

DAL STIVENS

A STORY OF SUMMER. . .

She was sixteen and he a year older when they fell in love. They were afraid, and there were times when they were shy and awkward and could find no words to make articulate the tenderness and longing that possessed them, and when they could only kiss and embrace, gently and yet at times with a fierceness that surprised and dismayed them.

He was the son of a tradesman in the town and she the daughter of a widow who farmed a small property.

Early one morning she waited for him by the hedge: she was taking him to see her mother, whom he had not yet met.

She was tall, her limbs full under her blue summer frock. Her face was tanned a golden brown with two flushes of colour under the forward high cheek bones. Her black hair came away directly from her face; she had blue eyes.

She was sitting on the ground, her blue frock spread out from her body; but when she heard him speak, she sprang up joyfully, crying his name, clutching up her frock. He could not answer for a moment for the beauty of her limbs under the lifted frock had caught at his throat.

Then he cried her name.

"Rose!" he said.

She took his hands and laughed in his face. Then they became silent. He was a little taller than she, finely made, strong. His head had stiff brown hair.

She held his hands for some minutes and he could feel her warm breath on his neck and the softer-than-fingers caress of her hair, and below and sideways from his eye he saw the whiteness of her bosom. Sunburn did not come within four inches of the top of her frock and the veins that tinged faintly that mushroom-soft skin had the blueness that one sees sometimes in milk. And suddenly he wanted to put his hand above her breasts and feel the warmth of such sweetness. But she had turned away from him and was drawing him along the path.

The path led through the oats; it had rained in the night

and the young crop was furred with it and puff-balls of foam had caught in the reeds of the drains and watercourses. As they came nearer to her mother's farm, the girl could no longer suppress what had been troubling her all day.

"I hope you like my mother," she said. She wanted to ask him if he believed the gossip about her mother, and she watched his face as he answered.

"I'm sure I will," he said, "I want to be friends with her."

She could tell little from his face and speech but as they came along the side of the black slope that loomed over them like a wall she became strangely less troubled.

They were walking into the lifting sun and its warmth came through her clothing and caressed her body. And feeling the gentleness of the sun, and the yielding black soil under her feet; seeing the golden and black and green paddocks, and the tipsy sprawling stooks of hay; smelling the wet-earth odours; hearing the creamy calls of magpies — feeling, seeing, smelling, hearing, loving these things, she wanted to run through the fields, making a green trail through the rain-frosting of the young oats. And she had a desire to climb to the top of one of the cottage-shaped haystacks. She tried to communicate some of her mood to him but he could not respond, having only in his mind the beauty of her legs and the thrust of them beneath the blue frock, and the pain of the sweetness of her young bosom.

The girl's mother was in the kitchen when they reached the house. She was a big woman with coarse limbs. She had the same high cheek bones, the same black hair, the same blue eyes. She had once been beautiful but she had become coarse. Her face was heavy and sullen; her skin was greasy. She was a slattern and a round of gossip had grown up around her.

The boy, listening to her while she chattered, was taken with a sudden dismay, feeling a strange melancholy coming over him, sensing but not understanding with his mind that she must once have been beautiful as her daughter was beautiful, and that the young girl, too, would become coarse and slatternly, and that beauty passed and nothing could stay its going.

Presently when the young girl asked him to go with her to the orchard he went with her immediately, moved by an urgency that he could not understand.