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TOPS AND BOTTOMS

LESLEY CONGER



ILLUSTRATIONS BY IMERO GOBBATO



TOPS AND BOTTOMS

adapted from a folk tale by LESLEY CONGER

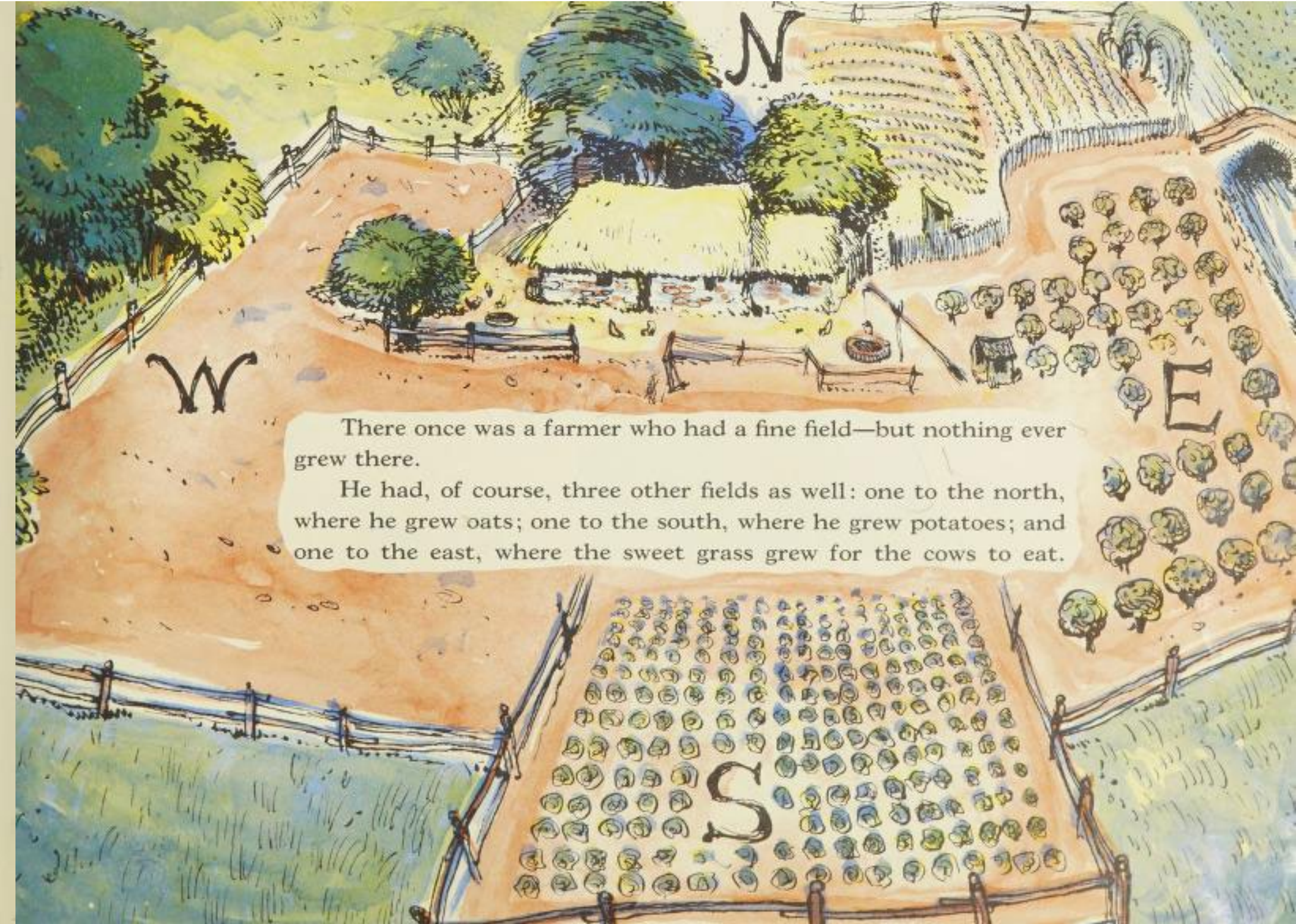
illustrated by IMERO GOBBATO



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But the west field just lay empty, and nothing grew there, nothing at all.

Why?—Because the farmer never planted anything there.

That was the way it had always been.

His father had never planted anything there.

His grandfather had never planted anything there.

And his great-grandfather had never planted anything there, either.

“Remember,” his father had told him, “don’t ever plant anything in that west field. There’s no use planting anything there—you’d never get a crop from that field anyway. Just let it be.”



So that’s what he did.

But it bothered him. Oh, how it bothered him!

Every year it bothered him more and more.

Every spring, at planting time, he became angrier and angrier.

Every spring, at planting time, he went out and walked around the edge of that west field, talking to himself.

“All this land going to waste!” he said.

“And this is the biggest field of all!” he said.

“It’s silly not to use this field—just plain silly!”

And finally one spring he said to himself, "What possible harm can it do?" So the next morning he went to the west field with his horse and his plow.

"Well," he said to no one in particular, "I'm going to plow this field and I'm going to sow seed in this field, that's what I'm going to do." His mind was made up.



But as soon as the plow dug into the good, black dirt, pop!—there in front of him stood a goblin.

"Fine!" cried the goblin. "And I'll take the crop, I will!"



The farmer took one look at the goblin. "Yeow!" he said, and his hair stood on end. For that goblin was certainly the most horrid goblin anyone ever saw. Just looking at him gave the farmer goosebumps and shivers all the way to his toes. No wonder nobody had ever planted anything in this field! But when the farmer looked down at the good, black dirt, he still couldn't help thinking of what he could grow in it.

I am not going to give up so easily, he thought. There must be a way out of this.

"If you want a crop," he said to the goblin, "why don't you plant it yourself?"

"Oh, bother, I won't do *that*," answered the goblin. And he yawned and leaned lazily against a fencepost. "Not me!"

"Then listen," said the farmer, thinking quickly. "Nobody's planted a crop here for a long time—and it's a waste of a good field. So suppose we go halves? Half for me, half for you. Wouldn't that be fair?"

"Well—" The goblin scratched his head and poked at the dirt with his toe. "I don't know about that—"

"And I'll do all the work," added the farmer.

"Oh, *that's* fair enough!" cried the goblin. "Half for me, half for you, and you do all the work."

"But tell me," asked the farmer, "which half of the crop do you want? The top half or the bottom half? Tops or bottoms, which?"



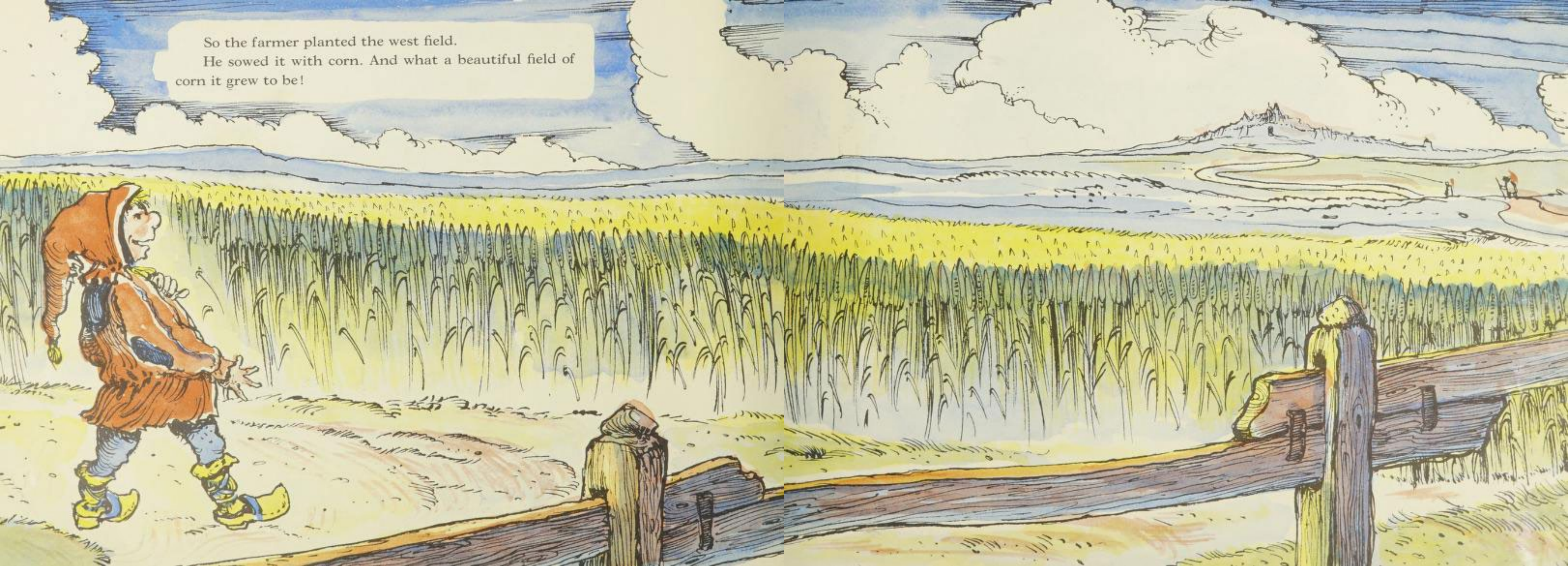
The goblin looked down at the fine, rich soil the plow had turned. He poked at it with his toe again. He thought of things growing in that warm, dark earth, things deep in the ground, getting bigger and tastier day by day—

"Bottoms!" declared the goblin.



"Bottoms it is, then," said the farmer, hiding a smile.
"And I'll be back at harvest time," said the goblin.
And pop!—he was gone.

So the farmer planted the west field.
He sowed it with corn. And what a beautiful field of
corn it grew to be!



When harvest time came, there was the goblin, ready for his share.

"I've come for my half!" he cried.

"Remember," said the farmer, "you said *bottoms*."
And the farmer cut the field of corn and took the lovely golden ears to the market, and all the goblin got was the useless stubble and the roots.

And oh, that goblin danced with rage, he did, until, pop!—he was gone.



Next spring, at planting time, as soon as the plow dug into the dirt, there was the goblin again.

"Tops, this time," he growled. "I say *tops*! You may have cheated me once, but you won't cheat me twice."

"Tops it is," said the farmer, and he sighed and turned down the corners of his mouth.





So the farmer planted the west field.
He planted it with carrots. And what a beautiful
field of carrots it grew to be, with the lovely green carrot-
tops, so feathery and soft, growing taller every day!

When harvest time came, there was the goblin, ready
for his share.
"Here I am," he grinned. "I've come for my half!"
"Remember," said the farmer, "you said *tops*."

And the farmer pulled all the carrots up out of the ground and twisted off their tops. Then he left the soft, green, feathery, useless tops for the goblin, while he took the lovely golden carrots off to the market.

And oh, that goblin danced with rage, he did, until pop!—he was gone.



But the next spring, at planting time, there was the goblin again.

"Which half this time?" asked the farmer. "Tops or bottoms?"

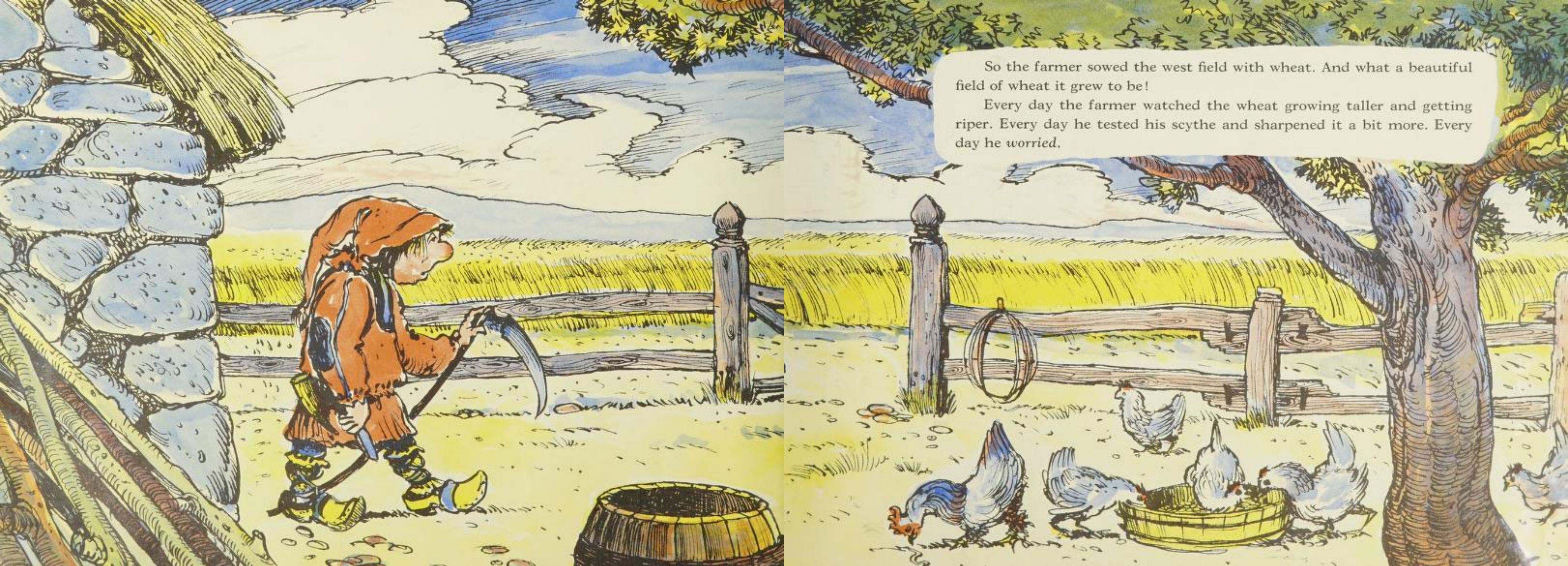
"Never mind tops or bottoms!" cried the goblin. "You may have cheated me once, you may have cheated me twice, but you're not going to cheat me again. This time you'll plant wheat—and I'll take *this* half of the field and you'll take *that* half. Fair enough?"



"Oh, yes, fair enough," agreed the farmer.
But then the goblin grinned, showing his yellow teeth.
"And then," the goblin went on, "then we'll have a mowing match. You'll mow your half and I'll mow mine, and the one who finishes first gets it all." He looked at the farmer. "Fair enough?" he asked again.

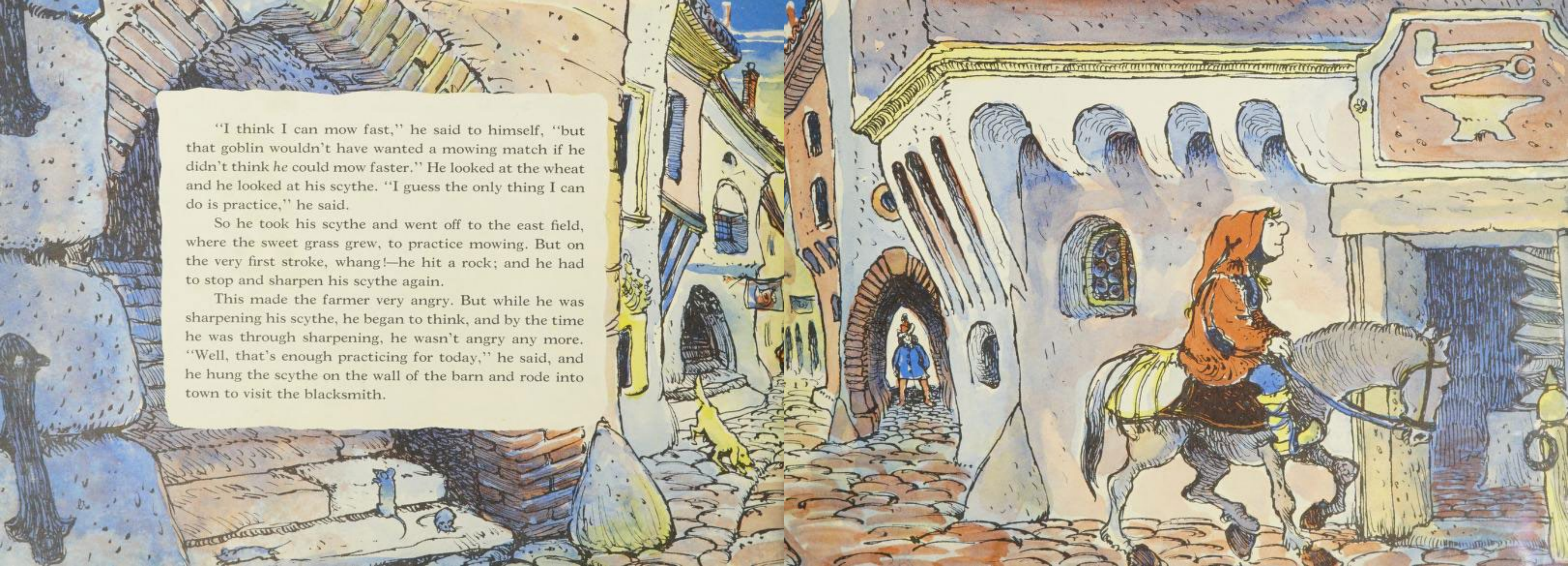
"Well—" said the farmer. But he didn't really have any choice in the matter. "Fair enough," he sighed.





So the farmer sowed the west field with wheat. And what a beautiful field of wheat it grew to be!

Every day the farmer watched the wheat growing taller and getting riper. Every day he tested his scythe and sharpened it a bit more. Every day he worried.



"I think I can mow fast," he said to himself, "but that goblin wouldn't have wanted a mowing match if he didn't think he could mow faster." He looked at the wheat and he looked at his scythe. "I guess the only thing I can do is practice," he said.

So he took his scythe and went off to the east field, where the sweet grass grew, to practice mowing. But on the very first stroke, whang!—he hit a rock; and he had to stop and sharpen his scythe again.

This made the farmer very angry. But while he was sharpening his scythe, he began to think, and by the time he was through sharpening, he wasn't angry any more. "Well, that's enough practicing for today," he said, and he hung the scythe on the wall of the barn and rode into town to visit the blacksmith.

"Can you make me some thin iron rods?" he asked the blacksmith. "—Little sticks of iron, maybe two hundred or so?"

"That I can," answered the blacksmith. "But would you mind telling me what you're going to do with them?"

"I think," said the farmer, "I think I'm going to plant them."

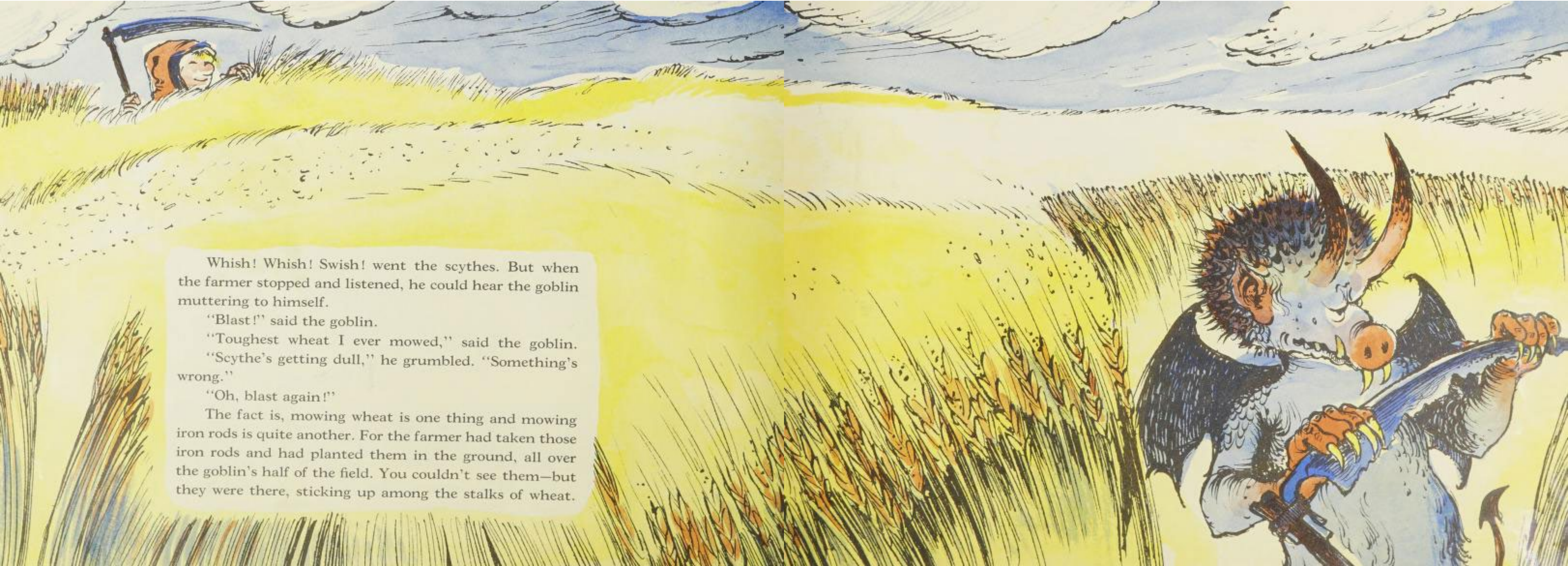




And that's just what he did.

When harvest time came, there was the goblin, just as always. Only this time he was carrying a fine, sharp scythe and grinning from ear to ear.

Early in the morning, just as the sun began to rise, the goblin and the farmer started off at opposite sides of the field, each one mowing as fast as he could.



Whish! Whish! Swish! went the scythes. But when the farmer stopped and listened, he could hear the goblin muttering to himself.

"Blast!" said the goblin.

"Toughest wheat I ever mowed," said the goblin.

"Scythe's getting dull," he grumbled. "Something's wrong."

"Oh, blast again!"

The fact is, mowing wheat is one thing and mowing iron rods is quite another. For the farmer had taken those iron rods and had planted them in the ground, all over the goblin's half of the field. You couldn't see them—but they were there, sticking up among the stalks of wheat.

And before the morning was even half begun, the goblin's scythe was so dull that he couldn't have cut a pound of butter with it.

"When's sharpening-time, mate?" cried the goblin. For it was only fair in a mowing contest for both of them to sharpen their scythes together.

"Sharpening?" said the farmer cheerily. "Oh, about noon, I suppose!"



"Noon!" shrieked the goblin. "Then I've lost already!" And he threw down his scythe, and oh, how that goblin danced with rage, he did, mad as a hornet, until pop! he was gone—and he never came back again.

So the farmer finished mowing his half of the field;
then he went into the goblin's half of the field and pulled
up all the iron rods and mowed *that* half of the field too.
"Fair enough," the farmer said.

