

Lady Blanche Farm

A ROMANCE OF THE COMMONPLACE

By Frances Parkinson Keyes

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WNU Service

CHAPTER XII—Continued

Mrs. Elliott had seen Mrs. Gray watching her slow approach through the deep snow from the kitchen windows, and had waved a greeting. Now, as she mounted the porch, she shook her umbrella and stamped the snow from her overshoes.

"No, I ain't a bit wet," she said, returning Mrs. Gray's hearty kiss. "I'm dressed real warm. If we're goin' to set in the kitchen, I guess I won't lay off my overshoes. If I keep 'em on my feet, it'll take 'em off my mind."

This point being satisfactorily settled, the two ladies sat down in rockers beside the stove and started work on their sleeveless sweaters. Mrs. Elliott, as usual, scarcely stopping for breath before she began her recital of the recent news of the neighborhood.

"Have you heard that old Mis' Hunter, up to White Water is married again? Mr. Taylor tried to reason with her, seein' he's buried four of her husbands already, but she said, as long as the Lord took 'em, she would. Shockin', ain't it?—How's the baby? I shouldn't have thought that Austin could have borne to go off and leave that little helpless creature, but it seems to be thrivin', don't it? I don't s'pose you have the least notion he'd want to marry again, not for a while, anyway. Yes, I knew he was real fond of Sylvia, but men are human. Writes you real regular, does he? And Thomas, too? I'm always real pleased to hear about your boys, but I declare I steer clear of Violet Mannin' these days. You know how set she was against Paul goin' to war. But now she's got the biggest service flag in town and we are 100 per cent subscribed on her Liberty loan card. I bet all she thought was \$50 bonds, don't you? Be that as it may, mornin', noon and night she don't open her head except to talk about 'her hero. Goes around with a letter of Paul's in her hand, and—"

"Does he write her regular?"

"Seems to. I can't make out that he's ben in any great danger yet, and I've questioned her close. Enjoyin' himself considerable, I should say. Them Mannin' children always just itched and hankered to get out of Hamstead and I shouldn't be a mite surprised if that itchin' and hankerin' didn't have somethin' to do with Paul's 'patriotism' and Blanche's 'romance. And that brings me to my main piece of news—Philip Starr's number's been called and he's goin' to Devens this week. Blanche's comin' home for the present and I hear she's mad clear through."

"Oh, the poor child!"

"Poor child nothin'. I don't deny Blanche is pretty and pleasant, but there ain't nothin' very deep about her. I bet she's lookin' forward to comin' here with lots of good-lookin' clothes and new ideas and puttin' on airs with her old neighbors. Mary's got her faults, but I'll say this for her, she ain't near so high and mighty as the rest of the family. Well, I must start along home. Clearin', ain't it? Well, this'll make nice sleighin' and that's one thing to be thankful for. It's lucky we got a few comforts left."

Philip had longed to volunteer in the first days of the war and Blanche had been so bitterly opposed to it that he had given in to her wishes, trying not to let her see the bitter spiritual struggle and loss of self-esteem which it had cost him to do this. But when the draft came, there could be no question of evasion or hesitation. His little income would keep her comfortable, and there was no child. This, Blanche knew, had been a source of disappointment and grief to Philip while she had secretly rejoiced at "not being tied down right away." Now the fact that a baby might have kept him at home made her resentful that she did not have one.

It was out of the question for her to stay on in the little Brookline apartment alone, and there was nothing for her to do but to return, rebelliously, to Hamstead. Philip, with never-failing understanding and gentleness, saw how hard it was for her to do this, and insisting that it should hereafter be called "Carte Blanche" to perpetuate his joke, urged her again to amuse herself by having the little law office renovated to suit the plans which he had made so long before. This time, the suggestion was a godsend. Blanche became genuinely interested and worked harder and more happily than she ever had done before in order to have the tiny home in perfect order

for his first furlough. There was a merry little housewarming, when Philip appeared, wearing his sergeant's uniform, for all Hamstead wanted to see him.

But after the last guest had departed, he lighted a fire in the wide, shallow fireplace of the big, soft-colored bedroom, and unfastened Blanche's party dress by candle-light as they stood before it. It had grown very cold outside, and the many-paned windows were frosting over with delicate shapes. The man, looking towards them from the fire, suddenly shivered a little. They were so icy and sparkling, reflecting the frozen moonlight out there, that there was something of almost unearthly loveliness about them, something ghostly—

"Blanche," he said abruptly, "when you fixed up Carte Blanche, what did



But After the Last Guest Had Departed, He Lighted a Fire and Unfastened Blanche's Party Dress.

you do with those old law books that were here?"

Blanche was standing before the mirror, combing her hair. She did not even turn.

"They were so musty and shabby and dry-looking, I burned them up. Why, did you want them?"

"No. Did you burn them all?"

"Yes."

"Read any of them first?"

"No. I could tell by the looks that they were dull. Not what you and I wanted in our lovely home."

She walked across the room to him, her golden hair falling over her shoulders, her soft white dressing-gown flowing from her bare neck and arms in an unbroken line to the floor. Deliberately, she blew out the flickering candles, one after the other, and, in the dim firelight, put her arms around his neck.

"It is lovely, isn't it?" she whispered.

Philip bent over her. There was something in her manner that had never been there before. Was she, too, feeling the mystery and power of the night? Had these last weeks of separation been teaching her, too—teaching her the lessons that for a time, it seemed as if he, for all his love, had failed to make clear to her? Was the dread which had been slowly growing through the spring and summer that his white star was to prove only a will-o'-the-wisp, to be taken from him after all?

"Yes, sweetheart, beautiful," he answered. "But I want you to know a story that was in one of those books you burned, just the same, if you don't already. I ought to have spoken of it to you before—"

As quietly as he could, he told her first of his reading of the legend and then of his talk with Mary about it afterwards.

"I can't pretend to explain it. But it seems to me the first Blanche didn't want to hurt any person, especially—that it isn't a curse in that sense—but to teach her descendants, if she could, what a terrible thing it is to be selfish. Most of all, the selfishness that calls itself love. Occasionally mothers feel that kind of love for their sons, or children for their parents, or husbands for their wives—"

"You mean that is the kind that Colonel Moses felt for the countess," said Blanche slowly, "and—and it's been so, straight through the family. That's the way mother cares for Paul. That's the way—that's the way I cared for you—once. But, oh, I don't any more!"

"That isn't the way I've cared for

you," said Philip. "I'm not very strong, and I'm not very good. I don't think that for a minute. But I do love you with all my heart and soul. That—that makes more difference than anything else, I believe. That curse is never going beyond this generation, and you must tell me tonight, that you're glad—I ought to have gone to war when I first knew it was the right thing for me to do. We can't help that now. But you've got to say you're glad I'm going now—"

His arms tightened around her, his lips, meeting hers, lay for a long time against them.

"If only we had a son—"

"Whenever I think of Lady Blanche farm," he went on, after a long silence, "I think of you and the brook—its freshness and fragrance and purity. It's shallow in places, it rushes into little falls, but where I found you, it widens to a deep pool, clear as crystal, a haven of refreshment and delight and—holiness. That's what you seem to me tonight—do you understand? Oh, my darling—"

CHAPTER XIII

And so the first winter of the war came to Hamstead. The mail that brought letters from Jaqueline, nursing in a convalescents' home in Brittany; from David, operating in a field hospital directly behind the firing-lines; from Austin, driving his ambulance over shell-shot roads; from Paul, "somewhere in France;" from Jack and Thomas and Philip at Camp Devens—all as yet, unharmed and well.

There was a ball, and a banquet, and "comfort kits" for all the boys. There was the preparation of Christmas packages. There was the careful searching of the newspapers for accounts of the unsatisfactory conditions existing at Camp Devens. . . .

Then, suddenly, the first blow fell.

A telegram came for Blanche.

And Sol Daniels, instead of telephoning it up to the house, as he had telephoned so many times, wrote it down slowly with his stubby pencil, and locking up the station, walked down the road through the deep snow with it in his pocket, blowing his nose hard on his red bandana handkerchief as he went along.

To his intense relief, it was Mary, who was with her cousin a good deal in those days, who answered the knocker at Carte Blanche. Sol handed the grimy paper to her without a word as she opened the door, and cleared his throat.

"For Blanche?" asked Mary in a startled voice.

"Yes—it's a doggone shame. You better open it first, and then tell her what's in it."

"No—I want it myself, please."

Mary and Sol turned quickly. Blanche was standing on the tiny winding staircase, holding out her hand. She, too, had heard the knocker.

"I've been—been expecting it ever since Philip was home for his furlough. Take Sol in where it's warm. Mary, and give him some coffee. It was awfully kind of you, Sol, to bring it yourself."

"I'd a-rather ben licked than to a-brung it."

"I know—please."

She opened it slowly, almost carefully. It was from one of the doctors, and it was rather long. Philip had been stricken, very suddenly, with pneumonia. The entire illness had been a matter of only thirty-six hours. The doctor was obliged, with the deepest regret, to inform her . . . If she would telegraph her wishes, they would of course, be complied with in so far as possible—

The yellow sheet crackled in her hand. For a moment she shut her eyes, swaying, and Mary started towards her but she put out her hand as if to keep her back. Not even Mary could help her through this moment; she wanted to meet it alone. Then she came slowly down the stairs, and going to the window where the service flag hung, she took it down and stood for a long time with it in her arms, her lips quivering. At last she gathered it up, and crossing the room with it, she hung it, as if it had been an emblem of victory, over the portrait of the little French countess. Then she faced her cousin and her old friend.

"I'll have a new one, with a gold star, in the window," she said quietly, "but that one belongs there. Can you have the express stopped at Hamstead for me, Sol?—You'll go with me, Mary, of course? Please tell mother

and Cousin Jane. I'd like to be alone a little while, I think— But I'll be ready to start in an hour."

There was no time to waste in "breaking the news gently." Mary found the two older women together and, without a single unnecessary word, told them what had happened. Violet, horribly stunned and shocked, broke into angry and rebellious grief which prostrated her completely. But when Jane had done all she could to relieve her and the frailer woman had recovered somewhat and they had taken the necessary steps to send Blanche and Mary to bring Philip home and to prepare Hamstead for its first military funeral, Jane went alone to her room and sat a long time, the tears rolling down her grim, plain face, the old candy box tied with red ribbons which Philip had given her long before and which she had kept ever since on her bed-side table near her Bible, clasped in her hands.

"That nice, pleasant, happy boy," she said repeatedly, and added involuntarily, "and he was a real Christian, too, same as Mary said from the first."

Violet, when she had discarded her mourning for her husband, had laid it away in her attic with her usual exquisite neatness, and Mary, unlocking the trunk, brought down the things that Blanche needed and helped her put them on, just as she had helped her dress for her wedding, a year and a half before.

"If I had let him go when he wanted to, this wouldn't have happened."

That was the only complaint she made, the only grief which, so far, she seemed able to voice. But she said it over and over again, after she and Mary were on the train, and the door of the pullman drawing room had been closed, leaving them quiet and alone together.

"Hush, dear! He might have been killed in battle."

"There'd have been some meaning—some compensation—a glory of achievement in that! This was just waste! Hundreds of boys are dying like that—when it could perfectly well have been avoided. They've been almost freezing to death in the camps all over the country."

"I know. I see how you feel. But I don't believe that anything Philip ever did was wasted, just the same."

"If Paul dies, at least it won't be this way."

"No."

"Oh, Mary, now could you let him go the way you did? Supposing he never comes back, either—do you ever think of that?"

Did she ever think of it! Not long before, Mrs. Weston had handed her a letter that had just come from Rosalie King. She had married her floorwalker on a "hurry call" and they had had three days together before he "went across." And that, she had learned, was to be all the honeymoon she would ever have. Mary, taking the letter from Mrs. Weston's limp hand, read it over twice. And she had refused "a week at some quiet place by the sea"—had denied Paul the chance of looking forward to coming back to her "that way." . . . Did she ever think of it!

"Yes, I think of it," she said slowly. "But I had to do what I did, just the same. Even if I'd known he was going to be killed. Paul didn't—didn't love me the way Philip loved you."

"Mary—what do you think it all means? Why do the people who aren't needed, who aren't even wanted, live and live and live? While the ones like Philip—Do you think that it's really punishment for selfishness—not just mine, but—"

"This whole war is a punishment of selfishness—and an atonement for it. Philip is—one of thousands—"

"But my part. That story coming true. And the certainty we both had that it was going to."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Gobi Desert Winner

In the vast Gobi Desert of Asia the camel and the pony still are used for transportation just as they were in the days of Genghis Khan, that great oriental conqueror of all Asia. At infrequent intervals streams have to be crossed, and some of them are too deep or swift to be forded. In such cases ferries are used. The camel of these high, cold deserts is of the Bactrian breed, quite distinct from the dromedary, native to low, North African deserts. The dromedary has but one hump and the Bactrian camel two. A heavy coat of wool enables the Bactrian camel to withstand the rigors of his environment.

See No Harm in Using Left Hand

But British Experts Would Have Child Cultivate Ambidexterity.

We have published the fullest and most considered pronouncement on left-handed writing which has reached us in the course of a lively correspondence. The topic was raised by a request for advice whether it was or was not well to insist at school upon the use of the right hand for writing. The inquirer's experience was that boys who wrote with their left hands were apt to be slovenly not only in their writing but also in their thinking. That slovenliness others have stoutly denied; but one suggestion is that the appearance of it may be caused by a tendency in left-handed people to read from right to left, which would make written and printed matter, and especially figures, much more difficult to take in. Then came the question whether or not compulsory use of the right hand for writing by left-handed children was likely to induce stammering. Our correspondent "Medicus" does not deny this; but he says that it is difficult to discover what, if any, connection exists between stammering and left-handedness, because stammering occurs in right-handed people. A surgeon thinks that compulsory right-hand writing is likely "to encourage an inferiority complex"; and it is not unreasonable to suppose that a sense of guilt (or, at least, of being "different") and the enforced struggle to do as others do might easily result in some disability or trouble of which stammering might be only one, and not an invariable sign. The parents of left-handed children may have to choose between allowing them (or seeing that others allow them) to write as comes natural to them and letting them run the risk of nervous or other afflictions through being forced into the usual practice. The choice would not be easy. Probably the most sensible course would be to induce a left-handed child, as gently and as early as possible, to use his right hand, not instead of but as well as his left hand in drawing and writing, holding out the reward that, when both are reasonably efficient, he shall take his choice and be allowed to maintain it at school. On all but very highly strung or unconquerably left-handed children this ought not to put an undue strain. And indeed it would be no bad thing to give right-handed children the same chance of ambidexterity.—London Times.

Wouldn't Desert Mate

When some white storks left South Africa for a spring flight to Germany and Holland one with a broken leg was left behind near a small town. A few days afterward its mate returned and the two birds roamed the veldt for nearly three weeks until the invalid was able to start the long flight.

Nervous, Pains in Side

Junction City, Oregon—"A few years ago I became very nervous, also suffered from headaches and pains in my back, side and limbs. I was in bed about one month. The doctor gave me very little help," said Mrs. John Wright of Greenwood St. "I started taking Dr. Pierce's Favorite Prescription and noticed a big change after using the second bottle and when I had finished the sixth bottle I can truthfully say my nerves were normal, I slept fine at night, felt strong and well again and the pains and aches had left me." Sold by all druggists.

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