



THE LAND GIRL

By DIANA GARDNER First published in Horizon, December 1940.

I HAVE Jersey cream for breakfast here on the farm. It is thick enough to spread on my porridge. Unfortunately, there is not enough sugar to go with it because of the rationing, which is rather a curse. What I'd like would be oceans of brown sugar crystals of the kind we used to have at my guardian's. As it is, I have to take it surreptitiously when Mrs. Farrant goes to the kitchen for the kettle. She's very severe and down on land girls altogether. She's also against me because I'm a "lady," or I am when compared with her. She's a hard-bitten, crusty, thin woman and I don't think she and her husband get on particularly well together. She never calls him by his name or anything else, and refers to him as "Mr. Farrant."

They don't half work the land girls. You are expected to do a man's work right enough. Not that I mind: it's fun being out in the open all day, even if it is blasted cold. Today we ploughed a field the size of the hall at college and it took five hours. About mid-afternoon, Mr. Farrant came over and gave me a cigarette. I'm not allowed to smoke at the farmhouse because of Mrs. F., so I have one now and again in the fields. It's decent of him to understand. I should say he's a man of about fifty-six, tall, very thin and his face is lined with tiny red veins. He has whitish hair and blue, amused eyes. I wish he wouldn't wear leather gaiters: they make his legs look far too thin.

"We'll make you into a farmer yet. Miss Una," he said.

I laughed at the idea. If there weren't a war on I'd never be doing land work. I don't believe I've got the patience. Farming is a dull game: you have to wait so long for things to grow. I like action. It was that which got me expelled from

school — I used to sneak into the town to buy sweets after “lights-out.” I’ve also got strong feelings, with decided likes and dislikes. Which reminds me, I don’t think I’m going to like Mrs. F. at all.

There’s a thick frost today. Miller, the cowman, says it went down to 27 degrees last night. I was late for breakfast because it was so hard getting out of bed. Mr. Farrant was on the farm and Mrs. F. was busy in the scullery. It was quite nice to eat alone. I didn’t have to be endlessly on my best behaviour. Believe me I was in a rage when I discovered that Mrs. F. had left only a teaspoonful of sugar in the bowl for both tea and porridge. Mean old pig! I thought. I’ll pay you out. Before I went on the farm I upset my tea over the tablecloth.

Miller was detailed for two hours to teach me how to manage the tractor. When the weather breaks we’ll be busy. Miller is a bad teacher, or I’m a dud. I expect I shall understand it in time.

Mr. Farrant gave me my lesson this morning. He explains things very well. He took the whole carburetor to pieces and showed me how it worked.

The weather is still mid-winter. Today I felt very bored, going up and down among the cabbages. If the war goes on much longer I shall be sick of this game. Nobody of my own age to talk to, only the farmhands and their wives, and I bet they laugh and imitate me behind my back. To tell the truth I don’t feel I’m all that popular, and this makes me seem affected. Am beginning to wonder why I ever came here at all.

This morning Mr. Farrant took me in his gig to market. The town looked like a Christmas card by Raphael Tuck; people were climbing the hill bent double for fear of falling on the ice, and one or two women wore red woolen caps with lipstick to match.

I enjoy going around with Mr. Farrant. He’s a nice old boy and treats me well. He was shy at first about taking me into the “Drovers,” because he said I was a lady. It was very hot and farmerish in there. I must say I enjoyed drinking a glass of good old brown ale with the locals. These togs, breeches and coat, etc., are very comfortable. Thank goodness I don’t bulge out in the wrong places.

When we got home Mrs. F. didn’t seem particularly pleased to see us. She spilled my tea pouring it out, so I refused to thank her for it. When she went to lock up the fowls I am afraid I pulled a face at Mr. Farrant, but he didn’t seem to mind.

There has been another fall of snow. My room is in the attic and after Mr. Farrant called me to get up I lay quite a while looking at it reflected on the ceiling.

Practically all day I was clambering about with Miller searching for a pair of ewes, which have lambed too early. After we'd found them, Mrs. Miller made tea for us at their cottage. It was the queerest place inside. The "parlour" was fixed from top to bottom with pictures of the seaside, and china "gifts," mostly from Brighton. She was very pleasant and had only two teeth in the top front. I wonder what happened to the others. Miller is a robust, earnest sort of fellow, and good-looking, if you like the earthy type.

Mrs. Farrant made a scene today. I have come to loathe her.

When I came in I shook off all the snow I could in the scullery before going into the sitting room. Mr. Farrant was doing accounts. I could see she was in a vile temper; her hair was screwed into a tighter knot than ever.

I sat in an armchair and took up the Daily Mail.

Presently she looked across.

"Why didn't you take off your boots?" she said.

Before answering I laid the paper down very deliberately, and looked her over. "Because I've been out all day on the farm and I'm dog-tired. I shook the snow off as I came in."

"The snow's all over the carpet, and you'll take off those boots," she said.

She came and stood over me so menacingly that my gorge rose.

"My good woman," I said. "I haven't taken up farming to be ordered about by you."

"This is my house and I'll be obeyed in it."

"No one could mistake that," I replied curtly, and I admit I looked meaningfully at Mr. Farrant.

"You'll kindly leave this room," said Mrs. F. She's certainly got a shrill voice.

"I'm going to, thanks," I said, and I took the Daily Mail with me. As I climbed to my room I brushed off as much snow as I could on the stairs.

When I came down for supper I found Mrs. F. had gone to bed. Mr. Farrant was quiet all through the meal. I am afraid he was upset about it all.

Mrs. F. is scarcely civil when I address her now. She has also taken to giving me small helpings at meals. When I object she refers to the strict rationing. I don't believe it.

We live on a farm where there's plenty of food, and I tell her so.

This morning she had taken away the cream and left no milk for the porridge. She was making her bed upstairs.

I must say I wouldn't like to have a wife like Mrs. F.

Last night I went to a Temperance Dance with the Millers. Mrs. Miller doesn't dance, so I waggled a toe with him. It was a tiring affair. It's hard to get drunk on lemonade. When we got back to the farm after a three-mile walk through the snow, I found that damned woman had locked me out. All the doors were bolted and the place in darkness. I threw snowballs at Mr. Farrant's window — they have separate rooms — and presently he came down, looking very sleepy, poor man, and let me in.

As I passed her door her room was suspiciously quiet. I am afraid I made no apology for getting him out of bed. He ought never to have married a woman like Flo Farrant.

This morning, when I accused her of locking up the house, she had the rotten taste to reply, "Oh, I thought you'd be out all night."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" I asked.

I think she was frightened because she did not answer.

"Come on," I said. "Explain yourself."

But she wouldn't.

I'm going to get even with her for this.

I spent the whole of to-day carting hay for the cattle. I can't help thinking of what that bitch said yesterday.

It's open war between Mrs. F. and me in this house now. I don't know how Mr. Farrant can put up with it. I talk only to him. Mrs. F. and I have put each other into Coventry.

I must think clearly about this evening to know what exactly happened. I admit I did it in an inexplicable, mad moment and I suppose I shall live to regret it, but I

do feel Mrs. F. is entirely to blame for the atmosphere which has grown up between us.

As it was Sunday she caught the early 'bus into town and went by train to her mother's farm.

She was gone all day.

At lunchtime Mr. Farrant and I got on particularly well together. We laughed a good deal at his jokes and he seemed relieved that she was out of the way, and shy that he and I were alone, which was funny, because around the farm and all the time we are at work he treats me as if I were a sort of refined workman. In the afternoon he dozed, the newspaper over his face and his gaiters off, I was dressed in a frock for a change and feeling no longer a farm labourer.

Over tea we got on still better. I know Mr. Farrant likes me quite a lot; I'm sensible and reasonably attractive. I like him in lots of ways. He's friendly and has a sense of humour.

As I poured the tea, sitting in Mrs. F.'s chair, I must admit I was glad she was out of the house for once.

But not a shadow of what happened later entered my head at any time during the afternoon. I wrote some letters to one or two people I'd met at the agricultural college and amused Mr. Farrant with tales about them. He thought they sounded great jokes.

When supper-time came he insisted that he should prepare it.

"After all, we're both farmers," he said, "So why shouldn't I get a meal for a change."

He opened a tin of tongue and made some sandwiches. The tea was dreadfully strong. Afterwards he smoked some of my cigarettes and told me about his youth. He must have been a lad. Why on earth he had to marry Flo Farrant only the stars can tell.

As she was due on the ten o'clock 'bus, I decided to go to bed before she arrived. Just before nine-thirty, Mr. Farrant made the fire up and went into the kitchen to make some tea. While he was gone I put the room to rights, and presently he returned with a thermos and laid it on the table.

It was then something took possession of me. The sight of the old, chipped thermos on the orange tray and his spent, thin shoulders bent over it, caused my

dislike of Mrs. Farrant to well up into a sudden storm of hatred. I don't remember ever having experienced such rage and no one can accuse me of being sweet-tempered. I felt choked with hatred. As I watched the nape of his neck I gripped the back of a wooden chair so hard that my hands were bloodless. Yet despite the ferocity of this feeling I don't think it could have lasted a second. I relaxed my grip on the chair and sat down.

He looked up, alarmed.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes.... t-thanks," I stammered.

"Not ill or anything? You're so white."

"It must be the heat of the room," I said, and pulled myself together. I got up. "I'm going to bed."

"Right you are," he said. "I'm turning in, too."

He went into the kitchen and I heard him stoking the "Ideal" boiler.

Suddenly my brain began to work at a great speed. Now that I think about it I suppose my subconscious had already worked out a plan. My movements became swift and furtive. I went quickly to the door, looked to right and left in the hall and then, as softly as I could, sped up the stairs. The way I knew what to do next was quite peculiar. I went straight to Mr. Farrant's bedroom and switched the light on. His bed was over in the corner. I went straight over and lay on it. I even shook off my shoes as I climbed up — a funny thing to do when I had only a few moments to spare. I could hear him moving about down- stairs and I knew the 'bus with Mrs. Farrant in it would be arriving at any minute. I lay on my back and rolled about from side to side to deepen my impression in the feather mattress. It very soon became disordered. Then I got up, took off a blue Tyrolean brooch I always wear and laid it beside his brushes on the dressing table. Grabbing my shoes in my hand I made my way on to the landing and up the stairs to the attic.

Once in my own room I stood with my head pressed against the door, listening for the sound of his movements. I heard him lift the lid of the letterbox and let it drop. He paused by the stairs to wind the grandfather clock.

At that moment I heard the 'bus. It pulled up and then started off noisily. Mrs. Farrant was at the gate.

He climbed the stairs softly. I don't think he heard the 'bus. As he came to the linoleum on the landing, his steps grew louder. He crossed to his room and went in.

Hardly breathing, I came out of mine and ran quietly down the stairs. My eyes must have been fixed and frightening. When the front door handle turned, I gave a little gasp; nothing must prevent my plan from succeeding. If I were not wrong, Mrs. Farrant would say goodnight to her husband before she drank her tea.

I slipped into his room as quickly and quietly as I could. Once inside I appeared to be in no hurry. He stood in the middle of the room in his shirtsleeves. He appeared not to have noticed the state of the bed, and was staring pensively at his feet. He looked up, surprised.

"I'm sorry," I said, and I can't think what I must have looked like, "but I've left a brooch on your dressing-table." I spoke slowly. "It's a little Austrian brooch my guardian gave me years ago."

I began to play for time.

"Stupid of me to have left it. There it is — on the little china tray" — I heard footsteps on the stairs — in a slightly higher key I said, "On the china tray, beside your brushes."

"Oh," he said, vaguely, and took it up in his hands. He was stupefied and tired. "I don't quite understand," he looked down at it in the palm of his hand and then at me.

"How did it get there?"

But I had no need to reply. Mrs. Farrant stood in the doorway, her dark clothes part of the shadow in the landing, her face compressed and challenging. She looked at her husband, at the brooch in his hand, at me, and finally, at the disarranged bed.

I don't know what I looked like but I can remember a sensation of rising triumph as I met her eyes. He was too befuddled to know what to say and I made no effort to help him.

I waited an age for her to speak, but she said nothing. Her face became completely expressionless. She looked again at the brooch in Farrant's hand and then turned on her heel. We heard her cross the landing to her own room and close the door sharply behind her.

I must confess I didn't know what to do when he turned and looked at me in a bewildered sort of way. I snatched the brooch from his hand and rushed upstairs to my room.

This morning it is still very cold. As I lay in bed unable to sleep, a good deal of noise was going on in the house below. Eventually I got up and stared out at the outbuildings of this blasted farm. Presently, Miller led the pony out and harnessed him to the gig. Almost at once Mrs. Farrant piled it high with some tattered luggage. Without saying anything to Miller she climbed in and jerked the reins. The pony moved forward, through the gate and on to the high road, his breath misty in the frozen morning air. I got cold watching her back-view until it was out of sight; the thin body and that frightful bun. That was the last I shall ever see of her, thank God.

After that I dressed and went downstairs.

As I went into the kitchen with a jauntiness I was far from feeling, Mr. Farrant was making his own breakfast. He looked up with a numbed expression. I had expected reproaches: it put me off my stroke not to get any.

"She's gone," he said, wearily, "Nothing I could say made any difference."

I said nothing.

Here I am waiting for the 'bus. It's so cold I have to run up and down beside my suitcases to keep warm. I am in my best clothes, but I do not know where I am going or what I shall do. All I am certain of is, I must get out of that house.

After all, I couldn't stay there alone with Mr. Farrant. Even though he's been an awful dear to me, he's old enough to be my father. And my life has only just begun.



