

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—More as a joke than otherwise Jim is selected as teacher of the Woodruff district school.

CHAPTER III—Jim, in his new position, sets out to make staunch friends of his pupils, especially two boys, Newton Bronson and "Buddy" Simms, the latter the son of a shiftless farmer. Colonel Woodruff, Jennie's father, has little faith in Jim's ideas of improving rural educational methods. He nicknamed him the "Brown Mouse," in illustration of an anecdote.

CHAPTER IV—Jim's conduct of the school, where he endeavors to teach the children the wonders of nature and some of the scientific methods of farming, as well as "book learning," is condemned.

CHAPTER V—Jennie Woodruff is nominated for the position of county superintendent of schools. The school board grows bitter in its opposition to Jim and his innovations.

CHAPTER VI—At a public meeting Jim roundly condemns the methods of teaching in the rural schools, and makes no friends thereby.

CHAPTER VII—A delegation of prominent women condemn Jim's methods of teaching, but he is stoutly defended by his pupils, especially Newton Bronson.

CHAPTER VIII

Jennie arranges a Christmas party. Miss Jennie Woodruff of the Woodruff district was a sensible country girl. Being sensible, she tried to avoid uppishness. But she did feel some little sense of increased importance as she drove her father's little runabout over the smooth earth roads. In the crisp December weather, just before Christmas. The weather itself was stimulating, and in the little car, visiting the one hundred or more rural schools soon to come under her supervision, she rather fancied the picture of herself, clothed in more or less authority and queening it over her little army of teachers.

Mr. Haakon Peterson was phlegmatically conscious that she made rather an agreeable picture, as she stopped her car alongside his top buggy to talk with him. She had bright blue eyes, fluffy brown hair, a complexion whipped pink by the breeze, and she smiled at him ingratiatingly.

"Don't you think father is lovely?" said she. "He is going to let me use the runabout when I visit the schools."

"That will be good," said Haakon. "It will save you lots of time. I hope you make the county pay for the gasoline."

"I haven't thought about that," said Jennie. "Everybody's been so nice to me—I want to give as well as receive."

"Why," said Haakon, "you will just begin to receive when your salary begins in January."

"Oh, no!" said Jennie. "I've received much more than that now! You don't know how proud I feel. So many nice men I never knew before, and all my old friends like you working for me in the convention and at the polls, just as if I amounted to something."

"And you don't know how proud I feel," said Haakon, "to have in county office a little girl I used to hold on my lap."

Haakon was a rather richer man than the colonel, and not a little proud of his ascent to affluence. A mild-spoken, soft-voiced Scandinavian, he was quite completely Americanized, and his influence was always worth fifty to sixty Scandinavian votes in any county election. He was a good party man and conscious of being entitled to his voice in party matters. This seemed to him an opportunity for exerting a bit of political influence.

"Yennie," said he, "this man Jim Irwin needs to be lined up."

"Lined up! What do you mean?"

"The way he is doing in the school," said Haakon, "is all wrong. If you can't line him up, he will make you trouble. We must look ahead. Everybody has his friends, and Jim Irwin has his friends. If you have trouble with him, his friends will be against you when we want to nominate you for a second term. The county is getting close. If we go to convention without your home delegation it would weaken you, and if we nominate you, every piece of trouble like this cuts down your vote. You ought to line him up and have him do right."

"But he is so funny," said Jennie. "He likes you," said Haakon. "You can line him up."

Jennie blushed, and to conceal her slight embarrassment, got out for the purpose of cranking her machine.

"But if I cannot line him up?" said she.

"I think," said Haakon, "if you can't line him up, you will have a chance to revoke his certificate when you take office."

Jennie thought of Mr. Peterson's suggestion as to "lining up" Jim Irwin as so thoroughly sensible that she gave it a good deal of thought that day. To be sure, everybody had always favored "more practical ad-

vice," and Jim's Latin arithmetic, farm physiology, farm reading and writing, cow-testing exercises, seed analysis, corn clubs and the tomato, poultry and pig clubs he proposed to have in operation the next summer, seemed highly practical; but to Jennie's mind, the fact that they introduced dissension in the neighborhood and promised to make her official life vexatious seemed ample proof that Jim's work was visionary and impractical. Poor Jennie was not aware of the fact that new truth always comes bringing, not peace to mankind, but a sword.

"Father," said she that night, "let's have a little Christmas party."

"All right," said the colonel. "Whom shall we invite?"

"Don't laugh," said she. "I want to invite Jim Irwin and his mother, and nobody else."

"All right," reiterated the colonel. "But why?"

"Oh," said Jennie, "I want to see whether I can talk Jim out of some of his foolishness."

"You want to line him up, do you?" said the colonel. "Well, that's good politics, and incidentally, you may get some good ideas out of Jim."

"Rather unlikely," said Jennie. "I don't know about that," said the colonel, smiling. "I begin to think that



"Talk Jim Out of Some of His Foolishness."

Jim's a Brown Mouse. I've told you about the Brown Mouse, haven't I?"

"Yes," said Jennie. "You've told me. But Professor Darbishire's brown mice were simply wild and incorrigible creatures. Just because it happens to emerge suddenly from the forests of heredity, it doesn't prove that the Brown Mouse is any good."

"Justin Morgan was a Brown Mouse," said the colonel. "And he founded the greatest breed of horses in the world."

"You say that," said Jennie, "because you're a lover of the Morgan horse."

"Napoleon Bonaparte was a Brown Mouse," said the colonel. "So was George Washington, and so was Peter the Great. Whenever a Brown Mouse appears he changes things in a little way or a big way."

"For the better, always?" asked Jennie.

"No," said the colonel. "The Brown Mouse may throw back to slant-headed savagery. But Jim . . . sometimes I think Jim is the kind of Mendelian segregation out of which we get Franklins and Edisons and their sort. You may get some good ideas out of Jim. Let us have them here for Christmas, by all means."

There is no doubt that on Christmas day Jennie Woodruff was justified in thinking that they were a queer couple. They weren't like the Woodruffs, at all. They were of a different pattern. To be sure, Jim's clothes were not especially noteworthy, being just shiny, and frayed at cuff and instep, and short of sleeve and leg, and ill-fitting and cheap. Jim's queerness lay not so much in his clothes as in his personality.

On the other hand, Jennie could not help thinking that Mrs. Irwin's queerness was to be found almost solely in her clothes. The black alpaca looked undeniably respectable. Jennie felt it must have a story—a story in which the stooped, rusty, somber old lady looked like a character drawn to harmonized with the period just after the war.

But Jennie had the keenness to see that if Mrs. Irwin could have had an up-to-date costume she would have become a rather ordinary and not bad-looking old lady. What Jennie failed to divine was that if Jim could have invested a hundred dollars in the services of tailors, haberdashers, barbers and other specialists in personal appearance, and could have blotted out his record as her father's field-hand, he would have seemed to her a distinguished-looking young man. Not handsome, of course, but the sort peo-

ple look after—and follow.

"Come to dinner," said Mrs. Woodruff, who at this juncture had a hired girl, but was yoked to the oar nevertheless when it came to turkey and the other fixings of a Christmas dinner. "It's good enough, what there is of it, and there's enough of it such as it is—but the dressing in the turkey would be better for a little more sage!"

The bountiful meal piled mountain-high for guest and hired help and family melted away in a manner to delight the hearts of Mrs. Woodruff and Jennie. The colonel, in stiff starched shirt, black tie and frock coat, carved with much empressment, and Jim felt almost for the first time a sense of the value of manner.

"I had bigger turkeys," said Mrs. Woodruff to Mrs. Irwin, "but I thought it would be better to cook two turkeys instead of one great big gobbler with meat as tough as tripe and stuffed full of fat."

"One of the hens would 'a' been plenty," replied Mrs. Irwin. "How much did they weigh?"

"About fifteen pounds apiece," was the answer. "The gobbler would 'a' weighed thirty, I guess. He's pure Mammoth Bronze."

"I wish," said Jim, "that we could get a few breeding birds of the wild bronze turkeys from Mexico."

"Why?" asked the colonel.

"They're the original blood of the domestic bronze turkeys," said Jim, "and they're bigger and handsomer than the pure bred bronzes, even. They're a better stock than the North-

ern wild turkeys from which our common birds originated."

"Where do you learn all these things, Jim?" asked Mrs. Woodruff.

"I declare, I often tell Woodruff that it's as good as a lecture to have Jim Irwin at table. My intelligence has fallen since you quit working here, Jim."

There came into Jim's eyes the gleam of the man devoted to a Cause—and the dinner tended to develop into a lecture. Jennie saw a little more plainly wherein his queerness lay.

"There's an education in any meal, if we would just use the things on the table as materials for study, and follow their trails back to their starting points. This turkey takes us back to the chaparral of Mexico."

"What's chaparral?" asked Jennie, as a diversion. "It's one of the words I have seen so often and know perfectly to speak it and read it—but after all it's just a word, and nothing more."

"Ain't that the trouble with our education, Jim?" queried the colonel, cleverly steering Jim back into the track of his discourse.

"They are not even living words," answered Jim, "unless we have clothed them in flesh and blood through some sort of concrete notion. 'Chaparral' to Jennie is just the ghost of a word. Our civilization is full of inefficiency because we are satisfied to give our children these ghosts and shucks and husks of words, instead of the things themselves, that can be seen and hefted and handled and tested and heard."

CHAPTER IX

The Brown Mouse Escapes.

Jennie looked Jim over carefully. His queerness was taking on a new phase—and she felt a sense of surprise such as one experiences when the conjurer causes a rose to grow into a tree before your very eyes.

"I think we lose so much time in school," Jim went on, "while the children are waiting their dinners."

"Well, Jim," said Mrs. Woodruff, "every one but you is down on the human level. The poor kids have to eat!"

"But think how much good education there is wrapped up in the school dinner—if we could only get it out!"

Jennie grew grave. Here was this Brown Mouse actually introducing the subject of the school—and he ought to suspect that she was planning to line him up on this very thing—if he wasn't a perfect donkey as well as a dreamer. And he was calmly wading into the subject as if she were the ex-farm-hand country teacher, and he was the county superintendent-elect!

"Eating a dinner like this, mother," said the colonel gallantly, "is an education in itself—and eating some others requires one; but just how 'learnin'' is wrapped up in the school lunch is a new one on me, Jim."

"Well," said Jim, "in the first place the children ought to cook their meals as a part of the school work. Prior to that they ought to buy the materials. And prior to that they ought to keep the accounts of the school kitchen. They'd like to do these things, and it would help prepare them for life on an intelligent plane, while they prepared the meals."

"Isn't that looking rather far ahead?" asked the county superintendent-elect.

"It's like a lot of other things we think far ahead," urged Jim. "The only reason why they're far off is because we think them so. It's a thought—and a thought is as near the moment we think it as it will ever be."

"I guess that's so—to a wild-eyed reformer," said the colonel. "But go on. Develop your thought a little. Have some more dressing."

"Thanks, I believe I will," said Jim. "And a little more of the cranberry sauce. No more turkey, please."

"I'd like to see the school class that could prepare this dinner," said Mrs. Woodruff.

"Why," said Jim, "you'd be there showing them how! They'd get credits in their domestic economy course for getting the school dinner—and they'd bring their mothers into it to

help them stand at the head of their classes. And one detail of girls would cook one week, and another serve. The setting of the table would come in as a study—flowers, linen and all that. And when we get a civilized teacher, table manners!"

"I'd take on that class," said the hired man, winking at Selma Carlson, the maid, from somewhere below the salt. "The way I make my knife feed my face would be a great help to the children."

"And when the food came on the table," Jim went on, with a smile at his former fellow-laborer, who had heard most of this before as a part of the field conversation, "just think of the things we could study while eating it. The literary term for eating a meal is discussing it—well, the discussion of a meal under proper guidance is much more educative than a lecture. This breast-bone, now," said he, referring to the remains on his plate. "That's physiology. The cranberry sauce—that's botany, and commerce, and soil management—do you know, Colonel, that the cranberry must have an acid soil—which would kill alfalfa or clover?"

"Read something of it," said the colonel, "but it didn't interest me much."

"And the difference between the types of fowl on the table—that's breeding. And the nutmeg, pepper and coconut—that's geography. And everything on the table runs back to geography, and comes to us linked to our lives by dollars and cents—and they're mathematics."

"We must have something more than dollars and cents in life," said Jennie. "We must have culture."

"Culture," cried Jim, "is the ability to think in terms of life—isn't it?"

"Like Jesse James?" suggested the hired man, who was a careful student of the life of that eminent bandit.

There was a storm of laughter at this sally amidst which Jennie wished she had thought of something like that. Jim joined in the laughter at his own expense, but was clearly suffering from argumentative shock.

"That's the best answer I've had on that point, Pete," he said, after the disturbance had subsided. "But if the James boys and the Youngers had had the sort of culture I'm for, they would have been successful stock men and farmers, instead of train robbers. Take Raymond Simms, for instance. He had all the qualifications of a member of the James gang when he came here. All he needed was a few exasperated associates of his own sort, and a convenient railway with undefended trains running over it. But after a few weeks of real 'culture' under a mighty poor teacher, he's developing into the most enthusiastic farmer I know. That's real culture."

"It's snowing like everything," said Jennie, who faced the window.

"Don't cut your dinner short," said the colonel to Pete, "but I think you'll find the cattle ready to come in out of the storm when you get good and through."

"I think I'll let 'em in now," said Pete, by way of excusing himself. "I expect to put in most of the day from now on getting ready to quit eating. Save some of everything for me, Selma—I'll be right back!"

"All right, Pete," said Selma. Mrs. Woodruff and Jim's mother went into other parts of the house on research work connected with their converse on domestic economy. The colonel withdrew for an inspection of the live stock on the eve of the threatened blizzard. And Jim was left alone with Jennie in the front parlor.

Scanning him by means of her back hair, Jennie knew that in another moment Jim would lay his hand on her shoulder, or otherwise advance to personal nearness, as he had done the night of his ill-starred speech at the schoolhouse—and she rose in self-defense. Self-defense, however, did not seem to require that he be kept at too great a distance; so she maneuvered him to the sofa, and seated him beside her. Now was the time to line him up.

"It seems good to have you with us today," said she. "We're such old, old friends."

"Yes," repeated Jim, "old friends. . . . We are, aren't we, Jennie?"

He reached over and possessed himself of her hand. She pulled it from him gently, but he paid no attention to the little muscular protest, and examined the hand critically. On the back of the middle finger he pointed out a scar—a very tiny scar.

"Do you remember how you got that?" he asked.

Because Jim clung to the hand, their heads were very close together as she joined in the examination.

"Why, I don't believe I do," said she.

"I do," he replied. "We—you and I and Mary Forsythe were playing numble-peg, and you put your hand on the grass just as I threw the knife—it cut you, and left that scar."

"I remember, now!" said she. "How such things come back over the memory. And did it leave a scar when I pushed you toward the red-hot stove in the schoolhouse one blizzard day like this, and you peeled the skin

off your wrist where it struck the stove?"

"Look at it," said he, baring his long and bony wrist. "Right there!"

And they were off on the trail that leads back to childhood. They had talked long, and intimately, when the shadows of the early evening crept into the corners of the room. Jennie recalled the time when the tornado narrowly missed the schoolhouse, and frightened everybody in school nearly to death.

"Everybody but you, Jim," Jennie remembered. "You looked out of the window and told the teacher that the twister was going north of us, and would kill somebody else."

"Did I?" asked Jim.

"Yes," said Jennie, "and when the teacher asked us to kneel and thank God, you said, 'Why should we thank God that somebody else is blown away?' She was greatly shocked."

"I don't see to this day," Jim asserted, "what answer there was to my question."

In the gathering darkness Jim again took Jennie's hand, but this time she deprived him of it.

He was trembling like a leaf. Let it be remembered in his favor that this was the only girl's hand he had ever held.

"You can't find any more scars on it," she said soberly.

"Let me see how much it has changed since I stuck the knife in it," begged Jim.

Jennie held it up for inspection. "It's longer, and slenderer, and whiter, and even more beautiful," said he, "than the little hand I cut; but it was then the most beautiful hand in the world to me—and still is."

"I must light the lamps," said the county superintendent-elect, rather flustered. It must be confessed, "Mamma! Where are all the matches?"

Mrs. Woodruff and Mrs. Irwin came in, and the lamplight reminded Jim's mother that the cow was still to milk



"Remember How You Got That."

and that the chickens might need attention. The Woodruff sleigh came to the door to carry them home; but Jim desired to breast the storm. He felt that he needed the conflict. Mrs. Irwin scolded him for his foolishness, but he strode off into the whirling drift, throwing back a good-by for general consumption, and a pathetic smile to Jennie.

"He's as odd as Dick's husband," said Mrs. Woodruff, "tramping off in a storm like this."

"Did you line him up?" asked the colonel of Jennie.

The young lady started and blushed. She had forgotten all about the politics of the situation.

"I—I'm afraid I didn't, papa," she confessed. "Those brown mice of Professor Darbishire's," said the colonel, "were the devil and all to control."

(To be continued)

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