

VIRTUOUS DOVE
A historical novel
by Linda Daly

LOGLINE

Idealism is a dangerous trait in a society controlled by greed and deceit.

PITCH

Her parents killed for helping slaves escape, Felicity Phelps reluctantly turns to English relations to save her from a rapidly fractioning America about to erupt into Civil War. Hired as a schoolteacher and housed with the local vicar, a kind and handsome man, and his snobbish bitch of a wife Felicity struggles to make a place for herself in a strict class-based community intent on punishing her for something her grandparents did. Maintaining her own integrity in the face of sweet temptation and outright hostility, Felicity converts bulwarks of the society set to her side and discovers the strength of her own heritage while winning a seemingly unobtainable love.

SYNOPSIS

Felicity Phelps believes everyone should be free. She pays a tragic price for those beliefs when her parents are killed for helping runaway slaves on the eve of America's Civil War. Rich English relatives offer her a teaching job so she sails to Victorian England where she's boarded with the handsome, thoughtful vicar and his beautiful but snotty bitch of a wife, daughter of the local Squire. There's an immediate attraction and appreciation between Felicity and Reverend Benjamin Myles.

Felicity's relatives and their friends are suspicious of her motives, but her warm and open ways soon win over her great aunt Gwen. Felicity confesses the attraction with Benjamin and Aunt Gwen advises discretion and great caution. There are power struggles, ancient family grudges, lust and deceit going on behind all that wealth and proper manners. While Gwen plans a "coming out" party for her new-found niece, Felicity begins to suspect trouble in Reverend Benjamin and Lavinia's marriage. She's not sure whether this troubles her or she finds it heartening.

Lavinia and her father the Squire stir up more trouble. Felicity loses her teaching job and is moved out of the vicarage to her Aunt Gwen's. At her debut party, Gwen's plans for Felicity's formal introduction to society are foiled. The lecherous drunken Squire attacks Felicity and he and Lavinia try to blame Benjamin. A kindly cousin comes to their rescue and the Squire's impropriety is revealed, along with Lavinia's scandalous behaviour. The town turns against them. The Reverend gets an annulment and is assigned far away.

A year later, Felicity and Aunt Gwen travel to America, where much to Felicity's surprise and delight Benjamin works at an orphanage for former slave children. Her Abolitionist work and his current position bind them even closer together on both idealistic and practical levels. The ailing Gwen urges Felicity and Benjamin to reunite and they wed just as she dies, happy. Felicity is devastated to lose her dear aunt, but her passionate love with Benjamin comforts her.

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LONG SYNOPSIS

Felicity Phelps helplessly watches her parents burn to death. Former family friends hold her back and scorn her loss because she and her parents are Abolitionists and provided a safe haven for runaway slaves in Chesapeake Bay, Virginia.

Casper her brother turns against her since she was also an Abolitionist and helped the runaway slaves. He blames her and their parents for him having lost everything: money, prestige, and the good family name.

Now penniless and outcast, to avoid the poor farm Felicity contacts English relatives. Her Uncle Edwin sends for her. She'll sail over with a proper chaperone and be in mourning clothes; she'll take a teaching job and live with the local preacher. It's a far cry from her former elevated position, but she's thankful to have it. Miss Freeport is her remote and proper chaperone on the ship to England.

They land in Plymouth and Miss Freeport coolly turns Felicity over to a driver from her new home, the village of Ashwillow in Dartmoor.

Reaching her new home, the vicar's beautiful but snotty bitch of a wife Lavinia makes Felicity unwelcome. Felicity is kind and gives her the benefit of the doubt, her being imposed on them and all. Being an American, Felicity speaks her mind, which she quickly learns is not always a good and proper thing here in very proper Victorian England.

Her host the Reverend Benjamin Myles is a handsome and seemingly thoughtful man. There's an immediate attraction and appreciation between him and Felicity.

Randolph Bailey-Smythe is the Squire of the parish, father of Lavinia and her sister Annabelle, a soft-spoken kind-hearted young woman, the very opposite of her vain cruel sister. Felicity and Annabelle quickly become dear friends.

At the school where she'll be teaching, Felicity meets Mrs. Kneebone, the old caretaker who ramrods the students with a stern bluff over her caring heart. The students are a mixture of classes and the upper class kids make a point of pointing out the differences and trying to make the lower class ones feel less-than. The poor kids are poor to the point of pitiful, including four Pike children who live in a workhouse for the poor with their mom, their dad having been sent off to a workfarm after they were all kicked out of their home by the Squire. Felicity is particularly drawn to young Joseph Pike; he stutters but seems capable nonetheless. She determines to help him.

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Reverend Myles adores his shrewish wife, who continues to be mean and snobby to Felicity. He apologizes for her and is kind and thoughtful to the new teacher boarding in their home. Felicity wonders at the dynamics of their marriage.

Felicity meets her great aunt Gwendolyn and learns more of her own family history. Her beloved grandparents had eloped and run off to America, creating bad blood among three prestigious and landed families: the Robbins, Phelps, and Bailey-Smythe clans.

Ruling from her lovely estate, Gwendolyn is an outspoken woman who suffered her own disappointments in love. She does not want to see the same thing happen to her niece Felicity. Her distant niece Anne and Anne's husband Edward Spencer live there with her, along with the couple's somewhat snobbish children.

Aunt Gwendolyn is standoffish at first with Felicity, but her niece's warm and open ways soon win over the older woman, much to the disapproval of her other relatives who suspect Felicity's motives.

On the way back from visiting Aunt Gwendolyn, Felicity and Benjamin are caught in a rainstorm and thrown quite literally together. An "almost kiss" is witnessed and Benjamin's vicious wife Lavinia blackmails him emotionally about it, though both Felicity and Benjamin deny it was anything other than a "thank you" peck on the cheek. Yet both of them know deep in their hearts that it was much more.

Felicity confides in Gwendolyn about the kiss and her feelings for Benjamin. Aunt Gwendolyn advises discretion and great caution, given the tense and societally dangerous situation. Felicity brings up her concern for the Pike family who'd been kicked out of their home and how she'd really like to help them...perhaps by helping them move into an abandoned house on Aunt Gwen's property. Gwendolyn agrees.

Felicity meets more of her relatives and their friends. James Sterling shows himself a snake, but his sickly wife Rebecca is a saint of patience, realizing his womanizing ways but certain he'll always return to her. Felicity's cousin Rupert Robbins, son of Uncle Edwin who made possible her move to England and her teaching job, comes across as a fop with his speech affectations and citified manners.

At a social event, Felicity and Rupert overhear James rebuffing Lavinia's romantic demands, which throws Lavinia into an even more hostile attitude towards her American houseguest Felicity.

At the school, returning schoolmaster Mr. Burns admonishes Felicity to be more strict with the students. She demurs and maintains her encouraging and egalitarian attitude towards all the children.

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Felicity accompanies Reverend Benjamin to the village dance because his wife Lavinia refuses to mix with the peasants and goes to a society event instead. Felicity dances with the locals and with Benjamin. Both of them enjoy the event and experience a growing affinity for each other.

Cousin Rupert admits his suspicions towards Felicity: is she here to take advantage of her rich Aunt Gwendolyn? Gwendolyn too admits to having had suspicions of Felicity's motives. Yet both agree that Felicity seems to be what she appears to be – a kind, generous, open-hearted and non-grasping, lovely young woman.

Gwendolyn meanwhile is planning a “coming out” party for her newfound niece Felicity, whom she now totally accepts. All the local gentry is invited, plus relative and friends from afar.

Felicity meets the sculptor Francois Racine, a French charmer who had totally enchanted her dear new friend the shy Annabelle Bailey-Smythe. During party events and random comments, Felicity begins to suspect that the Reverend Benjamin and Lavinia are in an arranged marriage. She's not sure whether this troubles her or she finds it heartening.

Determined to cement her claim to him, in a wicked moment Lavinia seduces Benjamin for the first time in their marriage. Lavinia and Benjamin move Felicity out of their home and to her Aunt Gwen's, which suits Felicity just fine.

Then Benjamin releases Felicity as a teacher at the school. She knows it is not a job that someone of her station should keep but she really loved the children and liked teaching them so she is sorely disappointed. She is particularly taken by young Joseph Pike, the boy who stammers and who reminds her of someone...she can't think who.

Taking their cause in hand, Felicity arranges with her Aunt Gwen for the Pike family to be given a deserted house on the family land. It is revealed that Joseph – because of the physical resemblance – is Squire Randy's bastard son.

At Felicity's coming-out party, her Uncle Edwin reveals that much to her surprise, given his condemnation of her and her parent's Abolitionist activities, her brother Casper has become a Major in the Union Army. Discussions and expressions across the ballroom reveal bad blood between Felicity's Uncle Edwin and Aunt Gwen. Felicity also learns that James Sterling, Lavinia's not-so-secret lover, and Edwin have a business deal in the USA.

At the party, Edwin fouls Gwen's plans for Felicity's coming-out by cutting short her formal introduction to society that will reveal her as the descendant of two of the three local prestigious families. What is it he has against her?

Squire Randy Bailey-Smythe, always a disgusting drunk and a lech, attacks Felicity in the garden. As she rebuffs him and hurries back to the ballroom, the Squire and Lavinia loudly try to

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lay the blame on Reverend Benjamin. It's a messy scene. Both Felicity's Cousin Rupert and her Aunt Gwen come to the rescue and try to downplay the scandal as Felicity gathers her wits.

Working quickly, cousin Rupert falls out of his lispng fop character and takes control of the potentially devastating situation witnessed by the local society-that-counts. Given all the lapses of propriety by Squire Randy, including the bastard son Joseph Pike, it is not difficult to sway public opinion against the rake and his vain selfish daughter Lavinia.

Reverend Benjamin travels that night to the Bishop's palace to apprise him of the situation, the accusations, his admitted but unrequited love for Felicity, and to plead for annulment from his arranged marriage to the Squire's daughter in return for the position in the parish, and a reassignment far away.

The word having spread about the scandalous event, Lavinia is shunned at church the next day. Everyone now knows that Squire Randy Bailey-Smythe attacked Felicity and the family is socially rejected. Word is that Benjamin has been reassigned to Scotland.

A year later, Felicity knows that Benjamin and Lavinia's marriage has been annulled. But she thinks he is in Scotland and follows her Aunt Gwen's longstanding advice to quench her heart's desire.

Aunt Gwen suggests a trip to America to reconnect with Felicity's remaining relatives there, even if it's only her brother Casper. When they arrive in America, Benjamin meets them at the docks, much to Felicity's surprise and delight. He is working at an orphanage for former slave children there in New York. Her Abolitionist work and his current position bind them even closer together on the idealistic and practical levels.

Gwen and Felicity are guests of the Honeycutts. Echoing Lavinia's unwelcome a year ago by Lavinia, Vivian Honeycutt seems hostile to Felicity, yet she is a dear friend of Gwen, having corresponded with her for decades. Gwen has fallen ill with influenza and all see that she is slipping away from life.

Gwen urges Felicity and Benjamin to reunite since he is now a free man. On a romantic carriage ride they embrace, kiss, and pledge their love.

Aunt Gwen arranges the marriage between Felicity and Benjamin. It happens at her bedside in the Honeycutt home and as their last vows are exchanged, she dies happy. Felicity is devastated to lose her dear aunt, but her passionate love with Benjamin comforts her.

Just before a celebration dinner at the Honeycutt's, Felicity and Benjamin learn that newlyweds James and Lavinia Sterling will be there, too.

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Back in England at Ashwillow, Felicity's dear friend Annabelle watches her father Squire Randy die, never having seen again his more beloved but selfish daughter Lavinia. Annabelle is distraught at her father's death and resigned to her own fate.

At the funeral, young Joseph Pike, Randy's bastard son, curses the old man. Annabelle graciously offers him work on the estate. Cousin Rupert comforts Annabelle and wholeheartedly supports her as she learns that she has inherited Ashwillow. Rupert learns that his father and his long-time mistress Miss Freeport are dead in a crash.

The next generation is about to take over.

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