

Hard Times, Hard Work

JOHN WATCHED his mother reach to the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard, take down the small tin money box, and open it.

"I wish times weren't so hard," she sighed as she took out a coin.

"I don't think times are as hard as subtraction," said George, who had just finished his third year in school. He frowned as Mrs. Deere and John laughed.

"Mother didn't mean arithmetic," explained John. "She meant hard times. You know, George, when it's hard for people to get money, they say times are hard."

"Then we have hard times all the time, don't we?" George asked.

"It seems that way, George," Mrs. Deere answered. "I thought last year after the war was over, that our tailoring shop would have more customers. But now people just don't have any money to pay for sewing."

"Maybe the farmers will have good crops this year, Mother," John said. He was thinking of last year, the coldest summer people could remember. There had been snow long into the summer months and frosts even in July and August. In the fall there was no harvest, for nothing had grown. Because the farmers had no crops to sell, they had no money to buy things from the stores and shops in town.

The Deeres, like many other families in Middlebury, had to make every penny go as far as possible. In the spring they had moved to a small house near the northeast edge of town.

"The rent is cheaper here, and we can have a big garden," Mrs. Deere had explained.

Now she gave a coin to John. "Please go to Dickinson's store," she said, "and buy a pound of codfish, a small package of tea, and a spool of black thread."

"I wish I could earn some more money," John said wistfully.

"Why, John, you've been a big help!" his mother declared. "That's probably one of the coins you put in the box yourself! For a boy of only twelve, you've earned a lot!"

All winter John had been collecting wood ashes and selling them to Mr. Page, who made potash. It took a long time to collect enough good ashes to earn a coin. But John had worked hard at it. Nearly every week during the winter he had been able to put a coin into their box.

"But now that it's summer, there won't be so many ashes," he replied sadly.

"We still have to burn wood to cook and bake," Mrs. Deere reminded him. Then she thought of some good news. "Our money box may fill up quicker, now that summer clothes are needed. Just yesterday, Mrs. Seymour came in and ordered two silk dresses."

"Oh, that's fine, Mother!" John was pleased. He knew Mrs. Seymour wouldn't ask his mother to accept maple syrup or firewood in exchange for the sewing. Mrs. Seymour would pay with silver dollars. Her husband was a rich man. He was having a big new house built right across the street from the meeting house.

John remembered another cash customer. "Do you think Miss Painter will need some summer dresses, too?" he asked. Miss Abby Painter was the daughter of Gainaliel Painter, the most important man in Middlebury.

"Yes, John, Miss Painter will probably be in, too." Mrs. Deere smiled fondly at her son. "Now

you and George run along to the store. And, John, stop worrying! Soon Francis and I will have more sewing and tailoring than we can do! You wait and see!"

The boys walked down the dusty road. John looked up at the hot blue sky. "If it doesn't rain soon, we'll have to start carrying pails of water to the garden," he told George.

"Last summer it was too cold, and this summer it's too hot!" George said crossly.

The hot, dry weather continued. Every evening the boys pumped water and carried it in big wooden pails to the garden to water the plants. In spite of all they could do, the beans and peas withered and died.

Everyone was hoping for rain. The farmers' crops were burning in the fields. Pastor Merrill held special meetings in the church to pray for rain. Finally the rains came, but not in time to save the gardens or the crops.

"Yes, times are certainly hard," Captain Lawrence said one October afternoon when John was at the smithy. John liked to stop there after school to watch Captain Lawrence work and often to help him.

During the summer the house on the edge of town had been sold. Now the Deeres lived in a yellow building at the east end of Merchants' Row. John was glad they had moved. He liked being near Otter Creek and the blacksmith shop. Today Captain Lawrence was repairing a log chain for Joseph MacDonald,

"Don't rightly know how we're going to get through this winter," Mr. MacDonald said slowly. He sounded very discouraged. "No harvest to speak of for the last two years! Tell you, Captain, if I could sell my farm, I'd pack my family in the wagon and move West!"

The Captain nodded. "A good many Vermonters are doing just that. But, Joseph,

times are bound to get better around here, if you can just stick it out."

John felt sorry for farmers like Mr. MacDonald. They worked hard to grow crops in their stony fields. When the weather turned against them, all their work was for nothing. Sometimes their families had hardly enough food to live through the long cold winters. Even when there was a good harvest, they took in very little money for their work.

The next two summers were warm, and there was plenty of rain for the crops. "Times are getting better," everyone said.

"Times may be better, but money is still as scarce as hen's teeth," John said to his brother William. It was a warm April evening and the boys were walking over to Seth's house where the singing school was held.

"I'm beginning to wish the hens themselves were scarce, too!" chuckled William.

John smiled. He knew what William meant. Just before they left home, a farmer's wife had brought their mother four dozen eggs and three chickens in payment for some sewing.

"That makes nine dozen eggs we have now!" John exclaimed.

"Tomorrow I'll have to go to the store and see if Mr. Dickinson will trade some salt and tea for eggs," William said.

John looked down at his old shoes. Even though he had used boot black and lard on them, they still looked shabby. He tried to pull his coat sleeves down on his wrists, but the sleeves were just too short for his long arms.

William looked at his brother carefully. "John, that old suit of mine is just too small for you." he stated. "You're taller and more broad shouldered than I was at fifteen!"

"Yes," John agreed, "this suit is too short and too tight. I'm afraid to bend over!"

"Maybe Francis and Mother should make you a new one," William suggested.

"No," John said firmly. "They work too long by candle light as it is. Besides, wool cloth costs too much. If I could just earn some extra money this summer, I'd buy a blue suit and a pair of black shoes I saw at Hagar's store. Don't say anything to Mother about it. If I can, I'm going to surprise her."

Singing school was almost like a party. The young ladies wore their prettiest dresses. The young men wore starched shirts and sat tall and straight before the singing master.

When the singing was over, Mrs. Miller passed a plate of maple sugar candy. John saw Peter Goodrich laughing and talking to the prettiest girl in their class. Peter was wearing a new suit. John felt as if his coat sleeves and pant legs were getting shorter every minute. He stood back out of the candle light.

Seth came over and stood beside him. "Wish we had our old clothes on and could go out in the barn and wrestle," he said in a low voice. "Who wants to stand around talking to girls anyway? Who cares about girls?"

"I guess Pete does," John remarked. Then he thought of his problem. "Seth, have you heard of anyone wanting some work done?"

"Papa just said at supper that Mr. Atwood needs someone to turn the grinder at his tannery. I wanted to try it, but Mother said my arms aren't strong enough."

"Do you think I could get the job?" John asked quickly. "I could do it."

"Why sure you could! You can beat all the rest of us at wrestling. I'll bet you could turn that old grinder all day!" Seth was still John's best friend and admirer.

Mr. Atwood was glad to hire such a strong boy. John didn't have to turn the grinder all

day—just for a couple of hours each day. But it was hard work grinding oak and hemlock bark. At first his arms ached at night. But in a few days his muscles grew used to the heavy work and he did not mind it.

"You're the best grinder I ever had," Mr. Atwood complimented him. "You can turn that crank faster and longer than most men."

John, with William's help, was able to keep his secret from the rest of the family. By the end of the summer he had saved enough money to buy the blue suit and black shoes.

One Sunday morning he was the last one down to breakfast. He had dressed carefully.

"Why, John Deere!" his mother cried when she saw him. "Where did you ever ——" But she was too surprised to finish.

"You look as important as Mr. Painter!" declared George proudly.

"And a lot more handsome!" added Betsey.

"How in the world did you manage to buy this suit?" Francis asked, feeling of the fine wool cloth. "Pou made a fine choice."

"I've been grinding bark for Mr. Atwood," John explained. "This suit probably isn't as well made as you and Mother could have done, but I wanted to save you the work. I wanted to earn it myself and surprise you."

"Well, you most certainly did!" Mrs. Deere exclaimed. "It's a fine suit, John, and it fits you well. I know you needed it and the new shoes, too. We're mighty proud of you!"

William winked at Francis. "Now John won't have to stand back in the corner at singing school. Maybe he'll even be brave enough to talk to some of the girls!"

John grinned and looked down at his shiny shoes. Then he said happily, "If I can keep on grinding bark after school this winter, I'll buy Mother an India silk shawl."