

I could have a real musician? Compared to you, Dave knows nothing whatever about this farm, its romance—

'You'll find, young woman, that there's a good deal more than romance in farming.'

She was thoughtful. 'Of course. There's been death—'

'My father and mother,' he said simply.

'And life—'

'There's Dave.'

'And hopes and struggles and achievements.'

His face became sad; of most of these he had been cheated.

For a long time they talked—till the shadows grew dim and were finally blotted out.

Before they had done he knew all about her motherless years and her loneliness since her father's death, five years earlier. And she, almost a stranger, knew more of him than his nearest kinsfolk did—more, perhaps, than he himself knew of his crushed desires. She was silent while they walked back to the house.

Dave's form loomed up on the dark piazza.

'Where have you people been?' he asked.

'We've been sitting on the pole of a hay-waggon, getting acquainted,' Marion replied.

David Manson went into the house. He was unaccountably light-hearted.

'Why, if I haven't been enjoying myself!' he thought, wonderingly.

'Dave,' said Marion, 'do you know your father is splendid?'

'Why, of course he is. If he could have stayed in college he would certainly have been an honor man.'

'He's an honor man right now.'

'What's that?' Mrs. Manson's thin voice penetrated the darkness. She came out swathed in a white shawl.

'Marion's singing father's praises.'

'Well, she ought to,' Mrs. Manson said. 'He's the best man that ever breathed. But I do wish he'd fix himself up a little and seem to care about things. He's terribly careless about his appearance.' Mrs. Manson sighed. 'Sometimes I'm so ashamed!'

Marion was silent. 'They don't know,' she said to herself. 'The pity of it!'

The next morning Marion, unable to sleep, was downstairs before she heard any one stirring in the house. When she entered the kitchen, she came upon Mr. Manson, kneading a mass of dough. She stopped, astonished.

'What are you doing?'

The old impenetrable shell of reserve dropped over him.

'It hurts Julia's side to knead bread, he explained.

Marion thought swiftly, 'I'm afraid I'm going to dislike Julia.' Aloud she said 'Let me do that. I've studied cookery, and here's my chance to see what I know.'

He remonstrated, but her hands were soon in the dough.

'Mr. Manson.' She had suddenly stopped, and her cheeks flushed. 'Please don't think me inquisitive, but is this necessary. Could we afford help?'

'Plenty of it,' he answered.

'Then why—'

'Julia's particular, and—' he hesitated.

'I understand,' Marion said. 'And the foreman's wife? She couldn't help out?'

'No, she boards the help,' he explained.

There followed a period of several weeks during which Marion devoted herself to Dave's father. She accompanied him to the fields; she talked to him at table; and little by little she drew him out of himself.

'I should think it was father you had married instead of me,' her husband said.

One morning, when she was downstairs early, she came upon Mr. Manson, dressed in his shabby best, shining his shoes.

He looked up, startled. 'I'm going to the fair,' he said, 'but I haven't told any one. They are going to exhibit some cattle that I feel sure aren't so good as mine.'

'Why in the world didn't you send yours?'

'I wanted to, but Dave and his mother thought it wasn't best.'

'We will next year. Are you going alone?'

'Yes. I haven't been without Julia for ten years, but I'm not going to take her this time. She always gets a headache and has to be brought home before noon.'

'I don't get headaches,' Marion said.

'Would you go?'

A gleam of interest lighted up his weather-beaten face. He looked from her white-shod feet up to her young eyes and shining hair. It would be good fun to go away for a day with this eager girl.

'Would I! Father Manson, you get the team without a sound, and I'll put something in a box for breakfast.'

It was late when they returned, tired but exultant. At least, Marion was exultant. Mr. Manson always seemed abashed in the presence of his wife and son.

Mrs. Manson's greeting was not cordial, but Dave took the escapade as a good joke.

'The cattle did not compare with ours, did they, dad?' Marion exclaimed. 'If we don't take some blue ribbons next year we're no farmers. Oh, it's been a splendid day!'

The next morning Marion was up and had the breakfast ready before Mrs. Manson came down. Mrs. Manson was more than usually fretful, and she ignored Marion's presence.

'Your father can't stir,' she said to Dave. 'I knew he'd pay for that madness. He's got the worst attack of rheumatism he's had for years. To go off that way, like a child! I always bring him home early when I go.'

'May I go up to see him?' asked Marion.

Mrs. Manson said slowly, 'He asked to have you go up.'

'Your father's afraid she'll blame herself,' Mrs. Manson said to her son when Marion had gone. 'And she ought to. She seems to encourage him in his freaks.'

'Marion is splendid,' Dave replied. 'You know she is.'

When Marion came down, Mrs. Manson and Dave were at breakfast. 'I'm going to fix up a tray,' the girl said, 'and then I'll be with you. Unless you would rather do it.' She looked inquiringly at Mrs. Manson.

'I can't carry a tray upstairs,' the older woman declared. 'I don't see who's going to take care of him, anyway.'

'I am, if there's no one else to do it.' Marion's voice was dangerously soft. 'Do you, perhaps, remember who took care of you two days last week?'

'Marion!' Dave exclaimed.

'Oh, I don't mean to be rude, but it's time some one opened the eyes of you two, dear, blind bats. Can't you see that he's hurt—that he thinks he isn't needed? Nothing kills so quickly as that. What if he should think he isn't wanted? A father! He's living alone, isolated, in the midst of his family. I'm beginning to find out what he is, how big and splendid.'

She turned to Dave, flushed with indignation. 'Whose farm is this? Don't you suppose he wants to plan and do the big things on it? Yet I've never heard you consult him, or known you to take his seldom-proffered advice. And it's good advice, too. I've seen him scrubbing the piazza floor, and kneading the bread, and washing clothes when he was aching to be out there managing his own affairs. Do you suppose men like to do such things? But he's so good he lets you rob him of his birthright.'

'Marion,' Dave said, 'you're overwrought and exaggerating this matter.'

'Am I, Dave? I don't think you've done these things intentionally. But from now on let's count him in our plans. And let's have a girl for the heavy work.'

'She'll shrink the flannels.' That was all that Mrs. Manson, overwhelmed, could find to say.

'Do you prefer a shrunken spirit to shrunken flannels?'

There was silence in the pleasant room: then Marion started out to the garden to get some flowers