POOR DOCUMENT

KATE VALLIANT.

—OR—

With -:-the -:- Circus !

(Continued.)

'Ah! yes,' Admiral Beaufort said hastily, fearing that Mrs. Carroll was going to pour forth the whole story of Lady Teresa's wrongs for Miss Valliant's benefit. 'Heatherly didn't behave well I've heard, about money when Lady Teresa married him. He thought she was dear enough at the price of the settlements, and she thought he ought to pay her father's debts. For my part, I——'

Kate heard no more, for at that momenth er attention was claimed by her brother.

'Come down with me,' he said' and, as she slipped away by his side, he added in an undertone:

'I'm taking you to a sister, Kate; Blanche has promised to trust herself to the guardianship of a rough country bumpkin, and I am the lucky man.'

'She's the still luckier girl! Kate cried clasping Philip's arm very closely.

'Phil, dear, I hope she'll like it all—Hasselton, and Nell Gwynn and me.'

He had no time to answer her, for Blanche was coming to meet them.

'This room is given to our people who pretend they find themselves refreshed by mamma's tepid ices and boiled tea,' she began, drawing the dining room door gently to shut hersely off from the people and the refreshments she was describing so disparagingly. 'And upstairs it's all disharmony, and Lady Teresaism Come and see me to-morrow, Miss Valliant—if you care to see me, that is?'

'Of course I care, after what Philip has just told me,' Kate answered a little coldly.

'How prettily dutiful and sisterly Miss Carroll laughed musically; 'for my part, if I had a brother like Wyndham and he told me something about a girl that I presume Mr. Wyndham has just told you about me, I should not care to see more than I could possibly help of the intruder.'

'I shouldn't like to believe you,' Kate said.

'You wouldn't—why not?'

'I wouldn't for my brother's sake first, and for yours and my own afterwards.'

Blanche lifted her eyebrows a hair's breadth in response to this, held her hand out to Kate, and then to Philip calmly, and said merely:

'You're going I see. These At Homes are things to flee from as soon as one can I admit. To-morrow we shall meet?——till then, good-bye.'

'May I call at twelve? Won't you ride? Philip asked eagerly.

'Ride! Oh, no! not till I have a horse my own, thank you, Mr. Wyndham.'

She made a step towards the stairs as she spoke, and the accepted lover of ten minutes' standing had no excuse for detaining her another moment it seemed. So with rather a sadly uttered, 'Now, Kate,' he bowed himself a little awkwardly out of the presence of the stately lady of his love. For her part she walked leisurely enough up past the drawing-room door to the top of the next flight of stairs, then with almost a bound she reached the seclusion of her own chamber.

'Thank the Lord for deliverance from this bondage of poverty and tedium,' she said triumphantly, as she flung herself on a sofa, with broken springs, that stood at the foot of her bed. 'He's a bit of rough gold, but malleable I do believe. His sister might be a nuisance to some people. I'll take care she never is to me. I'll take care of that from the first.'

She sat there, externally motionless, but with a throbbing heart, for about ten minutes. It was part of the plan of this girl's life to make those nearest to her and most intimate with her believe that her composure was as absolute and real as it seemed to be. So now she sat still, and heard the majority of her mother's guests depart, with much banging of cab doors, before she went down to face her family. Then she walked into the drawing room, saying—

'Mamma, rather than endure another hour of that appalling Lady Teresa and her exasperating companion, I'll go to bed when you have your next At Home. Louisa! you here still! What nerves you have.'

'I stayed to see you rehersa the first bit of your new part; don't wink at me dear' (the admiral hastily disavowed any action of the kind), 'I knew Blanche wouldn't come and honestly ask for good wishes and congratulations on her great success.'

The married sister's manner was kinder than her words. She strove to take out whatever sting there might be for Blanche in these latter by a hearty kiss to which Blanche submitted with the same graceful indifference she had displayed towards Kate Valliant's advances.

'What do you mean by 'my great success'? ' she asked.

'Having killed Cock Robin with your little arrow.'

'If I have killed him, I am sure it's by accident. I haven't aimed at him.'

'Really, Blanche, if I were not so well pleased at this, the best thing you've ever done in your life, I could find it in my heart to be angry with you for your 'vain pretence,'' Mrs. Beaufort said impatiently. 'You didn't aim straight at him, perhaps, but why should you pretend that he has dropped at your feet, wounded by a chance shot, when we all know that our efforts to entertain him when he was in town before, and mamma's At home to-day were the munitions we put into your hands to make war against him.'

'Don't be too hard on my stupidity,' Blanche said, quietly. 'I had no idea that Mr. Wyndham had been driven and lured to 'my feet' (as you call his asking me to marry him) by my relatives. I thought he came voluntarily.'

'Now, now, my dear Louy!' Admiral Beaufort interposed deprecatingly.

'Pray don't check any little ebullition of aggrieved feeling on Louy's part; I can bear being cavilled at for retaining my mental balance, even though a man has been found ready to marry me; indeed, I'm only following my elder sister's example; she didn't show the slightest elation when you proposed to her, I remember.'

All this Blanche said with an unruffled gracious manner, that was perfect to look upon id itself, but, regarded as an indication of the marble heart beneath that regularly heaving breat, it was not so satisfactory to her mother.

'I wish you would let yourself be a little more natural, my dear; especially at such times as these, when such honor and fortune has been offered you, as we ought all to be grateful for.'

'Such times as these, mamma! Louy will remind you that it's the first time anything of the kind has been offered to me, even if I didn't disclaim having had any previous experience,' Blanche laughed, and with the lighter tone she used, the family jar ceased.

'I suppose his sister knew it before they left, didn't she?' Mrs. Carroll asked.

'Yes,' Blanche said carelessly; 'Mr. Wyndham is a little romantic, I should imagine; he seemed to think that I should stand in the passage in a draught and develope sisterly feelings towards Miss Valliant on the spot.'

'What a revelation you'll be to him, Blanche,' Mrs. Beaufort said, with feigned admiration; 'it will be a pretty sight, that of the fine young countryman's plastic mind being moulded anew by your cool' clever hands. When you've been married to him a year, he'll know better than to expect to see you develope sisterly affection to any one, either in or out of a draught.'

'You and I have always agreed and been happy together, Louy!'

'So we have,' Mrs. Beaufort replied heartily; and she refrained from adding that perhaps the agreement would have been less perfect, and the happiness less undisturbed, if she herself had not been the source from which countless boons, benefits, pleasures and favours flowed to Blanche.

* * * *

Meanwhile, Mr. Wyndham and his sister had driven back to the quiet family hotel in Norfolk Street, where they were staying.

Kate had felt thankful all the way back, that the rattle of the wheels gave her a fair excuse for keeping silent on the event of the day. For intuition told her that it was no matter of congratulation to her brother or herself.

To do her justice, this last consideration did not weigh with her in her endeavor to come to something like a correct estimate of Blanches Carroll's character. If she could be happy in her own relations with Philip's wife, it would be so much the better. But from the first, that this would not be the case, was the conviction forced home upon her. But, after putting herself out of the question entirely, she still felt painfully sure that she would have no cause for contentment, in her brother's happiness with this handsome girl whom he had chosen.

All her experience of her brother Philip taught her that he was an earnest, unselfish, true and tender hearted fellow, who could never wear a mask nor play a part. How would it be with him when he discovered that his wife habitually did both?

'She was acting all the time; I didn't think it even, till he took me to her 'as her sister,' and then I knew it all in a moment,' Kate thought as she stole a glance at his proud, happy face; 'he wants me to be interested in everything about the place, from the tenants down through the stables and kennels, to the last shrubs he's had planted, and the last prize pig he's bought. And she'll never show interest in anything, unless she thinks to gain something by it.'

Her meditations were cut short at this juncture, by Philip saying—

'After dinner, Kate, we'll go, if you like, and see uncle and aunt Laurence. I think they ought to hear of my engagement at once; I don't like keeping anyone in the dark about what I am doing. Will you like to go, dear?'

'Yes, Phil.' Kate always 'liked' to go wherever Philip wished to take her, and moreover the Laurence Wyndhams, though they were no relations of hers, had always treated her as if she were their niece and Philip's sister in truth.

'I should like them to come to Hasselton as soon as I can get Mrs. Carroll and Blanche to fix a time for their visit,' the young man went on in a state of happy excitement, 'we'll have a house full of people, and show Blanche that she's not quite going into exile in coming to the old place.'

'She will hardly imagine that she is, I should think; after Boomerang Road, Hasselton will be a very sunny and sweet Siberia.'

'My dear child, your life-long recollections are of the dear old place you must remember. Blanche won't have any sentiment about it, beyond the sentiment that the man she has honored with her love is its owner, don't you see?'

'Yes, I shouldn't think that Miss Carroll was sentimental.'

'She's not a bit,' he cried delightedly. 'A sentimental wife would have been a ghastly nuisance, so it's lucky I didn't lose my head in such a direction. Aunt Laurence can help you a good deal if she will come down; she might take some of the housekeeping off your hands, and leave you free to do more of the elegant entertaining and amusing our guests.'

'I shouldn't like Mrs. Laurence Wyndham or any one else to interfere a bit with the house keeping that I've managed so many years," Kate laughed good-temperedly. Then she remembered that Blanche Carroll would soon take it out of her hands by right and added more soberly:

"I mean I shouldn't like to see the reins in anyone else's hands, till I give them over to your wife, Phil.'

'And that won't be like giving them up at all, will it?' he said affectionately, 'your two girls will always pull together, I know.'

('Any way, I'll never pull in opposition to her, for his sake: for if I do, she will make him suffer, knowing that's the surest way to hurt me.'

The Laurence Wyndhams lived in a handsome house in a handsome square in South Kensington. They had dined about two hours before their nephew Philip and his sister came in, and were spending a typical family evening in the massively furnished drawing-room, in which all things seemed riveted to their respective places, so seldom was the position of any of them altered.

Mr. Laurence Wyndham, the head of the house, sat in a capacious chair by the clearly burning fire in the highly polished steel grate. He was a tall, large man, but there was no flabby superfluous flesh about him. His face was clean shaven. The expression of his light grey eyes was keen and calculating. His pose even as he sat at rest by his own hearth, reading his evening paper, with the consciousness that there would be no further call upon his intellect or energy this day, betokened that he was an active, strong, persevering, man, well able to grasp any situation that was submitted to his observation. A prosperous solicitor with a large paying practice, he rarely troubled himself about the possibility of his ever succeeding to the family estate of Hasselton. That his nephew would marry, have sons, and cut him—Mr. Laurence Wyndham—out of the property, seemed the right and natural sequence of things, and he was well satisfied that this should be the case. But his wife and daughter held different views.

Mrs. Laurance Wyndham had for many a year resolved that if the skill and will of woman could compass such a thing, her nephew Philip should marry her daughter Frederica; and her daughter, without having any special desire to please her mother, had tacitly endorsed the latter's determination.

They were not an attractive pair, this mother and daughter, and yet there was something interesting about them. Mrs. Wyndham had married young, before her judgement had been sufficiently formed to grasp the facts, that outside his profession her husband was a narrow-minded, egotistical, selfish and mean-spirited man; a man who loved display, and yet grudged expenditure; who liked power, not that he might wield it for the good of his fellow men, but that he might inflict exactly the amount of pain and humiliation which he deemed fit upon them; a man who was ambitious for the welfare of his son and daughter, not from any affection for them, but because the sound of the words 'how wel! Laurence Wyndham's children have done, would sound pleasant in Laurence Wyndham's own ears. A man who cared for his wife, just exactly in proportion as she conduced to his comfort, or the consideration in which he was held by the world. A man who worshipped the owners of wealth, rank and lands servilely, though in politics he was an avowed Liberal. A man who thought that by tyrannizing over his household, he was proving good his claim to be a competent ruler over many. Lastly, and chiefly, a man whom his wife and children distrusted—and deceived, whenever they could do so with fancied impunity to themselves.

The son Godfrey, a many of twenty-five or six, was merely a clerk in his father's office as yet. This was by way of keeping him in subjection. 'If I took him into partnership he would have his own way, now he must take mine,' Mr. Laurence Wyndham told his wife when she dared to make a maternal appeal for her only son to be rendered more independent than the stipend of the clerkship allowed him to be.

'I wonder he doesn't go away and leave you Laurence,' the mother said angrily, and her husband did not resent her anger; it amused him to see that he had the power to hurt the mother through the son.

CHAPTER IV.

MISS FRED.

'Philip! and Kate! Why didn't you come to dinner?' Mrs. Laurence Wyndham cried after her easily agitated fashion, bustling and fussing about, as if their arriving just when they did arrive—neither an hour earlier or later—was about as inopportune an occurrence as could well have been devised. Her conception of hospitality was a good one. She really desired to 'do all she could' towards the comfort of every tenant, permanent or temporary, within her gates. But her execution of this conception was inadequate not to say faulty, by reason of that spirit of fussiness which permeated all she did and said. The habit her husband had of cavilling at, or rowing for her, every word and action, reacted on her to this extent, that she, in turn, good naturedly but excitedly questioned, and volubly differed from the course of conduct pursued by every one else, whom she dared to assail with a dissentient or adverse opinion. In this she only displayed the essential human quality of kicking where she dared. For the rest she was amiable in a common place, selfish way, willing always to make sacrifices of time, money and personal convenience for her own children, and rather apt to think that the rest of the world failed in its duty, if it did not imitate her in this respect.

By the time Philip and Kate had exonerated themselves from the implied charge of want of consideration in not having come to dinner, another figure had appeared upon canvas—a slight, rather, short girl, with a fair pale face, surmounted by a fluffy crop of fair, pale hair, a pair of cynical blue eyes, and a general air of self-complacency, dashed with discontent at her surroundings.

'We are very glad to see you now, though you didn't come to dinner, Philip and Kate,' she began in clear cutting tones. 'Why mother should begin reproaching you at once, is, as usual, beyond me. When did you come up?'

'Yesterday,' Philip, to whom her question was chiefly addressed, replied.

'Yesterday! and you haven't found your way to us till to-night?' Mrs. Wyndham said pettishly. That is to say, her words and manner were pettish, but her intention was merely to express affectionate regret.

'You always seem to forget, mamma, that Philip at Kate have other friends in town,' Miss Wyndham put in raspingly, 'and very attractive friends, too, I should imagine, judging from the fact that they have been powerful enough to draw you away from the last of the hunting.'

She shot her arrow into the air, but Philip, happily conscious, ingenious Philip, fancied that she aimed at him.

'I'll tell you presently, what brought me—or rather whom I came to see,' he answered in a confidential wisper, and his cousin Frederica's pale cheeks flushed a little, and her cynical blue eyes softened with a gleam of happy expectancy.

'Come and look at my primroses in the conservatory, Philip,' she said in her softest tones. As he had something to say to her, she was resolved to give him an opportunity of saying it without any further delay. It could be only one thing, she told herself triumphantly—the one thing she had been waiting for more or less impatiently all her grown-up life. She could not refrain from darting a meaning glance at her mother, and that glance showed her that Mrs. Wyndham augured as favorably from Philip's manner as she (Frederica) did herself. Mrs. Wyndham colored up nervously, and began speaking 'fast and excitedly to Kate.'

Such a girl as Fred is for flowers—she will run off with every one who comes to the house at once to see them. And the fuss she makes about these primroses especially is quite amusing, just because she brought the roots from 'dear Hasselton' as she calls it; and I'm sure I quite agree with her, for a dearer, sweeter place than Hasselton I never saw.'

'Phil wants you all to come and stay with him this summer,' Kate said, unconsciously fanning the flame of maternal hope and ambition which the action of Philip in thus retiring to the conservatory with her daughter, had just lit in Mrs. Wyndham's heart. Again the color mounted high in Mrs. Wyndham's face, and without any apparent cause (to Kate), she forthwith fell into a fluster.

'Laurence—Mr. Wyndham! Do you hear what Kate is saying? No! there you are, absorbed in your dry old paper, and not attending or caring a bit about your own child—I mean your own relations and visitors. Kate is saying that Philip (dear fellow) wants us to go and stay at Hasselton. So delightful, won't it be? Dear Fred will be overjoyed when she hears it.'

'Does he want us to start to-night? because I refuse to turn out,' Mr. Wyndham grumbled.

'Now, Laurence, how can you be so disagreeable, such a wet blanket?' Mr. Wyndham remonstrated, while Kate laughingly explained:

'Indeed no, Philip has no such design upon your comfort to-night; he only said to me coming along this evening that he should try and persuade you all to come and stay at Hasselton when the Carroll's are there.'

'And who may the Carroll's be?' Mrs. Wyndham questioned petulantly.

'Oh I forgot,' Kate cried, her beaming bright face clouding ominously, 'you don't know yet; we came to tell you that Phil is engaged to Miss Carroll, and he wants you all to know her as soon as possible.'

'Engaged!—to Miss Carroll!'

'Ha, ha, ha! Hasselton won't come in for so many endearing adjectives in future.'

The former ejaculatory sentence fell from the lips of Mrs. Wyndham in gasping accents, the latter derisive one from her husband.

'Yes, engaged to Miss Carroll. Her name is Blanche, and she is a great beauty,' Kate went on, ignoring Mrs. Wyndham's suffering, not from heartlessness, but from pre-occupation. The subject of her brother's approaching marriage was still a too newly sore one in her mind for her to give any thought to the bearing it would have on the minds of others. But for this Mrs. Wyndham's chagrin would have been patent and amusing to her.

'Then I must say Philip has behaved most unhandsomely, 'most' unhandsomely,' Mrs. Wyndham spluttered out. 'That Philip, our nephew and nearest relation, should be going to be married, and that we should be left to learn it from other lips than his own!'

'His lips are employed, you must remember, in imparting the pleasing intelligence to Fred.'

This callous reminder proceeded, it need scarcely be said, from Mr. Laurence Wyndham. He had never—as has been told—counted on possessing Hasselton himself, and though it would have pleased him well to see his daughter reigning there, it pleased him almost as well to witness his wife discomfiture at the prospect of another queen than Frederica coming to the cradle of the Wyndham race.

'Philip has treated us shamefully, and I shall always say it to every one I name the subject to. Oh, you needn't pretend to look so surprised, Kate; you must know as well as I do that he has behaved in a nasty underhand way.

Mrs. Wyndham chattered these out with much venom, for her mortification on behalf of her daughter was extreme. She had on various occasions given many of her most intimate friends to understand that Philip and Frederica were all but engaged, and in anticipation she had seen herself a frequent and honoured guest at Hasselton—without her husband.

In these three last words lie hid the subtle charm of the prospect that was now proved so fallacious. To be anywhere in peace and plenty without her husband, was to be in an earthly Paradise to Mrs. Wyndham. And this not because of any unseemly skittish propensities on her part, but because of the womanly yearning she had to be out of reach of his tyrannous temper and his taunting tongue. If to be 'anywhere' out of these things was joy to her, imagine what fulness of joy would have been her portion in the beautiful home of so amiable and acquiescent a son-in-law as Phliip would be sure to prove. The overthrow of such a basket of eggs as she had carried ever since Frederica had arrived at a marriageable age, was heart-breaking to her, poor woman, and in the first moments of her agony she betrayed her vain hopes, and laid bare her bitter disappointment.

'Poor Phil,' Kate quietly remonstrated 'he has been rash and hasty. Even I think that, but he hasn't been underhand!—he couldn't be underhand.'

'Oh, I've no patience with it all—but tell me about the girl, Kate, a designing creature to entrap him away—away from a suitable match.'

'Perhaps the designing creature's mother would hold the same opinion about your daughter, Mrs. Wyndham, if Fred had been the trapper,' her husband chuckled out, and his wife could not definitely decide which she loathed most—his tigerish temper when it was roused or his hilarity now that she was so sorely discomfited.

In the conservatory the primroses had good reason to consider themselves neglected.

'See, here they are—the same roots I brought up from Hasselton last May; haven't they flourished under my care, Phil?' Frederica had said when they first entered the conservatory. And as she spoke she pointed to two long brown salmon-baskets filled with primrose plants in luxuriant flower, that Miss Fred had by happy chance bought in Covent Garden the previous day.

'I didn't come here to look at the primroses, Fred. I came to talk to you about something more important.'

The young man, all aglow with thoughts of his recent successful wooing of his beautiful love, did not notice that the face of the girl by his side was radiant with 'the light that ne'er can shine again on life's dull stream.'

But this it was, for in her own cool, compressed, calculating fashion, Frederica loved her cousin Philip—independent of his claims to her regard as master of Hasselton! As far as such a practical girl can suffer herself to go, she had gone into the Fairyland of Hope about him. He was her love's young dream, her nearest approach to a hero. And now she told herself that her hope was to be realised, her dream to become a fair waking reality, and her hero to be her husband.

"What did you come to talk about, may I ask?'

She tried to speak indifferently, but it was not so easy for her to assume the care-for-nothing air which the beautiful stately Blanche could drape herself in at any moment.

'About the girl who is to be my wife!'

Unhappy—for Frederica—the honest-hearted young fellow couldn't even allude to his betrothed without betraying some slight emotion. He did so at this critical juncture, and still more unhappily for herself, Frederica thought she was the moving cause! Her self-possession deserted her. The words, from her point of view, sounded like a direct offer of marriage, and coming as they did on the top of her own and her mother's firm conviction that 'marriage' was the ultimate issue of her intimate friendship with Philip—they really sounded definite enough. The minute after he had spoken them Philip Wyndham for the second time in that eventful day found himself an accepted lover.

To be continued.

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