

THE BROWN MOUSE

by Herbert Quick



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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 nicknames 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.

But, true to his belief in honest, thorough work, like a general preparing for battle, he examined his field of operations. His manner of doing this seemed to prove to Colonel Woodruff, who watched it with keen interest as something new in the world, that Jim Irwin was possibly a Brown Mouse. But the colonel knew only a part of Jim's performances. He saw Jim clothed in slickers, walking through rainstorms to the houses in the Woodruff district, as greedy for every moment of rain as a haymaker for shine; and he knew that Jim made a great many evening calls.

But he did not know that Jim was making what our sociologists call a survey. For that matter, neither did Jim; for books on sociology cost more than 25 cents a volume, and Jim had never seen one. However, it was a survey. To be sure, he had long known everybody in the district, save the Simmses—and he was now a friend of all that exotic race; but there is knowing and knowing.

He now had note-books full of facts about people and their farms. He knew how many acres each family possessed, and what sort of farming each husband was doing—live stock, grain or mixed. He knew about the mortgages, and the debts. He knew whether the family atmosphere was happy and contented, or the reverse. He knew which boys and girls were wayward and insubordinate. He made a record of the advancement in their studies of all the children, and what they liked to read. He knew their favorite amusements. He talked with their mothers and sisters—not about the school, to any extent, but on the weather, the horses, the automobiles, the silo-filling machinery and the profits of farming.

Really, though Jennie Woodruff did not see how such doings related to school work, Jim Irwin's school was running full blast in the homes of the district and the minds of many pupils, weeks and weeks before that day when he called them to order on the Monday specified in his contract as the first day of school.

Con Bonner, who came to see the opening, voiced the sentiments of the older people when he condemned the



"That Feller'll Never Do."

school as disorderly. To be sure, there were more pupils enrolled than had ever entered on a first day in the whole history of the school, and it was hard to accommodate them all. But the director's criticism was leveled against the free-and-easy air of the children. Most of them had brought seed corn and a good-sized corn show was on view. There was much argument as to the merits of the various entries. Instead of a language lesson from the text-book, Jim had given them an exercise based on an examination of the ears of corn.

The number exercises of the little chaps had been worked out with ears and kernels of corn. One class in arithmetic calculated the percentage of inferior kernels at tip and butt to the full-sized grains in the middle of the ear.

All the time, Jim Irwin, awkward and uncouth, clad in his none-too-good Sunday suit and trying to hide behind his Lincolnian smile the fact that he

was pretty badly frightened and much embarrassed, passed among them, getting them enrolled, setting them to work, wasting much time and laboring like a heavy-laden barge in a sea-way.

"That feller'll never do," said Bonner to Bronson next day. "Looks like a tramp in the schoolroom."

"Wearin' his best, I guess," said Bronson.

"Half the kids call him 'Jim,'" said Bonner.

"That's all right with me," replied Bronson.

"The room was as noisy as a caucus," was Bonner's next indictment, "and the fure was all over corn like a hog-pen."

"Oh! I don't suppose he can get away with it," assented Bronson disgustedly, "but that boy of mine is as tickled as a colt with the whole thing. Says he's goin' regular this winter."

"That's because Jim don't keep no order," said Bonner. "He lets Newt do as he pleases."

"First time he's ever pleased to do anything but deviltry," protested Bronson. "Oh, I suppose Jim'll fall down, and we'll have to fire him—but I wish we could git a good teacher that would git hold of Newt the way he seems to."

CHAPTER V

The Promotion of Jennie.

If Jennie Woodruff was the cause of Jim Irwin's sudden irruption into the educational field by her scoffing "Humph!" at the idea of a farm-hand's ever being able to marry, she also gave him the opportunity to knock down the driver of the big motorcar, and perceptibly elevate himself in the opinion of the neighborhood, while filling his own heart with something like shame.

The fat man who had said "Cut it out" to his driver, was Mr. Charles Dilly, a business man in the village at the extreme opposite corner of the county. Mr. Dilly was a candidate for county treasurer, and wished to be nominated at the approaching county convention. In his part of the county lived the county superintendent—a candidate for renomination. He was just a plain garden or field county superintendent of schools, no better and no worse than the general political run of them, but he had local pride enlisted in his cause, and was a good politician.

Mr. Dilly was in the Woodruff district to build a backfire against this conflagration of the county superintendent. He expected to use Jennie Woodruff to light it withal. That is, while denying that he wished to make any deal or trade—every candidate in every convention always says that—he wished to say to Miss Woodruff and her father, that if Miss Woodruff would permit her name to be used for the office of county superintendent of schools, a goodly group of delegates could be selected in the other corner of the county who would be glad to reciprocate any favors Mr. Charles J. Dilly might receive in the way of votes for county treasurer with ballots for Miss Jennie Woodruff for superintendent of schools.

Mr. Dilly never inquired as to Miss Woodruff's abilities as an educator. That would have been eccentric. Miss Woodruff never asked herself if she knew anything about rural education which especially fitted her for the task; for was she not a popular and successful teacher—and was not that enough? So are the officials chosen who supervise and control the education of the farm children of America.

When Jim Irwin started home from putting out his team the day after his first call on the Simms family, Jennie was waiting at the gate to be congratulated on her nomination.

"I hope you're elected," Jim said, holding the hand, she had extended; "but there's no doubt of that."

"They say not," replied Jennie; "but father believes in working just as if we didn't have a big majority for the ticket. Say a word for me when on your pastoral rounds."

"All right said Jim, "what shall I say you'll do for the schools?"

"Why," said Jennie, rather perplexed, "I'll be fair in my examinations of teachers, try to keep the unfit teachers out of the schools, visit schools as often as I can, and—why, what does any good superintendent do?"

"I never heard of a good county superintendent," said Jim.

"Never heard of one—why, Jim Irwin!"

"I don't believe there is any such thing," persisted Jim, "and if you do no more than you say, you'll be off the same piece as the rest. Your system won't give us any better schools than we have—of the old sort—and we need a new kind."

"Oh, Jim, Jim! Dreaming as of yore! Why can't you be practical!

What do you mean by a new kind of rural school?"

"It would be correlated with rural life. It would get education out of the things the farmers and farmers' wives are interested in as a part of their lives."

Jennie looked serious, after smothering a laugh.

"Jim," said she, "you're going to have a hard enough time to succeed in the Woodruff school, if you condescend yourself to methods that have been tested, and found good."

"But the old methods," urged Jim, "have been tested and found bad. Shall I keep to them?"

"They have made the American people what they are," said Jennie. "Don't be unpatriotic, Jim."

"They have educated our farm children for the cities," said Jim. "This county is losing population—and it's the best county in the world."

"Pessimism never wins," said Jennie.

"Neither does blindness," answered Jim. "It is losing the farms their dwellers, and swelling the cities with a proletariat."

For some time, now, Jim had ceased to hold Jennie's hand; and their sweet-heart days had never seemed farther away.

"Jim," said Jennie, "I may be elected to a position in which I shall be obliged to pass on your acts as teacher—in an official way, I mean. I hope they will be justifiable."

Jim smiled his slowest and saddest smile.

"If they're not, I'll not ask you to condone them," said he. "But first



"Good Night," said Jennie curtly.

they must be justifiable to me, Jennie."

"Good night," said Jennie curtly, and left him.

Jennie, I am obliged to admit, gave scant attention to the new career upon which her old sweetheart seemed to be entering. She was in politics, and was playing the game as became the daughter of a local politician. Col. Albert Woodruff went South with the army as a corporal in 1861, and came back a lieutenant. His title of colonel was conferred by appointment as a member of the staff of the governor, long years ago, when he was county auditor. He was not a rich man, as I may have suggested, but a well-to-do farmer, whose wife did her own work much of the time, not because the colonel could not afford to hire "help," but for the reason that "hired girls" were hard to get.

The colonel, having seen the glory of the coming of the Lord in the triumph of his side in the great war, was inclined to think that all reform had ceased, and was a political stand-patter—a very honest, and sincere one. Moreover, he was influential enough so that when Mr. Cummins or Mr. Dolliver came into the county on political errands, Colonel Woodruff had always been called into conference. He was of the old New England type, believed very much in heredity, very much in the theory that whatever is right, in so far as it has secured money or power.

A very respectable, honest, American Tory was the colonel, fond of his political sway, and rather soured by the fact that it was passing from him. He had now broken with Cummins and Dolliver as he had done years ago with Weaver and later with Larrabee—and this breach was very important to him, whether they were greatly concerned about it or not.

Such being her family history, Jennie was something of a politician herself. She was in no way surprised when approached by party managers on the subject of accepting the nomination for county superintendent of schools. Colonel Woodruff could deliver some delegates to his daughter, though he rather shied at the proposal at first, but on thinking it over, warmed somewhat to the notion of having a Woodruff on the county pay roll once more.

CHAPTER VI

Jim Talks the Weather Cold.

"Going to the rally, James?"

Jim had finished his supper, and prepared for a long evening in his attic den with his cheap literature. But as the district schoolmaster he was to some extent responsible for the protection of the school property, and felt some sense of duty as to exhibiting an interest in public affairs.

"I guess I'll have to go, mother," he replied regretfully. "I want to see Mr. Woodruff about borrowing his Babcock milk tester, and I'll go that way. I guess I'll go on to the meeting."

He kissed his mother when he went—a habit from which he never devi-

ated, and another of those personal peculiarities which had marked him as different from the other boys of the neighborhood. His mother urged his overcoat upon him in vain—for Jim's overcoat was distinctly a bad one, while his best suit, now worn every day as a concession to his scholastic position, still looked passably well after several weeks of schoolroom duty. It seemed more logical to assume that the weather was milder than it really was, on that sharp October evening, and appear at his best, albeit rather aware of the cold. Jennie was at home, and he was likely to see and be seen of her.

"You can borrow that tester," said the colonel, "and the cows that go with it, if you can use 'em. They ain't earning their keep here. But how does the milk tester fit into the curriculum of the school? A decoration?"

"We want to make a few tests of the cows in the neighborhood," answered Jim. "Just another of my fool notions."

"All right," said the colonel. "Take it along. Going to the speakin'?"

"Certainly, he's going," said Jennie, entering. "This is my meeting, Jim."

"Surely, I'm going," assented Jim. "And I think I'll run along."

"I wish we had room for you in the car," said the colonel. "But I'm going around by Bronson's to pick up the speaker, and I'll have a chuck-up load."

"Not so much of a load as you think," said Jennie. "I'm going with Jim. The walk will do me good."

Any candidate warm to her voting population just before election; but Jennie had a special kindness for Jim. He was no longer a farm hand. The fact that he was coming to be a center of disturbance in the district, and that she quite failed to understand how his eccentric behavior could be harmonized with those principles of teaching which she had imbibed at the state normal school in itself lifted him nearer to equality with her. A public nuisance is really more respectable than a nonentity.

She gave Jim a thrill as she passed through the gate that he opened for her. White moonlight on her white furs suggested purity, exaltation, the essence of womanhood—things far finer in the woman of twenty-seven than the glamour thrown over him by the school girl of sixteen.

Jim gave her no thrill; for he looked gaunt and angular in his skimpy, ready-made suit, too short in legs and sleeves, and too thin for the season. Yet, as they walked along, Jim grew upon her. He strode on with immense strides, made slow to accommodate her shorter steps, and embarrassing her by his entire absence of effort to keep step. For all that, he lifted his face to the stars, and he pointed out the great open spaces in the Milky Way, wondering at their emptiness and at the fact that no telescope can find stars in them.

They stopped and looked. Jim laid his hand on the shoulders of her white fur collar.

"What's the use of political meetings," said Jim, "when you and I can stand here and think our way out, even beyond the limits of our universe?"

"A wonderful journey," said she, not quite understanding his mood, "but while we roam beyond the Milky Way, we aren't getting any votes for me for county superintendent."

Jim said nothing. He was quite re-established on the earth.

"Don't you want me to be elected, Jim?"

Jim seemed to ponder this for some time—a period of taking the matter under advisement which caused Jennie to drop his arm and busy herself with her skirts.

"Yes," said Jim, at last; "of course I do."

Nothing more was said until they reached the schoolhouse door.

"Well," said Jennie rather indignantly, "I'm glad there are plenty of voters who are more enthusiastic about me than you seem to be!"

More interesting to a keen observer than the speeches were the unusual things in the room itself. On the blackboards, with problems in arithmetic, were calculations as to the feeding value of various rations for live stock, records of laying hens and computation as to the excess of value in eggs produced over the cost of feed.

Pinned to the wall were market reports on all sorts of farm products, and especially numerous were the statistics on the prices of cream and butter. There were files of farm papers piled about, and racks of agricultural bulletins. In one corner of the room was a typewriting machine, and in another a sewing machine. Parts of an old telephone were scattered about on the teacher's desk. A model of a piggy stood on a shelf, done in cardboard.

Instead of the usual collection of text-books in the desk, there were hectograph copies of exercises, reading lessons, arithmetical tables and essays on various matters relating to agriculture, all of which were accounted for by two or three hand-made hectographs—a very fair sort of printing plant—lying on a table.

The members of the school board were there, looking on these evidences of innovation with wonder and more or less disfavor. Things were disorderly. The text-books recently adopted by the board against some popular protest had evidently been pitched, neck and crop, out of the school by the man whom Bonner had termed a dub. It was a sort of contempt for the powers that be.

Colonel Woodruff was in the chair. After the speechifying was over, and the stereotyped, though rather illogical, appeal had been made for voters of the one party to cast the straight

ticket, and for those of the other faction to scratch, the colonel rose to adjourn the meeting.

Newton Bronson, safely concealed behind taller people, called out, "Jim Irwin! speech!"

There was a giggle, a slight sensation, and many voices joined in the call for the new schoolmaster.

Colonel Woodruff felt the unwisdom of ignoring the demand. Probably he relied upon Jim's discretion and expected a declination.

Jim arose, seedy and lank, and the voices ceased, save for another suppressed titter.

"I don't know," said Jim, "whether this call upon me is a joke or not. If

it is, it isn't a practical one, for I can't talk. I don't care much about parties or politics. I don't know whether I'm a Democrat, a Republican or a Populist."

This caused a real sensation. The nerve of the fellow! Really, it must in justice be said, Jim was losing himself in a desire to tell his true feelings. He forgot all about Jennie and her candidacy—about everything except his real, true feelings. This proves that he was no politician.

"I don't see much in this county campaign that interests me," he went on—and Jennie Woodruff reddened, while her seasoned father covered his mouth with his hand to conceal a smile. "The politicians come out into the farming districts every campaign and get us hayseeds for anything they want. They always have got us. They've got us again! They give us clodhoppers the glad hand, a cheap cigar, and a cheaper smile after election; and that's all. I know it, you all know it, they know it. I don't blame them so very much. The trouble is we don't ask them to do anything better."

"I want a new kind of rural school; but I don't see any prospect, no matter how this election goes, for any change in them. We in the Woodruff district will have to work out our own salvation. Our political ring never'll do anything but the old things. They don't want to, and they haven't sense enough to do it if they did. That's all—and I don't suppose I should have said as much as I have!"

There was stark silence for a moment when he sat down, and then as many cheers for Jim as for the principal speaker of the evening, cheers mingled with titters and catcalls. Jim felt as if he had made an ass of himself. And as he walked out of the door, the future county superintendent passed by him in high displeasure, and walked home with someone else.

Jim found the weather much colder than it had been while coming. He really needed an Eskimo's fur suit.

CHAPTER VII

New Wine and Old Bottles.

In the little strip of forest which divided the sown from the sown wandered two boys in earnest converse. They seemed to be Boy Trappers, and from their backloads of steel-traps one of them might have been Frank



Frank Merriwell and Deadshot Dick.

Merriwell, and the other Dead-Shot Dick. The boy who resembled Frank Merriwell was Raymond Simms. The other, whose overalls were fringed, who wore a cartridge belt about his person, and carried hatchet, revolver, and a long knife with a deerfoot handle, and who so studiously looked like Dead-Shot Dick, was our old friend of the road gang, Newton Bronson. Newton put down his load, and sat upon a stump to rest.

Raymond Simms was dimly conscious of a change in Newton since the day when they met and helped select Colonel Woodruff's next year's seed corn. Newton's mother had a mother's confidence that Newton was now a good boy, who had been led astray by other boys, but had reformed. Jim Irwin had a distinct feeling of optimism. Newton had quit tobacco and beer, casually stating to Jim that he was "in training."

Since Jim had shown his ability to administer a knockout to that angry chauffeur, he seemed to this hobbler-dehoy peculiarly a proper person for athletic confidences.

Newton's mind seemed gradually filling up with new interests. Jim attributed much of this to the clear mountain atmosphere which surrounded Raymond Simms, the ignorant barbarian driven out of his native hills by a feud. Raymond was of the open spaces, and refused to hear fetid things that seemed out of place in them.

As the reason for Newton's improvement in manner of living, Raymond, out of his own experience, would have had no hesitation in naming the school and the schoolmaster.

"I wouldn't go back on a friend," said Newton, seated on the stump with his traps on the ground at his

feet, "the way you're going back on me."

"You got no call to talk thataway," replied the mountain boy. "How'm I goin' back on you?"

"We was goin' to trap all winter," assented Newton, "and next winter we were goin' up in the north woods together."

"You know," said Raymond sardoniously, "that we can't run any trap line and do what we got to do to help Mr. Jim."

Newton sat mute as one having no rejoinder.

"Mr. Jim," went on Raymond, "needs all the help every kid in this settlement kin give him. He's the best friend I ever had. I'm a pore ignorant

boy, an' he teaches me how to do things that will make me something."

"Darn it all!" said Newton.

"You know," said Raymond, "that you'd think mahgty small of me, if I'd desert Mr. Jim Irwin."

"Well, then," replied Newton, seizing his traps and throwing them across his shoulder, "come on with the traps, and shut up! What'll we do when the school board gets Jennie Woodruff to revoke his certificate and make him quit teachin', hey?"

"Nobody'll ever do that," said Raymond. "I'd set in the schoolhouse do' with my rifle and shoot anybody that'd come to th'ow Mr. Jim outen the school."

"Not in this county," said Newton.

"This ain't a gun country,"

"But it orto be either a justice kentry, or a gun kentry," replied the mountain boy. "It stands to reason it must be one 'r the other, Newton."

"No, it don't neither," said Newton dogmatically.

"Why should they th'ow Mr. Jim outen the school?" inquired Raymond.

"Ain't he teachin' us right?"

Newton explained for the tenth time that Jim had done so many things that no teacher was supposed to do, and had left undone so many things that teachers were bound by custom to perform, that Newton's father and Mr. Bonner and Mr. Peterson had made up their minds that they would call upon him to resign, and if he wouldn't, they would "turn him out" in some way.

"What wrong's he done committed?" asked Raymond. "I don't know what teachers air supposed to do in this kentry, but Mr. Jim seems to be the only shore-enough teacher I ever see!"

"He don't teach out of the books the school board adopted," replied Newton.

"But he makes up better lessons," urged Raymond. "An' all the things we do in school helps us make a livin'."

"He begins at eight in the mornin'," said Newton, "an' he has some of us there till half past five, and comes back in the evening. And every Saturday, some of the kids are doin' something at the schoolhouse."

"They don't pay him for overtime, do they?" queried Raymond. "Well, then, they orto, instid of turnin' him out!"

"Well, they'll turn him out!" prophesied Newton. "I'm havin' more fun in school than I ever—an' that's why I'm with you on this quittin' trapping—but they'll get Jim, all right!"

"I'm havin' something betteh'n fun," replied Raymond. "My pap has never understood this kentry, an' we all has had bad times hyeh; but Mr. Jim an' I have studied out how I can make a betteh livin' next year—and pap says we kin go on the way Mr. Jim says. I'll work for Colonel Woodruff a part of the time, an' pap kin make corn in the biggest field. It seems we didn't do our work right last year—an' in a couple of years, with the increase of the haws, an' the land we kin get under plow . . ."

It was still an hour before nine—when the rural school traditionally "takes up"—when the boys had stored their traps in a shed at the Bronson home, and walked on to the schoolhouse. That rather scabby and weathered edifice was already humming with industry of a sort. In spite of the hostility of the school board, and the aloofness of the patrons of the school, the pupils were clearly interested in Jim Irwin's system of rural education. Never had the attendance been so large or regular; and one of the reasons for sessions before nine and after four was the inability of the teacher to attend to the needs of his charges in the five and a half hours called "school hours."

The day passed. Four o'clock came. In order that all might reach home for supper, there was no staying, except that Newt Bronson and Raymond Simms remained to sweep and dust the schoolroom, and prepare kindling for the next morning's fire—a work they had taken upon themselves, so as to enable the teacher to put on the blackboards such outlines for the morrow's class work as might be required. Jim was writing on the board a list of words constituting a spelling exercise. They were not from textbooks, but grew naturally out of the study of the seed wheat—"cockle," "morning-glory," "convolvulus," "viable," "viability," "sprouting," "iron-weed" and the like. A tap was heard at the door, and Raymond Simms opened it.

In filed three women—and Jim Irwin knew as he looked at them that he was greeting a deputation, and felt that it meant a struggle. For they were the wives of the members of the school board. He placed for them the three available chairs, and in the absence of any for himself remained standing before them, a gaunt shabby-looking revolutionist at the bar of settled usage and fixed public opinion.

Mrs. Haakon Peterson was a tall blonde woman, slow-spoken and dignified, and Jim felt an instinctive respect for her personality. Mrs. Bron-