full of sap it is easy to slip, lose your balance, and fall in front of a sled runner."

Oxen are much better than horses in a sugar woods 'cause they plod through snow and take their time whereas horses wallow, get panicky, and are apt to fall and break a leg. Tom and Jerry and Mutt and Jeff were so faithful and really put their backs into pulling those tubs.

Every thing was going along fine until the end of the second week of sugarin'. Sabin was firin' the evaporator and had a roaring fire going. The steam was pouring out of the vent in the sugar house roof. I was thinking how much I liked to smell the vapor of boiling sap. We had already made thirty gallons of syrup and the sap was still running great guns. I was coming toward the sugar house with my gathering tank full. I spied a bucket running over near the trail just ahead of Tom and Jerry. I didn't say anything to them, I ran and grabbed the bucket as they were plodding along and ran to pour it into the gathering tub. They were starting to go down a rather steep incline and as I ran, my feet slid out from under me. It all happened so quickly.

I couldn't stop, I yelled, "Whoa!" I was so frightened because I knew they couldn't stop and would run over me and so would the sled and the full gathering tub. I could feel their breath. I heard Dad yelling, "Whoa, Whoa!" and running as I tried to roll out of the slippery path. I rolled down the incline and could hear Tom and Jerry's feet sliding, the sled moaning, creaking, and the sap sloshing. Any second I expected to feel their unshod hooves trampling over me.. I rolled off the path and scrambled to my feet as quickly as possible. I couldn't understand why I hadn't been killed. Dad was right there trying to grab me. I looked back at Tom and Jerry. They were sitting on their haunches, straining every muscle, holding back the sled, their bulging eyes were red as they held back the heavy load. They had saved my life! Dad gathered me in his arms, tears were streaming down his cheeks as he yelled, "Wahoosh."

Tom and Jerry , still sliding a little relaxed their straining muscles and slowly slid the rest of the way down the incline and plodded toward the sap holding tank behind the sugar house and stopped. Without a word Dad and I walked toward Tom and Jerry. We both threw our arms around their necks and I don't think I had ever seen Dad cry so hard and chew his lower lip so furiously. I couldn't help sobbing and they were trembling as much as I was. It was as though we were all one somehow. Their beautiful brown eyes had a very tender expression. I had done everything Dad had warned me not to do but he didn't say a word. He didn't have to. The expression "strong as an ox" is the truth of all wool and a yard wide.

We had a great sugarin' year and put \$127.00 in our saving accounts at the Wells River ^{Savings Bank} Trust. Through the following years we earned quite a lot of

money hiring out to neighbors with our oxen. George and I made extra money at fairs at oxen pulling contests. It always bothered me when men would flogg their oxen to make them pull. The oxen would look at them with fear and roll their eyes until you could see the whites. We didn't have to flogg ours, we'd talk to them, scratch between their horns, guide them and yell "Wahoosh" with all our might. They would really pull.

My senior year in high school, with Dad's encouragement, I won a Redfield Proctor Scholarship.

"You'll certainly never win it if you don't apply and try for it. Nothing ventured, nothing gained." With this scholarship and Tom and Jerry's earnings, I was able to go to Middlebury College. I guess this is the first time a pair of strong, loveable, placid oxen ever sent a boy to college.

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