

"Get me a couple o' gradely back-nooks," said Farmer to George, "afore t' Missis starts puttin up her hen-nests." So a large forkful from George was positioned on each corner of the back "tripper", and tied together with another large forkful between them. The hen-nests helped to fill the cart bottom. Then the first full round was started again from the back and continued with tidy forkfuls up each side of the cart till Farmer called "Front-nooks!" This was the signal for a large forkful on each corner of the front tripper, then all was tied in with more hay and the round finished off level before starting a second round from the back of the cart.

But before the next round was completed Farmer had noticed a large black cloud coming over Parlick. Soon there were a few spots of rain. Everyone worked even harder. "It'll miss us," said Farmer, from his vantage point on top of the cart, and then a few moments later, "It's fur bucketin' down on Chaigley." But everyone could see that the showers would soon develop into steady rain. The load was finished off at four rounds and roped, and immediately the adults started lumping up the remaining plecks of hay into cocks, finishing just as the rain began to fall. Farmer soon had the cart backed into the barn and threw the hay off to George, who put the damp upper round against the barn walls before filling in the remainder.

The children had got the cows in for milking and everyone gathered in the kitchen for a few moments. Aunt Polly tried to be cheerful. "It's a pity we'n gotten caught, but yon hay near th'hedge has part fire le-af in it. It wornt proper ready, unless you could a putten it on t'scaffots." (loft). (Fire-leaf, ribwort plantain, needs to be dry or it can make a haystack dangerously hot).

A spare coat was found for George to walk home in, and Missis had put a few eggs in a basket for him to take home to Betty. "T'boss'll square up with ye some day," she said. "Oh, aye, he allus does," said George, "Tor't Christmas." And so he set off, Aunt Polly going with him as far as the bridge. Meanwhile the children were warned that they would have to go to school tomorrow, unless the weather improved again, so they had better have a good wash and get to bed.

"Shall we ever finish this year?" asked Missis as they started milking, "It doesn't rain like this down i' Garstang." And then, "I did hope we could all have a ride down home on Mother's birthday." "Well," said Farmer, "It's still a fortnet off. Happen t'weather'll pick up afore then. Ah'll mow another settin' tomorra' if it's stopped rainin'. Grandfather used to say, as him as waited for fine weather never did get finished." And so we leave them.

There was rarely time to organise a "harvest-home", but the supper on the last night was called "the shuttin's". It was a time of heart-felt relief at getting shut of the annual struggle between human energy and unpredictable weather. The farm family's survival (one dare not say prosperity) depended on good health, good friends and good organisation, willing horses and a lot of good luck.

Nowadays powerful tractors allow much heavier crops of grass to be grown and made quickly into silage, and usually without weather problems. When the oil runs out we may all have to return to haymaking. But perhaps not to the horse. Hall's Encyclopaedia, written about 1800, details the advantages of oxen. They were cheaper to buy and cheaper to feed, and could end up as good beef. They had much less risk of illness or accidents - and this last point was important. Sometimes a farm worker would "borrow" a horse for a night out. He was less likely to borrow an ox!

There is a tradition that early mowing-machines were made at Bleasdale's Goose Lane factory. Any information about this would be welcome. Longer since, there were only scythes, but they were kept well adjusted and sharp, and there would often be several men mowing together. There is a two-acre field to the west of Chipping called "Dick Chew". It is named in the 1840 Tithe Survey as part of Howclough Farm. According to a local tradition, Dick wagered that he could mow this meadow in one day, but the attempt killed him. The tradition may or may not be true, but the Parish Register has the baptism of a Richard Chew in 1686.

And now to end with a true story from 1944 to show that good hay made quickly without losing its green colour was somewhat rare. Little Frankie Curtis, aged about four and evacuated from Walthamstow with his mother, said, "Uncle Tom, this is not hie, this is graaas!"