

# 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 and 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—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 deeply; the color had surged into his face and his eyes looked angry. She felt afraid, and was about to turn and run swiftly back to the house when he spoke again. Whatever it was that had upset him he was not vexed with her, for that low note had come back to his voice, and once more she dared not meet his eyes.

"So that's what you have been thinking? And you didn't like it? I am glad of that! I don't like it either, White Rose. But it isn't true—not a bit of it. I haven't 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 a very ignorant little girl. How can I make love with this stupid old gate between us?"

He gave it a kick as he spoke. Was he laughing at her? she wondered. There was such a strange exultant note in his voice. Then she thrilled, for he bent still nearer, and though he did not touch her her whole being seemed to be caught up and enfolded as with an embrace.

"Darling," he whispered, "if the gate were not between us—and more, much more!—do you know what I should do? I should take your face in my hands—such a wistful little face it is!—and kiss your sweet lips over and over again—as I've been longing to do ever since I first saw you. I should hold you in my arms, so

close that I could feel your heart beating against mine. I should dare to touch your hair, and to stroke your cheek. I should make you put your arms round my neck, and call me 'sweetheart.' We could stay here together till the stars came out, and I should call you mine, and kiss you—kiss you!" He broke off and laughed softly. "We would be so happy. Say you wish the old gate was down—say it!"

Mesmerised, bewildered, carried away by his tender eloquence, Joyce lost her head, and to her unspeakable horror and dismay 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 dainty 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 Eliza looked at each other. "Joyce, and look what has come by post!" she pointed to a case of books—half a dozen new six-shilling novels—and laughed a little consciously. "I shall have quite a library if I stay here much longer."

Joyce had 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 eating in the low-collared 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 had never 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 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—need 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 rudely. "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 quietly, "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 pan 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 in 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 kitchen," Joyce said, smiling.

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

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

"Well, stop at 'ome, then."

"I can't. 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 old-laid 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 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?"

"Missie 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 they were like 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 a good space. 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 his 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! He had loved Felicity. He had loved her. He had 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 I had been sure it was any concern of yours," she said, not without dignity. "Felicity should have told you before."

"How?" he echoed. "He 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 low whisper, and she shrank, her slender shoulders a little. "A girl who would sell herself to a man old enough to be her father—just for that 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 eyes and a disfigured face? It was almost unbearable at times—the smarting of the aching 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 contemptible 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 it! 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 maid-servant 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.

No 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 terrified her with terror—she had reached 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 dangerous to shelter under a tree. 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 a 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, tramping at every pace, finching 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 unfamili-



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lar, 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 Stoneycross, to Worledge, 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.)

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"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 at four o'clock the next morning we had risen, and an hour later were sitting, together with nearly a dozen others, in a merchant's cart slowly wending its way to the Dutch frontier. After a weary journey of six hours, and

shivering with fright—for we did not know how our venture would end—we arrived at the little frontier village of Moulin. We visited the only inn in the village, which was crowded. For hours we racked our brains for some plan to pass the frontier guards.

"Finally we started out along the muddy roads after dark, but found we were being followed by a sentinel, so we returned to the inn. Then a man, whom we and several refugees bribed, led us through a garden at the back of the inn. On our hands and knees we groped in the mud under some barbed wire entanglements, climbed several hedges, dodged a number of sentries, and finally crossed the frontier."

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