

The BROWN MOUSE

by Herbert Quick



CHAPTER I

A Maiden's "Humph!"

Jim brought from his day's work all the fragrances of next year's meadows. He had been feeding the crops. All things have opposite poles, and the scents of the farm are no exception to the rule. Just now, Jim Irwin possessed in his clothes and person the olfactory pole opposite to the new-mown hay, the fragrant butter and the scented breath of the lowing kine—perspiration and top-dressing.

He was not quite so keenly conscious of this as Jennie Woodruff. Had he been so, the glimmer of her white plique dress on the bench under the basswood would not have drawn him back from the gate. He had come to the house to ask Colonel Woodruff about the farm work, and having received instructions to take a team and join in the road work next day, he had gone down the walk between the beds of four o'clocks and petunias to the lane. Turning to latch the gate, he saw through the dusk the white dress under the tree and drawn by the greatest attraction known in nature, had re-entered the Woodruff grounds and strolled back.

A brief hello betrayed old acquaintance, and that social equality which still persists in theory between the work people on the American farm and the family of the employer. A desultory murmur of voices ensued. Jim Irwin sat down on the bench—not too close, he observed, to the plique skirt. . . . There came into the voices a note of deeper earnestness, betokening something quite aside from the rippling of the course of true love running smoothly. In the man's voice was a tone of protest and pleading.

"I know you are," said she, "but after all these years don't you think you should be at least preparing to be something more than that?"

"What can I do?" he pleaded. "I'm tied hand and foot. . . . I might have. . . ."

"You might have," said she, "but, Jim, you haven't. . . . and I don't see any prospects. . . ."

"I have been writing for the farm papers," said Jim; "but. . . ."

"But that doesn't get you anywhere, you know. . . . You're a great deal more able and intelligent than Ed, and see what a fine position he has in Chicago. . . ."

"There's mother, you know," said Jim gently.

"You can't do anything here," said Jennie. "You've been a farm-hand for fifteen years. . . . and you always will be unless you pull yourself loose. Even a girl can make a place for herself if she doesn't marry and leaves the farm. You're twenty-eight years old."

"It's all wrong!" said Jim gently. "The farm ought to be the place for the best sort of career—I love the soil!"

"I've been teaching for only two years, and they say I'll be nominated for county superintendent if I'll take it. Of course I won't—it seems silly—but if it were you, now, it would be a first step to a life that leads to something."

"Mother and I can live on my wages—and the garden and chickens, and the cow," said Jim. "After I received my teacher's certificate, I tried to work out some way of doing the same thing on a country teacher's wages. I couldn't. It doesn't seem right."

Jim rose and after pacing back and forth sat down again, a little closer to Jennie. Jennie moved away to the extreme end of the bench, and the shrinking away of Jim as if he had been repelled by some sort of negative magnetism showed either sensitiveness or temper.

"It seems as if it ought to be possible," said Jim, "for a man to do work on the farm, or in the rural schools, that would make him a livelihood. If he is only a field-hand, it ought to be possible for him to save money and buy a farm."

"Pa's land is worth two hundred dollars an acre," said Jennie. "Six months of your wages for an acre—even if you lived on nothing."

"No," he assented, "it can't be done, and the other thing can't, either. There ought to be such conditions that a teacher could make a living."

"They do," said Jennie, "if they can live at home during vacations. I do."

"But a man teaching in the country ought to be able to marry."

"Marry?" said Jennie, rather unfeelingly, I think. "You marry!" Then after remaining silent for nearly a minute, she uttered the syllable—with-out the utterance of which this narrative would not have been written. "You marry! Humph!"

Jim Irwin rose from the bench tingling with the insult he found in her tone. They had been boy-and-girl

sweethearts in the old days at the Woodruff schoolhouse down the road, and before the fateful time when Jennie went "off to school" and Jim began to support his mother. They had even kissed—and on Jim's side, lonely as was his life, cut off as it necessarily was from all companionship save that of his tiny home and his fellow-workers of the field, the tender little love-story was the sole romance of his life. Jennie's "Humph!" retired this romance from circulation, he felt. It showed contempt for the idea of his marrying. It relegated him to a sexless category with other defectives, and badged him with the cellophane of a sort of Twentieth-century monk, without the honor of the priestly vocation. From another girl it would have been bad enough, but from Jennie Woodruff—and especially on that quiet summer night under the lindens—it was insupportable.

"Good night," said Jim—simply because he could not trust himself to say more.

"Good night," replied Jennie, and sat for a long time wondering just how deeply she had unintentionally wounded the feelings of her father's field-hand; deciding that if he was driven from her forever, it would solve the problem of terminating that old childish love affair which still persisted in occupying a suite of rooms all of its own in her memory; and finally repenting of the unpremeditated thrust which might easily have hurt too deeply so sensitive a man as Jim Irwin. But girls are not usually so made as to feel any very bitter remorse for their male victims, and so Jennie slept very well that night.

Jim Irwin was bony and rugged and homely, with a big mouth, and wide ears, and a form stooped with labor. He had fine, lambent, gentle eyes which lighted up his face when he smiled. He was not ugly, Jim Irwin possessed charm. That is why little Jennie Woodruff had asked him to help with her lessons, rather oftener than was necessary, in those old days in the Woodruff schoolhouse when



"You Marry! Humph!"

Jennie wore her hair down her back. But in spite of this homely charm of personality, Jim Irwin was set off from his fellows of the Woodruff neighborhood. He was different. In local parlance, he was an off ox. He was as odd as Dick's hatband. He ran in a gang by himself. He had always liked to read, and had piles of literature in his attic room which was good, because it was cheap.

Very few people know that cheap literature is very likely to be good, because it is old and unprotected by copyright. Jim had Emerson, Thoreau, an Encyclopedia of English Literature, some editions of standard poets in paper covers, and a few Ruskins and Carlyles—all read to rags.

In fact, Jim had a good library of publications which can be obtained gratis, or very cheaply—and he knew their contents. He had a personal philosophy, which while it had cost him the world in which his fellows lived, had given him one of his own, in which he moved as lonely as a cloud, and as untouched of the life about him.

By every test of common life, he was a failure. His family history was a badge of failure. People despised a man who was so incontestably smarter than they, and yet could do no better with himself than to work in the fields alongside the tramps and transients and hoboes. Save for his mother and their cow and garden and flock of fowls and their wretched little rented house, he was a tramp himself.

His duties, his mother, and his dead father's status as an outcast took away his citizenship in Boyville, and drove him in upon himself, and, at first, upon his school books and later upon Emerson, Thoreau, Ruskin and the poets, and the agricultural reports and bulletins.

All this degraded—or exalted—him to the position of an intellectual farm-hand, with a sense of superiority and a feeling of degradation. It made

Jennie Woodruff's "Humph!" potent to keep him awake that night, and send him to the road work with Colonel Woodruff's team next morning with hot eyes and a hotter heart.

Colonel Woodruff's gray perchomans seemed to feel the unrest of their driver, for they fretted and actually executed a clumsy prance as Jim Irwin pulled them up at the end of the turnpike across Bronson's Slew—a peat-marsh which annually offered the men of the Woodruff district the opportunity to hold the male equivalent of a sewing circle while working out their road taxes. Columbus Brown, the pathmaster, prided himself on the Bronson Slew turnpike as his greatest triumph in road engineering. The work consisted in hauling, dragging and carrying gravel out on the low fill which carried the road across the marsh, and then watching it slowly settle until the next summer.

"Haul gravel from the east gravel bed, Jim," called Columbus Brown from the lowest spot in the middle of the turnpike. "Take Newt here to help load."

Jim smiled his habitual slow, gentle smile at Newton Bronson, seventeen, undersized, tobacco-stained, profane and proud of the fact that he had once beaten his way from Des Moines to Faribault on freight trains. A source of anxiety to his father, and the subject of many predictions that he would come to no good end, Newton was out on the road work because he was likely to be of little use on the farm. Clearly, Newton was on the downward road in a double sense—and yet, Jim Irwin rather liked him.

"The fellers have put up a job on you, Jim," volunteered Newton, as



"Fellers Have Put Up a Job on You, Jim."

they began filling the wagon with gravel.

"What sort of job?" asked Jim.

"They're nominating you for teacher," replied Newton.

"Since when has the position of teacher been an elective office?" asked Jim.

"Sure, it ain't elective," answered Newton. "But they say that with as many brains as you've got sloshing around loose in the neighborhood, you're a candidate that can break the deadlock in the school board."

Jim shivered at silently for a while, and by example urged Newton to earn the money credited to his father's assessment for the day's work.

A slide of earth just then brought down a sweet-clover plant growing rankly beside the top of the pit. Jim Irwin pulled it loose from its anchorage, and after looking attentively at the roots, laid the whole plant on the bank for safety.

"What do you want of that weed?" asked Newton.

Jim picked it up and showed him the nodules on its roots—little white knobs, smaller than pinheads.

"Ever hear of the use of nitrates to enrich the soil?"

"Ain't that the stuff the old man used on the lawn last spring?"

"Yes," said Jim, "your father used some on his lawn. We don't put it on our fields in Iowa—not yet; but if it weren't for those white specks on the clover-roots, we should be obliged to do so—as they do back east."

"How do them white specks keep us from needin' nitrates?"

"It's a long story," said Jim. "You see, before there were any plants big enough to be visible—if there had been any one to see them—the world was full of little plants so small that there may be billions of them in one of these little white specks. They knew how to take the nitrates from the air."

"Air?" ejaculated Newton. "Nitrates in the air! You're crazy!"

"No," said Jim. "There are tons of nitrogen in the air that press down on your head—but the big plants can't get it through their leaves, or their roots. They never had to learn, because the little plants—bacteria—located on those roots and tapped them for the sap they needed—began to get their board and lodgings off the big plants. And in payment for their hotel bills, the little plants took nitrogen out of the air for both themselves and their hosts."

"What d'ye mean by 'hosts'?"

"Their hotel-keepers—the big plants. And now the plants that have the hotel roots for the bacteria furnish nitrogen not only for themselves, but for the crops that follow. Corn can't get nitrogen out of the air; but clover can—and that's why we ought to plow down clover before a crop of corn."

"Gee!" said Newt. "If you could get to teach our school, I'd go again."

"It would interfere with your pool playing."

"What business is that o' yours?" interrogated Newt defiantly.

"Well, get busy with that shovel,"

suggested Jim, who had been working steadily, driving out upon the fill occasionally to unload. On his return from dumping the next load, Newton seemed, in a superior way, quite amiably disposed toward his workfellow—rather the habitual thing in the neighborhood.

"I'll work my old man to vote for you for teacher," said he.

"These school directors," replied Jim, "have become so bullheaded that they'll never vote for any one except the applicants they've been voting for."

"The old man says he will have Prue Foster again, or he'll give the school a darned long vacation, unless Peterson and Bonner join on some one else. That would beat Prue, of course."

"And Con Bonner won't vote for any one but Maggie Gilmartin," added Jim.

"And," supplied Newton, "Haakon Peterson says he'll stick to Herman Paulson until the Hot Springs freeze over."

"And there you are," said Jim. "You tell your father for me that I think he's a mere mule—and that the whole district thinks the same."

"All right," said Newt. "I'll tell him that while I'm working him to vote for you."

Jim smiled grimly. He had remained a peasant because the American rural teacher is placed economically lower than the peasant. He gave Newton's chatter no consideration. But when, in the afternoon, he ditched his team with others to the big road grader, and the gang became concentrated within talking distance, he found that the project of heckling and chaffing him about his eminent fitness for a scholastic position was to be the real entertainment of the occasion.

"Jim's the candidate to bust the deadlock," said Columbus Brown, with a wink. "Just like Garfield in that Republican convention he was nominated in—eh, Con?"

"Con" was Cornelius Bonner, an Irishman, one of the deadlocked school board, and the captain of the road grader. He winked back at the pathmaster.

"Jim's the gray-eyed man o' destiny," he replied, "if he gets two votes in that board."

"You'd vote for me, wouldn't you, Con?" asked Jim.

"I'll try anything wance," replied Bonner.

"Try voting with Ezra Bronson once, for Prue Foster," suggested Jim. "She's done good work here."

"Opinions differ," said Bonner, "an' when you try anything just for wance, it shouldn't be an irrevocable ship, me bye."

"You're a reasonable board of public

servants," said Jim ironically. "I'd like to tell the whole board what I think of them."

"Come down tonight," said Bonner jeeringly. "We're going to have a board meeting at the schoolhouse and ballot a few more times. Come down, and be the Garfield of the convention. We've lacked brains on the board, that's clear. They ain't a man on the board that ever studied algebra, or that knows more about farmin' than their imp'yers. Come down to the schoolhouse, and we'll have a field-hand address the school board—and begosh, I'll move yer diction meself! Come, now, Jimmy, me bye, be game. I'll vary the program, anyhow."

The entire gang grinned. Jim flushed, and then reconquered his calmness of spirit.

"All right, Con," said he. "I'll come and tell you a few things—and you can do as you like about making the motion."

(To be continued)

Chinese Mode Is Given Prominence in Paris

Strange how the Chinese mode has swept over us by way of Paris. Most of the openings speak of Chinese colors and Chinese feeling, but it has remained for Lanvin to present us with coolie coats developed in all sorts of attractive fabrics the coolie never dreamed about. These she tops with mandarin hats—just to be inconsistent and democratic and altogether femininely French. Since mah jongg has become so popular that special rooms in the houses of enthusiasts are being decorated as a background for play, the Chinese coats and hats ought to have strong attraction for those women who always get the new thing, and get it first.

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