HERBERT QUICK

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The Brown Mouse

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CHAPTER I

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A MAIDEN'S "HUMPH"

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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 addriss 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

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REVERSED UNANIMITY

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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 bayonetted 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