

A Poisonous Plow

THAT SUMMER JOHN and his friends often played down by the creek near the blacksmith shop. One afternoon he and Seth carved wooden boats and sailed them in the shallow water.

"This is MacDonough's big 'Saratoga!'" John cried as he pushed his boat away from the bank with a stick. That was the name of the Lieutenant's largest ship—the one from which the spike had fallen and hurt the man's leg.

"Mine is the British 'Confiance'! Watch out! I'm going to ram you!" Seth yelled.

"Bang! Bang!" John shouted, turning his boat away from Seth's. "I hit you broadside!"

"No, you didn't! You missed! Besides I don't see any guns on your boat!"

"Maybe you can't see them, but Francis told me the 'Saratoga' has twenty-six guns! It took eighty ox teams to haul them over the snow from Troy, New York!"

"I wish we could really put guns on our boats," Seth said, picking his "Confiance out of the water and looking it over.

John pushed the "Saratoga" over to the bank. "Let's go ask Captain Lawrence for some bent horseshoe nails," he suggested. "He'll be glad to let us have 'em. We can straighten them out and nail them into the sides for guns. Come on, let's put on the guns and then come back!"

The boys took their boats and ran up the path to the shop. Three wagons were pulled up in front of the building. Captain Lawrence stood in the doorway. He was talking to two farmers, Mr. Mattocks and Mr. MacDonald.

John and Seth knew better than to interrupt. They leaned against the ox frame and watched another man lift a wooden plough from the back of his wagon. They recognized Mr. Seth Storrs, the man who owned Goliath.

Mr. Storrs set his plow down near the door of the shop and spoke to the smith. "Would you have time to fix my plow today, Captain? Broke that iron point again on a rock!"

"You mean you've got rocks in your field?" Samuel Mattocks pretended to be shocked. Captain Lawrence and Mr. MacDonald laughed. The boys chuckled. It was a joke because all New England farmers had rocky fields.

"Not rocks," Mr. Storrs joked back. "I just got one rock. But that one jumped right out of the ground and broke my plow!" Then he said seriously, "Well, I've got fewer than last year, anyway. My young ones have had Goliath hitched to the stone boat most of the summer.

I'll wager those boys have a pile of rocks now 'most as high as this blacksmith shop!"

John and Seth looked at each other and grinned. Sometimes they were glad they lived in town. They had heard the farm boys tell what hard work it was to harvest rocks! First they had to go out in the fields and fill the low, heavy box, or stone boat, with rocks. Then the ox pulled the stone boat to the edge of the field. There the boys had to toss the rocks onto a pile. No matter how many trips they made, they could never seem to get all the rocks! More rocks seemed to come from the ground.

"I get tired of just clearing the rocks out of our garden!" Seth said to John.

Mr. Storrs noticed the boys. "Why, there's the lad who made those Deere shoes for Goliath!" he exclaimed.

John smiled but he felt embarrassed. He knew he hadn't really made the shoes.

"Reckon that's how come Goliath could move that stone boat so fast!" Mr. Storrs told the men. Then he winked at them and asked the boys, "How'd you fellows like to come out to my place and help old Goliath harvest rocks?"

Seth shook his head, but John looked at the broken piece of metal and answered, "I'd a lot rather help fix your plow, Mr. Storrs!"

"Oh, you would? Well, tell you what, John," Mr. Storrs continued to tease, "Instead of just fixing this one, why don't you make me a whole new one that won't break on the next rock I hit?" Again the men laughed. John did, too. He was wishing, though, that he could help the blacksmith fix that plough.

Captain Lawrence bent and examined the broken plow. "Wood still seems to be good and solid," he informed Mr. Storrs. "I can bolt on a new iron share, Seth. But I can't promise it won't break again the first time you hit a stone!"



"Did you ever see one of those Newbold plows from New Jersey?" Mr. Storrs asked. "I've heard that only the handles and beam are made of wood. The part that turns the soil is all one piece of cast iron."

Mr. Storrs scratched his head thoughtfully. "Poisons the soil and makes the weeds grow, does it?" he repeated. Then he added firmly, "Well, all the same, if I could get a cast iron plow, I'd try it! I'm plumb tired of having the bolts and point break on this wooden one! Just when I need it the most, too!"

A little while later as John and Seth were pounding nails into their boats, John said, "I think Mr. Storrs was right."

"Right about what?" Seth wanted to know. He had forgotten all about the men and their talk. He was thinking only about the boats.

But John was still thinking about the plough. "I think Mr. Storrs would be right to try a cast iron plough. Iron comes from the soil. I don't see how iron could poison the ground or make weeds grow."

"I'll bet it could! You don't know anything about it!" Seth argued.

"That's right, Seth," answered the smith. "Fellow going through here last fall had one in his wagon. Seemed to me it ought to work a lot better than these wooden ones that just have iron strips bolted on them."

"No, sir!" exclaimed Joseph MacDonald, shaking his head. "You couldn't sell me one of those cast iron plows! Wouldn't risk it! I've heard they poison the soil."

"Well, I don't know about that," Samuel Mattocks spoke up. "But I had a letter last winter from a cousin of mine in New Jersey. He said a farmer near him had bought a Newbold plow. Worked all right, but it made the weeds grow twice as fast as they did before!"

"That's right. That's what I heard, too." Mr. MacDonald nodded. "All that heavy iron turning the ground over poisons the earth and fertilizes the weeds. It's hard enough already to get a decent crop around here."

"Well, I know iron is just red dirt! Don't you remember that load of iron ore we saw in Vergennes last winter?"

"Sure! It looked like a big load of poison, too!" Seth pounded his last nail.

"If iron poisons the soil, then why don't the beans and potatoes in the garden die? We sure have to hoe them enough with iron hoes!"

"That's it! That's why we have to hoe so often! Those iron hoes make the weeds grow! That's what the men said!" Seth was sure he had won the argument.

John looked thoughtfully at his friend. Maybe Seth was right. Weeds seemed to grow mighty fast in gardens! Could it possibly be because of the iron hoes?

"I'm going to tell papa about iron making weeds grow," Seth declared. "Maybe he won't make me hoe the potatoes." Hoeing potatoes was almost as bad as picking potato bugs!

"You'd better not do that," John warned. "You'd just have to pull weeds by hand!"

Seth looked disappointed. "I guess you're right," he admitted. He had been pleased with his idea. He didn't like garden work.

"What about iron spades and shovels? They don't poison the ground!" John insisted. He thought of something else. "Even the wooden plows have iron on the bottoms."

"Aw, who cares about old plows and iron anyway!" Seth was tired of talking about it. He picked up his boat. "Let's have a battle and see who gets sunk first!"

"All right," John agreed. "My 'Saratoga' has all her twenty-six guns now." As he leaned over to put his boat in the water, he couldn't help saying, more to himself than Seth, "But when I get to be a blacksmith, I'm going to make a cast iron plow, just to prove that it won't poison the soil or make weeds grow!"