POOR DOCUMENT

KATE VALLIANT.

—OR—

With -:- the -:- Circus !

(Continued.)

Now, what were comparatively halycon days, were dawning upon her. Her eldest daughter, Louisa, had wooed and won rich, kind, old Admiral Beaufort. And Blanch, her second daughter, was, in all probability, going to make a very fair match—would make it of a surety, if only the man were given a chance of being brought to know his own mind. So, against Blanche's wish, the heroic mother determined to give him the chance, by inviting him to spend an uncomfortably cramped hour or two in her ill-arranged house, in an out-of-the-way suburb, in unknown and uncongenial society.

'If he comes, I shall be glad to let him see that we know some very good people; so I shall be extremely careful about my invitations,' Mrs. Carroll said, when she first mooted the subject of this 'At Home,' to her daughter Blanche.

'If he comes at all he won't give much consideration to your good people; in fact if he swallows me at all, he will shut his eyes to my surroundings while he's doing it.'

'Now Blanche, your scornfulness is a little misplaced. Admiral Beaufort used to find my little gatherings very pleasant.'

Blanche laughed. 'Mother dear, don't deceive yourself. This one—Mr. Wyndham—is a very different case to the dear, vain, egotistical, intensely tedious, old Admiral. Mind, I'm not saying a word against Lou's choice, if he was her choice, but this man who may choose me, won't be gratified by finding that we know a few people of title (and what people they are when you think of them apart from their title!) Indeed I am sure Mr. Wyndham will think your aristocratic friends, 'shady.''

'My dear Blanche!' The expression of 'shock' on Mrs. Carroll's face would not have been stronger if Blanche had uttered heresy.

'And indeed I'm not sure that I don't think them shady myself,' pretty Blanche said languidly. 'To begin with the women. There's Lady Teresa Heatherly—'

'The daughter of an Irish Earl, whose earldom dates from 1641,' Mrs. Carroll put in loftily.

'Exactly! the daughter of an Irish Earl whose ancestor robbed and pillaged and fought like the unprincipled savage he was—who got 'title and lands' from King James, and afterwards ratted and fought for the Commonwealth for 'money.'

'Lady Teresa is hardly responsible for the vacillating policy of her ancestor,' Mrs. Carroll said cheerfully. She felt relieved for a moment, for she had feared Blanche was going to make some more distinctly personal allegation than this against Lady Teresa. She congratulated herself too soon.

'She is responsible for the scandal of living apart from her husband, and for being flighty and eager for flirtation with men young enough to be her sons! Mother, it's only because she is 'Lady' Teresa, that you tolerate the woman——'

'My dear, I've no doubt there are faults on both sides in the Heatherley's case,' Mrs. Carroll said depreciatingly.

'She has an evil temper and an evil tongue. She grasps at every chance of pleasure and excitement as rapaciously as if she was just entering life, instead of thinking as she ought to be about leaving it.'

'How severe you are, Blanche.'

'I can't help feeling bitter when I see such a woman as Lady Teresa courted and tolerated by people like ourselves whom she regards as her social inferiors.'

At this Mrs. Carroll heaved a depreciating sigh, and dropped a gentle uncomplaining tear or two. It was depressing it was a little hard on her indeed, that Blanche should take this condemnatory, depreciating tone concerning those people whom Mrs. Carroll, at a considerable expenditure of time, forethought, painstaking calculation, trouble and money, was seeking to gather together for what she termed 'Blanche's ultimate good.'

Ungrateful, thoughtless, selfish Blanche! Now that it was settled that she was to have this good thing, Mr. Wyndham, put in her path, she carped and found fault with her mother for the means taken to put him there. Until the arrangements for this At Home had been irrevocably made, until all those whom Mrs. Carroll most desired to show off under her rooftree to Mr. Wyndham had been invited, Blanche had said nothing against the scheme. It was only now, at the eleventh hour, when the awning was up, and the refreshments were momentarily expected from the confectioner's round the corner, that Blanche gave loose to her discontent and became critical about that 'circle' of which her mother was so proud.

Blanche was to reap all the benefits of this social effort which Mrs. Carroll was making. Blanche was to reap all the benefits according to Mrs. Carroll's design, but on the shoulder of the latter the whole of the burden was laid! And this the fond, foolish unselfish, unexacting mother thought was only due and right. Blanche was beautiful, Blanche was clever, Blanche never made small fusses about small things (as Mrs. Carroll was dimly conscious she herself did). Blanche was born with luxurious tastes, which she had cultivated to the best of her ability. Undoubtedly therefore, since Blanche by nature and education was unfitted to cope with tedious, not to say sordid details, it behoved her mother to do it for her.

Blanche was quite good-looking enough to justify her mother in thinking and calling her "a beauty." Her intensely deep blue eyes looked as soft and tender under their long black lashes, as her heart was hard and cool. She had magnificent deeply waved lengths of dark golden hair. She had an equally magnificently white skin. She had fair height, and her clothes always fitted her firm fine figure without a crease. She had a low, musical voice, and she always spoke with such indolent deliberation that she gave the impression of being deeply imbued with the belief that it was worth the while of the world to stand still and listen to her.

It has been said that her mother thought her "clever," but it must be confessed that her great talent lay in concealing her ignorance of the majority of things with which the average young English lady is moderately acquainted. She neither played nor sang, nor painted, nor was she conversant with any literature, English or foreign, save that which she found in Fashion books.

She could work elaborate embroideries if they were designed and shaded for her. She could group flowers stiffly without regard to colour or form in vases and glasses. She could "word a sneer" so delicately that the one she wounded was apt to think the weapon had slipped out of her hand accidentally. She could sit idle for hours, her delightfully shaped and coloured hands gracefully reposing in her lap, while her mother was struggling hardly and hotly to initiate some third-rate cook into the mysteries of some salmi or broil or rissole, that appealed to Blanche's appetite. For the rest she could always "look well," for her beauty paid for dress, Mrs. Carroll declared.

Accordingly, as a rule, the mother went shabby in order that Blanche might be arrayed in well-cut clothes of the best materials.

New Syrian curtains fell in soft folds over the drawing room windows. The awning on the balcony kept out the rays of the bright, scorching, spring-tide sun. Blanche seated herself in the most comfortable chair in the room, out of the draught, yet near enough to the open window to catch the faint fragrance that was wafted in from the pots of hot-house mignonette which had been brought round from the florist's in company with the palm ferns and india rubber plant. As she sank down, leaning back, and putting forward her delicately, shod, well shaped feet easily and gracefully, her well cut and draped tea-green satin and cashmere dress adjusted itself without strain or wrinkle to her movements, and she looked so thoroughly 'the right thing in the right place' that her mother had not the heart to even gently rebuke Blanche for selfishness when she said:

"This is the nicest corner in the room in every respect, I shall keep to it all the time; if Mr. Wyndham comes he'll cut me off from all your bores on one side, and these plants that are too precious to be touched will do it on the other.'

'Then I trust Louisa will come, for she is always ready to move about and help me,' was Mrs. Carroll's sole comment and remonstrance.

Presently, carriages—or cabs, chiefly, it must be confessed—began to roll up to the door, and the occupants thereof soon filled Mrs. Carroll's rooms with movement and chatter. But for a period of time that seemed long and wearisome to Blanche, Mr. Wyndham did not appear.

A lively looking pretty woman, exquisitely dressed in several shades of heliotrope with bouquets of the natural flower on the top and the handle of her parasol and on her bonnet, came up to Blanche, scenting the air as she passed.

'Isn't Wyndham coming, Blanche?'

'Ask Mamma, I take no interest in either the invitations or acceptances as you know. Lou,' Blanche replied, looking straight in her sister's bright, mobile face without a momentary change even of her expression of languid indifference.

'Tell that to Mamma if you like, Blanche,' the elder sister laughed outlightly and noisily. 'I know better.' Then she lowered her voice and added seriously' 'Don't overdo the indifference, Blanche, dear; it suits you capitally, and when once you're married you can indulge in it to any extent; but it would be a pity to give Wyndham the notion that it's too great a trouble for you to care for anything.'

'You're terribly afraid I shall be an old maid.'

'No, I'm not,' the elder sister disputed earnestly, 'but I can't half enjoy all the enjoyable conditions of my own life, when I think of you without any of them. If I could see you at Hasselton Place, and Mamma in the Dower house, which Wyndham now lends to the curate of the parish, I should be quite happy'

'Hush!' Blanche murmured warningly, and Mrs. Beaufort looked up to see Mr. Wyndham shaking hands with his hostess, and heard him introduce the pretty girl by his side as his 'sister, Miss Valliant.'

('His bringing her settle it in my mind,' Mrs. Beaufort hurriedly whispered to her sister, 'I congratulate you confidently). How do you do Mr. Wyndham—the last man in the world I expected to see in town before the end of the hunting season; what brings you up?'

'Mrs. Carroll's invitation,' Philip answered truthfully. He felt a little hurt at the manner of his reception—or rather hurt that Kate should see that Mrs. Beaufort was 'surprised' at his being there, and that Blanche should have so evidently forgotten to tell her sister that he had been asked to come.

'Miss Valliant, I have heard so much of you from the Glanville's that I seem to know you already. No, Blanche, I am not going to let you make room near you for Miss Valliant; you'll monopolise her all the time if I do, and I shall have to be off soon, come and have a cup of tea, Miss Valliant? No! an ice, then. I want to hear about Cissy Glanville's marriage.' So the considerate sister wafted the willing Kate downstairs for an ice, and then kept her chatting on the staircase while two or three lengthy songs and ballads were being warbled dispiritedly. And all this time Blanche remained motionless in her graceful attitude in the corner and Philip stood by her, and no man or woman had the hardihood to interrupt the game or delay the next move.

As an excuse for bending down and speaking to her, and so breaking the ice, he leant towards her and asked:

'Who is the sprightly singer of 'Love's Young Dream?''

Blanche made an almost imperceptible gesture of disgust.

'Lady Teresa Heatherly, one of the most spiteful, flighty, gossiping, disagreeable women in Mamma's spiteful, gossipping, disagreeable clique. She's a woman of high rank and good position, but I think nothing of these things unless they're united with something like nobility of nature. All these people seem to me more or less hollow and untrustworthy, if not actually false. I revolt at the feigned friendship of the women, and loathe the flatteries of the men. So in society you would generally find me alone—as you found me just now.'

Blanche had spoken this sentence so often that she knew how to give each word its fullest effect. Mrs. Beaufort need not have feared that her sister would mismanage Mr. Wyndham. Blanche knew quite well what she was about.

Just then Mrs. Carroll neared them with a look of anguish on her face that Blanche knew well how to interpret. Something had gone wrong with the refreshment department downstairs. Mrs. Carroll dared not absent herself from her guests, and go down to put the crooked matter straight. She had looked in vain for her helpful eldest daughter. That invaluable ally was keeping Kate out of her brother's way in Blanche's interests. Accordingly the distraught mistress of the house was driven to aid from her youngest daughter.

'Blanche, dear,' she began suavely, 'take dear Mrs. Egerton down for some fruit. Lady Macvie has just come in, and I can't leave her.' Then she added, in an agonised whisper, that Philip Wyndham strove hard not to hear, 'that wretched Sanders has drunk all the champagne cup, and got quite tipsy; go and send for some more, and make him go away.'

For a moment, Blanche thought of ignoring her mother's request, and of letting Sanders and the champagne work their wicked worst upon one another. But a glance at Philip showed her that his face was full of sympathy. Instantly she resolved to pose as the dutiful daughter, anxious to fulfil a task at which her principles rebelled to serve her mother.

'You heard?' she asked softly. 'Poor mamma! Well, I must do my best, and so I must leave you, I suppose.'

She rose as she spoke, and stood grandly, graceful, commandingly beautiful, he thought, by his side. And she—this goddess, this splendid girl, who preferred solitude to frivolty, and his comparative-uncultured companionship to that of the fashionable looking men he had seen her surrounded by at Beaufort's—was ready to go at her mother's bidding, at the call of duty, to deal with pettifogging details concerning champagne and a tipsy waiter.

'Let me come with you,' he muttered, offering her his arm. So, forgetful altogether of Mrs. Egerton, Mr. Wyndham and Blanche went down, passing Mrs. Beaufort and Kate at the entrance to the conservatory.

The tipsy waiter had vanished from the refreshment room when they entered it, and the two or three guests who were hovering about, vanished in an affected fit of musical fervor at the sound of the first bars of one of the songs of the day. Blanche's heart gave an exultant bound. She had done well in showing readiness to help her mother.

'The poor man, the waiter who has got tipsy, you know, is only another instance of the unnaturalness of our social system,' she sighed, compassionately. 'He sees his betters drinking wine when they don't want it, and the temptation to follow their example has wrought his ruin. And there's no reality, no friendship in these gatherings, Mr. Wyndham. Its different in the country, where you know your people well, and ask them to come to your house for their pleasure and yours. With us it's all a sham, and we are too poor to put a pretty exterior on the sham.'

'I bless the sham, if it is one, for the opportunity it has given me of being with you to-day—for the chance it gives me of asking you to let me be with you for the rest of my life.'

It had come sooner than she had expected, but she was not going to let it slip for want of grasping it promptly.

'You really mean that you want me for your wife? Then my dream has come true— my beautiful dream.'

Her hands were in his now, and as he drew her towards him he asked—

'What was the dream, my Blanche?'

'I dreamt the first night I met you that you and I loved each other, and gave up the world for a bentiful, true, simple life.'

'You'll find life at Hasselton beautiful and true, I hope, my darling, my grand unworldly darling,' he said, enthusiastically. And just then Mrs. Carroll's face crimson with heat and perturbation of spirit, was popped in at the door.

'Oh, dear, I beg your pardon. I mean I didn't know you were here, Mr. Wyndham, but that nasty spiteful, old Lady Teresa is going all over the room giggling and whispering, and saying she can't even get a cup of tea. It's shameful of Sanders. He knows my servants lose their heads the minute there's anything extra to be done. Have you ordered more cup to be made, Blanche?'

'It's my fault that she hasn't, Philip Wyndham said cheerily. 'I wouldn't let her settle the champagne question till she had settled the far more important one I had to ask. Having done that to my satisfaction, I will let her go while I ask you, my dear Mrs. Carroll, if you are willing to have me for your son-in-law?'

'Dear mamma, you'll forgive my having been forgetful of your wishes for once won't you?' that astounding Blanche asked as glibly as if she had not been consistently unmindful and forgetful of them all her life. But in this hour of triumph Mrs. Carroll had no remembrance of anything that was not highly creditable to her daughter.

Accordingly the present need was disregarded. Sanders went unrebuked, and the guests went without the champagne cup.

CHAPTER III.

'NOW KATE.'

To Kate Valliant, who from the 'vantage ground of the conservatory doorway watched the slow progress of this At Home, the incidents which so disturbed Mrs. Carroll were full of humour and pathos! Kate could laugh at the puerility of the efforts that were made to make "little" look "large." And at the same time she was thrilling with sympathy and pity for the wearied, warm-hearted flustered matron, who was making these efforts. For Kate fathomed the motive of the gathering. It had been organized and was being carried through for the purpose of giving her brother Philip that opportunity which Kate knew he was so ready to value, and which as has been told he had taken.

Moreover she found pretty, lively Mrs Beaufort an agreeable companion, for some subtle instinct led that lady to speak at large on the subject of the Glanville family, and with delicate tact to say good words of that special member of the family in whom Kate took the warmest interest.

'Charlie Glanville is the one I know best and like best,' Mrs. Beaufort said truthfully enough, for she had seen and conversed with that gentleman at least half-a dozen times, whereas the rest of the family she had only seen once, and as that was at a drag-luncheon at Lord's on a Harrow and Eton day she had failed to get—or at least to retain—any definite impression of them.

'Most people like him; he's so—so good natured,' Kate replied a little lamely.

'As a rule people who are described as 'so good natured' are rather weak brothers,' Mrs. Beaufort remarked, with a laugh that caused Kate to tingle with annoyance for having awarded such feeble praise to the man of her heart. Then Mrs. Beaufort went on to heal the wound she had made by adding: 'But Charlie Glanville can afford to stand the test of such a description, which you only gave, by the way, because you were not attending to the subject. Are you looking at that old lady and wondering who she is? She is Lady Teresa Heatherley, a great friend of mamma's and a great abomination of my sister Blanche's.'

Why doesn't Miss Carroll like her mother's great friend?' Kate asked bluntly.

'Because Miss Carroll is the most difficult girl in the world for man, woman or child to please. That is she has such a magnificently high standard that few people come up to it. And unless people come up to it, Blanche stands aloof from them, mentally, morally and physically.

Kate looked interested, but said nothing. It did not occur to her that she was being used as a sort of strainer, through which the sentiments of Mrs. Beaufort wanted to be held about her sister Blanche, were to filter through to Philip Wyndham's mind.

'You must forgive me for praising my own sister to you, a stranger,' Mrs. Beaufort went on apologetically, 'but the fact is Blanche is so very much to us all, that we're apt to make her our theme a little oftener than we ought. My husband takes as much interest in her as if she were his own daughter; you don't know Admiral Beaufort? well! ask Charlie Glanville about him, and he'll tell you what a fine dear old fellow he is.'

at this moment an elderly gentleman who had only just entered the house approached Mrs. Beaufort from the rear, and before the lady could turn and give him a precautionary introduction to Kate Vallaint, he had said:

'Lou, my dear, I'm glad to see Blanche has got hold of that young Wyndham; if she doesn't make another mistake by over-doing the 'grandly indifferent' business——'

Here Mrs. Beaufort, who had vainly implored him with beseeching glances to pause, broke into the midst of his indiscreet flow of eloquence with the words:

'Let me introduce you to Miss Valliant, Mr. Wyndham's sister; take Miss Valliant up to the drawing-room again. I have kept her far too long from the music.'

Kate was smiling. The words that had struck terror to Mrs. Beaufort's heart had not conveyed any very terrible meaning to Kate's mind. She simply thought that Admiral Beaufort was a blundering, amiably interfering old gentleman, who probably didn't understand the magnitude of Miss Carroll's superiority to the usual order of her surroundings. 'And so he's surprised to see her engrossed with Philip? As if any girl wouldn't be proud of his notice!' the sister thought affectionately, as she was being conveyed by the gallant Admiral to a seat as near to the piano as possible.

Lady Teresa was at it again. It a shrill, quavering soprano, that had once on a time been light, sweet and flexible, the volatile Irish lady was discordantly declaring that "There's nothing half so sweet in life as Love's young dream," and close by her side stood her much younger companion, an Irishwoman also, of a far inferior class to her ladyship, packed closely with mean and malignant sentiments, which she distributed freely whenever she thought the utturance of one of them might be beneficial to herself, or baneful to some who could not, or would not, serve her.

'Ah! Now, Lady Teresa, it's sweetly you sang that,' she murmured sycophantishly, as her benefactress-tyrant came to a conclusion, with a painful gasp, 'and none of thim here with the heart to feel, or the art to know the beauty of it! Augh! — these stupid English people!—don't we see through them right well. Ah! Admiral Beaufort, and it's a pleasure to see you always, especially here at Mrs. Carroll's, where it's all so friendly and pleasant, and where Lady Teresa shines in a way that remoinds me of what it used to be at home. And Miss Carroll growing more like a Duchess every time we see her; and Mrs. Beaufort! don't we always read about her dresses at Court, and say there's none like them, Lady Teresa——'

'You may. I don't, Lady Teresa snapped out complainingly, rising from the piano, and clutching at her gloves in a way that showed she had not been gratified by the meed of attention her last song had received. 'Where's Mrs. Carroll? I want to say good-bye, and slip away now; if one doesn't get away early from these outlandish districts, one's benighted. Miss Leary, I left my parasol on the sofa in the other room. Admiral Beaufort, I was telling your wife just now that it's time she and you assimilated your seasons better—we're getting tired of the pastoral of May and December. Besides, she's too mature for May, and, indeed, no one would think there was all the difference of years detween you that there is; she's aged so sadly since she married. Ah! there's good Mrs. Carroll coming to me; my dear, I'm glad for your sake that Miss Blanche has caught the young man; you'll feel now that there is no need for you to try and do this again. Ah! don't tell me you've enjoyed seeing us all!'—you didn't enjoy it one bit from the time the champagne cup ran short. Miss Leary, go on and call a cab, and tell the man he's to set me down opposite Hyde Park Gate, that's just the shilling fare, and not one penny more will he get from me if he's impudent.'

'What a disagreeable woman,' Kate muttered, as Lady Teresa strutted off, and Admiral Beaufort heard and responded to the remark:

'I think her a detestable old lady in herself,' he said cheerily; 'but, God bless your heart, when you think of it all, is it wonderfull is it now, Miss Valliant? Let's be just to her.'

'I don't think about it all or at all, I don't know anything of the case,' Kate laughed out, 'but I can see she's overbearing—how she ordered that obsequious companion of hers about, and I could hear she was spiteful and sneering; she gave a dig at everyone she spoke to or of, and at the same time she 'my deared' you all, and larded her face with smiles.'

'Oh! she's had such trouble,' Mrs. Carroll put in anxiously. She had only heard some of Kate's remarks, but she gathered from the few she had heard that they were depreciatory of Lady Teresa in their tendency. And it was a great point with Mrs. Carroll that Admiral Beaufort should range himself on her side with regard to Lady Teresa.

To be continued.

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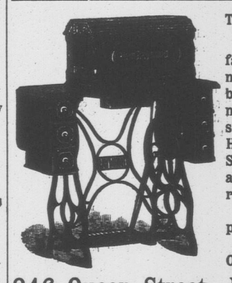

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