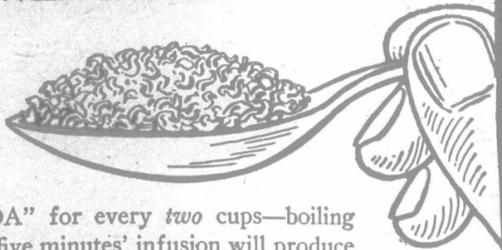


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"It's beastly," said Jim, reddening. "I didn't know, either."

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. Prisidint," said he, "we have wid us t'night, a 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 fr 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 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 adjured 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 conscientiously useful and obviously practical.

Three 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. Prisidint. 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, fr 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 prisidint be instructed to enter into a contract with him fr 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 as ordered. Prepare the ballots for a vote on the election 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, 'tis 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 van vote, too," said Bonner. I thought meself the only dang fool on the board—an' he made a spache that aimed wan vote—but fr the love of hivin, that dub fr a teacher! What come over you, Haakon—you voted fr him too!"

"Ay wanted him to have wan vote too," said Peterson. And in this wise, Jim became the teacher in the Woodruff District—all on account of Jennie Woodruff's "Humph!"

To be continued.