

A BROWN WOMAN

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

"A critical age called for symmetry; and exquisite finish had to be studied as much as nobility of thought. . . . POPE aimed to take first place as a writer of polished verse. Any knowledge he gained of the world, or any suggestion that came to him from his intercourse with society, was utilized to accomplish his main purpose. To put his thoughts into choice language was not enough. Each idea had to be put in its neatest and most epigrammatic form."

"**B**UT I must be hurrying home now," the girl said, "for it is high time I were back in the hay-fields."

"Fair shepherdess," he implored, "for heaven's sake, let us not cut short the *pastorelle* thus abruptly."

"And what manner of beast may that be, pray?"

"Tis a conventional form of verse, my dear, which we at present strikingly exemplify. The plan of a *pastorelle* is simplicity's self: a gentleman, which I may fairly claim to be, in some fair rural scene—such as this—comes suddenly upon a rustic maiden of surpassing beauty. He naturally falls in love with her, and they say all manner of fine things to each other."

She considered him for a while before speaking. It thrilled him to see the odd tenderness that was in her face. "You always think of saying and writing fine things, do you not, sir?"

"My dear," he answered, gravely, "I believe that I was undoubtedly guilty of such folly until you came. I wish I could make you understand how your coming has changed everything."

"You can tell me some other time," the girl gaily declared, and was about to leave him.

His hand detained her, very gently. "Faith, but I fear not, for al-

ready my old hallucinations seem to me incredible. Why, yesterday I thought it the most desirable of human lots to be a great poet"—the gentleman laughed in self-mockery. "I positively did. I labored every day toward becoming one. I lived among books, esteemed that I was doing something of genuine importance as I gravely tinkered with alliteration and metaphor and antithesis and judicious paraphrases of the ancients. I put up with life solely because it afforded material for versification; and, in reality, believed the destruction of Troy was providentially ordained lest Homer lack subject matter for an epic. And as for loving, I thought people fell in love in order to exchange witty rhymes."

His hand detained her, very gently. . . . Indeed, it seemed to him he could never tire of noting her excellencies. Perhaps it was that splendid light poise of her head he chiefly loved; he thought so just now at least. Or was it the wonder of her walk, which made all other women he had ever known appear to mince and hobble, like rusty toys? Something there was assuredly about this slim brown girl which recalled an untamed and harmless woodland creature; and it was that, he knew, which most poignantly moved him, even though he could

not name it. Perhaps it was her bright, kind eyes, which seemed to mirror the tranquillity of forests.

"You gentry are always talking of love," she marveled.

"Oh," he said, with acerbity, "oh, I don't doubt that any number of beef-gorging squires and leering, long-legged Oxford dandies—" He broke off here, and laughed contemptuously. "Well, you are beautiful, and they have eyes as keen as mine. And I do not blame you, my dear, for believing my designs to be no more commendable than theirs—no, not at all."

But his mood was spoiled, and his tetchy vanity hurt, by the thought of stout, well-set fellows having wooed this girl; and he permitted her to go without protest.

Yet he sat alone for a while upon the fallen tree-trunk, humming a contented lilt tune. Never in his life had he been happier. He did not venture to suppose that any creature so adorable could love such a sickly hunchback, such a gargoyle of a man, as he was; but that Sarah was fond of him, he knew. There would be no trouble in arranging with her father for their marriage, most certainly; and he meant to attend to that matter this very morning, and within ten minutes. So Mr. Alexander Pope was meanwhile arranging in his mind a suitable wording for his declaration of marital aspirations.

Thus John Gay found him presently and roused him from phrase-spinning. "And what shall we do this morning, Alexander?" Gay was always demanding, like a spoiled child, to be amused.

Pope told him what his own plans were, speaking quite simply, but with his countenance radiant. Gay took off his hat and wiped his forehead, for the day was warm. He did not say anything at all.

"Well—?" Mr. Pope asked, after a pause.

Mr. Gay was dubious. "I had never thought that you would marry," he said. "And—why, hang it, Alexander! to grow enamored of a milkmaid is well enough for the hero of a poem, but in a poet it hints at injudicious composition."

Mr. Pope gesticulated with thin hands and seemed upon the verge of eloquence. Then he spoke unanswerably. "But I love her," he said.

John Gay's reply was a subdued whistle. He, in common with the other guests of Lord Harcourt at Nuneham Courtney, had wondered what would be the upshot of Mr. Alexander Pope's intimacy with Sarah Drew. A month earlier the poet had sprained his ankle upon Amshot Heath, and this young woman had found him lying there, entirely helpless, as she returned from her evening milking. Being hale of person, she had managed to get the little hunchback to her home unaided. And since then Pope had often been seen with her.

This much was common knowledge. That Mr. Pope proposed to marry the heroine of his misadventure afforded a fair mark for railery, no doubt, but Gay, in common with the run of educated humanity in 1718, did not aspire to be facetious at Pope's expense. The luxury was too costly. Offend the dwarf in any fashion, and were you the dread Duchess of Marlborough or an inconsiderable rhymester, it made no difference; there was no crime too heinous for "the great Mr. Pope's" next verses to charge you with, and, worst of all, there was no misdoing so out of character that his adroit malignancy could not make it seem plausible.

Now, after another pause, Pope said, "I must be going now. Will you not wish me luck?"

"Why, Alexander—why, hang it!" was Mr. Gay's observation, "I believe that you are human after all and not just a book in breaches."

He thereby voiced a commentary patently uncalled-for, as Mr. Pope afterward reflected. Mr. Pope was then treading toward the home of old Frederick Drew. It was a gray morning in late July.

"I love her," Pope had said. The fact was undeniable; yet an expression of it necessarily halts. Pope knew, as every man must do who dares conserve his energies to annotate the drama of life rather than play a part in it, the nature of that loneliness which this conservation breeds. Such persons may hope to win a posthumous esteem in the library, but it is at the bleak cost of making life a wistful transaction with foreigners. In such enforced aloofness Sarah Drew had come to him—strong, beautiful, young, good and vital, all that he was not—and had serenely befriended "the great Mr. Pope," who was in her eyes only a decrepit little gentleman of whom within a week she was unfeignedly fond.

"I love her," Pope had said. Eh, yes, no doubt; and what, he fiercely demanded of himself, was he—a crippled scribbler, a bungling artisan of phrases—that he should dare to love this splendid and deep-bosomed goddess? Something of youth awoke, possessing him—something of that high ardor which, as he cloudily remembered now, had once controlled a boy who dreamed in Windsor Forest, and with the lightest of hearts planned to achieve the impossible. For what is more difficult of attainment than to achieve the perfected phrase, so worded that to alter a syllable of its wording would be little short of sacrilege?

"What whimsams!" decreed the great Mr. Pope, aloud. "Verse-mak-

ing is at best only the affair of idle men who write in their closets and of idle men who read there. And as for him who polishes phrases, whatever be his fate in poetry, it is ten to one but he must give up all the reasonable aims of life for it."

No, he would have no more of loneliness. Henceforward Alexander Pope would be human—like the others. To write perfectly was much; but it was not everything. Living was capable of furnishing even more than the raw material of a couplet. It might, for instance, yield content.

For instance, if you loved, and married, and begot, and died, with the seriousness of a person who believes he is performing an action of real importance, and conceded that the perfection of any art, whether it be that of verse-making or of rope-dancing, is at best a by-product of life's conduct; at worst, you probably would not be lonely. No; you would be at one with all other fat-witted people, and there was no greater blessing conceivable.

Pope muttered and produced his notebook and wrote tentatively.

Wrote Mr. Pope:

The bliss of man (could pride that
blessing find)
Is not to act or think beyond mankind;
No powers of body or of soul to share
But what his nature and his state can
bear.

"His state!" yes, undeniably, two sibilants collided here. "His wit?"—no, that would be flat-footed awkwardness in the management of your vowel-sounds. Pope was fretting over the imbroglia when he absent-mindedly glanced up to perceive that his Sarah, not irrevocably offended, was being embraced by a certain John Hughes—who was a stalwart, florid, personable individual, no doubt, but, after all, only an unlettered farmer.

The dwarf gave a hard, wringing motion of his hands. The diamond—Lord Bolingbroke's gift—which ornamented Pope's left hand cut into the flesh of his little finger, so cruel was the gesture; and this little finger was bleeding as Pope tripped forward, smiling. A gentleman does not incommode the public by obtruding the ugliness of a personal wound.

"Do I intrude?" he queried. "Ah, well! I also have dwelt in Arcadia." It was bitter to comprehend that he had never done so.

The lovers were visibly annoyed; yet, if an interruption of their pleasant commerce was decreed to be, it could not possibly have sprung, as they soon found, from a more sympathetic source.

These were not subtle persons. Pope had the truth from them within ten minutes. They loved each other; but John Hughes was peniless, and old Frederick Drew was, in consequence, obdurate.

"And, besides, he thinks you mean to marry me!" said Sarah Drew.

"My dear, he pardonably forgets that the utmost reach of my designs in common reason would be to drag you down into the gutter," drawled Mr. Pope. "As concerns Mr. ——— ah, Hughes here, the case is somewhat different. Why, it is a veritable romance—an affair of Daphne and Corydon—although, to be unpardonably candid, the plot of your romance, my dear, is not the most original conceivable. I think that the dénouement need not baffle our imaginations."

The dwarf went toward Sarah Drew. The chary sunlight had found the gold in her hair, and its glint was brightly visible to him. "My dear"—he said. His thin, long fingers touched her capable hand. It was a sort of caress—half-timid. "My dear, I owe my life to you.

My body is at most a flimsy abortion such as a night's exposure would have made more tranquil than it is just now. Yes, it was you who found a caricature of the sort of man that Mr. Hughes here is, disabled, helpless, and—for reasons which doubtless seemed to you sufficient—contrived that this unsightly parody continue in existence. I am not lovable, my dear. I am only a hunchback, as you can see. My aspirations and my sickly imaginings merit only the derision of a candid, clean-souled being such as you are." His finger-tips touched the back of her hand again. "I think there was never a maker of enduring verse who did not at one period or another long to exchange an assured immortality for a broader pair of shoulders. I think—I think that I am prone to speak at random," Pope said, with his half-drowsy smile. "Yet, none the less, an honest man, as our kinsmen in Adam average, is bound to pay his equitable debts."

She said, "I do not understand."

"I have perpetrated certain jingles," Pope returned. "I had not realized till now they are the only children I shall leave behind me. Eh, and what would you make of them, my dear, could ingenuity contrive a torture dire enough to force you into reading them! . . . Misguided people have paid me for contriving these jingles. So that I have money enough to buy you from your father just as I would purchase one of his heifers. Yes, at the very least, I have money, and I have earned it. I will send Mr. ——— I believe that Hughes is the name?—£500 of it this afternoon. That sum, I gather, will be sufficient to remove your father's objection to your marriage with Mr. Hughes."

In such matters no woman is blind. Tears came into Sarah's huge brown eyes. This hamadryad was

not thinking of John Hughes now. Pope noted the fact with the pettiest exultation. "Oh, you—you are good." The girl spoke as with difficulty.

"No adjective, my dear, was ever applied with less discrimination. It is merely that you have rendered no inconsiderable service to posterity, and merit a reward."

"Oh, and indeed, indeed, I was always fond of you—" The girl sobbed this.

She would have added more, no doubt, since compassion is garrulous, had not Pope's scratched hand dismissed a display of emotion as not entirely in consonance with the rules of the game.

"My dear, therein you have signally honored me. There remains only to offer you my appreciation of your benevolence toward a sickly monster, and to entreat for my late intrusion—however unintentional—that forgiveness which you would not deny, I think, to any other impertinent insect."

Then Pope bowed low, wheeled, walked away from her. Yes, she had wounded him past sufferance; it seemed to him he must die. Life was a farce, and Destiny an overseer who hiccoughed mandates. Well, all that even Destiny could find to gloat over, he reflected, was the tranquil figure of a smallish gentleman switching at the grass-blades with his cane as he sauntered under darkening skies.

For a storm was coming on, and the first big drops of it were splattering the terrace when Mr. Pope entered Lord Harcourt's mansion.

POPE went straight to his own rooms. As he came in there was a vivid flash of lightning, followed instantaneously by a crashing, splitting noise, like that of universes ripped asunder. He did not honor the dis-

cord with attention. This dwarf was not afraid of anything except the commission of an error in taste.

Pope lighted four candles and set them before the long French mirror. He stood appraising his own deformity while the storm raged. He stood sidelong, peering over his left shoulder, in order to see the outline of his crooked back. Nowhere in England, he reflected, was there a person more pitiable and more repellent outwardly.

"And, oh, it would be droll," Pope said, aloud, "if our exteriors were ever altogether parodies. Now, if you take the first letter of Mr. Alexander Pope's Christian name, and the first and last letters of his surname, you have A.P.E.," Pope quoted, genially. "I begin to think that Dennis was right. What conceivable woman would not prefer a well-set man of five-and-twenty to such a withered monster? And what does it matter, after all, that a hunchback has dared to desire a shapely brown-haired woman?"

Pope came more near to the mirror. "Make answer, you who have dared to imagine that a goddess was ever bribed to descend into womanhood except by kisses, brawn and a clean heart."

Another peal of thunder bellowed. The storm was growing furious. "Yet I have had a marvelous dream. Now I awaken. I must go on in the old round. As long as my wits preserve their agility I must be able to amuse, to flatter and, at need, to intimidate the patrons of that ape in the mirror, so that they will not dare refuse me the market-value of my antics. And Sarah Drew has declined an alliance such as this in favor of a fresh-colored complexion and a pair of broad shoulders!"

Pope thought a while. "And a clean heart! She bargained royally, giving love for nothing less than

love. The man is rustic, illiterate; he never heard of Aristotle, he would be at a loss to distinguish between a trochee and a Titian, and if you mentioned Boileau to him he would probably imagine you were talking of cookery. But he loves her. He would forfeit eternity to save her a toothache. And, chief of all, she can make this robust baby happy, and she alone can make him happy. And so, she gives, gives royally—she gives, God bless her!"

Rain, sullen rain, was battering the window. "And you—you hunchback in the mirror, you maker of neat rhymes—pray, what had you to offer? A coach-and-six, of course, and pin-money and furbelows and in the end a mausoleum with unimpeachable Latin on it! And—*paté sur paté*—an unswerving devotion which she would share on almost equal terms with the Collected Works of Alexander Pope. And so she chose—chose brawn and a clean heart."

The dwarf turned, staggered, fell upon his bed. "God, make a man of me, make me a good brave man! I loved her—oh, such as I am, You know that I loved her! You know that I desire her happiness above all things. Ah, no, for You know that I do not at bottom. Ah, God, and why did You decree that I should never be an obtuse and comely animal such as this John Hughes is? I am so tired of being 'the great Mr. Pope,' and I want only the common joys of life."

The hunchback wept. It would be too curious to anatomize the writhings of his proud little spirit.

NOW someone tapped upon the door. It was John Gay. He was bidden to enter, and, complying, found Mr. Pope yawning over the latest of Tonson's publications.

Gay's face was singularly portent-

ous. "My friend," Gay blurted out, "I bring news which will horrify you. Believe me, I would never have mustered the pluck to bring it did I not love you. I cannot let you hear it first in public and unprepared, as, otherwise, you would have to do."

"Do I not know you have the kindest heart in all the world? Why, so outrageous are your amiable defects that they would be the public derision of your enemies if you had any," Pope returned.

The other poet evinced an awkward comminglement of consternation and pity. "It appears that when this storm arose—why, Mistress Drew was with a young man of the neighborhood—a John Hewet—" Gay was speaking with unaccustomed rapidity.

"Hughes, I think," Pope interrupted, equably.

"Perhaps—I am not sure. They sought shelter under a haycock. You will remember that first crash of thunder, as if the heavens were in demolishment? My friend, the reapers who had been laboring in the fields—who had been driven to such protection as the trees or hedges afforded—"

"Get on!" a shrill voice cried; "for God's love, man, get on!" Mr. Pope had risen. This pallid shaken wisp was not in appearance the great Mr. Pope whose ingenuity had enabled Homeric warriors to excel in the genteel.

"They first saw a little smoke . . . They found this Hughes with one arm about the neck of Mistress Drew, and the other held over her face, as if to screen her from the lightning. They were both dead."

Pope turned abruptly. Nakedness is of necessity uncouth, he held, whether it be the body or the soul that is unveiled. Mr. Pope went toward a window, which he opened;

and he stood thus looking out for a brief while.

"So she is dead," he said. "It is very strange. So many rare felicities of curve and color, so much of purity and kindness and valor and mirth, extinguished as one snuffs a candle! Well! I am sorry she is dead, for the child had a talent for living and got such joy out of it . . . Hers was a lovely happy life, but it was sterile. Already nothing remains of her but dead flesh which must be huddled out of sight. I shall not perish thus entirely, I believe. Men will remember me. Truly a mighty foundation for pride! when the utmost I can hope for is but to be read in one island, and to be thrown aside at the end of one age. Indeed, I am not even sure of that much. I print, and print, and print. And when I collect my verses into books, I am altogether uncertain whether to look upon myself as a man building a monument, or burying the dead. It sometimes seems to me that each publication is but a solemn funeral of many wasted years. For I have given all to the verse-making. Granted that the sacrifice avails to rescue my name from oblivion, what will it profit me when I am dead and care no more for men's opinions than Sarah Drew cares now for what I say of her? But then she never cared. She loved John Hughes. And she was right."

He made an end of speaking, still peering out of the window with considerate narrowed eyes.

The storm was over. In the beech tree opposite a wren was raising optimistic outcry. The sun had won his way through a black-bellied shred of cloud; upon the terrace below, a dripping Venus and a Perseus were glistening as with white fire. Past these, drenched gardens, the natural wildness of which was

judiciously restrained with walks, ponds, grottoes, statuary and other rural elegancies, brightly displayed the intermingled brilliancies of diamonds and emeralds, and glittered as with pearls and rubies where tempest-battered roses were reviving in courage.

"I think the storm is over," Mr. Pope remarked. "It is strange how violent are these convulsions of nature. It is consolatory to reflect that they pass quickly."

He turned as in defiance. "Yes, yes! It hurts. But I envy them. Yes, even I, that ugly, spiteful hornet of a man! 'the great Mr. Pope,' who will be dining with the proudest people in England within the hour and gloating over their terror of me! I envy these dead young fools . . . You see, they loved each other, John. I left them, not an hour ago, the happiest of living creatures. I looked back once. I pretended to have dropped my handkerchief. I imagine they were talking of their wedding-clothes, for this broad-shouldered Hughes was matching poppies and field-flowers to her complexion. It was a scene out of Theocritus. I think Heaven was so well pleased by the tableau that Heaven hastily resumed possession of its enactors in order to prevent any after-happenings from belittling that perfect instant."

"Egad, and matrimony might easily have proved an anti-climax," Gay considered.

"Yes; oh, it is only Love that is blind, and not the lover necessarily. I know. I suppose I always knew at the bottom of my heart. This hamadryad was destined in the outcome to dwindle into a village housewife, she would have taken a lively interest in the number of eggs the hens were laying, she would even have assured her children, precisely in the way her father spoke of John Hughes,

that young people ordinarily have foolish fancies which their rational elders agree to disregard."

Pope broke off short. He produced his notebook, which he never went without, and wrote frowningly, with many erasures. "H'm, yes," he said; and he read aloud:

When eastern lovers feed the funeral
fire,
On the same pile the faithful fair expire;
Here pitying heaven that virtue mutual
found,
And blasted both that it might neither
wound.
Hearts so sincere the Almighty saw well
pleased,
Sent His own lightning and the victims
seized.

Then Pope made a grimace. "No, the comparison is neat enough, but the lines lack fervor. It is deplorable how much easier it is to express any emotion other than that of which one is actually conscious." Pope had torn the paper half through before he reflected that it would help to fill a printed page. He put it in his pocket. "But, come now, I am writing to Lady Mary this afternoon. You know how she loves oddities.

Between us—with prose as the medium, of course, since verse should, after all, confine itself to the commemoration of heroes and royal persons—I believe we might make of this occurrence a neat and moving pastorelle—I should say, pastoral, of course, but my wits are woolgathering."

Mr. Gay had the kindest heart in the universe. Yet he, also, had dreamed of the perfected phrase, of the personal thought so worded that to alter a syllable of its wording would be little short of sacrilege. Eyes kindling, he took up a pen. "Yes, yes, I understand. Egad, it is an admirable subject. But, then, I don't believe I ever saw these lovers—?"

"John was a well-set man of about five-and-twenty," replied Mr. Pope: "and Sarah was a brown woman of eighteen years, three months and fourteen days."

Then these two dipped their pens and set about a moving composition which has to-day its proper rating among Mr. Pope's Complete Works.

So let us leave him to his scribbling, this great Mr. Pope, nor be too intolerant of his ready acquiescence in the offerings of tragedy. For the perfected phrase is a hard master and leaves small room for pity. And the server of words is ever too wise to come to grips with Fortune, villain of many pieces. Yet in this same beruffled time there was one who did essay this feat. Server of phrases he was, too, who had not learned the poet's trick of losing the thing but snaring the image of it with words, and so making it the more his own. Wherefore he grasped—and to what pass this brought him you shall read next month in "Pro Honoria."

