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## AZWOL'S PITCH FORK

Falstaff's Music School was proud of its band. Eugene the band master was conducting his players, waving his baton to keep them all in time. It might have just looked like a stick to anyone else; but Eugene thought of it as his Band in the Hand. It was as if the music was actually coming from it, sweet music usually. On this occasion, however, the tune the band was playing wasn't sweet at all. "It sounds tired and very dull," he had told his players. Walking over to a glass cabinet set on the wall, he pointed to the big silver cup which it held. "We need to win another one of these," he declared, "And we aren't going to if you carry on playing the way you are."

"But our instruments are old," the trumpeter complained.

"And most of them have been damaged over time," added the violinist.

"I know that," said Eugene, "We just have to do the best we can with what we've got. And remember - first prize in the Annual Big Band Competition gets us more than another silver cup: we'll win a lot of money too; maybe enough to buy some new instruments."

After that bit of encouragement, the players tried very hard to make their tunes sound better. Eugene believed they were actually improving, but not by much. With only a week to go before the competition he didn't hold out much hope that they would win anything, certainly not first prize.

As they had done in previous years, with two days to go they set off. This allowed for one day's travelling and another for practising before the start of the competition. Spirits were high until a number of things went wrong. First, the bus had a flat tyre; then it was discovered that the spare wheel was also flat. By the time someone came from a local garage to fix it and get them on their way again, it was already afternoon. "We'll never make it to the competition hall tonight," the bus driver told them, "But I know of a farm that is just down the road, and I'm sure the farmer will be pleased to help us out."

At least he was right about that. "There's an old cottage you can sleep in," Farmer Slurry told Eugene, "And you can use the barn for practice."

Once the players had put their suitcases in the cottage, they all went to the barn. Sitting on bales of hay, they set up their music sheets on the stands in front of them; then they waited for Eugene to start them off. Tapping his baton on his own music stand, he announced: "Let's try

The Jolly Tinker – that’s a lively tune.” Raising his baton, he counted aloud: “One, two, three, and…” The band began to play. Eugene let them continue for a little, then was tapping his stick on his music stand for them to stop. “No, no, no. That was awful. The Tinker is supposed to be *Jolly*: not on his last legs and about to drop his pots; and some of you were well out of tune.”

“We haven’t warmed up yet,” was the trombonist’s excuse. “Give us a few minutes and we’ll be fine.”

This was fair enough. It usually took a bit of time for players to get into the swing of things; so Eugene just let them play on, making mistakes and hitting wrong notes. He considered five minutes would be long enough for the band members to warm up their instruments; but after playing for almost half an hour they still sounded terrible. He was about to switch to a different tune when Mrs Slurry the farmer’s wife came in and said: “Dinner’s on the table. You can leave your instruments here – they’ll be quite safe. Now come along before it goes cold.”

Once the players had gone, the instruments began talking amongst themselves. “Your player was right about us being damaged, Rozz,” Herb the trumpet said to the violin, “I’ve got a dent in my bell.”

“And my slide keeps sticking,” said Barber the trombone.

Other instruments added their own complaints until the barn was filled with blaring and tooting and screeching. They were so involved in their own problems that none of them noticed the barn door creak open. Then there was a strange voice: “Enough of this!” ordered the new arrival. They all stopped talking and looked. Standing in the doorway was a really scruffy man wearing old clothes, a battered straw hat and carrying a pitch fork. “I’ve been listening to you, and your band master is quite right – you were dreadful.”

“What would you know about music?” piped Bilko the clarinet. “You just look like a tatty scarecrow to me,”

Peering down at himself, the stranger said: “I object to being called tatty – these are designer-label clothes. As for *what* I am, you’re not wrong: I am indeed a scarecrow, name of Azwool. And when it comes to music, I’m a bit like Eugene. The only difference is that I conduct a choir.”

“Yeah, right,” tooted Mulligan the saxophone in disbelief. “What have you got – a bunch of birds?”

Azwool grinned. “You’re not as dumb as you look. A choir of birds is exactly what I’ve got – larks and nightingales, blackbirds and finches; and they all sound a darn sight better than you lot. At least they can sing in tune, which is more than can be said for the way you play.” This really upset the instruments and they began coming out with the same excuses about being old and damaged. Azwool listened for a bit, then said: “Absolute balderdash!”

“No it’s not!” boomed Oompah the tuba, “And, anyway, the people who play us are the ones to blame. They make the mistakes, not us.”

“Rubbish!” declared the scarecrow adamantly. “Your players just blow into you, or stroke you with bows. You are the ones that make the sounds, and they are not very good at all. You can do much better, if you only tried harder.”

“I could try as hard as I like,” said Herb the trumpet, “But it won’t alter the way the sounds come out of me, not with my dented bell.”

The complaints and excuses started up again. They ceased immediately when a peculiar sound echoed round the barn. Azwool struck the handle of his pitch fork on the floor again and that same hum filled the air. “Listen to it,” he said. “That note is perfectly in tune and I am going to use my fork to re-tune all of you instruments so that you can play your music the way it should be played.”

“How can you do that with a fork meant for pitching hay?” asked Barber the trombone.

“Because it is also a music-maker,” said Azwool proudly. “That is another reason it’s called a pitch fork – for getting the pitch right. You know pitch – like how high or low the note is when you play it. Well, me and my pitch fork are going to re-tune you all so that the notes you play are not only the right pitch, but they will sound sweet and beautiful. Trust me,” the scarecrow added, “By the time I’ve finished you will be more than good enough to win that competition without a doubt.”

Azwool went over to the trumpet; and after striking his pitch fork on the floor to make it hum, he touched it on the instrument. “Ooh, that felt weird,” parped Herb.

“And did you hear the way you just sounded?” asked Azwool.

“I did,” cut in Bilko the clarinet. “Herb sounded beautiful, the way he used to before his bell got dented.”

“What dent would that be?” wondered Azwool. “I can’t see one.”

“Waah-waah!” blared Barber the trombone in amazement. “The dent’s gone! And Herb looks really shiny as if he’s just been polished.”

The other instruments saw this too and became very excited as they waited for their turn. In a short while, Azwool had used his pitch fork to repair all of them and make them play perfectly in tune. “Right,” he said, “There’s just one final thing to do.” Walking to Eugene’s music stand, he struck the ground with the pitch fork and while it was humming, touched the baton with it. The old chips and scratches miraculously disappeared and it looked like new. Holding the baton the way Eugene did, Azwool raised it in the air and said: “Let’s try The Jolly Tinker again and see how you go.”

The band instruments started playing with Azwool conducting. After only a minute, he tapped the music stand for them to stop. Oompah, the tuba was puzzled. “Did we make a mess of it as usual?”

“Far from it,” declared Azwool with a huge grin. “It was perfect.”

“So, why did you stop us?” thumped Kruper the drum.

Casting a quick glance at the door, Azwool said: “Because the players will be coming back soon, and they need to find you as they left you - just resting silently. We want them to think that

they are the ones playing better music. They wouldn't understand that it was you, the instruments, doing it. That will be our secret." Just before he left, he said: "I've done all I can. Now it's up to you. Play as well as I know you can and you'll win the competition, I'm sure of it."

Because he was keen to know what would happen when the band members returned, instead of going back to his field, Azwool stood behind the barn and listened. He couldn't help smiling as he heard the players talking in amazement about how shiny and new-looking their instruments suddenly appeared. Even Eugene couldn't believe his baton was the same one he had before going in for dinner; and when his band began to play, the music it made was truly sweet and perfectly in tune. While they were playing, Farmer and Mrs Slurry had slipped in to listen and they congratulated Eugene on his band's performance. "I can't understand it," the band master said to them. "You must have heard us practising before and we were terrible. Anyone would think we were a totally different band."

Mrs Slurry smiled. "That's what a good meal can do for you," she said.

"And some country air," added farmer Slurry. "I've always said it."

Azwool might have agreed, except he knew the real reason the band sounded better.

On the day of the competition, each entrant had to play three tunes. Eugene decided to leave The Jolly Tinker until last; and when they'd finished playing it, the audience stood to its feet and began clapping and cheering. They were shouting, too; words like: "Bravo! and Encore!" The second one meant that they wanted the band to play the tune again, which is what they did. It was clear that the Falstaff's Music School was the overall winner and the judges awarded the band first prize of the silver cup, plus a large sum of money.

Although they were very happy about winning, the instruments were also worried that they would now be replaced by some new ones; but when Eugene asked the players about this, the trumpeter said: "What do we want new instruments for? There's nothing wrong with the ones we've got. They helped us win the competition, didn't they? You lot can do what you like, but I'm keeping my trumpet."

Not one of the other players wanted to give up their instruments either. Then, to confirm that they were all in agreement, Eugene said: "And I'm keeping my baton, my Band in the Hand. We will have to decide, though, what to spend the prize money on."

"Maybe we could buy us a scarecrow," suggested the violinist.

Eugene frowned. "I don't see why. We're a band, not a bunch of farmers – what good would a scarecrow be to us?"