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Jim's House

An Absorbing Romance

L. M. Montgomery

Illustrated by Charles Andrew Bryson

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Margaret's eyes suddenly filled with tears. It hurt her to look at Jim's House, it was so lovely—yet she liked the hurt



riend Cat,” said Jim Kennedy, “I am going house-hunting to-day.”

Friend Cat, sitting on a stool beside Jim, blinked his topaz eyes a trifle insolently and then looked bored. He never condescended to get excited. But Jim was evidently very much excited about something, and Margaret Irwin gazed at him across the breakfast table with shy, friendly interest.

She had not seen Jim Kennedy excited about anything in the week she had been boarding with his sister-in-law. Excitement became him, she thought. It thrilled his lazy, musical voice with delightful cadences, and lighted illuminating fires in the depths of his golden-brown eyes.

Margaret Irwin had known Jim only a week, but she felt better acquainted with him than with any man she had ever met—which is not saying a great deal, since she seldom met men, and never got really acquainted with them when she did. It was

very pleasant to sit across from Jim at meal times, listening to his gentle, whimsical talk, and watching him smuggle tidbits to Friend Cat when Mrs. Kennedy was not looking.

You'll have an awful job to find a house," said Mrs. Kennedy, placidly. "I don't know of one in the village either for rent or for sale, except the big Ormsby house. And you don't seem to care for that."

"It is an impossible house," said Jim, solemnly. "Not because of its size—but just because of—its impossibility. Miss Irwin, you saw it yesterday. What was your first impression, if you don't mind telling me?"

"I felt," Margaret said, responding to the challenge in Jim's eyes, "as if I wanted to get a broom and sweep off all the gingerbread and frippery and wooden lace."

"Exactly! *Any* sensible woman would feel the same."

"It's an elegant house," said Mrs. Kennedy, a trifle warmly. Her brother had built it—the matter was slightly personal.

"It *is* elegant—with all the term implies," agreed Jim gravely. "Far too elegant for a humble schoolmaster like me. It would own me, body and soul. I'd have to carry it with me wherever I went—on my back, like a snail. I want a house I can love, and that Friend Cat can boss. Oh, I'll find one! I don't know where—but I feel it in my bones, luck's just waiting round the corner for me. My house is somewhere, wanting me as badly as I want it. Come, Friend Cat. We'll walk up the spruce road and talk it over."

Jim went out, flinging a smile back from the door. Friend Cat ambled after him. Mrs. Kennedy smiled indulgently.

"Jim's in great spirits this morning. I don't wonder. He had a letter from Isabel Bartlett last night. And at last she's coming home to marry him. They've been engaged five years. *That's* why he's going house-hunting. I must say I'm glad. Jim has been very patient, but the long wait has been hard on him. He's always been crazy about Isabel. And he's thirty—it's time he settled down and had a home of his own. Though I'll be sorry enough to lose him. He's boarded with me ever since I came here, and a nicer man never lived, odd as he is.

"For he *is* odd, nobody can deny it. You may have noticed the queer things he's always saying. My husband wasn't a bit like him. You'd never have thought they were brothers. Still, I'm fond of him, and I'm glad he's going to be happy. I've been worried for fear Isabel would take up with some one else and throw him over—and that would break his heart. I always wondered at her liking him. She's so pretty and

attractive she could marry most anybody. But Jim was her choice, it seems, and she hasn't changed, and I'm thankful for his sake. She'll make him a wonderful wife, just the kind he needs."

Mrs. Kennedy paused for lack of breath, to Margaret's regret. Jim's affairs interested her. She had known he was engaged—Mrs. Kennedy had told her, and intimated that there was a romance linked up with it. Margaret loved romance. It had never touched her own life—never would touch it. She wanted quite greedily to hear all about Jim's.

"It's no secret," Mrs. Kennedy assured her. "Everybody in Glenby knows about Jim and Isabel. It's a wonder Jim hasn't told you—he loves to talk about her. I never heard of a man so wrapped up in a girl. That's why I've been worried for fear she wouldn't come back to him. It began six years ago. Jim was just through college and had been taken on as principal in the High School. Isabel had come to live in Glenby then, with the aunt who brought her up. It was love at first sight with Jim, and no wonder, for she was the prettiest thing—just seventeen and slight as a reed, with the loveliest golden hair—yards of it, and big blue eyes.

And such a happy little thing—her laugh was *catching*, as Jim said. Everybody liked Isabel and she had dozens of beaux, but from the first it was Jim and nobody else. People wondered—Jim was eight years older and always had been an odd stick. He's not as handsome as some, but he has a taking way with him, as you may have noticed."

Yes, Margaret had noticed it.

"They were engaged, and meant to be married right off. And then the aunt, Miss Bartlett, got sick, and the doctors told her her lungs were affected and she must go to Colorado. And she didn't know what to do. She couldn't go alone—and there wasn't a soul to go with her except Isabel. Isabel and she were alone in the world, and she was one of the clinging, dependent sort of women.

"But Isabel said right out she'd go with her, and Jim agreed that it was her duty, though it was mighty hard on him. When they went away they didn't think she'd be away more'n a year; but here it's been five years. This spring Miss Bartlett up and married an old widower she'd met out there—no waiting for *her* once he came to time—and poor Isabel was free at last. That was the news Jim got last night—that and the fact that she was coming home to him. She's to be here in September—and I s'pose Jim'll spend the summer hunting up a house for her and talking the ears off his cat. He's *got* to talk to some one about her, and the cat's the only creature that's

willing to listen for hours on end.”

“I hope he’ll find his house,” said Margaret, dreamily.

I don’t know why on earth Jim has such a spite against the Ormsby house. He seems to hate it as if it was a prison. And it’s such a nice house. Perhaps it’s a little fussy on the outside—I think myself a bay window or two could be spared. But it’s so convenient! Hot and cold water, electric light, hardwood floors, two bathrooms—why, it’s equal to a city apartment. And so near everything—shops and churches and the park. Cassell Street’s the liveliest in Glenby—there’s a string of motors passing all the time on the way to the lake. Perhaps the price staggers Jim—but he has money saved up, and Ormsby would sell it for half its value to settle up the estate.”

“I don’t think the Ormsby house belongs to Jim,” said Margaret.

Mrs. Kennedy stared.

“No, of course it don’t belong to him. It is part of the old Ormsby estate.”

“It might belong to him for all that,” said Margaret. “Have you never seen houses that you felt belonged to you—no matter who owned them?”

No, Mrs. Kennedy had not, nor had she a glimmer of a notion what Miss Irwin meant. So she got up and began to clear away the dishes and Margaret went out to the garden and lay in a hammock under the trees, doing nothing.

Oh, how sweet it was to do nothing, in the beautiful silence! Margaret had been working in a department store for twelve years, and she hated it. She always felt that she was in the grip of an octopus that was slowly devouring her, and would never let her go as long as there was a bone left to crack. She had two weeks’ vacation once a year, and had to spend it on a lonely farm with the grouchy old uncle and aunt who had brought her up and who expected her to work hard at weeding and milking and pie-baking, all her little two weeks.

She always felt more tired when she went back to work than when she had left it.

But she had never rebelled. There was nothing of the revolutionary in her. She was a little brown thing; her dark brown eyes were too soft and shadowy to be black, and apart from her eyes she was neither pretty nor ugly—just insignificant. She had had two chances of marriage; but though in the abstract she had thought she would marry *anybody* who would take her out of that horrible transfer and change department, when it came to the concrete she found she couldn’t do it. Nobody would ever marry her now—she must go on at her counter and her little wicket forever and ever and ever, until she got too old to work.

Her uncle and aunt had died in the winter. Margaret was not very sorry—and she did not blame herself because she wasn't. They had always been tyrants—cruel, selfish tyrants. She was too gentle and sweet to hate any one, or she would have hated them. They did not leave her anything—everything went to their own daughter. But Margaret had an odd, stifled feeling of freedom. She would have a *real* vacation—the first she had ever had.

It was to be a longer vacation than she had counted on, for she felt so miserable in the spring she was obliged to go to a doctor. He told her that she must take three months off or a worse thing would befall her. Margaret didn't see how she could—and then she suddenly made up her mind to do it, even if she lost her place. But the manager of the transfer department became human for five minutes, and told her he would keep her place for her, so she decided to make one wild, reckless plunge. She would take enough of her small savings and find a nice boarding house in some quiet place where there was no *noise*, and no abominable cabbage smells. Oh, to be where there was no noise!



For the transfer and change department, in the middle of the big hardware basement, was the noisiest place in the great hive. There were all kinds of noises—ceaseless, meaningless noises that hammered on her tired brain and numbed her soul. The other girls in the transfer got used to the noises—never noticed them, so they said. Margaret didn't believe them—it seemed so impossible to her. But now, for the whole golden, blissful summer she was going to forget them.

Jim did not come home to dinner. Somehow it seemed a rather flat meal. But he was there at supper time, radiating triumph.

"I told you it was my lucky day," he said. "I've found my house—and bought it—paid cash down for it before Jack Petersen could change his mind. I wouldn't take any risks on that house. It's mine—mine this blessed minute. Why, it's such good luck as to be almost uncanny."

"Jack Petersen?" said Mrs. Kennedy. "You don't mean to say——"

"I do. I mean to say it all. I've bought Jack's house—or rather the house he owned by a legal quibble. It's always been really *my* house, you know—built for me—predestined for me. But I had no hope of ever getting my own. I thought he wanted it for himself and *his* bride. I couldn't believe any man who owned that house could dream of selling it. And to-day has literally flung it into my hands."

“That little Petersen house!” said Mrs. Kennedy, aghast. “Why—it’s old—and shabby—and so small, and out of the world!”

“You’ve said it! It’s most gloriously out of the world. That’s one reason I love it. And it is old and shabby—that’s why I can afford it. I’m going to fix it up—I’ve got two months to work at it. I mean to do everything with my own hands.”

“Do you think Isabel will like to live away up in that lonely place?” demanded Mrs. Kennedy.

Jim looked at Margaret and smiled. “Do *you* think she will?” he asked.

“She can’t help it,” said Margaret.

Mrs. Kennedy snorted.

“Well, I suppose it’s no use saying anything——”

“Not a bit. The fatal deed is done. I, Jim Kennedy, am a landed proprietor, owning a house, a garden and a spruce wood an acre in extent—I, who this morning hadn’t a square inch of this big earth to call my own. Friend Cat, be excited for once, I implore you—that’s a duck of a cat.”

Friend Cat still refused to be excited. He purred placidly and winked one eye at Margaret.

“I want you to do me a favor, Miss Irwin,” Jim went on, when Mrs. Kennedy had gone out, “I want you to come up to my house—*my* house—*my house*—excuse me, I *have* to say it—I *have* to try how it sounds every way—and look it over; tell me what you think of it. I want to make it convenient for Isabel—for I’m not such a fool as to imagine that a woman can keep on loving a man who doesn’t provide her with proper cupboards.”

“I’ll be delighted!” said Margaret sincerely. Jim looked grateful.

“You’re too good to be true—almost,” he said. “What nice things women are! Women—and dear little houses with kind, quiet trees about them! Hurry up and finish eating. I want to take you right up to mine. There’s a short cut to it up the hill. Never mind a hat—you don’t want a hat on an evening like this. I like the thought of that smooth brown head of yours slipping through the gray-green trunks and the long green boughs. Your hair is just the brown that belongs to the woods.”

As they went out, Margaret remembered that this was the first compliment she had ever received—if it were a compliment. Yes it was—Jim’s eyes told her that. She tasted it all the way up the long hill. The little, winding path was so narrow they had to walk in single file. Margaret went first and Friend Cat followed, waving his tail, and Jim brought up the rear. It was a lovely path; ferns grew all along it and the dew-moist air was pungent with the aroma of young, sun-steeped firs. Before the last turn Jim overtook her with one long stride and put his hands over her eyes.

*G*o on like this," he commanded, "and don't open your eyes till I say you can."

Margaret obeyed delightedly. A few more steps—and Jim took his hands away.

"Oh!" gasped Margaret. "Oh!" Something seemed to sweep over her soul. Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. It *hurt* her to look at Jim's house—yet she liked the hurt.

It was a little gray house that looked as if it had never been built, but had just grown up in that wild, ferny, woodsy corner—like a toadstool. It was low-eaved, with odd, little diamond-paned windows. Its gray roof was mottled with fat cushions of moss—like green velvet mice. Two big pine trees joined their branches right over it. There was a porch over the front door, covered with honeysuckle. Behind it tall spires of fir stood out against gray-pink shades of evening. Robins were whistling wildly in the firs. The woods were all around the house except on the south side, where the land fell away in a long hill, looking down on Glenby. Between the house and the view, but not hiding it, was a row of wonderful Lombardy poplars.



She knew Isabel would be crazy over this old willowware set

And between their trunks, far away through the crystal-clear evening air, rose a great, round, full moon.

“Girl—you’re crying!” said Jim.

“It’s—all so lovely—it hurts,” said Margaret.

“I knew you’d like it—but I didn’t expect you’d like it as much as that,” said Jim. “You don’t know half its charms yet, either. Wait until it gets dark and you see the lights of Glenby twinkling out down there and all over that hill. And this hill is full of squirrels—I love squirrels, don’t you? Friend Cat likes them, too—he catches them—I’ve got to break him of it. There are any number of shy rabbits, too. And bats—it’s a great place for bats. I like ’em—nice, queer, creepy, mysterious creatures, coming out of nowhere. There’s one now—s-s-woop! And there’s a little mossy hollow behind those young firs that’s full of violets in spring—violets!

‘Sweeter than the lids of Isabel’s eyes
Or Isabel’s breath.’

“Isabel’s a nicer name than Cytherea or Juno, isn’t it? And I want you to notice especially that little gate over yonder. It isn’t really needed—it opens only into the woods. But *isn’t* it a gate? I love a gate like that—it’s full of promise. There *may* be something wonderful beyond. A gate is always a mystery anyhow—it lures—it is a symbol. That’s a nice bit of garden, too, don’t you think? Of course I haven’t much land, but the sky is all mine.”

Margaret thought she could have stood there forever listening to Jim’s lazy, laughing voice at her shoulder. But Friend Cat flew through the garden after a bat and Jim led her into the house. It was as dear and lovable inside as out. It was a house where there had been brides and mothers, and their happiness seemed to linger in it like a perfume. Margaret fancied she saw Isabel there—lovely, golden-haired Isabel, flitting through the little rooms, laughing under the firs, sitting hand in hand with Jim before the fireplace.

“Will you let me help you fix this house up for you—for Isabel?” she said softly.

“Oh, will you?” he cried. “How I wanted to ask you—and I was afraid you’d hate to be bothered. I need a woman’s help in heaps of ways. My brother’s wife is a jewel, but certain things are holden from her eyes. *You’ll* know just what Isabel would like—I was sure of that the moment I saw you. And you’ll help me! Oh, you nice little thing! You *nice* little thing!”

He was squeezing her hands so hard that he hurt her, but she did not flinch. She had never been so happy in her life. What a joy it would be to help fix up this darling

place for beautiful Isabel. Margaret felt she loved Isabel herself, for her beauty, her charm, her loyalty, her laughter. She would do her very best to make this house, where Isabel would be queen, perfect in its way.

“I won’t paint it,” said Jim. “I want it left its own woodsy gray. But inside it must be painted—and things bought to put in it. That’s where I need your help. I don’t know a darn thing about furnishing a house and I’ve precious little money left. I wasn’t going to have a cent of debt on this place. But I must get things—for *her*—somehow.”

“We’ll get them,” said Margaret. “I’ll help you paint—I can paint beautifully.”

“And you’re *sure* it won’t be a nuisance?” said Jim anxiously. “You ought to be resting, I suppose—you’re not strong.”

“It will be the greatest treat of my life,” cried Margaret. “And it will be the right kind of a rest. Oh—we’ve been here half an hour—and I feel as if I’d known this house all my life. When you and Isabel are living here I’m coming to visit you whether you ask me or not—but I won’t stay long. I’ll just come and look at the house—and see if you’re using it right—and if you *deserve* it—and then go away again.”

“I know you’re too nice to be real,” said Jim. “I’m sure I’ve dreamed you. But I hope you’ll get my house furnished before I wake up. And when Isabel comes you’ll love her, too. She’s—she’s—she’s *Isabel*. Do let me talk about her to you. You needn’t answer—you needn’t even let on you hear me—just let me talk.”

“Talk, dear lover,” laughed Margaret. She wondered a little at herself. It seemed so easy to chatter with Jim, somehow—as easy as talking to herself. She lay awake quite late that night planning for Jim’s house. As long as she could remember, life had been dull and colorless. Now she had come to a little patch of violets, purple and fragrant, hers for the plucking.

She would advise Jim to paint the living-room in tones of deep cream and brown—she would see that he picked the right kind of paper. She would get him to put up shelves in the chimney recess—and a rose trellis over the wildwood gate—and replace the worn out wooden steps of the porch with red sandstone. And make a new button for the pantry door—and—she was asleep, the first sound sleep she had had for weeks.

The next two months seemed like one dream of rapture to Margaret. She was so absorbed and happy that she never thought about herself, and she worked so hard in the daytime that she slept like a log at night.

They painted and papered the house, and Margaret got her own way in

everything. Then they borrowed Mrs. Kennedy's fat old brown mare and jogged far and wide looking for furniture—quaint, old-fashioned bits that belonged to the little house. Margaret knew one whenever she saw it, and she was such a good bargainer that she always got it for a song.

When they got it up to Jim's house they tried it in a dozen different places and were not satisfied until they found the right one; and sometimes they could not agree about it, and then they would sit on the floor and argue it out. And if they couldn't settle it, they got Friend Cat to pull a straw with his teeth and decide it that way.

Margaret found a delightful old dinner set of real willowware at a farm auction, and snapped it up in a frenzy. Not a piece was missing and it had shallow thin cups and deep saucers, and scalloped plates and fat, knobby tureens. She knew Isabel would be crazy over it—Jim had told her Isabel loved pretty dishes. She regarded that set as her greatest treasure, though the old chest of drawers with the white china knobs was a close second. She polished the chest until her elbows ached.

Not all the things that went into the little house were bought. Jim had several bits that had belonged to his mother—an old rosewood piano; two tall, lovely brass candlesticks; lots of round, braided rugs; a grandfather's clock; a big, brass coal scuttle; a gilt-framed mirror with fat cupids gambolling in a panel over the glass; a battered little silver teapot of incredible age, and a quaint Japanese rose-bowl.

Margaret made *pot-pourri* for the bride in this, from the roses that grew in the garden, and she was quite reckless with her scents and spices. She paid for them herself, not telling Jim—she wanted to give the house something of her own. Finally she made jam—heaps of it—raspberry and cherry and blueberry and plum—the strawberries were over before she thought of it—and sealed it up in lovely little blue and white jars—dozens of them, which Mrs. Kennedy had stored away in her attic, relics of a departed brother's drugstore.

They had queer names printed on them, over which Margaret and Jim had lots of fun. But Margaret made dainty little labels, carefully written, and ornamented with curlicues, and pasted them on. She filled the pantry shelves and the swinging shelf in the cellar with them, and she loved them best of all the things in the house.

They had glorious minutes of fun whenever they stopped to rest. There was a little bluebird's nest in the rosebush under the living-room window, which they watched and protected from Friend Cat. They made friends with an old rabbit that often came hopping out of the woods into the garden. They had a game as to who

could count the most rabbits and squirrels in the daytime and the most bats in the evening.

For they did not always go home as soon as it got too dark to work. Sometimes they sat out on the porch steps and watched the twilight creep up from the valley, and the lights twinkle out on the opposite hill, and the shadows waver and advance under the fir trees, and the white, early stars shine over the big guardian pines. Friend Cat sat and purred beside them, or swooped madly about in pursuit of bats. Jim recited some of his poetry to Margaret in these hours. She thought it wonderful—perhaps she was not very critical. But Jim’s voice and the charm of the half-light would have made a masterpiece of anything.

And then, at last, everything was done. They looked at each other one September evening and realized that. Jim’s house was ready for Jim’s bride.

“There’s absolutely nothing more we can do,” said Margaret. “We can’t even *pretend* there’s anything more.”

“I suppose not,” agreed Jim. His voice sounded a little flat. He looked about the living-room wistfully, he looked at Margaret, sitting like a little brown elf on the oak settle in the chimney corner; he looked at the fireplace where kindling and pine wood were laid ready for a fire. His eyes lighted again.

“Yes, there is,” he cried. “How could we have forgotten it? We’ve got to see if the chimney will draw properly. I’m going to light that fire.”

Margaret had laid the fire, meaning that Isabel should light it with her own hand the first evening she came as Jim’s wife to Jim’s house. But she made no effort to dissuade Jim. She only nestled down a little closer in her corner. She had come suddenly to the end of everything—*everything*. Life seemed simply *cut off*. It sickened her to think of the transfer department. She *would not* think of it—for a little while she would just think of her house—yes, *her* house—and of Jim—not even of Isabel.

When the fire blazed up, Jim came over and sat down on the settle beside her. Friend Cat hopped up and sat between them. Up blazed the merry flames; they shimmered over the old piano, they glistened on the brass candlesticks, they danced over the glass doors of the cupboard where the willowware dishes were, they darted through the kitchen door—and the row of brown and blue bowls Margaret had ranged on the dresser winked back at them. The room was full of the scent of the rose-jar on the sideboard—a haunting scent like all the lost perfumes of old, unutterably sweet years.

“This is—home,” said Jim softly. “It’s lovelier than I ever dreamed of its being. And it’s your creation, Margaret.”

Margaret did not answer. She was looking at Jim, as he gazed into the fire—his black hair, his smiling eyes, his whimsical face. She was recalling all his friendly looks and jests and quips and subtle compliments. It was all she could ever have of him. For just this half hour she would give herself up to enchantment. The future was Isabel’s—but this half hour was hers. She shut her eyes and prayed—“Help me to remember *every moment* of this—never to forget one single breath of it.”

When she opened her eyes Jim was looking at her.

“We’ve been good friends,” he said.

Margaret nodded.

We’ll just sit here and think about it all,” he said. “We won’t talk. But we’ll think it all over—everything—until the fire burns out.”

The fire crackled and snapped; the great clock ticked; Friend Cat purred; a little slender young moon shone down through the pine boughs straight on them through the window. It was worth while to have lived long dreary years for this and to live them again looking back on it, thought Margaret.

When the fire died down into white ashes, Jim got up.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Little friend and chum and comrade, there’s nothing to do but go.”



And this was Isabel! She was so beautiful that her beauty struck you in the face. Margaret had heard of "stunning" girls. Well, Isabel was stunning

Margaret wondered if he guessed—if he was sorry for her. She did not care. She didn't mind his knowing, somehow. He would never laugh at her. He belonged to Isabel. Isabel would have the little house and the jam-pots, and the rabbits and the blue dishes. But Isabel could never have this perfect, enchanted half hour.

She was in her room at sunset, crumpled up in a chair, listening. Jim had gone to bring Isabel over. Isabel had arrived in Glenby the night before and was with her cousin, Mrs. Alden, up the road. Jim had met her at the station and spent the evening with her. At breakfast that morning he had been even more whimsical than usual and Mrs. Kennedy had thought him in remarkably good spirits. Then he had gone to school—school opened that day—promising to bring Isabel over that night.

And now they were coming. Margaret, peeping from the window, saw them in the distance and shrank back in her chair. A few minutes later a peal of laughter floated up to her from the front porch—a frank, hearty, generous peal of laughter, evidently welling up from a friendly, uncritical heart. Margaret stared straight before her. *That* could not be Isabel's laughter! Impossible! Isabel's laughter was like—what had Jim said it was like? Oh, yes, the tinkle of a woodland brook. This

—sounded more like rich cream gurgling out of a big jug. Margaret gave a queer, choked, half-hysterical little giggle.

Mrs. Kennedy called her. She went down slowly, wishing herself anywhere else in the world—even in the transfer department, or in her cheap boarding house with its stale cooking smells. She paused for a moment in the doorway of the sitting room. She saw Jim back in the twilight corner, smiling his twisted, enigmatical smile. Then —

A billowy whirl of white and blue surged across the room to her, a pair of plump white arms were around her, a gay voice was exclaiming,

“This is Marg’ret—I know this is Marg’ret!”

And she was heartily kissed—no, *smacked!*

Margaret was ashamed all the rest of her life of what she did then. She said stiffly,

“My name is Margaret.”

She gasped with repentance the next moment. How insufferably rude and silly she was! But Isabel only threw back her big golden head and laughed again—that great, full, jolly laugh of hers. Then she seized Margaret once more and gave her a hearty hug.

“So it is! Do forgive me,” she said frankly. “I know how horrid it is to have your name mangled. I could murder and devour without sauce any boob who calls me ‘Is’bel.’ I guess it was cheeky of me to call you by your name like that, but I just couldn’t help it. I seem to know you by heart—Jim’s written so much of you and how good you’ve been helping him fix up our house and all. I don’t know how we’re ever going to thank you, you darling thing. But I do know I’m just going to love you forever and ever, amen. I’m like that. I just fancy a person at first sight—or I never do. And I—love—you.”

Isabel emphasized each word of her last sentence with a squeeze that nearly expelled every particle of breath from Margaret’s slender body. Then she went back and sat down on the settee by Jim, sending Friend Cat spinning to the floor with a cheerful slap and a “Here now, puss, this is *my* place.” Margaret dropped into a chair and stared like one fascinated at Isabel who began talking gaily to Mrs. Kennedy. Outraged Friend Cat got up on Jim’s knee—and Jim stroked him absently.

And this was Isabel! What had Mrs. Kennedy said of her? “A slight reed of a thing?” Isabel was a big, buxom, deep-bosomed creature, altogether splendid in her way. Naturally, one would expect some difference between a girl of seventeen and a

woman of twenty-two. And Mrs. Kennedy had been right—perfectly right—in calling her beautiful. She was so beautiful that her beauty struck you in the face. Margaret had heard of “stunning” girls. Well, Isabel was stunning.

Her head was crowned with masses of wavy golden hair held in place by many jewelled pins. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes big and brilliantly blue; she had a crimson mouth, through which bursts of laughter came at the end of every sentence, and superb white teeth, most of which she showed when she laughed.

She had a marble-white neck, a splendid figure, large, capable, dimpled hands, well-ringed, and a very high instep, silken-sheathed. She radiated health and good-humor. Never had Margaret felt so brown and skinny and insignificant. And never, *never*, had she been so helplessly furious over anything as over the idea of this magnificent girl queening it in Jim’s little, gray house. It was outrageous—her house had been furnished for the Isabel of her dreams. And *that* Isabel had no existence.

“Oh, yes—I had a perfectly delightful trip home,” Isabel was telling Mrs. Kennedy. “Everybody was so kind—I made friends all along the way. And when I got to Redway—you know how horrid and confusing it is there with that big station and those new lines built since I went away—I *was* all muddled up—and I met the nicest young fellow—he looked after everything for me—said his name was Ned Rogers and he lived in Glenby.”

“Oh, he’s our new veterinary surgeon,” said Mrs. Kennedy. “Yes, he *is* a nice young fellow. Everybody likes him—except Jim here.”

“Oh, *Jim!*” Isabel turned and chucked him under the chin. “Now, what fault have *you* to find with him, Jim?”

“None—none whatever,” said Jim solemnly. “It can’t be his fault exactly that he’s a horse doctor—these things are predestined. He’s good-looking, well-off, a church member, and has—they tell me—a great knack with colic.”

Isabel threw back her head and let out a laugh that flooded the sitting room, large as it was.

“Isn’t that like him?” she appealed to Margaret. “He’s jealous, that’s it. You needn’t be—honey.” She chucked Jim under the chin again. Margaret quivered. It was sacrilege. Jim should be kissed—should have his cheek patted—his thick, black hair stroked softly—but he should never, never be chucked under the chin! Then Margaret wanted to laugh—hysterically. She had to clutch hold of her chair.

“I s’pose Jim’s told you of the house he’s got for you?” Mrs. Kennedy said,

smiling.

Isabel laughed, as if it were a huge joke.

“Yes! I thought he was hoaxing me at first. Then when I found he wasn’t, I said he must be dippy—didn’t I, honey?”

“I *told* him you wouldn’t like it,” said Mrs. Kennedy.

“Like it? Me? Buried alive up there in the woods! Not for mine! But we’ll have to put up with it for awhile, I guess, till we can find a better place. I wondered why he was so mysterious in his letters about the house—never *would* tell me where or what it was—just kept saying he had a surprise for me. Well, it *was* a surprise all right.”

Isabel’s laugh made the pendants on the hanging lamp tingle. Jim did not laugh. He continued to stroke Friend Cat slowly and rhythmically.

“Well, I’ll make the best of it till we can mend it,” said Isabel. “I haven’t been up to see it yet—I want to put off the evil day as long as possible. I know I’ll have a conniption when I do see it. Let’s talk of something cheerful.”

They talked—at least Isabel and Mrs. Kennedy did—of births and deaths and marriages and engagements, and motor cars and movies. And when Isabel went away she put on her big hat and came across to Margaret again.

You sweet little thing, I want another kiss. I don’t know when I’ve seen anybody I liked so much. And you’re going to love me, too, honey, aren’t you? We’re going to be special friends, aren’t we?”

“I—I hope so,” stammered Margaret. Behind Isabel she saw Jim smiling in a curious way, and Friend Cat winking impudently at her.

“Of course we are,” Isabel kissed her again, waved her hand to Mrs. Kennedy, linked her arm in Jim’s and swept out, goddess-like in her loveliness.

“Isabel hasn’t changed a mite,” said Mrs. Kennedy, complacently. “Except to fill out. She’s going to be big like her mother, I guess. Mrs. Bartlett weighed two hundred and fifty. But she’s just the same dear, bright, friendly girl. Isn’t she breezy? And hiding her disappointment over the house so well—that’s Isabel—always making the best of things—never a word of reproach to Jim for doing such a fool thing.”

Margaret fled to her room. “Breezy? Why—why,” gasped Margaret, “she’s a *tornado!*”

*M*argaret held on to herself—she would not let herself go—she would relapse into helpless, hysterical laughter if she did.

"I hate her—I hate her," she gasped. "And I *could* like her awfully—yes, the creature's abominably likable—if only she weren't going to live in *my house*! That's desecration. Oh, *what* does Jim think of her? I suppose he's perfectly satisfied—she's so beautiful—she's as she always was, Mrs. Kennedy says. It's just that I've been a fool with my imagination of something entirely different. Oh, to think of her washing my lovely dishes with those horrible fat, pudgy hands of hers."

Margaret looked at her own thin, brown hands. Was she jealous of Isabel's smooth, dimpled fingers? No, she was not. She had expected to be jealous of Isabel and she was not—not the tiniest bit. She only hated to think of her in Jim's house—laughing at it. She could wring Isabel's satin neck for laughing at it.

"Anyhow, Friend Cat doesn't like her. He knows—and I know—that she is the kind of woman who likes cats 'in their place'," said Margaret vindictively, and took immense satisfaction out of knowing it.

The wedding was fixed for October. Isabel was busy getting her trousseau. She pleaded with Margaret to stay and be her bridesmaid, but Margaret said her leave would be up the week before and she must go. Jim came and went and smiled and quipped, and took very little notice of Margaret. Margaret told herself this was only what was to be expected—and it really did not worry her much.

The only thing that worried her was her dear, unappreciated house. She never went near it—she couldn't bear to. Isabel went to see it and came down and said it was quite sweet and quaint and would do nicely until they could get something better.

"I don't mind the furniture being so old-fashioned—I know Jim hasn't much money. But that queer old piano! I'm going to have a victrola—I'll have enough money for that after I get my things, and I must have *something* to cheer me up in that little hole, 'steen miles from anywhere. I *could* stand the furniture, but I can't stand the location. Jim is peeved that I don't like it, so I don't say much to him. And he could have had that lovely Ormsby house—and wouldn't take it! Can you beat it, honey?"

"I think Jim's house is—lovely," said Margaret.

Isabel patted her hand.

"*You* did your best, anyhow, pet. Don't think I'm not grateful. Men don't understand things, do they? We've got to humor them sometimes."

For a wonder she did not laugh after she had said this. She looked thoughtfully across the autumn fields.

"You know, honey," she said slowly, "there are times when I think—."

But just then, Jim came up the porch steps and Margaret never knew what Isabel thought.

Margaret was packing her trunk. She was going away the next day.

She went slowly down the stairs. The front door was open and the sunset came flooding in. Isabel was standing in the hall, superbly beautiful, in a warm, golden-brown suit. It was her going-away suit, and Margaret wondered what on earth she had put it on to-day for. She ought not to wear it until her wedding day.

Isabel put her arms around Margaret, drew her into the parlor and shut the door. Evidently she was very much excited and—if such a thing could be imagined of Isabel—a little nervous.

“Marg’ret honey, I want you to do something for me.”

“What is it?”

“Will you—will you go and tell Jim something?”

“Tell him—what?” cried Margaret.

“Tell him—that I—was married to Ned Rogers in Redway—this afternoon.”

Margaret stared at Isabel without saying anything. Isabel, the confession over, was herself again. She laughed and caught Margaret’s hand.

You *do* look flabbergasted, honey! Now, don’t scold. It isn’t a bit of use. Just sit down by me on the sofa and let me explain. I haven’t much time. Ned’s waiting for me down the road in his lovely new car—we’re going to take the Montreal train to-night. Oh, I know you’re shocked to death, honey. But it had to be. Ned and I fell in love with each other the day I came home. But I’d promised Jim, and I meant to be true to him. You know, I was just wild about Jim five years ago. Even yet I like him—better than Ned in some ways—and if it wasn’t for that crazy house of his—but I *couldn’t* swallow it—and Jim’s so stubborn—he was *bound* to live there.

“Ned’s bought the Ormsby house and is going to furnish it handsomely. Really, honey, everything’s better as it is—Ned and I are much better suited to each other than Jim and I.”

“Yes, I think you are,” said Margaret coolly. She was one whom great shocks render cool. “But why didn’t you tell Jim *before* you did this?”

“Oh, honey, I know I *should* have. But I was afraid—honestly. Jim has such a wheedling tongue. If I wasn’t really married to Ned he’d talk me out of it. I had to do it this way. Now you just go and tell him, angel—break it to him gently—he’ll take it better from you than from any one else—he thinks so much of you—and so do I. You *mustn’t* blame me for this—I know you won’t. You’re such a sweet little

thing. And I know Jim will feel awful. But he'll get over it—they always do. There was a fellow in Colorado—gracious, I *must* go—we haven't too much time. *Goodest*-bye, honey—and tell Jim I'm awfully sorry—but that house got on my nerves."

She was gone. Margaret went at once to Mrs. Kennedy. The hideous thing she had to do must be done while her curious numbness of thought and feeling lasted. When sensibility returned she could never do it. She had to break Jim's heart—and it must be broken quickly.

"Where's Jim?" she asked.

"Oh, up in that blessed house of his, I reckon," replied Mrs. Kennedy. "Anyhow, I saw him and Friend Cat going up the path not long ago."

Margaret stepped out of the back door and went up the path—that little, sequestered path up the hill, where Jim and she had always to walk in single file. It was a perfect evening, full of nice whispery sounds. Summer had stolen back for one more day of dream and glamour. When she reached the little house the Lombardy poplars were in dark purple silhouette against a crocus sky, and there was one milk-white star over the big pines, like a pearl on a silver-green lake.

The robins were whistling sleepily in the firs and the moist air was fragrant with the tang of balsam. Oh, how lovely and dear it all was; but the little house looked very pathetic to her—a casket rifled of its jewels—a lamp with the flame gone out.

"Anyhow, she won't eat my jam," she whispered suddenly—and then hated herself heartily for the contemptible thought.

She had never been up to the house since the evening Jim and she had sat together by the fire. She found Jim there now—only there was no fire—nothing but the ashes of the one they had left. It seemed that another one had never been laid.

Margaret stood before him, straight and tense and white-lipped. It was horrible to think that Jim would always connect her with this dreadful news.

"Jim, I have something to tell you."

"Yes?" Jim went on stroking Friend Cat.

"She said to break it gently—but I can't—I don't know how. You've *got* to know it. Isabel married Ned Rogers in Redway to-day. They've gone on the Montreal train. That's all."

Margaret turned to go—and tripped over Friend Cat, who had suddenly bounded—or been tumbled to the floor. Jim caught her just in time.

"You'd have given yourself a nice bump if you'd struck that fender! Why don't

you look where you're going, elf?"

"I'm sorry," said Margaret dazedly, trying to wriggle herself out of Jim's arms, and not succeeding.

"I'm not. It gave me an excuse for grabbing you just this much sooner. Don't squirm like that—you're worse than Friend Cat when he wants to break loose. So Isabel and Ned have eloped—God bless them! Now you and I can get married right off."

"Married!"

Margaret stopped squirming and stood quite still.

"Of course. You can't live here in this house with me unless we do. There'd be talk. And you've *got* to live here—it's *your* house! It's *always* been your house!"

"But—don't you care—Isabel—"

"Isabel's a darling," said Jim. "She's saved everybody heaps of trouble. I love her bushels. But you—you're *mine*! I knew that, way back in summer. That's why I lit that fire here that night. I didn't care a hoot whether the chimney drew or not. I just wanted to sit here with you and pretend we were a honeymoon couple.

"I thought it would be all I ever could have. I meant to do my duty and marry Isabel, of course. I was such a vain, besotted fool I really believed she wanted me—point of honor, and all that. That angel of a girl has solved everybody's problems. I'm going to give her a corking kiss for it when she comes back. And so will you—*won't* you now, Mrs. Jim Kennedy?"

"Oh—I will—I will," said Margaret, not knowing in the least what it was Jim had asked her to do.

"But give *me* one first—now," said Jim.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Jim's House* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]