

LADY BLANCHE FARM

A Romance of the Commonplace

by Frances Parkinson Keyes

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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 Miss Hunter, up to White Water is married again? Mr. Taylor tried to reason with her, seen' 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 bought 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 'er hero. Goes around with a letter of Paul's in her hand, and—"

"Does he write her regular?"

"Seems so. 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