

"When Wives Were Scarce"

By JAS. F. B. BELFORD

Sketches by G. Campbell

HERE were just three kids of school age in our settlement—Yonnie Yonson, aged six, born of poor, Icelandic parents; Stanislaus Keviet, aged eight, of the Hungarian persuasion, and Mysie Butler, six, coming seven, whose parents had left Tyrone for the Western prairie.

It didn't seem, at first, to us bachelors that there was any violent hurry for a school; but Jack Green, who pitched the hymns on Sunday, when a minister came our way, and in consequence was looked up to as our leading citizen, pointed out that Osprey had a school, and appealed to our patriotism as to whether we would allow a degenerate community of clodhoppers, backed up against the Sand Hills, to put it over us on a vital matter like education of the young.

We could grow two bushels of wheat to their one; we could lick them playing base-ball; and our tug-of-war team had pulled theirs all over the grounds at the County Fair. Would we sit quiet and let them throw their schoolhouse in our face? The matter being put in that way, we decided unanimously that we wouldn't.

We organized our district, making it six sections bigger than Osprey, and elected Jack Green, Joe Thompson, and Jim Bruce trustees. All were bachelors—you can't always depend on the enterprise of a married man; his acts are more or less subject to veto, anyway, and we weren't taking chances. Mike Keviet kicked some, but Jack pointed out to him that he was a parent, and his boy would be a pupil, which was honour enough; that being a Hun he wasn't on to the latest dodges in American education; and, finally, that he wouldn't stand for it. And as Jack was some big and husky, Mike ceased from troubling.

That winter we drew the logs into Mac's mill and got the lumber sawed for the schoolhouse—the Osprey school was only a log building. In the spring we all turned out and put it up, and I want to remark that it looked fine. A good, big room—we hadn't had a real good place for dances so far—new shiny desks, a factory-made door, and the outside painted the brightest and reddest red that money could buy. The preacher moved his service from Joe Thompson's shack to the school, and, say, he had crowds—sometimes thirty or forty people would line up on a Sunday to listen to the preaching, and help Jack negotiate the hymns. The Osprey fellows were boiling mad.

The next move was to hire a teacher. The trustees met, and Jack was instructed to advertise in the city daily. Our mail came in on Saturday, and next mail day we were all sitting round the office an hour before old Jake Cathers pulled in. Jack was there, and when Jim Baxter had shuffled the letters, he dealt Jack three. A meeting of the school board was called, and the letters read.

EACH application was from a lady. As far as I could see, there was no choice among them. Each had the necessary certificate, each wanted fifty dollars a month, and each was ready to sail in at once and instil useful knowledge into the heads of the Rosedale youth. But the trustees couldn't agree. One girl's name was Dottie Jennings, and Joe Thompson was for her from the start. Jim Bruce liked the writing of Miss Mary Saunders, and Jack said the style of the other girl, Miss Annie Binks, was far superior. They argued and wrangled until the rest of us got plumb tired, and we suggested that they should cut the deck, high man to win. They agreed; old Jake cut, and shuffled, and cut again; and each trustee drew a card. Joe got a king, Jim Bruce a ten-spot, and Jack a deuce. Joe got up off the keg he was sitting on.

"I declare Miss Dottie Jennings, duly elected teacher of this here Rosedale school," he announced.

The stage started back to town carrying a telegram which Jake was to send to Miss Jennings, stating that her application was accepted and that she was to report the next Saturday.

There was a full house that next Saturday with one exception. Joe Thompson wasn't there. We

kept guessing and wondering what had happened to Joe, until the stage came in sight, and then we forgot him, we were so anxious to see the new arrival. Jake drove up with a flourish, but our jaws dropped; there was no school-ma'am on board. We questioned Jake, but he knew nothing, or if he did he wouldn't tell.

We were about to disperse, some discouraged, when another rig turned the corner of the trail. A man and a woman were in it, and not one of the three women in our settlement wore a hat like that. We stared, and stared, and, as they drew nearer, Jack roared, "Herrin's, if it ain't Joe!"

And Joe it was. He pulled the horse up at the door of the office, and stood up in the buggy.

"Gents all," he said, "let me make you acquainted with Mrs. Joe Thompson, viceroy Miss Dottie Jennings, who hereby and hereon resigns her position as teacher of this school. Good evening." And he drove off to his shack.

We were sure flabbergasted. That ornery Joe had borrowed the only buggy in the settlement and sneaked off to town on Friday. He sprung himself to a new outfit of clothes, a haircut and a shave, and announced himself to our school-ma'am as the reception committee from Rosedale. And he made himself so agreeable that in two hours after the train had left Miss Jennings on the platform she became Mrs. Thompson.

WE held a council of war, and talked the matter over. We were some reconciled when we remembered that Dottie looked thirty-five and was decidedly of the skinny order. Jim Bruce and Jack matched quarters, and Jake carried back another telegram, this time to Miss Mary Saunders, accepting her application, and asking her to report the following Saturday. Joe and the missus came to meeting on Sunday, and when we saw four women in the crowd, we felt better. Osprey had always crowed over us because they had four women in their settlement—they counted in Pete Contois' wife, and she was three parts squaw—but now we had four genuine white women and another coming. Things might have been worse, and we forgave Joe.

Next Saturday we lined up at the office again, and this time Jake delivered the goods. I heard afterwards that Jack had had four arguments with fellows that wanted to borrow Pete McIntyre's buggy, and I know some of the boys looked puffed about the eyes. Jack stepped up to the stage and helped her out. She was a fine, big, strapping woman, not so young as she used to be, but still a mighty fine girl. Mrs. Yonson had agreed to board her—they had three rooms in their house—and Jack escorted her there, Jim Bruce tagging behind carrying her grip.

Next day five women at church. But you ought to have seen how the boys had slicked up. Hair plastered smooth as grease could make it, boots rubbed up, and Jim Bruce had on a boiled shirt. We overlooked it under the circumstances, but we all felt it was a dangerous innovation. School



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started the next day. Jack and Jim were there in their official capacities, and the three kids were there with three dinners wrapped up in newspapers. The teacher got busy, and the trustees, after admiring a spell, got up and came home.

Jack was busy breaking sod the next few days, so when I went over to his shack one night and congratulated him on the increase in the number of pupils he looked astonished.

"Yes," said I, "started with three on Monday, had four on Tuesday, seven on Wednesday—that's to-day—and I wouldn't wonder if she has twenty by Friday."

"Hey," he said, "you crazy? There ain't but three kids within ten mile of here."

"All the same," I replied, "if you had peeped in through the windows of our dinky red schoolhouse to-day, you'd have seen seven pupils busy with their spelling-books."

"By Herkimer," he snapped—Jack never used the old-fashioned, vulgar cuss-words—"what d'you mean?"

"Tuesday," said I, slow like, "Jim Bruce started. Said he felt he was kind of backward in arithmetic and ought to rub up a little. To-day Bob Gilmour, Tom Bowles and Alf. Little joined the merry throng. Book-keeping is their specialty. I'm thinking of a course in hygiene myself."

Jack sat and stared at me. The door opened, and Mike Keviet came in.

"Mister Green, I come see you 'bout dat school."

Jack grunted, and turned his glare on Mike. "My Stanislaus, he go for say his lesson, and Mister Jim Bruce, he tell him not to bodder teacher. He want teacher to show him sum. Why for my Stanislaus not say his lesson? I pay more de tax dan Mister Jim Bruce."

"You, Mike, listen to me!" Jack got on his feet. "I'll fix that school first thing to-morrow. Now you go home."

Mike went.

By tactful questioning, I found that Jack had determined to visit the school at ten o'clock next day. Promptly I attached myself to the committee of inspection.

Next morning we cautiously approached the schoolhouse through the scrub, and took up a strategic position under one of the windows. Peeping "She sure bowled Jack over." in we gazed in wonder at the scene. The seven of the previous day had swelled to twenty. One-half of the able-bodied bachelors of Rosedale had abandoned their growing crops and other agricultural affairs for higher education. Miss Saunders moved among them, a buxom Minerva, seemingly not one whit disconcerted by her position. As for the three original pupils, literally they had to take a back seat. Fierce resentment showed on the face of Stanislaus, while Mysie Butler relieved her outraged feelings by covertly sticking out her tongue at the teacher whenever that lady's ample back was turned.

But the senior grade—how industrious they were! They figured, they wrote, they erased, with conscientious faithfulness. They blushed with pleasure as Miss Saunders examined their work. It was an affecting scene.

Jim Bruce was easily the star pupil. Jim was a very tall man, stoop-shouldered, and celebrated as having the biggest feet in the county. He humped up over the little desk before him, while his eyes, framed by stringy side-whiskers, followed the teacher. Whenever he considered she dallied too long by the desk of another pupil, he would shoot up a hand like a ham, and, with a snap of his finger and thumb that sounded like a rifle crack, bring her hurrying to his side. For ten minutes we gazed on this hive of industry, then Jack started for the door. Not being sure of my footing I stayed where I was.

"Miss Saunders," said Jack, opening the door, "I am sorry to interrupt the children at their studies. But we have to put up the stoves and pipes to-day, and sometimes on such occasions, language is used which is not fit for infant ears. If you would dismiss the little ones"—he glared at Jim—"for the day, I'll have everything ready for to-morrow."

"Certainly, Mr. Green, certainly. Pupils, attention!"

The bunch looked sheepishly, but they straightened

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