

The Free Press' Short Story

JOAN TAKES A HAND

By ALICE DYAR RUSSELL

JOAN HARBIN drew a long breath of wonder and delight. "Heavenly!" she murmured. She felt as though she had come home at last.

She stood on the edge of the reservoir at the Madden ranch. Water was pouring in through the weir, clear and cold. Swallows darted and twittered over the shimmering surface. The faint delicious fragrance of alfalfa came from the emerald green fields on the other side of the cottonwoods. Beyond the burning plain, on the dim horizon, were the dry, bare hills.

James Newman shut off the irrigation pump and the water ceased to flow. "That's how it works," he said, and came to stand beside her. His sunburned face had an anxious, uncertain look. He was so eager for Joan to like this desert country, and so afraid she would not. With the utmost trepidation he had invited her to spend a week-end on the ranch where he was foreman for the summer. All his longings, ambitions and plans he was keeping severely under cover until he should see what the city-bred girl thought of this harsh, lonely land. Would she perceive its beauty and promise or would she be repelled? If she would not, ask a girl to share his chosen lot unless she were able to throw herself wholeheartedly into it. Not this girl!

"I suppose it all seems pretty crude to you," he said awkwardly.

"Not at all," Joan responded quickly. "I like it. It's very interesting." She did not know how to praise her voice.

"I will not gush," she was saying to herself. "He'd think I was putting it on."

James felt his heart register a point down. "She is just trying to be polite," he thought. "She does not really like it. She could not really stand it to live here."

A thin wall rose up between them. "Is there anything else you would care to see?" he asked civilly, his unhappy blue eyes taking in her white silk skirt that had a smudge of oil from the pump and her white shoes that were beginning to show the dust. He did not have to look at her bright sweet face, her shape, her waving hair, her shining dainty nails, to be aware of them. The image of Mrs. Madden dragged at his recollection. Blue-ginghamed, weather-beaten, worn down with work. If he asked Joan to marry him, that was what she would think he would bring her to. "I was an idiot to invite her here," he thought. "I wish this was over."

Joan glanced about a little wildly. They had eaten the hearty ranch dinner—fried chicken, vegetables, raisin pie—at one o'clock, soon after her arrival. James, beaming proudly, had then led her out to view the turkey range, the Jersey calves, the alfalfa fields, the sheds and the water system. He was to have an hour off before returning to his tractor. What had gone wrong between them in that hour? Had her city ignorance offended him? She knew she was stupid; but she would learn, she loved it so, she loved him so. She wished she had not worn white shoes.

"What are those for?" she asked, pointing at a row of small plain shackles, screened but curtained.

"That's where the help live," answered James shortly. "Second to the last is mine." He wanted to tell her that they would not have to live in such a place; that he had staked out homestead rights; that they would build; that they could have a porch, a view, a garden; but his lips would not move. "Yokel!" he thought furiously to himself. "Yokel! That is what I am."

"See here, I have to get back to work," he declared abruptly. Twenty minutes were left to them, but Joan might not know it. Once out in the sun again, in the fragrant open field, perhaps he could forget his misery. "The east side of the house is already, cool as anywhere. You can sit and read or—crochet."

"Jimmie, I never crocheted in my life!" laughed Joan. "I didn't come up here to crochet. Didn't Mrs. Madden say something about a neighborhood meeting at her home this afternoon, to organize for community work of some kind?"

"You'd be bored to death!" exclaimed James savagely. "The women around here haven't an idea in their heads except babies and how to feed the chickens. If Mrs. Madden thinks she can organize a club she's gone, that's all."

Joan looked at the young man speculatively. Before she had time to voice her thought that for such women a door might be the one thing needed, a door slammed at the house, a shrill voice screamed, "Jimmie! Jimmie!" and down the dusty road toward them flew a small barefooted figure. It was Aggie Madden, aged ten, lively, freckled, sharp. She had been all eyes and interest on Joan's arrival and James had kept her from tagging them only by an agonized appeal to her mother. Her very little frame shot down the road now as though released by a spring. At every step she screamed "Jimmie!"

"How comes the family pet?" muttered James, supremely annoyed. "No more peace for us." He forgot he had been on the point of sending Joan back to the house and began to think of all

the things he wanted to say to her in private.

Aggie arrived, panting, important. "Jimmie, Mom says to get the car out right away and take her over to Uncle Bill's quick. Aunt Polly's scolded her arm—something awful, I guess. They just phoned for Mom. You got to hurry now!" she finished warningly. Her eyes, glistening in her darkly-browed little face, flickered over Joan; but she gave no sign that her whole being was devoured by worship of this lovely apparition from an outside world.

"Hurry? Of course I'll hurry!" was James' tart retort. "You don't have to tell me Joan, what'll you do?" he asked in appeal before he broke away. "It's ten miles away and I may be gone the whole afternoon."

"Don't mind me! I'll be all right! Go on, go on!" she urged.

"Aggie'll have to phone those women not to come! They can't have a meeting without Mrs. Madden," he called over his shoulder, as he ran toward the garage.

"You needn't do anything of the kind, Aggie!" Joan gaily declared, her fingers resting lightly on the small girl's shoulder. "I want to get acquainted with your neighbors. Let's entertain them, you and I together, shall we?"

"And give 'em refreshments 'n' everything?" inquired Aggie eagerly.

"Refreshments and everything!" replied Joan, with the best of cheer, starting for the house. She felt confident and light-hearted now that James, with his anxious face, was not with her. That seemed awful, to be glad to be rid of James; but she would show him, oh, she would show him! She would take Mrs. Madden's place; she would be entertaining, sympathetic, helpful; she would tell about her own club work, help organize, conduct herself with such poise, versatility, efficiency as never had been seen. James should see what she could do, that she belonged here. She had not been able to say right out, "Jimmie, I'd love to live on a desert ranch with you. I'm useless and bored and unhappy in the city. I long for real things to do." In this would see her at her own, successful, happy, admired.

"Don't go so fast!" gasped Aggie. "I can't keep up with you."

"There's fruit salad in the cooler and the makings for lemonade," Mrs. Madden told Joan, as she darted about collecting a roll of soft linen, a bottle of olive oil, a package of baking soda and other articles that might prove useful in assuaging the pain of a burn. "Chocolate cookies 'in that jar. The ladies always say they like my chocolate cookies. If they like for the recipe, just put them off. Now I can't tell you how kind I take this of you, Miss Harbin. You see it was my idea that we ladies might meet regular and do something to improve our minds like reading the poets and well-known authors, or else plan nice wholesome entertainments for our young folks. Something like that is needed here where it's all hard work and town's twenty miles away. I got the most influential to promise to come. There may be ten or eleven, Miss Harbin, ranchers' wives and women who're homesteaded alone. It wasn't easy to get them to take an afternoon off, with alfalfa rights in the middle of cutting and extra men to cook for and all. If nothing had come of it to-day, I don't know when I could have got them to come again." Outside, James honked his horn. "Oh, I must go, I must go!" distractedly. "If Polly is resting easy, I'll be back to get supper and see about

the milk. Aggie, mind you be a good girl!"

"Now, don't you worry about a thing," soothed Joan, bundling her off, so preoccupied that she did not have a single word or a glance for James. He drove away with Mrs. Madden, feeling that the very heavens were unkind.

Almost immediately the company began to arrive, in twos and threes or singly, in cars of various makes and vintage. It seemed to Joan that the ten or eleven promised by Mrs. Madden had multiplied to four times that number; but it may have been merely the effect of the large number of children accompanying their mothers and the incessant waves of speech that beat upon her ears.

A steady humming filled the house. These middle-aged, sunburned, hard-working women from their lonely ranches were seizing avidly upon the chance to talk. Joan had never heard anything like it. Having failed to impress upon the gathering any semblance of formal order, she sat back, a little dazed, feeling young, inexperienced and helpless. She had answered every conceivable question as to Mrs. Madden's sister's accident and her own fortunate presence, but inquisitive glances still picked her. Joan knew that they were studying in their minds what might be the status of her relationship with James, and its outcome.

She longed to make friends even with that alarming, stalwart, white-haired matriarch, Mary Barth, with the air of authority and the voice that boomed, who apparently wanted to boss the entire community! The tired-looking, dark little woman with the heavy baby and the four-year-old twins, who sucked their thumbs in spite of all she could do. She needed a counselor, she felt sure. The weather-beaten widow, with the seamed face, gnarled hands and hollow dark eyes—of what spiritual loneliness did her seeking gaze tell Mrs. Besseson, the pretty, ignorant wife of a Norwegian, immaculate, yet so frail, how Joan asked to inform her that her child needed spinach and orange juice!

Again and again she tried to raise her voice and bring them to the purpose of the afternoon. Again and again she was overwhelmed by the tides of talk. She felt silent at last, listening closely. She heard how Mrs. Olson made sour bread and did not scrub her kitchen floor; how Mrs. Catlin sold eggs at the store and one was found missing out of every box; how Johnny Lonsdale's girl was going wild; how the Nevenses quarreled; how old man Thompson wasted his money and abused his wife; and how Tony Quintana was probably a bootlegger.

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SCOTT'S SCRAP BOOK

By R. J. SCOTT



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improve their minds; what they wanted was to gossip about their neighbors! The young girl sprang up and beckoned Aggie, sitting wide-eyed and open-mouthed in a corner, to follow her into the kitchen. They would serve refreshments. That might cut short this awful afternoon.

The dainty food, the cooling drink seemed but to give new impetus to their tongues. Joan sent Aggie out reluctantly to gather eggs. To her horror, they now turned their attention to absent Mrs. Madden. Her mayonnaise was criticized; the chocolate cookies, it was decided, had been skimmed on butter and needed a mile more baking.

Just what happened to her at this point Joan never could quite decide. Suddenly, however, she found herself on her feet in the center of the room, pouring out a flood of eloquence. In the silence that fell, appallingly as a clap of thunder, in the midst of that circle of flushed faces and startled eyes, Joan told those women what she thought of them. Her cheeks were hot, her eyes were dark and angry, her clear young voice rang out scornfully. She minced no words. She derided petty gossip and spiteful tongues. She told them how strange but how beautiful their country looked to her, what a wonderful opportunity they had to be like pioneers again in a growing community; she described Mrs. Madden's longing efforts, and how she had baked those cookies at five o'clock in the morning. Seeing then, that Mrs. Besseson was crying, Joan broke down, too. She stretched out her arms to them and cried woefully, "I want to like you so—I did want to like you!"

Mrs. Barth was on her feet first, although the others were not far behind, driven by conflicting feelings. Admiration and an immense enjoyment shone on her strong lined face. "My dear girl!" she exclaimed. "My dear girl!"

It was late in the afternoon before James was released from the pressure of tasks to be done for Aunt Polly and was able to start home. Mrs. Madden remained behind. Her own household must do the best they could without her. Would Miss Harbin, she timidly suggested, who had been so obliging, mind putting on a cold supper for the men? James gave her no encouragement to suppose that Miss Harbin would do anything of the kind. "She may want me to start right down to the city with her," he started gloomily. "Probably she's fed up with the desert."

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James beheld a line of cars moving in a cloud of dust from the Madden ranch. He groaned in deep dismay at the thought that he could not escape meeting everyone. At least he could drive at top speed and indicate by an attitude of intense mental absorption that he was in no mood for light converse. His tactics did not succeed. Mary Barth's huge, lumbering car drew up beside the road as he approached, her resonant horn sounded commandingly, her imperious head looked out of the window, and James had to stop.

The woman was chuckling so heartily that her whole body shook. She winked at him and nodded. "You picked a winner, Jimmie!" she shouted. "Smartest girl I ever saw! Can't bring her up here for keeps too quick for me! Polly hurt bad? Mama going to stay? Well, well, she'll look after her. Good-by, Jimmie. Say, there's something you're going to hear about before long. Sage Plains' Women's Community Betterment Club—nice sounding name, eh? Made me president—me, Jimmie! So long!"

James drove on a few rods, thoughtfully. Mrs. Besseson came next. For her he stopped promptly. She waved and smiled. "Oh, Jimmie, I want to tell you, you've got the sweetest girl! And Jimmie, we're going to have a club! They made me secretary—me, Jimmie!"

James stopped before the widow did. She wore a new alertness. Her face was wreathed in smiles and her speech was voluble. "Oh, Jimmie, we've had the nicest afternoon! That Miss Harbin you brought up has the grandest ideas! Jimmie, we're going to have a club; they made me chairman of the program committee—me, Jimmie!"

James, halted by every car, heard every voice. One called down a splinter, but she waved and smiled. "Oh, Jimmie, I want to tell you, you've got the sweetest girl! And Jimmie, we're going to have a club! They made me secretary—me, Jimmie!"

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