

Quick Herbert

The Brown Mouse



Herbert Quick
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CHAPTER I

A MAIDEN'S "HUMPH"

A Farm-hand nodded in answer to a question asked him by Napoleon on the morning of Waterloo. The nod was false, or the emperor misunderstood – and Waterloo was lost. On the nod of a farm-hand rested the fate of Europe.

This story may not be so important as the battle of Waterloo – and it may be. I think that Napoleon was sure to lose to Wellington sooner or later, and therefore the words “fate of Europe” in the last paragraph should be understood as modified by “for a while.” But this story may change the world permanently. We will not discuss that, if you please. What I am endeavoring to make plain is that this history would never have been written if a farmer’s daughter had not said “Humph!” to her father’s hired man.

Of course she never said it as it is printed. People never say “Humph!” in that way. She just closed her lips tight in the manner of people who have a great deal to say and prefer not to say it, and – I dislike to record this of a young lady who has been “off to school,” but truthfulness compels – she grunted through her little nose the ordinary “Humph!” of conversational commerce, which was accepted at its face value by the farm-hand as an evidence of displeasure, disapproval, and even of contempt. Things then began to happen as they never would have done if the maiden hadn’t “Humphed!” and this is a history of those happenings.

As I have said, it may be more important than Waterloo. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was, and I hope – I am just beginning, you know – to make this a much greater book than *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. And it all rests on a “Humph!” Holmes says,

“Soft is the breath of a maiden’s ‘Yes,’
Not the light gossamer stirs with less.”

but what bard shall rightly sing the importance of a maiden’s “Humph!” when I shall have finished telling what came of what Jennie Woodruff said to Jim Irwin, her father’s hired man?

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 was Jennie Woodruff. Had he been so, the glimmer of her white piqué 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, be it observed, to the piqué 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 – without 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 celibacy 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 linden – 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.

Great events, I find myself repeating, sometimes hinge on trivial things. Considered deeply, all those matters which we are wont to call great events are only the outward and visible results of occurrences in the minds and souls of people. Sir Walter Raleigh thought of laying his cloak under the feet of Queen Elizabeth as she passed over a mud-puddle, and all the rest of his career followed, as the effect of Sir Walter's mental attitude. Elias Howe thought of a machine for sewing, Eli Whitney of a machine for ginning cotton, George Stephenson of a tubular boiler for his locomotive engine, and Cyrus McCormick of a sickle-bar, and the world was changed by those thoughts, rather than by the machines themselves. John D. Rockefeller thought strongly that he would be rich, and this thought, and not the Standard Oil Company, changed the commerce and finance of the world. As a man thinketh so is he; and as men think so is the world. Jim Irwin went home thinking of the "Humph!" of Jennie Woodruff – thinking with hot waves and cold waves running over his body, and swellings in his throat. Such thoughts centered upon his club foot made Lord Byron a great sardonic poet. That club foot set him apart from the world of boys and tortured him into a fury which lasted until he had lashed society with the whips of his scorn.

Jim Irwin was not club-footed; far from it. He 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, as Lincoln's illuminated his. He was not ugly. In fact, if that quality which fair ladies – if they are wise – prize far more than physical beauty, the quality called charm, can with propriety be ascribed to a field-hand who has just finished a day of the rather unfragrant labor to which I have referred, 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 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 in a manner quite as segregative as was Byron by his deformity. 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, like Deacon Avery's celebrated bull. He failed to matriculate in the boy banditti which played cards in the haymows on rainy days, told stereotyped stories that smelled to heaven, raided melon patches and orchards, swore horribly like Sir Toby Belch, and played pool in the village saloon. 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. He had Emerson, Thoreau, a John B. Alden edition of Chambers' *Encyclopedia of English Literature*, some Franklin Square editions of standard poets in paper covers, and a few Ruskins and Carlyles – all read to rags. He talked the book English of these authors, mispronouncing many of the hard words, because he had never heard them pronounced by any one except himself, and had no standards of comparison. You find this sort of thing in the utterances of self-educated recluses. And he had piles of reports of the secretary of agriculture, college bulletins from Ames, and publications of the various bureaus of the Department of Agriculture at Washington. In fact, he 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.

He seemed superior to the neighbor boys, and felt so; but this feeling was curiously mingled with a sense of degradation. 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 who drifted back and forth as the casual market for labor and the lure of the cities swept them. 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 father had been no better. He had come into the neighborhood from nobody knows where, selling fruit trees, with a wife and baby in his old buggy – and had died suddenly, leaving the baby and widow, and nothing else save the horse and buggy. That horse and buggy were still on the Irwin books represented by Spot the cow – so persistent are the assets of cautious poverty. Mrs. Irwin had labored in kitchen and sewing room until Jim had been able to assume the breadwinner's burden – which he did about the time he finished the curriculum of the Woodruff District school. He was an off ox and odd as Dick's hatband, largely because his duties to his mother and his love of reading kept him from joining the gangs whereof I have spoken. His duties, his mother, and his father's status as an outcast were to him the equivalent of the Byronic club foot, because they took away his citizenship in Boyville, and drove him in upon himself, and, at first, upon his school books which he mastered so easily and quickly as to become the star pupil of the Woodruff District school, 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.

What was he anyhow? And what could he ever be? What was the use of his studies in farming practise, if he was always to be an underling whose sole duty was to carry out the crude ideas of his employers? And what chance was there for a farm-hand to become a farm owner, or even a farm renter, especially if he had a mother to support out of the twenty-five or thirty dollars of his monthly wages? None.

A man might rise in the spirit, but how about rising in the world?

Colonel Woodruff's gray percherons 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 – the said slew being 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, with much conversational gain, and no great damage to the road.

In fact, 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, his helper. Newton was 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 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 shoveled on silently for a while, and by example urged Newton to earn the money credited to his father’s assessment for the day’s work.

“Aw, what’s the use of diggin’ into it like this?” protested Newton, who was developing an unwonted perspiration. “None of the others are heatin’ themselves up.”

“Don’t you get any fun out of doing a good day’s work?” asked Jim.

“Fun!” exclaimed Newton. “You’re crazy!”

A slide of earth from the top of the pit threatened to bury Newton in gravel, sand and good top soil. A sweet-clover plant growing rankly beside the pit, and thinking itself perfectly safe, came down with it, its dark green foliage anchored by the long roots which penetrated to a depth below the gravel pit’s bottom. 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.

“Know what they are, Newt?”

“Just white specks on the roots,” replied Newton.

“The most wonderful specks in the world,” said Jim. “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 when the little plants – bacteria – found that the big plants had roots with sap in them, they located on those roots and tapped them for the sap they needed. They 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 the job,” said he.

“What job?” asked Jim.

“Teacher for our school,” answered Newt.

“Those 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. Such a position might have been his years ago, if he could have left his mother or earned enough in it to keep both alive. 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 hitched 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 can get two votes in that board.”

“You’d vote for me, wouldn’t you, Con?” asked Jim.

“I’ll try annything 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 annything just for wance, it shouldn’t be an irrevocable shtip, 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 to-night,” 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 convintion. We’ve lacked brains on the board, that’s clear. They ain’t a man on the board that iver studied algebra, ’r that knows more about farmin’ than their impl’yers. Come down to the schoolhouse, and we’ll have a field-hand address the school board – and begosh, I’ll move yer illiction mesilf! Come, now, Jimmy, me bye, be game. It’ll vary the program, anny-how.”

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.”

CHAPTER II

REVERSED UNANIMITY

The great blade of the grading machine, running diagonally across the road and pulling the earth toward its median line, had made several trips, and much persiflage about Jim Irwin's forthcoming appearance before the board had been addressed to Jim and exchanged by others for his benefit.

To Newton Bronson was given the task of leveling and distributing the earth rolled into the road by the grader – a labor which in the interests of fitting a muzzle on his big mongrel dog he deserted whenever the machine moved away from him. No dog would have seemed less deserving of a muzzle, for he was a friendly animal, always wagging his tail, pressing his nose into people's palms, licking their clothing and otherwise making a nuisance of himself. That there was some mystery about the muzzle was evident from Newton's pains to make a secret of it. Its wires were curled into a ring directly over the dog's nose, and into this ring Newton had fitted a cork, through which he had thrust a large needle which protruded, an inch-long bayonet, in front of Ponto's nose. As the grader swept back, horses straining, harness creaking and a billow of dark earth rolling before the knife, Ponto, fully equipped with this stinger, raced madly alongside, a friend to every man, but not unlike some people, one whose friendship was of all things to be most dreaded.

As the grader moved along one side of the highway, a high-powered automobile approached on the other. It was attempting to rush the swale for the hill opposite, and making rather bad weather of the newly repaired road. A pile of loose soil that Newton had allowed to lie just across the path made a certain maintenance of speed desirable. The knavish Newton planted himself in the path of the laboring car, and waved its driver a command to halt. The car came to a standstill with its front wheels in the edge of the loose earth, and the chauffeur fuming at the possibility of stalling – a contingency upon which Newton had confidently reckoned.

“What d'ye want?” he demanded. “What d'ye mean by stopping me in this kind of place?”

“I want to ask you,” said Newton with mock politeness, “if you have the correct time.”

The chauffeur sought words appropriate to his feelings. Ponto and his muzzle saved him the trouble. A pretty pointer leaped from the car, and attracted by the evident friendliness of Ponto's greeting, pricked up its ears, and sought, in a spirit of canine brotherhood, to touch noses with him. The needle in Ponto's muzzle did its work to the agony and horror of the pointer, which leaped back with a yelp, and turned tail. Ponto, in an effort to apologize, followed, and finding itself bayoneted at every contact with this demon dog, the pointer definitely took flight, howling, leaving Ponto in a state of wonder and humiliation at the sudden end of what had promised to be a very friendly acquaintance. I have known instances not entirely dissimilar among human beings. The pointer's master watched its strange flight, and swore. His eye turned to the boy who had caused all this, and he alighted pale with anger.

“I've got time,” said he, remembering Newton's impudent question, “to give you what you deserve.”

Newton grinned and dodged, but the bank of loose earth was his undoing, and while he stumbled, the chauffeur caught and held him by the collar. And as he held the boy, the operation of flogging him in the presence of the grading gang grew less to his taste. Again Ponto intervened, for as the chauffeur stood holding Newton, the dog, evidently regarding the stranger as his master's friend, thrust his nose into the chauffeur's palm – the needle necessarily preceding the nose. The chauffeur behaved much as his pointer had done, saving and excepting that the pointer did not swear.

It was funny – even the pain involved could not make it otherwise than funny. The grading gang laughed to a man. Newton grinned even while in the fell clutch of circumstance. Ponto tried to

smell the chauffeur's trousers, and what had been a laugh became a roar, quite general save for the fact that the chauffeur did not join in it.

Caution and mercy departed from the chauffeur's mood; and he drew back his fist to strike the boy – and found it caught by the hard hand of Jim Irwin.

"You're too angry to punish this boy," said Jim gently, – "even if you had the right to punish him at all!"

"Oh, cut it out," said a fat man in the rear of the car, who had hitherto manifested no interest in anything save Ponto. "Get in, and let's be on our way!"

The chauffeur, however, recognized in a man of mature years and full size, and a creature with no mysterious needle in his nose, a relief from his embarrassment. Unhesitatingly, he released Newton, and blindly, furiously and futilely, he delivered a blow meant for Jim's jaw, but which really miscarried by a foot. In reply, Jim countered with an awkward swinging uppercut, which was superior to the chauffeur's blow in one respect only – it landed fairly on the point of the jaw. The chauffeur staggered and slowly toppled over into the soft earth which had caused so much of the rumpus. Newton Bronson slipped behind a hedge, and took his infernally equipped dog with him. The grader gang formed a ring about the combatants and waited. Colonel Woodruff, driving toward home in his runabout, held up by the traffic blockade, asked what was going on here, and the chauffeur, rising groggily, picked up his goggles, climbed into the car; and the meeting dissolved, leaving Jim Irwin greatly embarrassed by the fact that for the first time in his life, he had struck a man in combat.

"Good work, Jim," said Cornelius Bonner. "I didn't think 'twas in ye!"

"It's beastly," said Jim, reddening. "I didn't know, either."

Colonel Woodruff looked at his hired man sharply, gave him some instructions for the next day and drove on. The road gang dispersed for the afternoon. Newton Bronson carefully secreted the magic muzzle, and chuckled at what had been perhaps the most picturesquely successful bit of deviltry in his varied record. Jim Irwin put out his team, got his supper and went to the meeting of the school board.

The deadlocked members of the board had been so long at loggerheads that their relations had swayed back to something like amity. Jim had scarcely entered when Con Bonner addressed the chair.

"Mr. Prisdint," said he, "we have wid us t'night, a young man who nades no introduction to an audience in this place, Mr. Jim Irwin. He thinks we're bullheaded mules, and that all the schools are bad. At the proper time I shall move that we hire him f'r teacher; and pinding that motion, I move that he be given the floor. Ye've all heard of Mr. Irwin's ability as a white hope, and I know he'll be listened to wid respect!"

Much laughter from the board and the spectators, as Jim arose. He looked upon it as ridicule of himself, while Con Bonner regarded it as a tribute to his successful speech.

"Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Board," said Jim, "I'm not going to tell you anything that you don't know about yourselves. You are simply making a farce of the matter of hiring a teacher for this school. It is not as if any of you had a theory that the teaching methods of one of these teachers would be any better than or much different from those of the others. You know, and I know, that whichever is finally engaged, or even if your silly deadlock is broken by employing a new candidate, the school will be the same old story. It will still be the school it was when I came into it a little ragged boy" – here Jim's voice grew a little husky – "and when I left it, a bigger boy, but still as ragged as ever."

There was a slight sensation in the audience, as if, as Con Bonner said about the knockdown, they hadn't thought Jim Irwin could do it.

"Well," said Con, "you've done well to hold your own."

"In all the years I attended this school," Jim went on, "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 any of you three men were making a fight for what Roosevelt's Country Life Commission called a 'new kind of rural school,' I'd say fight. But you aren't. You're just making individual fights for your favorite teachers."

Jim Irwin made a somewhat lengthy speech after the awkwardness wore off, so long that his audience was nodding and yawning by the time he reached his peroration, in which he abjured Bronson, Bonner and Peterson to study his plan of a new kind of rural school, – in which the work of the school should be correlated with the life of the home and the farm – a school which would be in the highest degree cultural by being consciously useful and obviously practical. The sharp spats of applause from the useless hands of Newton Bronson gave the final touch of absurdity to a situation which Jim had felt to be ridiculous all through. Had it not been for Jennie Woodruff's "Humph!" stinging him to do something outside the round of duties into which he had fallen, had it not been for the absurd notion that perhaps, after they had heard his speech, they would place him in charge of the school, and that he might be able to do something really important in it, he would not have been there. As he sat down, he felt himself a silly clodhopper, filled with the east wind of his own conceit, out of touch with the real world of men. He knew himself a dreamer. The nodding board of directors, the secretary, actually snoring, and the bored audience restored the field-hand to a sense of his proper place.

"We have had the privilege of list'nin'," said Con Bonner, rising, "to a great speech, Mr. Prisdint. We should be proud to have a borned orator like this in the agricultural pop'lotion of the district. A reg'lar William Jennin's Bryan. I don't understand what he was trying to tell us, but sometimes I've had the same difficulty with the spaches of the Boy Orator of the Platte. Makin' a good spache is one thing, and teaching a good school is another, but in order to bring this matter before the board, I nominate Mr. James E. Irwin, the Boy Orator of the Woodruff District, and the new white hope, f'r the job of teacher of this school, and I move that when he shall have received a majority of the votes of this board, the secretary and prisdint be instructed to enter into a contract with him f'r the comin' year."

The seconding of motions on a board of three has its objectionable features, since it seems to commit a majority of the body to the motion in advance. The president, therefore, followed usage, when he said – "If there's no objection, it will be so ordered. The chair hears no objection – and it is so ordered. Prepare the ballots for a vote on the election of teacher, Mr. Secretary. Each votes his preference for teacher. A majority elects."

For months, the ballots had come out of the box – an empty crayon-box – Herman Paulson, one; Prudence Foster, one; Margaret Gilmartin, one; and every one present expected the same result now. There was no surprise, however, in view of the nomination of Jim Irwin by the blarneying Bonner when the secretary smoothed out the first ballot, and read: "James E. Irwin, one." Clearly this was the Bonner vote; but when the next slip came forth, "James E. Irwin, two," the Board of Directors of the Woodruff Independent District were stunned at the slowly dawning knowledge that they had made an election! Before they had rallied, the secretary drew from the box the third and last ballot, and read, "James E. Irwin, three."

President Bronson choked as he announced the result – choked and stammered, and made very hard weather of it, but he went through with the motion, as we all run in our grooves.

"The ballot having shown the unanimous election of James E. Irwin, I declare him elected."

He dropped into his chair, while the secretary, a very methodical man, drew from his portfolio a contract duly drawn up save for the signatures of the officers of the district, and the name and signature of the teacher-elect. This he calmly filled out, and passed over to the president, pointing to the dotted line. Mr. Bronson would have signed his own death-warrant at that moment, not to mention a perfectly legal document, and signed with Peterson and Bonner looking on stonily. The secretary signed and shoved the contract over to Jim Irwin.

"Sign there," he said.

Jim looked it over, saw the other signatures, and felt an impulse to dodge the whole thing. He could not feel that the action of the board was serious. He thought of the platform he had laid down for himself, and was daunted. He thought of the days in the open field, and of the untroubled evenings with his books, and he shrank from the work. Then he thought of Jennie Woodruff's "Humph!" – and he signed!

"Move we adjourn," said Peterson.

"No 'bjection 't's so ordered!" said Mr. Bronson.

The secretary and Jim went out, while the directors waited.

"What the Billy –" began Bonner, and finished lamely! "What for did you vote for the dub, Ez?"

"I voted for him," replied Bronson, "because he fought for my boy this afternoon. I didn't want it stuck into him too hard. I wanted him to have *one* vote."

"An' I wanted him to have wan vote, too," said Bonner. "I thought mesilf the only dang fool on the board – an' he made a spache that airned wan vote – but f'r the love of hivin, that dub f'r a teacher! What come over you, Haakon – you voted f'r him, too!"

"Ay wanted him to have one wote, too," said Peterson.

And in this wise, Jim became the teacher in the Woodruff District – all on account of Jennie Woodruff's "Humph!"

CHAPTER III

WHAT IS A BROWN MOUSE

Immediately upon the accidental election of Jim Irwin to the position of teacher of the Woodruff school, he developed habits somewhat like a ghost's or a bandit's. That is, he walked of nights and on rainy days.

On fine days, he worked in Colonel Woodruff's fields as of yore. Had he been appointed to a position attached to a salary of fifty thousand dollars a year, he might have spent six months on a preliminary vacation in learning something about his new duties. But Jim's salary was to be three hundred and sixty dollars for nine months' work in the Woodruff school, and he was to find himself – and his mother. Therefore, he had to indulge in his loose habits of night walking and roaming about after hours only, or on holidays and in foul weather.

The Simms family, being from the mountings of Tennessee, were rather startled one night, when Jim Irwin, homely, stooped and errandless, silently appeared in their family circle about the front door. They had lived where it was the custom to give a whoop from the big road before one passed through the palin's and up to the house. Otherwise, how was one to know whether the visitor was friend or foe?

From force of habit, Old Man Simms started for his gun-rack at Jim's appearance, but the Lincolnian smile and the low slow speech, so much like his own in some respects, ended that part of the matter. Besides, Old Man Simms remembered that none of the Hobdays, whose hostilities somewhat stood in the way of the return of the Simmses to their native hills, could possibly be expected to appear thus in Iowa.

"Stranger," said Mr. Simms, after greetings had been exchanged, "you're right welcome, but in my kentry you'd find it dangersome to walk in thisaway."

"How so?" queried Jim Irwin.

"You'd more'n likely git shot up some," replied Mr. Simms, "unless you whooped from the big road."

"I didn't know that," replied Jim. "I'm ignorant of the customs of other countries. Would you rather I'd whoop from the big road – nobody else will."

"I reckon," replied Mr. Simms, "that we-all will have to accommodate ourse'ves to the ways hyeh."

Evidently Jim was the Simms' first caller since they had settled on the little brushy tract whose hills and trees reminded them of their mountains. Low hills, to be sure, with only a footing of rocks where the creek had cut through, and not many trees, but down in the creek bed, with the oaks, elms and box-elders arching overhead, the Simmses could imagine themselves beside some run falling into the French Broad, or the Holston. The creek bed was a withdrawing room in which to retire from the eternal black soil and level corn-fields of Iowa. What if the soil was so poor, in comparison with those black uplands, that the owner of the old wood-lot could find no renter? It was better than the soil in the mountains, and suited the lonesome Simmses much more than a better farm would have done. They were not of the Iowa people anyhow, not understood, not their equals – they were pore, and expected to stay pore – while the Iowa people all seemed to be either well-to-do, or expecting to become so. It was much more agreeable to the Simmses to retire to the back wood-lot farm with the creek bed running through it.

Jim Irwin asked Old Man Simms about the fishing in the creek, and whether there was any duck shooting spring and fall.

"We git right smart of these little panfish," said Mr. Simms, "an' Calista done shot two butterball ducks about 'tater-plantin' time."

Calista blushed – but this stranger, so much like themselves, could not see the rosy suffusion. The allusion gave him a chance to look about him at the family. There was a boy of sixteen, a girl – the duck-shooting Calista – younger than Raymond – a girl of eleven, named Virginia, but called Jinnie – and a smaller lad who rejoiced in the name of McGeehee, but was mercifully called Buddy.

Calista squirmed for something to say. “Raymond runs a line o’ traps when the fur’s prime,” she volunteered.

Then came a long talk on traps and trapping, shooting, hunting and the joys of the mountings – during which Jim noted the ignorance and poverty of the Simmses. The clothing of the girls was not decent according to local standards; for while Calista wore a skirt hurriedly slipped on, Jim was quite sure – and not without evidence to support his views – that she had been wearing when he arrived the same regimentals now displayed by Jinnie – a pair of ragged blue overalls. Evidently the Simmses were wearing what they had and not what they desired. The father was faded, patched, gray and earthy, and the boys looked better than the rest solely because we expect boys to be torn and patched. Mrs. Simms was invisible except as a gray blur beyond the rain-barrel, in the midst of which her pipe glowed with a regular ebb and flow of embers.

On the next rainy day Jim called again and secured the services of Raymond to help him select seed corn. He was going to teach the school next winter, and he wanted to have a seed-corn frolic the first day, instead of waiting until the last – and you had to get seed corn while it was on the stalk, if you got the best. No Simms could refuse a favor to the fellow who was so much like themselves, and who was so greatly interested in trapping, hunting and the Tennessee mountains – so Raymond went with Jim, and with Newt Bronson and five more they selected Colonel Woodruff’s seed corn for the next year, under the colonel’s personal superintendence.

In the evening they looked the grain over on the Woodruff lawn, and the colonel talked about corn and corn selection. They had supper at half past six, and Jennie waited on them – having assisted her mother in the cooking. It was quite a festival. Jim Irwin was the least conspicuous person in the gathering, but the colonel, who was a seasoned politician, observed that the farm-hand had become a fisher of men, and was angling for the souls of these boys, and their interest in the school. Jim was careful not to flush the covey, but every boy received from the next winter’s teacher some confidential hint as to plans, and some suggestion that Jim was relying on the aid and comfort of that particular boy. Newt Bronson, especially, was leaned on as a strong staff and a very present help in time of trouble. As for Raymond Simms, it was clearly best to leave him alone. All this talk of corn selection and related things was new to him, and he drank it in thirstily. He had an inestimable advantage over Newt in that he was starved, while Newt was surfeited with “advantages” for which he had no use.

“Jennie,” said Colonel Woodruff, after the party had broken up, “I’m losing the best hand I ever had, and I’ve been sorry.”

“I’m glad he’s leaving you,” said Jennie. “He ought to do something except work in the field for wages.”

“I’ve had no idea he could make good as a teacher – and what is there in it if he does?”

“What has he lost if he doesn’t?” rejoined Jennie. “And why can’t he make good?”

“The school board’s against him, for one thing,” replied the colonel. “They’ll fire him if they get a chance. They’re the laughing-stock of the country for hiring him by mistake, and they’re irritated. But after seeing him perform to-night, I wonder if he can’t make good.”

“If he could *feel* like anything but an underling he’d succeed,” said Jennie.

“That’s his heredity,” stated the colonel, whose live-stock operations were based on heredity. “Jim’s a scrub, I suppose; but he acts as if he might turn out to be a Brown Mouse.”

“What do you mean, pa,” scoffed Jennie – “a Brown Mouse!”

“A fellow in Edinburgh,” said the colonel, “crossed the Japanese waltzing mouse with the common white mouse. Jim’s peddling father was a waltzing mouse, no good except to jump from one spot to another for no good reason. Jim’s mother is an albino of a woman, with all the color washed

out in one way or another. Jim ought to be a mongrel, and I've always considered him one. But the Edinburgh fellow every once in a while got out of his variously-colored, waltzing and albino hybrids, a brown mouse. It wasn't a common house mouse, either, but a wild mouse unlike any he had ever seen. It ran away, and bit and gnawed, and raised hob. It was what we breeders call a Mendelian segregation of genetic factors that had been in the waltzers and albinos all the time – their original wild ancestor of the woods and fields. If Jim turns out to be a Brown Mouse, he may be a bigger man than any of us. Anyhow, I'm for him."

"He'll have to be a big man to make anything out of the job of a country school-teacher," said Jennie.

"Any job's as big as the man who holds it down," said her father.

Next day, Jim received a letter from Jennie.

"Dear Jim," it ran. "Father says you are sure to have a hard time – the school board's against you, and all that. But he added, 'I'm for Jim, anyhow!' I thought you'd like to know this. Also he said, 'Any job's as big as the man who holds it down,' And I believe this also, *and I'm for you, too!* You are doing wonders even before the school starts in getting the pupils interested in a lot of things, which, while they don't belong to school work, will make them friends of yours. I don't see how this will help you much, but it's a fine thing, and shows your interest in them. Don't be too original. The wheel runs easiest in the beaten track. Yours. Jennie."

Jennie's caution made no impression on Jim – but he put the letter away, and every evening took it out and read the italicized words, "*I'm for you, too!*" The colonel's dictum, "Any job's as big as the man who holds it down," was an Emersonian truism to Jim. It reduced all jobs to an equality, and it meant equality in intellectual and spiritual development. It didn't mean, for instance, that any job was as good as another in making it possible for a man to marry – and Jennie Woodruff's "Humph!" returned to kill and drag off her "I'm for you, too!"

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

I suppose every reader will say that genius consists very largely in seeing Opportunity in the set of circumstances or thoughts or impressions that constitute Opportunity, and making the best of them.

Jim Irwin would have said so, anyhow. He was full of his Emerson's *Representative Men*, and his Carlyle's *French Revolution*, and the other old-fashioned, excellent good literature which did not cost over twenty-five cents a volume; and he had pored long and with many thrills over the pages of Matthews' *Getting on in the World*— which is the best book of purely conventional helpfulness in the language. And his view of efficiency was that it is the capacity to see opportunity where others overlook it, and make the most of it.

All through his life he had had his own plans for becoming great. He was to be a general, hurling back the foes of his country; he was to be the nation's master in literature; a successful drawing on his slate had filled him with ambition, confidently entertained, of becoming a Rubens — and the story of Benjamin West in his school reader fanned this spark to a flame; science, too, had at times been his chosen field; and when he had built a mousetrap which actually caught mice, he saw himself a millionaire inventor. As for being president, that was a commonplace in his dreams. And all the time, he was barefooted, ill-clad and dreamed his dreams to the accompaniment of the growl of the plow cutting the roots under the brown furrow-slice, or the wooshing of the milk in the pail. At twenty-eight, he considered these dreams over.

As for this new employment, he saw no great opportunity in it. Of any spark of genius he was to show in it, of anything he was to suffer in it, of those pains and penalties wherewith the world pays its geniuses, Jim Irwin anticipated nothing. He went into the small, mean, ill-paid task as a part of the day's work, with no knowledge of the stirring of the nation for a different sort of rural school, and no suspicion that there lay in it any highway to success in life. He was not a college man or even a high-school man. All his other dreams had found rude awakening in the fact that he had not been able to secure the schooling which geniuses need in these days. He was unfitted for the work geniuses do. All he was to be was a rural teacher, accidentally elected by a stupid school board, and with a hard tussle before him to stay on the job for the term of his contract. He could have accepted positions quite as good years ago, save for the fact that they would have taken him away from his mother, their cheap little home, their garden and their fowls. He rather wondered why he had allowed Jennie's sneer to sting him into the course of action which put him in this new relation to his neighbors.

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 twenty-five 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.

I suppose that no person who has undertaken the management of the young people of any school in all the history of education, ever did so much work of this sort before his school opened. 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 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 seaway.

"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 flure was all over corn like a hog-pin."

"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' reg'lar this winter."

"That's because Jim don't keep no order," said Bonner. "He lets Newt do as he dam 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 motor-car, 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. His choice of the Woodruff District as a place for motoring had a secret explanation. I am under no obligation to preserve the secret. He came to see Colonel Woodruff and Jennie. 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? Mr. Dilly merely asked himself if Miss Woodruff's name could command strength enough to eliminate the embarrassing candidate in his part of the county and leave the field to himself. Miss Woodruff asked herself whether the work would not give her a pleasanter life than did teaching, a better salary, and more chances to settle herself in life. So are the officials chosen who supervise and control the education of the farm children of America.

This secret mission to effect a political trade accounted for Mr. Dilly's desire that his driver should "cut out" the controversy with Newton Bronson, and the personal encounter with Jim Irwin – and it may account for Jim's easy victory in his first and only physical encounter. An office seeker could scarcely afford to let his friend or employee lick a member of a farmers' road gang. It certainly explains the fact that 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 congratulate you," said Jim.

"Thanks," said Jennie, extending her hand.

"I hope you're elected," Jim went on, holding the hand; "but there's no doubt of that."

"They say not," replied Jennie; "but father says I must go about and let the people see me. He believes in working just as if we didn't have a big majority for the ticket."

"A woman has an advantage of a man in such a contest," said Jim; "she can work just as hard as he can, and at the same time profit by the fact that it's supposed she can't."

"I need all the advantage I possess," said Jennie, "and all the votes. 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?”

“A truly-rural rural school,” said Jim.

“I can’t pronounce it,” smiled Jennie, “to say nothing of understanding it. What would your tralalooral rural school do?”

“It would be correlated with rural life,” said Jim.

“How?”

“It would get education out of the things the farmers and farmers’ wives are interested in as a part of their lives.”

“What, for instance?”

“Dairying, for instance, in this district; and soil management; and corn-growing; and farm manual training for boys; and sewing, cooking and housekeeping for the girls – and caring for babies!”

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 confine 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 sweetheart 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, 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. The reader must not by this term get the impression that Colonel Woodruff was a man of the grafting tricky sort of which we are prone to think when the term is used. The West has been ruled by just such men as he, and the West has done rather well, all things considered. Colonel 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 is right, in so far as it has secured money or power.

He had hated General Weaver and his forces; and had sometimes wondered how a man of Horace Boies' opinions had succeeded in being so good a governor. He broke with Governor Larrabee when that excellent man had turned against the great men who had developed Iowa by building the railroads. He was always in the county convention, and preferred to serve on the committee on credentials, and leave to others the more showy work of membership in the committee on resolutions. He believed in education, provided it did not unsettle things. He had a good deal of Latin and some Greek, and lived on a farm rather than in a fine house in the county seat because of his lack of financial ability. As a matter of fact, he had been too strictly scrupulous to do the things – such as dealing in lands belonging to eastern speculators who were not advised as to their values, speculating in county warrants, buying up tax titles with county money, and the like – by which his fellow-politicians who held office in the early years of the county had founded their fortunes. 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 yearned 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 deviated, 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. She pressed him to wear a muffler about his neck, but he declined that also. He didn’t need it, he said; but he was thinking of the incongruity of a muffler with no overcoat. 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 warms 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 schoolgirl 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 kept silence, save for certain fragments of his thoughts, in dropping which he assumed that she, like himself, was filled with the grandeur of the sparkling sky, its vast moon, plowing like an astronomical liner through the cloudlets of a wool-pack. 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 hard hands on the shoulders of her white fur collarette.

“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 very respectful to it.

“And together,” said Jim. “I’d like to go on a long, long journey with you to-night, Jennie, to make up for the years since we went anywhere together.”

“And we shouldn’t have come together to-night,” said Jennie, getting back to earth, “if I hadn’t exercised my leap-year privilege.”

She slipped her arm in his, and they went on in a rather intimate way.

“I’m not to blame, Jennie,” said he. “You know that at any time I’d have given anything – anything – ”

“And even now,” said Jennie, taking advantage of his depleted stock of words, “while we roam beyond the Milky Way, we aren’t getting any votes for me for county superintendent.”

Jim said nothing. He was quite, quite reestablished 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. To be sure, there were on the blackboards exercises and outlines, of lessons in language, history, mathematics, geography and the like. But these were not the usual things taken from text-books. The 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 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, 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 a good deal as he had done when he knocked down Mr. Billy’s chauffeur – rather degraded and humiliated, 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 some one else.

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

CHAPTER VII

THE NEW WINE

In the little strip of forest which divided the sown from the Iowa 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 Merriwell, and the other Dead-Shot Dick. However, though it was only mid-December, and the fur of all wild varmints was at its primest, they were bringing their traps into the settlements, instead of taking them afield. "The settlements" were represented by the ruinous dwelling of the Simmses, and the boy who resembled Frank Merriwell was Raymond Simms. The other, who was much more barbarously accoutered, 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. On the right, on the left, a few rods would have brought the boys out upon the levels of rich corn-fields, and in sight of the long rows of cottonwoods, willows, box-elders and soft maples along the straight roads, and of the huge red barns, each of which possessed a numerous progeny of outbuildings, among which the dwelling held a dubious headship. But here, they could be the Boy Trappers – a thin fringe of bushes and trees made of the little valley a forest to the imagination of the boys. Newton put down his load, and sat upon a stump to rest.

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