

# Come On, Wagon

**by Zenna Henderson**

I don't like kids—never have. They're too uncanny. For one thing, there's no bottom to their eyes. They haven't learned to pull down their mental curtains the way adults have. For another thing, there's so much they don't know. And not knowing things makes them know lots of other things grown-ups can't know. That sounds confusing, and it is. But look at it this way. Every time you teach a kid something, you teach him a hundred things that are impossible because that one thing is so. By the time we grow up, our world is so hedged around by impossibilities that it's a wonder we ever try anything new.

Anyway, I don't like kids, so I guess it's just as well that I've stayed a bachelor.

Now, take Thaddeus. I don't like Thaddeus. Oh, he's a fine kid, smarter than most—he's my nephew—but he's too young. I'll start liking him one of these days when he's ten or eleven. No, that's still too young. I guess when his voice starts cracking and he begins to slick his hair down, I'll get to liking him fine. Adolescence ends lots more than it begins.

The first time I ever really got acquainted with Thaddeus was the Christmas he was three. He was a solemn little fellow, hardly a smile out of him all day, even with the avalanche of everything to thrill a kid. Starting first thing Christmas Day, he made me feel uneasy. He stood still in the middle of the excited squealing bunch of kids that crowded around the Christmas tree in the front room at the folks' place. He was holding a big rubber ball with both hands and looking at the tree with his eyes wide with wonder. I was sitting right by him in the big chair, and I said, "How do you like it, Thaddeus?"

He turned his big, solemn eyes to me, and for a long time, all I could see was the deep, deep reflections in his eyes of the glitter and glory of the tree and a special shiningness that originated far back in his own eyes. Then he blinked slowly and said solemnly, "Fine."

Then the mob of kids swept him away as they all charged forward to claim their Grampa-gift from under the tree. When the crowd finally dissolved and scattered all over the place with their play-toys, there was Thaddeus squatting solemnly by the little red wagon that had fallen to him. He was examining it intently, inch by inch, but only with his eyes. His hands were pressed between his knees and his chest as he squatted.

"Well, Thaddeus." His mother's voice was a little provoked. "Go play with your wagon. Don't you like it?"

Thaddeus turned his face up to her in that blind, unseeing way little children have.

"Sure," he said, and standing up, tried to take the wagon in his arms.

"Oh for pity sakes," his mother laughed. "You don't carry a wagon, Thaddeus." And aside to us, "Sometimes I wonder. Do you suppose he's got all his buttons?"

"Now, Jean." Our brother Clyde leaned back in his chair. "Don't heckle the kid. Go on, Thaddeus. Take

the wagon outside."

So what does Thaddeus do but start for the door, saying over his shoulder, "Come on, Wagon."

Clyde laughed. "It's not that easy, Punkin-Yaller, you've gotta have pull to get along in this world."

So Jean showed Thaddeus how, and he pulled the wagon outdoors, looking down at the handle in a puzzled way, absorbing this latest rule for acting like a big boy.

Jean was embarrassed the way parents are when their kids act normal around other people.

"Honest. You'd think he never saw a wagon before."

"He never did," I said idly. "Not his own, anyway." And had the feeling that I had said something profound, but wasn't quite sure what.

The whole deal would have gone completely out of my mind if it hadn't been for one more little incident. I was out by the barn waiting for Dad. Mom was making him change his pants before he demonstrated his new tractor for me. I saw Thaddeus loading rocks into his little red wagon. Beyond the rock pile, I could see that he had started a playhouse or ranch of some kind, laying the rocks out to make rooms or corrals or whatever. He finished loading the wagon and picked up another rock that took both arms to carry, then he looked down at the wagon.

"Come on, Wagon." And he walked over to his play place.

*And the wagon went with him*, trundling along over the uneven ground, following at his heels like a puppy.

I blinked and inventoried rapidly the Christmas cheer I had imbibed. It wasn't enough for an explanation. I felt a kind of cold grue creep over me.

Then Thaddeus emptied the wagon and the two of them went back for more rocks. He was just going to pull the same thing again when a big boy-cousin came by and laughed at him.

"Hey, Thaddeus, how you going to pull your wagon with both hands full? It won't go unless you pull it."

"Oh," said Thaddeus and looked off after the cousin who was headed for the back porch and some pie.

So Thaddeus dropped the big rock he had in his arms and looked at the wagon. After struggling with some profound thinking, he picked the rock up again and hooked a little finger over the handle of the wagon.

"Come on, Wagon," he said, and they trundled off together, the handle of the wagon still slanting back over the load while Thaddeus grunted along by it with his heavy armload.

I was glad Dad came just then, hooking the last strap of his striped overalls. We started into the barn together. I looked back at Thaddeus. He apparently figured he'd need his little finger on the next load, so he was squatting by the wagon, absorbed with a piece of flimsy red Christmas string. He had twisted one end around his wrist and was intent on tying the other to the handle of the little red wagon.

It wasn't so much that I avoided Thaddeus after that. It isn't hard for grown-ups to keep from mingling

with kids. After all, they do live in two different worlds. Anyway, I didn't have much to do with Thaddeus for several years after that Christmas. There was the matter of a side trip to the South Pacific where even I learned that there are some grown-up impossibilities that are not always absolute. Then there was a hitch in the hospital where I waited for my legs to put themselves together again. I was luckier than most of the guys. The folks wrote often and regularly and kept me posted on all the home talk. Nothing spectacular, nothing special, just the old familiar stuff that makes home, home and folks, folks.

I hadn't thought of Thaddeus in a long time. I hadn't been around kids much, and unless you deal with them, you soon forget them. But I remembered him plenty when I got the letter from Dad about Jean's new baby. The kid was a couple of weeks overdue and when it did come—a girl—Jean's husband, Bert, was out at the farm checking with Dad on a land deal he had cooking. The baby came so quickly that Jean couldn't even make it to the hospital, and when Mom called Bert, he and Dad headed for town together, but fast.

"Derned if I didn't have to hold my hair on," wrote Dad. "I don't think we hit the ground but twice all the way to town. Dern near overshot the gate when we finally tore up the hill to their house. Thaddeus was playing out front, and we dang near ran him down. Smashed his trike to flinders. I saw the handle bars sticking out from under the front wheel when I followed Bert in. Then I got to thinking that he'd get a flat parking on all that metal, so I went out to move the car. Lucky I did. Bert musta forgot to set the brakes. Derned if that car wasn't headed straight for Thaddeus. He was walking right in front of it. Even had his hand on the bumper, and the dern thing rolling right after him. I yelled and hit out for the car. But by the time I got there, it had stopped, and Thaddeus was squatting by his wrecked trike. What do you suppose the little cuss said? 'Old car broke my trike. I made him get off.'

"Can you beat it? Kids get the dernedest ideas. Lucky it wasn't much downhill, though. He'd have been hurt sure."

I lay with the letter on my chest and felt cold. Dad had forgotten that they "tore up the hill" and that the car must have rolled up the slope to get off Thaddeus' trike.

That night I woke up the ward yelling, "Come on, Wagon!"

.....

It was some months later when I saw Thaddeus again. He and half a dozen other nephews—and the one persistent niece—were in a tearing hurry to be somewhere else and nearly mobbed Dad and me on the front porch as they boiled out of the house with mouths and hands full of cookies. They all stopped long enough to give me the once-over and fire a machine-gun volley with my crutches, then they disappeared down the land on their bikes, heads low, rear ends high, and every one of them being bombers at the tops of their voices.

I only had time enough to notice that Thaddeus had lanked out and was just one of the kids as he grinned engagingly at me with the two-tooth gap in his front teeth.

"Did you ever notice anything odd about Thaddeus?" I pulled out the makin's.

"Thaddeus?" Dad glanced up at me from firing up his battered old corncob pipe. "Not particularly. Why?"

"Oh, nothing." I ran my tongue along the paper and rolled the cigarette shut. "He just always seemed kinda different."

"Well, he's always been kinda slow about some things. Not that he's dumb. Once he catches on, he's as smart as anyone, but he's sure pulled some funny ones."

"Give me a fer-instance," I said, wondering if he'd remember the trike deal.

"Well, coupla years ago at a wienie roast he was toting something around wrapped in a paper napkin. Jean saw him put it in his pocket and she thought it was probably a dead frog or a beetle or something like that, so she made him fork it over. She unfolded the napkin and derned if there wasn't a big live coal in it. Dern thing flamed right up in her hand. Thaddeus bellered like a bull calf. Said he wanted to take it home cause it was pretty. How he ever carried it around that long without setting himself afire is what got me."

"That's Thaddeus," I said. "Odd."

"Yeah." Dad was firing his pipe again, flicking the burned match down to join the dozen or so others by the porch railing. "I guess you might call him odd. But he'll outgrow it. He hasn't pulled anything like that in a long time."

"They do outgrow it," I said. "Thank God." And I think it was a real prayer. I *don't* like kids. "By the way, where's Clyde?"

"Down in the East Pasture, plowing. Say, that tractor I got that last Christmas you were here is a bear cat. It's lasted me all this time and I've never had to do a lick of work on it. Clyde's using it today."

"When you get a good tractor you got a good one," I said. "Guess I'll go down and see the old son of a gun—Clyde, I mean. Haven't seen him in a coon's age." I gathered up my crutches.

Dad scrambled to his feet. "Better let me run you down in the pickup. I've gotta go over to Jesperson's anyway."

"Okay," I said. "Won't be long till I can throw these things away." So we piled in the pickup and headed for the East Pasture.

We were ambushed at the pump corner by the kids and were killed variously by P-38s, atomic bombs, ack-ack, and the Lone Ranger's six-guns. Then we lowered our hands which had been raised all this time, and Dad reached out and collared the nearest nephew.

"Come along, Punkin-Yaller. That blasted Holstein has busted out again. You get her out of the alfalfa and see if you can find where she got through this time."

"Aw, gee whiz!" The kid—and of course it was Thaddeus—climbed into the back of the pickup. "That dern cow."

We started up with a jerk, and I turned half around in the seat to look at Thaddeus.

"Remember your little red wagon?" I yelled over the clatter.

"Red wagon?" Thaddeus yelled back. His face lighted. "Red wagon?"

I could tell he had remembered, and then, as plainly as the drawing of a shade, his eyes went shadowy and he yelled, "Yeah, kinda." And turned around to wave violently at the unnoticed kids behind us.

So, I thought, he is outgrowing it. Then spent the rest of the short drive trying to figure just what it was he was outgrowing.

Dad dumped Thaddeus out at the alfalfa field and took me on across the canal and let me out by the pasture gate.

"I'll be back in about an hour if you want to wait. Might as well ride home."

"I might start back afoot," I said. "It'd feel good to stretch my legs again."

"I'll keep a look out for you on my way back." And he rattled away in the ever-present cloud of dust.

I had trouble managing the gate. It's one of those wire affairs that open by slipping a loop off the end post and lifting the bottom of it out of another loop. This one was taut and hard to handle. I just got it opened when Clyde turned the far corner and started back toward me, the plow behind the tractor curling up red-brown ribbons in its wake. It was the last go-round to complete the field.

I yelled, "Hi!" and waved a crutch at him.

He yelled, "Hi!" back at me. What came next was too fast and too far away for me to be sure what actually happened. All I remember was a snort and roar, and the tractor bucked and bowed. There was a short yell from Clyde and the shriek of wires pulling loose from a fence post followed by a choking, smothering silence.

Next thing I knew, I was panting halfway to the tractor, my crutches sinking exasperatingly into the soft, plowed earth. I nightmare year later I knelt by the stalled tractor and called, "Hey, Clyde!"

Clyde looked up at me, a half-grin, half-grimace on his muddy face.

"Hi. Get this thing off me, will you. I need that leg." Then his eyes turned up white and he passed out.

The tractor had toppled him from the seat and then run over top of him, turning into the fence and coming to rest with one huge wheel half burying his leg in the soft dirt and pinning him against a fence post. The far wheel was on the edge of the irrigation ditch that bordered the field just beyond the fence. The huge bulk of the machine was balanced on the raw edge of nothing, and it looked like a breath would send it on over—then God have mercy on Clyde. It didn't help much to notice that the red-brown dirt was steadily becoming redder around the imprisoned leg.

I knelt there paralyzed with panic. There was nothing I could do. I didn't dare to try to start the tractor. If I touched it, it might go over. Dad was gone for an hour. I couldn't make it by foot to the house in time.

Then all at once out of nowhere I heard a startled "Gee whiz!" and there was Thaddeus standing goggle-eyed on the ditch bank.

Something exploded with a flash of light inside my head, and I whispered to myself, Now take it easy. Don't scare the kid, don't startle him....

"Gee whiz!" said Thaddeus again. "What happened?"

I took a deep breath. "Old Tractor ran over Uncle Clyde. Make it get off."

Thaddeus didn't seem to hear me. He was intent on taking in the whole shebang.

"Thaddeus," I said, "make Tractor get off."

Thaddeus looked at me with that blind, unseeing stare he used to have. I prayed silently, *Don't let him be too old. O God, don't let him be too old.* And Thaddeus jumped across the ditch. He climbed gingerly through the barbwire fence and squatted down by the tractor, his hands caught between his chest and knees. He bent his head forward, and I stared urgently at the soft, vulnerable nape of his neck. Then he turned his blind eyes to me again.

"Tractor doesn't want to."

I felt a yell ball up in my throat, but I caught it in time. *Don't scare the kid, I thought. Don't scare him.*

"Make Tractor get off anyway," I said as matter-of-factly as I could manage. "He's hurting Uncle Clyde."

Thaddeus turned and looked at Clyde.

"He isn't hollering."

"He can't. He's unconscious." Sweat was making my palms slippery.

"Oh." Thaddeus examined Clyde's quiet face curiously. "I never saw anybody unconscious before."

"Thaddeus." My voice was sharp. "Make—Tractor—get—off."

Maybe I talked too loud. Maybe I used the wrong words, but Thaddeus looked up at me and I saw the shutters close in his eyes. They looked up at me, blue and shallow and bright.

"You mean start the tractor?" His voice was brisk as he stood up. "Gee whiz! Grampa told us kids to leave the tractor alone. It's dangerous for kids. I don't know whether I know how—"

"That's not what I meant," I snapped, my voice whetted on the edge of my despair. "Make it get off Uncle Clyde. He's dying."

"But I can't! You can't just make a tractor do something. You gotta run it." His face was twisting with approaching tears.

"You could if you wanted to," I argued, knowing how useless it was. "Uncle Clyde will die if you don't."

"But I can't! I don't know how! Honest I don't." Thaddeus scrubbed one bare foot in the plowed dirt, sniffing miserably.

I knelt beside Clyde and slipped my hand inside his dirt-smeared shirt. I pulled my hand out and rubbed the stained palm against my thigh. "Never mind," I said bluntly, "it doesn't matter now. He's dead."

Thaddeus started to bawl, not from grief but bewilderment. He knew I was put out with him, and he didn't know why. He crooked his arm over his eyes and leaned against a fence post, sobbing noisily. I shifted myself over in the dark furrow until my shadow sheltered Clyde's quiet face from the hot afternoon sun. I clasped my hands palm to palm between my knees and waited for Dad.

I knew as well as anything that *once* Thaddeus could have helped. Why couldn't he then, when the need was so urgent? Well, maybe he really *had* outgrown his strangeness. Or it might be that he actually couldn't do anything, just because Clyde and I were grown-ups. Maybe if it had been another kid—

Sometimes my mind gets cold trying to figure it out. Especially when I get the answer that kids and grown-ups live in two worlds so alien and separate that the gap can't be bridged even to save a life. Whatever the answer is—I still don't like kids.

The End

© 1951 by Zenna Henderson. Reprinted by permission of the author's estate and the author's agent, The Virginia Kidd Agency. First published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, December 1951