

THE GROUND BEAN*

There is a native wild bean which grows throughout a very extensive area of North America, and which was an item of great importance in the food supply of all the tribes in its range. But white people have never investigated its usefulness nor its possibilities of improvement under cultivation and selective breeding. The scientific name of this bean is *Falcata comosa*; its common name is ground bean, from its habit of producing one form of its fruits in the ground in manner similar to the peanut. It forms two kinds of branches, bearing two forms of flowers, producing two forms of fruits. Leafy branches climb up over shrubs, or in the absence of any support, form a tangled mass of vines. Upon these upper leafy branches are borne showy, purplish flowers exactly resembling garden bean blossoms in miniature. From these petaliferous flowers are produced small bean pods about a half inch to an inch in length. These pods contain each from three to four or five small hard mottled beans about an eighth of an inch long.

From the base of the main stem of the plant, the branches of the second form grow out in all directions, creeping prostrate on the ground under the shade of the overgrowth, and forming a perfect network of colorless, leafless branches. The tiny, inconspicuous blossoms borne on these prostrate branches are self-pollinated and push into the leaf mold and soft soil, and there each produces a single large bean closely invested in a filmy pod or husk. These beans, which are formed in the earth, are about the size of lima beans, or even larger. It is the large beans, borne in the ground upon these basal branches creeping on all the surface of the ground under the leafy branches, which are so good for food and so greatly desired. When cooked they are of excellent favor. These very desirable beans would be very difficult to obtain but for the help of a certain species of small mammal (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*), commonly called meadow mouse or bean mouse. They hollow out storage places in the ground where they put away their winter supplies.

These stores of ground beans were eagerly sought by Indians of all tribes throughout the range of the plant. And they were grateful to the bean mouse for its work in harvesting and storing the ground

* Notes of Field Work of 1923

beans. They said that they must not take away all the beans from the stores of the bean mice, for it would be wicked to loot their stores and leave them destitute. They believed that if one were so hard hearted and unjust that such action would surely bring its proper punishment. They said that when they went to look for the stores of beans laid up by the bean mice that they must first prepare themselves in heart and mind. One who went out to look for the bean stores must go in all humility and charity, not only toward all humankind, but with a feeling of acknowledgment of the rights of all living things, plants as well as animals and human beings, and with a becoming sense of the interdependence of all living things. One must have a consciousness of one's debt to all Nature and to all the Mysterious Powers. One going on this quest must, as they said, "have no evil thoughts, must think good thoughts, and have a good heart, one must put away any grudge or hard feelings." And especially one should think of our debt to the bean mouse for the favor to be asked. And they thus approached the stores of the bean mouse not as strong robbers of the weak and helpless, but humbly asking from the bean mouse a portion from its store for their own heed.

Among all the tribes, I found a strong popular feeling of affection and respect for the bean mouse. The Omahas have a saying, "The bean mice are very industrious people, they even help human beings."

All the people of the Dakota (alias Sioux) nation who have talked with me about the bean mouse have always said that they never took away any beans from them without making some payment in kind. They said it would be wicked and unjust to steal the beans from the mouse people without making any return. They therefore put back some corn, some suet, or some other food in exchange for the beans they took. They said that thus both they and the bean mouse people had a variety in their food supply.

The bean mouse and its works are regarded with respect, admiration, and reverence by the people of the various Indian tribes who benefit by its labor. In the fall, after the bean mice have harvested their beans and laid them up in their storehouses for the winter, the people often go out alone and sit upon the lap of Mother Earth near some such storehouse in some quiet place under the open sky, reverently and thankfully meditating upon the mysteries of Nature and on the bounties of Providence in Nature.

An old man of the Teton-Dakota who still lives (1923) upon the Standing Rock Reservation on the upper Missouri River, went out to the vicinity of a bean mouse's storehouse to meditate and pray.

Thinking himself alone in the presence of the powers of nature, this devout old man gave expression to his religious feeling in a prayer which was overheard and recorded by another man who was within hearing but unobserved by the old man who was praying. The words of his prayer, when translated into English, would be as follows:

“Thou who art holy, pity me and help me I pray. Thou art small, but thou art sufficiently large for thy place in the world. And thou art sufficiently strong also for thy work, for Holy *Wakantanka* constantly strengthens thee. Thou art wise, for the wisdom of holiness is with thee constantly.

May I be wise in my heart continually, for if an attitude of holy wisdom leads me on, then this shadow-troubled life shall come into constant light.”