VALLEY FARM;

Or, Felicity's Inheritance.

CHAPTER V.—(Continued).

"Yes, it is his writing," he said. "It looks bad, doesn't it. No wonder you were upset."

That was all. The eager light died out of Joyce's face. He was not going to explain—to defend himself. She bit her lip, and had much ado to keep the tears back.

Robert Stone read her thoughts, and took her hand again—this time in both his own. There was a very tender smile on his face, and she found herself looking straight into his steadfast eyes, compelled by a force she did not understand.

"Joyce," he said—and at that moment it seemed only natural he should call her by her name—"I am not going to say a word about that letter. I can't. I am going to ask you instead to trust me. Will it be very hard, little girl? You don't really think me a scoundrel, not in your heart of hearts, do you?"

Joyce shook her head.

"Then that is all I care for—at present. I want your trust, your faith. But some day—very soon, I hope—I shall ask you for something more precious even than that. Can you guess what it is?"

Oh, to be able to cast off the spell that his nearness seemed to cast over her! To escape from that wooing voice—that masterful touch! Oh, for the power to show him she was indifferent to him, then with a few cold, proud words to turn and leave him crestfallen humiliated!

But Joyce had never acted a part in her life, and she could not do it now. She could only look at him with such anguish in her lovely eyes that he was startled, almost afraid.

"What is it, dear?" he said quietly. "Tell me."

And then she plucked up courage and told him.

"It is this." Her voice broke in a sob. "Do you think it's right to talk to me like this? It makes me so ashamed! Other girls would not mind, perhaps, but I'm not used to it, and it frightens me. It's worse than hearing all sorts of dreadful things about you."

"What is worse? I don't understand."

"Mr. Stone, are you trying to make love to Felicity and me at the same time?"

Robert Stone dropped her hand and looked up at the sky in a meditative way. There was almost a whimsical look on his face.

"Making love to Felicity," he echoed. "Who says I have been doing that?"

Joyce was silent.

"I don't like that term making love. The love is there, it doesn't want making. But do you really think I have been doing that, Joyce?"

She did not speak, and he gave a short vexed laugh. He was silent for a moment, thinking, decidedly the color had surged into his face, and he even looked angry. She felt afraid, and was about to turn and hurry back to the house when she spoke again. Whatever it was that had hurt him he did not vent it on her, for in his low, vibrant voice, and once more she dared not meet his eyes, he said:

"I know what you have been thinking, of course, you didn't like it. I am glad of it, I don't like it either. White lies. But it isn't true, not a bit of it. I have made love to you, Joyce. I haven't had the chance. I am afraid you don't know much about it. I am afraid you're as ignorant little girl. How can I make love with the stupid old gate between us?"

He gave a laugh as he spoke. Was he laughing at her? she wondered. There was such a strange, exhilarating note in his voice. Then she felt, for the touch still merely that, though he did not touch her, he seemed to be caught up and crushed in a fierce embrace.

"Dearest," he whispered, "if the gate was open I'd take you in my arms and make much more than a conventional love to you. I'd take your face in my hands—such a little, little face it is—and kiss your lips over and over again as I've longing to do ever since I first saw you. I'd hold you in my arms, and then I could feel your heart beating against mine. I should dare to touch your pretty soft cheek. I should make you put your arms round my neck, and entwine our hearts. We could be here together till the stars came out, and I should call you mine, and kiss you as I kiss you—" He broke off and laughed softly. "We would be so happy. Say you wish the old gate down, say it!"

Memories, he whispered, carried away by his tender eloquence, Joyce lost her head, and to her unspeakable horror and shame found herself whispering "Yes."

The next moment she was flying back to the house, her cheeks burning, her brain in a whirl; and neither of them saw the tiny little figure in white, with a crown of golden hair that had been watching them for the last few minutes from the corner of one of the ricks.

CHAPTER VI.

Contrary to her usual custom, and greatly to the surprise of Joyce and Eliza, Felicity came down to breakfast next morning. She seemed in excellent spirits, and was more like her old affectionate self than she had been for some time, which, while it warmed Joyce's heart, made her feel a little conscience-stricken.

"I will have a look round and see what they are going to do," Felicity said, when the meal was finished, but I shan't go to the fields to-day. I feel lazy." She yawned as she spoke. "I have heaps of letters to write. I'll do them on the lawn if you will carry the little table out, Joyce. And look what has come by post!" She pointed to a case of books—half a dozen new sixpenny novels—and laughed a little consciously. "I shall have quite a library if I stay here much longer."

Joyce had not ventured to work in the garden that morning; she felt far too shy and self-conscious. She wondered if Robert Stone had lingered there awhile waiting for her; if he were disappointed she did not come? She wondered, too—with a quick little thrill, half joy, half pain, if it had anything to do with her that Felicity came back from her tour of inspection without having seen him.

"I can't find Mr. Robert anywhere," she said, rather crossly, "and I wanted him very particularly this morning."

Joyce was thankful that Eliza had mapped out a busy morning for her. She cleaned and dusted and helped to turn out rooms with a will, in spite of the fact that it was the hottest day they had yet had; and she made no demur when Eliza claimed her help in making strawberry jam. It was stifling in the low-ceilinged kitchen, but she stuck to her post, even when the woman paused to fan herself with her apron or went to the door for a breath of fresh air.

Joyce's heart was singing. Nothing could disturb her happiness, no task was too heavy. She did not envy her friend, who, after half-an-hour's writing had fallen asleep in her basket chair. Felicity was one of those fortunate mortals who can go to sleep at any hour and in any place—which fact accounted more than anything else for her plumpness and her rose-leaf complexion.

Felicity was quite gay over their early dinner—almost feverishly so, as Joyce would have noticed had she not been so taken up with her own thoughts. When not talking she seemed preoccupied and restless, and Eliza glanced at her uneasily from time to time.

"Joyce, I want you to go to Stanton Orby and return Mrs. Warrender's call this afternoon," she said, as Joyce prepared to attack another large basket of strawberries.

Joyce looked the dismay she felt.

"Oh, I can't, Felicity! It would be such an ordeal. I'm not used to calling as you know. I should feel so shy—I shouldn't know what to say."

"Why?" Felicity asked sharply. "You know the woman you said she was pleasant."

"She was, but but—and I go, Felicity? It's such a hot afternoon for a long walk, and Mrs. Warrender said it was quite three miles. Perhaps I could go another day, when I haven't had quite such a busy morning."

"Oh, if you don't feel well, that's a different matter," said Felicity quickly. "Why couldn't you say so at first?"

Joyce's color rose. Felicity could be very disagreeable when she was not pleased, as she had found out lately.

"I am feeling well enough," she said quickly, "and I'll go if you make a point of it."

"I do. You can take my card, and tell her I can't walk so far. You are a brick, Joyce. Thank you ever so much."

Then Felicity went off to the rickyard to look for Robert Stone, and Joyce repaired to the kitchen to tell Eliza.

"I can pick another pot of strawberries first," she added, "for I needn't start till three o'clock. You won't finish the jam before night if I don't."

Eliza set down the pails of water she had carried from the well, and wiped her hot face.

"What's she sending you gadding off there for?" she grumbled. "She's got something on her head, you mark my words! It's enough to kill you a day like this. You'll get sunstroke."

"It can't be worse than this in the kitchen," Joyce said, smiling.

"It is. The air's that heavy. There'll be a thunderstorm before night, or my names not Eliza Wilkins.

"Oh, I hope not, Eliza! I'm afraid of thunder and lightning."

"Well, stop at one, then if it comes. I don't want to vex Felicity."

The woman said no more, and they picked away in silence for a time. When she spoke again it was on her old grievance—the drawbacks of country life.

"I wish we were safe back in Wilminster, that I do. It's nothing like as hot there. And fancy having to draw every drop of water from a well! Nasty, smelly things!"

"Why! it's lovely water, Eliza, the coldest and purest, I ever tasted."

"Give me a tap over the sink, I say. Then as to all this talk about new-laid eggs and milk fresh from the cow. I've never had an oddfaid one in a town, and that warm, frothy milk makes me queer. Then if we'd been in Wilminster we shouldn't have had all these strawberries dumped on our hands—we could have bought 'em as we wanted 'em. Not but what you've been very good in helping me, Miss Joyce."

"I have liked helping, Eliza. I want to learn." And I am sorry you don't like being here—I think it's beautiful."

Eliza eyed the sweet face curiously.

"You shape well for work," she admitted. "You'd make a good farmer's wife."

Joyce's flushed face went a deeper red. As she was thinking of something to say the front door banged, and they heard Felicity run upstairs to her room. Then there was the sound of a key turned violently in the lock.

Eliza rose with an anxious face and washed her hands at the sink.

"Something's up," she said. "I'll go and see."

It was not long before she was down again.

"She won't let me in. She's crying—I can hear her through the door. They've had a quarrel; I knew they would."

"Who have, Eliza?"

"Pussie and Mr. Robert. I told her she'd try him too far. She says he's mad about all the things that keep coming for her. He took those books from the postman this morning, and she said she should tease him about them, though I begged her not to."

"I thought you didn't want her to marry Mr. Stone."

"No more I don't, but that's no reason why she should break the lad's heart. I like Mr. Robert. He's a gentleman."

Joyce's heart sank. She felt vaguely uneasy as she dressed for her walk. It was not a pleasant task that Felicity had set her. Added to her shyness and the discomfort of the journey was the dread of hearing something derogatory to Robert Stone.

"I won't listen," she decided. "I will tell Mrs. Warrender I would rather not know."

She sighed as she put on her gray coat and skirt—her white dresses were hardly good enough for the occasion—for though it was a summer costume she knew it would be unbearably heavy. She knocked at Felicity's door before starting, and a stifled voice answered her—

"I don't want to see you. You will find my card-case in my work-basket."

There was a private lane to the high road which went no further than the farm. It was quiet and tree shaded, and Joyce started off at a good pace. She knew she would have to slacken speed when she came to the turnpike—a white road where everything was smothered in dust, the highway for motors.

She had not gone far before she heard quick steps coming behind her. Her heart leapt, for she knew it was Robert Stone, and she turned with shy flushed face to greet him.

But this was not her lover—this man with the face convulsed with passion, whose very voice was altered, whose attitude was almost threatening! He put his hands heavily on her shoulders and made her face him.

"Why didn't you tell me about that man?" he said hoarsely. "Why haven't I heard about him before? Heavens! What a fool I've been! Why didn't you warn me? We were at least friends—or so you pretended!" and he laughed harshly.

Joyce's heart died within her. She saw it all! He had heard about Mr. Carmichael—and this was how he was taking it. She had made a mistake, a dreadful mistake! It was Felicity he loved. He had only been flirting with her. Her face went quite white, but she rallied her pride and looked at him bravely.

"I—I would have told you if—if I had been sure it was any concern of yours," she said, not without dignity. "Felicity should have told you before."

"Felicity?" he echoed. "She didn't know—how I felt till to-day. But you're right. It's no concern of mine."

He paused, staring down at her. His face terrified her. It looked so strange, with the color all fled and the sunburn left, and his eyes looked almost black.

"Shall I tell you what I think about a girl who would do that?" he asked in a furious whisper, and he shook her slender shoulders a little. "A girl who would sell herself to a man old enough to be her father—just for what he could give her? An old man she couldn't even pretend to love! I'll tell you. She's too mean and contemptible to waste a thought on, I hate and despise her. I'll stamp on my love for her. I'll crush her out of my heart. I'll forget her as utterly as if she had never been born."

Oh, poor Felicity! Joyce thought, with a pang. No wonder she was crying her heart out.

"Do!" she said coldly. "Do! She won't lose much!"

His face changed swiftly. His hands dropped, and he turned away with a groan.

"You're right," he said. "She won't lose much."

But at that look of suffering Joyce's tender heart melted. She sprang after him, and laid her hand on his arm.

"Don't look like that," she faltered, "and don't judge her too harshly, poor girl! you don't know all the circumstances. I'm so sorry for you. Perhaps everything will come right even yet."

"It will never come right for me," he said heavily.

Then he went back the way he had come. Joyce never remembered how she got to Stanton Orby. She dared not cry, for how could she meet Mrs. Warrender with red eyelids and disfigured face? It was almost unbearable at times—the smarting eyes, the choking throat, without the relief of tears. She stumbled occasionally, for she felt tired out now that her buoyancy of spirit had deserted her. The road seemed endless. There was not a breath of air—not a leaf stirred. She was vaguely conscious of the heat and discomfort of the journey, with its choking dust and tormenting flies, but her mental misery was so great that it seemed to dwarf all lesser troubles.

She felt overwhelmed. It was maddening to think how foolish she had been—how easily gulled! Robert Stone must indeed be the villain every one said he was. Only a villain would have uttered those sentimental speeches last night—would have looked into her eyes as if he meant them.

She went over the few times they had met, and everything he had ever said to her. She writhed as she had to own she had made the most of them. What a fool she had been! She had heard of men who were accomplished in this sort of thing—who could make a girl love them deeply with scarcely an effort.

Well, Robert Stone would be punished, for! He loved Felicity—there was no doubt about that; and whether she married him or not there was suffering in store for him. Joyce's eyes had been opened of late. Miss Chester had not been altogether wrong in summing up her friend's character, as she had thought at the time, and some day she would write and tell her so.

When Joyce entered Stanton Orby she was much too exhausted in mind and body to notice the pretty little village. The rectory was a mansion standing in its own grounds—it had evidently once been the Hall—and she felt quite ill with nervousness as she rang the bell.

She need not have troubled so much over the visit, for the smart maidservant informed her that Mrs. Warrender was "not at home." Joyce hardly knew whether to feel relieved or vexed as she turned away. A moment ago she dreaded the ordeal; now she felt that a little talk might perhaps have lightened the load of misery that threatened to crush her. And how grateful she would have been for a cup of tea! Her heart sank as she thought of the long walk before her.

She went even slower than before; there was nothing to hurry back for—nothing but trouble awaited her. She would have been glad never to see the Valley Farm again.

So absorbed was she that she did not notice the rapidly-darkening sky, the ominous hush that goes before a storm. When it came at last—with a deafening crack of thunder that for the moment paralysed her with terror—she had left the village far behind. Before her stretched the long white road, with not a house in sight. As she had told Eliza, she was afraid of thunder and lightning, and she began to run, keeping in the middle of the road, with some vague idea that it was safest for her with trees. It was not long before the rain came, literally pouring from the threatening sky, and after running till she was spent Joyce subsided into a walk, and told herself with the calmness of despair that this was indeed the last straw.

It added to her wretchedness to know that her pretty hat of chiffon and roses was hopelessly ruined, that her dress—a cheap one—would most certainly shrink. She set her teeth and kept doggedly on, trembling at every peal, flinching at every flash, and going—had she but known it—with every step that she took farther from her destination.

It flashed upon her suddenly that she had lost her way when she found herself hesitating where three lanes met. For some time the road had seemed unfamiliar, but she had consoled herself with the thought that she had taken very little notice of anything on the way to Stanton. There was a signpost here, and she scanned it with anxious eyes, the rain streaming down upon her upturned face. It pointed the road to Stoneycreek, to Wardledge, to Fretterton—not one of which she knew. She must have taken a wrong turning, and come far out of her way.

Joyce walked steadily on down one of the lanes, apathetic with misery. The first deluge had subsided into a steady downpour. The drought of the last few weeks had broken up with a vengeance! She could not possibly be wetter than she was, she told herself, and perhaps she might come across a cottage soon where she could inquire the way.

(To be continued.)

The Reality of War.

Mr. McGovern—a heavyweight gentleman of London's East End, who had never been known to work, but who nevertheless has added to the population of the earth in figures up to ten, suddenly became heroic and enlisted. The following dialogue took place between Mrs. McGovern and a lady: Mrs. McGovern being happy and complacent in the receipt of her 27s. 6d. from the War Office.

Mrs. McGovern—Good morning, miss.

Lady—Good-morning, Mrs. McGovern. I hear Mr. McGovern has gone to the war.

Mrs. McGovern (cheerfully)—Yes, miss.

Lady—Well, Mrs. McGovern, what do you think of this terrible war?

Mrs. McGovern—Good heavens, lady! I hope it will last forever.

POLAND A NATION AGAIN.

Declares Count Ivan Tolstoy, Mayor of Petrograd.

Count Ivan Tolstoy invited me to his home in Retrograd with all the courtesy of the true Russian aristocrat, writes Woclaw Czerniewski in London Graphic. I arrived at his house on the very day when posters bearing the words "Petrograd for Poland" were being displayed all over the City of Peter the Great. It was natural, therefore, that our conversation should turn chiefly upon Russia's new and great movement. Count Tolstoy spoke with the combined authority of a representative of the Russian nation, of a member of the oldest aristocracy, and of a Mayor of Russia's capital. His opinions were firm and clear.

"The manifesto of the commander-in-chief is of the greatest importance," said he. "It is a wise political step. It is my desire to impress British public opinion with the fact that the whole Russian nation heartily appreciates this measure. The promise given by the Grand Duke will be fulfilled, and of this there can be no possible doubt; such, also, is the desire of our nation and of our Tsar. When the Russian army wins, the divided parts of Poland will be reunited. Poland will comprise Galicia, Silesia, Posnania, West Prussia (with Dantzig), part of East Prussia, and the present Kingdom of Poland. Poles will enjoy full autonomy. Polish will again become the language of the schools, of public life, and of officialdom. The Poles must have at least one university entirely Polish.

"In my opinion, the officials of the future Polish Government ought to have a knowledge of the Russian language, as being the language of the Empire. The Poles must have their own Diet. The institution of Governor-General ought to be abolished. This places Poland on the same footing as the other parts of the Russian Empire."

The German Influence.

"Don't you consider," I asked the Count, "that the reactionaries, the German party, can hinder the realization of those promises through their powerful influence?"

"No, it is impossible. It is true that the Russian bureaucracy was under German influence for many a long day. The Germans gained the highest Government positions, they are still very powerful at Court, and they created a party of their own. They oppose us Real Russians. I do not believe in their patriotism for one moment, but no doubt they are loyal to the dynasty and to the Tsar. The Tsar, for his part, considers himself as the first servant of the nation. Thus, the Tsar is faithful to the nation, and the German party is faithful to the Tsar. The feelings of Poles towards Russia are now fraternal and sincere, and the Russian people entirely reciprocate these sentiments."

Count Ivan Tolstoy.

"Do you think, Count, that Russia is suffering very much through the war? 'Is there any change in Petrograd?" I inquired.

"None whatever. Everyday life is not changed in the slightest. Prices are lower. Many products which were previously exported, for example, geese, eggs, caviar, etc., must be sold on the spot, and therefore, are much cheaper. Shipping companies are the only sufferers; the people, as a whole, gain more than they lose. In our ordinary urban undertakings we had to suspend work on account of tasks more important in time of war. And that is all. Russia is too vast, too mighty to be devastated by any war.

"Her resources are immense, and she is able to continue war for an unlimited time. But I consider that the present contest cannot last long. The Germans cannot withstand our army. We shall drive them entirely out of our territory, and we shall carry on the war on German soil, where we shall soon manage to push them from East and West Prussia, from Posnania and Silesia. Then, the Germans will be compelled to sue for peace.

Growing in Moral Power.

"Our spirit is at the highest level, and this is true not only of the army, but of the nation. It was generally said that drunkenness would ruin Russia. Meanwhile a Ukase forbidding the sale of alcohol met with universal approval. It is true that restaurants and public houses are the sufferers, but the nation is rapidly growing in moral power and wealth. The result of this new law, even after a few months of operation, is very striking. Our hospitals in Petrograd never used to have sufficient room for patients. At the present moment, in spite of the fact that many a wounded soldier is sent here to be tended, we have always plenty of room for our patients. Statistics show a wonderful decrease of illness amongst the population. And thus, even now, we can see advantages and good results which have been conferred on us by the present war. The only sufferers are those who are living in the immediate sphere of military operations, and these are actually Poles.

"The sympathetic Russian nation realizes this, and holds out help to the sufferers. The City of Petrograd sent 25,000 francs for Belgium, but 50,000 roubles for Poland, and at the present moment throughout the town money and clothes are being collected for the Polish victims of the war. This money will be distributed amongst the population of Poland without any discrimination as to race, creed or religion. Poles, Lithuanians, Ruthenians, as well as Jews, will be assisted according to their degree of destitution.

CRAWLED OUT OF BELGIUM.

How Two British Convent Girls Fled Past German Sentries.

How two English schoolgirls at a convent near Liege made fruitless efforts for four months to leave Belgium after the German occupation, and how finally they escaped over the Dutch frontier on a dark night, was told by Miss Florence Walter, a Balham girl, nineteen years of age, who, with her friend, have only just succeeded in reaching their anxious relatives and friends in England.

"There were a number of other English girls at the convent," said Miss Walter, "but whenever we applied to the German officers we were refused military permits to leave. Life under the Germans was unbearable, for we were exposed to all sorts of dangers—so we decided to escape. One night my friend and myself tramped for hours through a fir wood to Cheval Blanc, and then on to Verviers and Ensival. Fortunately we got two or three hours sleep, but [illegible] morning [illegible] later we [illegible] nearly a [illegible] chant's car [illegible] to the Dutch frontier. After weary journey of six hours, [illegible] shivering with fright for we did not know what we were [illegible] end—we arrived at the little frontier village of Moulin. We were [illegible] the village, we [illegible] For hours we rapped [illegible] some plan to pass [illegible]

"Finally we started out at [illegible] muddy road after dark, but [illegible] we were followed by a [illegible] nel, so we turned to the inn. There a man, who [illegible] we and several fugees [illegible] led us through a [illegible] den at the back of the inn. On hands and [illegible] we groped in [illegible] mud under some barbed wire [illegible] entanglement, climbed [illegible] hedges, [illegible] a number of [illegible] trees, and finally crossed the frontier.

"Not even a [illegible] owe full man has [illegible] able to sus[illegible] his reputation. The [illegible] had written on board the [illegible] estions, 'What was yesterday?' and 'What is to-day?' [illegible] the little group [illegible] these [illegible] answers, 'Yesterday was [illegible] day, yesterday a [illegible] day will be [illegible] yesterday a [illegible]

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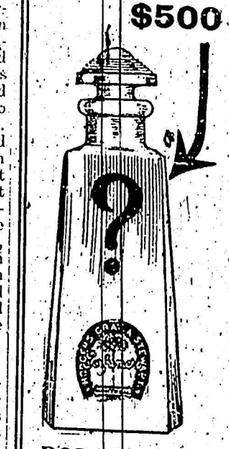

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