

The Brown Mouse

A story of a Rural School in which the Boys and Girls learned "to do" things

By Hopkins Moorhouse

Here is an unusual book, well worth the reading—unusual because it is a serious treatment in fiction form of the vital problem of rural schools and because it may be read for the genuine interest of the story itself as well as for the wider aspects of its subject matter. The author, Herbert Quick, was formerly the editor of "Farm and Fireside" and is well known for his book "The Good Ship Earth" and other works. He is a close student of all agricultural questions, believing that nothing can be more important than the welfare of that third of the population which feeds the other two-thirds; as the foundation of all agricultural efficiency he turns naturally to the rural schoolhouse.

"The Brown Mouse" is the story of a Lincoln in the country classroom—a lanky, gawky, raw-boned, ill-clad farm hand whom the community has always considered "as odd as Dick's hatband." He is an off ox. Instead of playing cards in the haymows on rainy days or raiding melon patches and orchards or playing pool in the village saloon like the rest of the boys, he was to be found at home "reading to rags" such cheap paper editions of standard authors as he could acquire from time to time and otherwise cultivating and seeding his mind even as he cultivated and seeded the acres of his employer for the meagre living of which he and his mother made the best. Jolted into ambition by the disdain with which his employer's daughter meets his advances, he finally takes charge of the district school and proceeds to upset the curriculum and put to practical test his own ideas of elementary education. In short, Jim Irwin proves himself a "brown mouse."

Colonel Woodruff, for whom he worked as a field hand, explains the meaning of the expression. A fellow in Edinburgh crossed the Japanese waltzing mouse with the common white mouse and every one in awhile got out of his hybrids a brown mouse. It wasn't a common house mouse, this, but a wild mouse which ran away and bit and gnawed and raised hob. Justin Morgan was a Brown Mouse, for instance, and founded what the Colonel considered the greatest breed of horses in the world. Napoleon Bonaparte was a Brown Mouse. So was George Washington. So was Peter the Great. Whenever a Brown Mouse appeared he changed things.

Chosen by Accident

Jim Irwin was chosen for the Woodruff School by a fluke. The three members of the school-board were deadlocked on three favorite candidates and more as a joke than anything else Jim Irwin was asked to speak at the meeting. He handled the three directors without gloves and dumped all the fallacies of the orthodox school methods into the hopper of his sarcasm to such good effect that he caused a slight sensation.

"In all the years I attended this school," he said, "I never did a bit of work in school which was economically useful. It was all dry stuff copied from the city schools. 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 either of you three men were making a fight for a new kind of rural school, I'd say fight. But you aren't. You're just making individual fights for your favorite teachers."

The upshot of it was that each director, expecting that the other two would vote otherwise, cast a vote for Jim Irwin so that he would have one vote for him and not feel too badly the failure of his candidature. (He was liked pretty well in the neighborhood). To everybody's surprise Jim Irwin's name was picked three times out of the hat and there was nothing anybody could do but declare him elected as teacher of the school for the ensuing year.

The New Idea

In this ironical manner did the radical young man obtain his chance. He made friends with all the children in the district and thru them with their parents and the attendance at school broke all records. The boys and girls went because they grew so keenly interested in their new teacher's methods of instruction they couldn't stay away. While the blackboards were covered with exercises and outlines of lessons in language, history, mathematics, geography, they were not lessons taken from the text-books.

"The problems in arithmetic were calculations as to the feeding value of various rations for livestock, 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 piggery 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."

One morning perhaps various dishes of grain specimens and grass seeds might be waiting. By each would be a card bearing the name of the farm from which one of the older pupils had brought it. Each lot would be put up in a small cloth bag, made by one of the little girls as a sewing exercise; each card had provided a lesson in penmanship for the younger boys and girls and contained heads under which to enter the number of grains of the seed examined, the number which grew, the percentage of viability, number of alien weed seeds and other sorts, names of these adulterants, weight of true and vitalized and of foul and alien and dead seeds, the value per bushel in the local market and the real market value of the samples after dead seeds and alien matter had been subtracted.

Farm Arithmetic

The pupils themselves concocted their problems in arithmetic: "If in each 250 grains of wheat in Mr. Ezra Bronson's bins 30 are cracked, dead or otherwise not capable of sprouting, what per cent. of the seed will grow?" "If the foul seed and dead wheat amount to one-eighth by weight of the mass, what did Mr. Bronson pay per bushel for the good wheat, if it cost him \$1.10 in the bin, and what per cent. did he lose by the adulterations and the poor wheat?"

Even the very small scholars were not left without interesting things to do. Under the leadership of the pupil who had been appointed weed-seed monitor they played a game of forfeits. Each child would be encouraged to bring some sort of weed from the winter fields, preferably one the seed of which still clung to the dried receptacles, but anyhow a weed. Some pupils would bring merely empty tassels, some bare stalks, and some seeds winnowed from the grain in their father's bins. With these they played forfeits. One of their number having become "IT," he would

be presented with a seed, stalk or head of a weed and if he could tell the name of the weed the child who brought the specimen became "IT" and the name was written on slates or tablets, the new "IT" telling where the weed or seed was collected. If any pupil brought in a specimen the name of which he himself could not give correctly, he paid a forfeit. If a specimen was brought in not found in the school cabinet—which soon contained a considerable collection—it was placed there and the best penman in the school wrote a label for it.

New and Old Clash

Naturally all this excitement and interest caused a buzz in the school, which appeared disorderly. Jim Irwin had his pupils coming earlier than the regular hour and often remaining later or coming back on Saturdays when there was something special in which they were interested. Jim and some of the boys even worked certain evenings at the boys' request. All of which caused much talk among the conservatively inclined parents. The idea that there could be anything fundamentally sane in overturning old and tried school methods, under which they had been educated, seemed absurd. To be sure everybody had always favored "more practical education" and Jim Irwin's farm arithmetic, farm physiology, farm reading and writing, cow-testing exercises, seed analysis, corn clubs and the tomato, poultry and pig clubs which he was proposing to have in operation the next summer—these seemed highly practical, of course; BUT—!

It was true that young Newt Bronson had quit smoking and frequenting the pool-room and was buckling enthusiastically into the school work; that the children were continually coming home and taking a genuine interest in the work of the home farm, asking questions and frequently demonstrating where saving could be made in various operations; BUT—!

Likewise it was noticeable that the boys and girls were learning a lot of practical things about the working of the rural telephone thru talks and demonstrations given by actual linemen who happened to be in the district making repairs; that similar lectures and demonstrations were given by others who were called in by the new teacher; BUT—!

Well, this wasn't school teaching! Where was the culture? The children wouldn't know anything but cows and hens and soils and grains! And how would their boys and girls appear when the parents got fixed so they could move to town. They wouldn't have any culture at all!

Feeling began to run high in the Woodruff district and it culminated in a request that the County Superintendent revoke the contract which engaged Jim Irwin as teacher of the Woodruff School. Miss Jennie Woodruff was County Superintendent, the same young lady who had scorned the awkward farm hand's advances and jolted him into ambition by her disdain. They had been boy and girl sweethearts and were still good friends tho' differing in their idea of educational methods. So here we have the story interest at work thruout, ending in the girl being called upon to sit in judgment upon the man she was learning to respect thru the sheer force of his expanding ideas.

Jim's Educational Ideas

The whole neighborhood turned out for that meeting when Jim Irwin was on the carpet. He admitted most of the allegations thrown at him. "He had practically ignored the text-books. He had burned the district fuel and worn out the district furniture early and late and on Saturdays! He had introduced domestic economy and manual training to some extent by sending the boys to the workshops and the girls to the kitchens and sewing-rooms of the farmers who allowed those privileges. He had used up a great deal of time in studying farm conditions." He had induced the boys to test the cows of the district for butter-fat yield. He was studying the matter of a co-operative creamery. He hoped to have a blacksmith shop on the schoolhouse grounds sometime, where the boys could learn metal working by repairing the farm machinery and shoeing the farm horses. He hoped to install a co-operative laundry in connection with the creamery. He hoped to see a building sometime, with an auditorium where the people would meet often for the moving picture shows, lectures and the like, and he expected that most of the

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THE RURAL SCHOOL

The story of "The Brown Mouse," told on this page, is an effort to illustrate in fiction form the new idea of rural school education. The old notion that the three R's were the only thing necessary to teach in the rural school has long been abandoned. Modern ideas are spreading thruout the rural districts of the Prairie Provinces. We want to publish in The Guide the work that our best schools in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta are accomplishing; what is being done to make the school life and work more interesting to the country boys and girls and of more practical value to them in their future life. It is taken for granted that the school book knowledge is being systematically drilled into the pupils. We would like to know what is being done in the way of school gardens, school fairs, school clubs, organized play, better school-houses and school equipment; what success has followed the serving of hot lunches at noon and how it is carried out; is any sewing, cooking, manual training, etc., being taught? Are the pupils learning of the life, habits and economic value of wild birds and animals? Are they learning to know and identify the weeds and wild flowers and their relative value? Can they all recognize noxious weeds and do they know the best method of exterminating them? Are the children learning farm arithmetic and other farm problems in the school? Are they devoting any study to the lives of really great men and women? What are they learning about the system of government prevailing in their province and country? Is the "teacherage," that is, the school teacher's home, a success? Are the parents taking any more interest in the school work? What is the attitude of the parents to new-fangled notions in school teaching? We shall be glad to have these questions and all others relating to the modern development of the rural school and its work discussed in letters from pupils, parents, teachers and trustees. We particularly want to know of the work of individual schools in the various communities.

These letters and discussions must relate only to purely rural schools, either one or two rooms. We are not considering the consolidated school or the village school at the present time. We would also like to receive good photographs to illustrate the letters, showing particularly attractive school buildings, grounds or pictures of special school work being done. There is no limit to the length of these letters, but they must be written on one side of the paper only and sent in folded, not rolled. Letters must reach The Guide office not later than May 30. To the writer of each one of the best ten letters we receive we will donate a copy of this remarkable book, "The Brown Mouse," which is not only a mighty interesting story, but the best stimulant for better rural education now in print. Address all letters to Editor, The Grain Growers' Guide, Winnipeg.