

The BROWN MOUSE

by Herbert Quick



SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I—Jennie Woodruff contemptuously refuses to marry Jim Irwin, young farm hand, because of his financial condition and poor prospects. He is intellectually above his station, and has advanced ideas concerning the possibilities of expert school teaching, for which he is ridiculed by many.

CHAPTER II

Reversed Unanimity.

The great blade of the grading machine, running diagonally across the road and pulling the earth toward its median line, had made several trips, and much persiflage about Jim Irwin's forthcoming appearance before the board had been addressed to Jim and exchanged by others for his benefit.

To Newton Bronson was given the task of leveling and distributing the earth rolled into the road by the grader—a labor which in the interests of fitting a muzzle on his big mongrel dog he deserted whenever the machine moved away from him. That there was some mystery about the muzzle was evident from Newton's pained to make a secret of it. Its wires were curled into a ring directly over the dog's nose, and into this ring Newton had fitted a cork, through which he had thrust a large needle which protruded, an inch-long bayonet, in front of Ponto's nose.

As the grader moved along one side of the highway, a high-powered automobile approached on the other, making rather bad weather of the newly repaired road. A pile of loose soil that Newton had allowed to lie just across the path made a certain maintenance of speed desirable. Newton planted himself in the path of the laboring car, and waved its driver a command to halt. The car came to a standstill with its front wheels in the edge of the loose earth, and the chauffeur fuming at the possibility of stalling—a contingency upon which Newton had confidently reckoned.

"What d'ye want?" he demanded. "What d'ye mean by stopping me in this kind of place?"

"I want to ask you," said Newton with mock politeness, "if you have the correct time." The chauffeur sought words appropriate to his feelings. Ponto and his muzzle saved him the trouble. A pretty pointer leaped from the car, and attracted by the evident friendliness of Ponto's greeting, pricked up its ears, and sought, in a spirit of canine brotherhood, to touch noses with him. The needle in Ponto's muzzle did its work to the agony and horror of the pointer, which leaped back with a yelp, and turned tail. Ponto, in an effort to apologize, followed, and finding itself bayoneted at every con-



Jim Countered With an Awkward Upper Cut.

tact with this demon dog, the pointer definitely took flight, howling, leaving Ponto in a state of wonder and humiliation at the sudden end of what had promised to be a very friendly acquaintance. The pointer's master watched its strange flight, and swore. His eye turned to the boy who had caused all this, and he alighted pale with anger.

"I've got time," said he, remembering Newton's impudent question, "to give you what you deserve."

Newton grinned and dodged, but the bank of loose earth was his undoing, and while he stumbled, the chauffeur caught and held him by the collar. Again Ponto intervened, for as the chauffeur stood holding Newton, the dog, evidently regarding the stranger as his master's friend, thrust his nose into the chauffeur's palm. The chauffeur behaved much as his pointer had done, except that the pointer did not swear.

The grading gang laughed. Newton grinned even while in the fell clutch of circumstance. Ponto tried to smell the chauffeur's trousers, and what had been a laugh became a roar. Caution and mercy departed from the chauffeur's mood; he drew back his fist to strike the boy—and found it

caught by the hard hand of Jim Irwin.

"You're too angry to punish this boy," said Jim gently, "even if you had the right to punish him at all!"

The chauffeur, however, unhesitatingly released Newton, and furiously delivered a blow meant for Jim's jaw, which miscarried by a foot. In reply, Jim countered with an awkward swinging uppercut. It landed fairly on the point of the jaw. The chauffeur staggered and slowly toppled over into the soft earth which had caused so much of the rumpus.

"Oh, cut it out," said a fat man in the rear of the car, who had hitherto manifested small interest in anything save Ponto. "Get in, and let's be on our way!"

Colonel Woodruff, waving toward him in his ramabout, held up by the traffic blockade, asked what was going on here, and the chauffeur, rising groggily, climbed into the car; and the meeting dissolved.

"Good work, Jim," said Cornelius Bonner. "I didn't think 'twas in ye!" "It's beastly," said Jim, reddening. "I didn't know, either."

Colonel Woodruff looked at his hired man sharply, gave him some instructions for the next day and drove on. The road gang dispersed for the afternoon. Newton Bronson carefully secreted the magic muzzle, and chuckled at what had been perhaps

the most picturesquely successful bit of devilry in his varied record. Jim Irwin put out his team, got his supper and went to the meeting of the school board.

The deadlocked members of the board had been so long at loggerheads that their relations had swayed back to something like amity. Jim had scarcely entered when Con Bonner addressed the chair.

"Mr. President," said he, "we have wld us t'night, a young man who nades no introduction to an audience in this place, Mr. Jim Irwin. He thinks we're bullheaded mules, and that all the schools are bad. At the proper time I shall move that we hire him fr teacher; and pnding that motion, I move that he be given the floor. Ye've all heard of Mr. Irwin's ability as a white hope, and I know he'll be listened to wid respect!"

Much laughter from the board and the spectators, as Jim arose. He looked upon it as ridicule of himself, while Con Bonner regarded it as a tribute to his successful speech.

"Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Board," said Jim, "I'm not going to tell you anything that you don't know about yourselves. You are simply making a farce of the matter of hiring a teacher for this school. You know, and I know, that even if your silly deadlock is broken by employing a new candidate, the school will be the same old story. It will still be the school it was when I came into it a little ragged boy"—here Jim's voice grew a little husky—"and when I left it, a bigger boy, but still as ragged as ever."

There was a slight sensation in the audience, as if, as Con Bonner said about the knock-down, they hadn't thought Jim Irwin could do it.

"Well," said Con, "you've done well to hold your own."

"In all the years I attended this school," Jim went on, "I never did a bit of work in school which was economically useful. No other pupil ever did any real work of the sort farmers' boys and girls should do. We copied city schools—and the schools we copied are poor schools. We made bad copies of them, too. If any of you three men were making a fight for what the Country Life commission called a 'new kind of rural school,' I'd say fight. But you aren't. You're just making individual fights for your favorite teachers."

Jim Irwin made a somewhat lengthy speech after the awkwardness wore off. He adjured Bronson, Bonner and Peterson to study his plan of a new kind of country school—in which the work of the school should be correlated with the life of the home and the farm—a school which would be in the highest degree cultural by being consciously useful and obviously practical.

Sharp spats of applause from the useless hands of Newton Bronson gave the final touch of absurdity to a situation which Jim had felt to be ridiculous all through. Had it not been for Jennie Woodruff's "Humph!" stinging him, had it not been for the absurd notion that perhaps, after they had heard his speech, they would place him in charge of the school, and that he might be able to do something really important in it, he would not have been there. As he sat down, he knew himself a dreamer. The nodding board of directors, the secretary, actually snoring, the bored audience restored the field-hand to a sense of

his proper place.

"We have had the privilege of listening," said Con Bonner, rising, "to a great speech, Mr. President. Making a good speech is one thing, and teaching a good school is another, but in order to bring this matter before the board, I nominate Mr. James E. Irwin, the Boy Orator of the Woodruff district, and the new white hope, fr the job of teacher of this school, and I move that when he shall have received a majority of the votes of this board, the secretary and president be instructed to enter into a contract with him fr the comin' year."

The president followed usage when he said: "If there's no objection, it will be so ordered. Prepare the ballots for a vote on the election of teacher, Mr. Secretary."

There was no surprise in view of the nomination of Jim Irwin by the blarneying Bonner when the Secretary smoothed out the first ballot, and read: "James E. Irwin, one." But when the next slip came forth, "James E. Irwin, two," the board of directors of the Woodruff Independent district were stunned at the slowly dawning knowledge that they had made an election! Before they had rallied, the secretary drew from the box the third and last ballot, and read, "James E. Irwin, three."

President Bronson choked as he announced the result—choked and stammered, and made very hard weather of it, but he went through with the motion, as we all run in our grooves.

"The ballot having shown the unanimous election of James E. Irwin, I declare him elected."

He dropped into his chair, while the secretary, a very methodical man, drew from his portfolio a contract duly drawn up save the name and signature. This he calmly filled out, and passed over to the president, pointing to the dotted line. Mr. Bronson would have signed his own death-warrant at that moment, not to mention a perfectly legal document, and signed with Peterson and Bonner looking on sullenly. The secretary signed and shoved the contract over to Jim Irwin.

"Sign there," he said. Jim looked it over, saw the other signatures, and felt an impulse to dodge the whole thing. Then he thought of Jennie Woodruff's "Humph!"—and he signed!

"Move we adjourn," said Peterson.

"No 'bjection 'tis so ordered!" said Mr. Bronson.

The secretary and Jim went out, while the directors waited.

"What the Billy—" began Bonner, and finished lamely! "What for did you vote for the dub, Ez?" "I voted for him," replied Bronson, "because he fought for my boy this afternoon. I didn't want it stuck into him too hard. I wanted him to have one vote."

"An' I wanted him to have wan vote, too," said Bonner. "I thought meself the only dang fool on the board—an' he made a spache that aimed wan vote—but fr the love of hivin, that dub fr a teacher! What come over you, Haakon—you voted fr him, too!" "Ay wanted him to have one wote, too," said Peterson.

And in this wise, Jim became the teacher in the Woodruff district—all on account of Jennie Woodruff's "Humph!"

(To be continued)

Beck Didn't Like a Wig.

James M. Beck, solicitor general of the United States, is pleased that he doesn't have to practice law in England, where the wig and gown are essential to a barrister's appearance before a high tribunal, says the Philadelphia Public Ledger. Mr. Beck, who recently argued America's case before the privy council, contesting the Canadian court's verdict in the General Motors' suit, is authority for the statement that he could not quite overcome the feeling that he was addressing the court in his hat and overcoat—a sensation which interfered no little with his best flights of oratory.

The wig-wearing custom in the courts of Great Britain is not without its virtues, according to Mr. Beck. In court, at least, he says, all men are equal in appearance. The bald-headed advocate does not appear ridiculous and attorneys who depend upon leopard-like manes or Byronic locks to influence the bench or jury find themselves out of luck.

Plan to Destroy the Tsetse Fly.

Dummy donkeys with sticky legs are proposed for experiments in destroying large numbers of tsetse flies, which carry the germs of the African sleeping sickness, in a publication of the department of agriculture of South Africa. R. H. Harris found that these dangerous insects were attracted to the legs of his donkey. He built a dummy animal with wooden legs covered with old bags, but the flies apparently did not discriminate between the natural and artificial limbs. He suggests construction of many such dummies covered with sticky materials to destroy the insects by the wholesale.

Peculiar Aviation Accident.

As an airman was performing "stunts" 2,000 feet from the ground at Cleethorpes (Eng.) carnival, one of the wheels of his undercarriage fell into a busy street. It rebounded high into the air, but after a succession of bounces, came to rest undamaged. Discovering what had happened the aviator completed his exhibition, then made a skillful landing upon one wheel in a field at Humberstone without his machine receiving further damage.

RETURN TO PRE-WAR FOOD HABITS URGED

BREAD-SAVING POLICY NOW IS REVERSE OF ECONOMIC

Washington, D. C., Nov. 26.—Needless continuation of bread-saving habits formed in war time, department of agriculture officials declared in a statement issued today, is limiting American wheat consumption to the disadvantage of both producer and consumer.

A return to pre-war food habits in the use of wheat by the public and the feeding of low-grade wheat to livestock, department experts asserted, would help greatly toward solving the wheat problem.

The wide disparity between the cost of bread to the consumer and the price received by the producer for the wheat from which it is made is cited by the department as an illustration of the disproportionate relationship which exists between the price of farm products and the price of things that have gone through a manufacturing process.

"The price of bread in cities has not fallen with the price of wheat and flour," says the statement. "A pound loaf of bread, which in Minneapolis in 1913-14 cost 5.3 cents, now costs approximately 9 cents, while flour, which in 1913-14 cost \$4.43 a barrel, now costs \$6.89. Allowing 280 leaves to the barrel, the margin between the flour price and the bread price has increased from \$10.40 to \$18.30."

"It is obvious that such conditions, however caused, work to the disadvantage of both producer and consumers. Producers are injured by the restriction which is caused in the demand and consumers are injured by high prices which enforce an uneconomic limitation in the use of an essential food. All interests in the country, including those of the bakers and millers, would be benefited by the restoration of a more normal ratio between the price of wheat when it leaves the farmers' hands and its price to the consumer."

JACK KENNEDY LOSES MATCH BUT MAKES HIT

Cottage Grove, Ore., Nov. 28.—Jack Kennedy of Condon, claimant to the lightweight wrestling championship of Eastern Oregon, lost last night to Ralph Hand, local wrestler in a fast match. It appeared as though Hand was to have an easy time when he grabbed a toehold and had Kennedy pounding the mat in just twelve minutes. The comeback of Kennedy was a thrilling surprise, and in twenty-seven minutes he had his opponent with a crotch and cradle lock. The final was a thriller, won by Hand in twenty with a flying mare and arm bar. Hand has never before depended upon this hold for a fall.

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