

KATE VALLIANT.

With -- the -- Circus!

(Continued.)

This was not at all the way in which Lucy had intended to make known her betrothal. The event was denuded of its proper importance by being mentioned in this hurried and cursory manner. But what could she have done other than she did under the circumstances? So she threw aside the coy and bashful part which she had picked up just previously, and gave Mr. Valliant to understand that there must be no indecision, concealment, or delving in the dark, as regards herself. She did it, indeed, because she over-valued him, and thought other people would estimate her the more highly now that he had selected her to be the sharer of his future life. It almost irritated her to know that she was a middle-aged woman, and he an elderly man. She felt as if injustice had been dealt out to her by Fate, in that she had not been allowed to meet him and win him when she had been young and better worth meeting and winning than she was now. In fact she felt discontented with her age, and envied that she had lived many years already in the world, and despised at the conviction that she could not expect to live so many more. Feeling thus, it was no wonder that she wanted to have her engagement known and ratified, in order that she might get all the honor and glory out of it that was to be had, and gather it all to herself.

It is not conducive to a man's self-esteem that he should have to ask his social permission to be happy, is it? Mr. Valliant asked, with that familiar genial manner of his, which was as apt to impress the majority as being the direct essence of light-heartedness and good feeling. "But that is the position I am in with my good friend Dr. Dacres. He will assume me that he will compensate me for stealing my daughter by giving me his sister."

He took Miss Lucy's thin, nicely kept pale hand in his as he spoke, and pressed his lips upon it, and Lucy felt that this was indeed the realization of some old, long past dream. To have her hand kissed and solicited by a tall, good-looking, strikingly gentlemanly man of the world, was blissfully bewildering to the dear old lady, who had never been the object of any but the most blundering, honest, straightforward and unprepossessing advances in her youth. For one wild instant she hoped that Dick would prove an obstructionist, in order that Mr. Valliant—Leonard, as she was beginning to call him herself—might do doughty deeds for her sake, or at any rate, show himself ready to do doughty deeds. But Dick was almost heartlessly acquiescent. It seemed to strike him as rather comical, that was all.

"Dear old soul!" he said affectionately to his sister Lucy, leaning across to hold his hand out to her. "I don't see why Mr. Valliant and you shouldn't jog along together, if it pleases you. I'm sure there's no just cause or impediment on your side, Lucy."

They were idle words, idly spoken to fill up a little conversational gap, and it seemed, to Miss Dacres at least, that it was mere tactlessness on Mr. Valliant's part to cavil and seem annoyed by them. But this he did, in an affectively hilarious way it is true.

"I hardly see why my dear friend Dacres should lay the stress he does on there being no impediment to our union on the lady's side. Even in joke I should shrink from asserting that my only child was a hindrance to my forming a second matrimonial alliance! But as Dacres is himself about to remove that charming obstacle from my path, I hardly understand (as I said before) why he should allude to her."

"Good Heavens!" Dr. Dacres cried, "I wasn't alluding to Kate, or you, or any one or anything connected with you, Mr. Valliant. I merely meant what I said, that my sister Lucy has no back numbers of her autobiography to tear up and destroy before entering on the new life with you."

"Fair Portia's counterfeits was in the lightest cast of all, I believe, Mr. Valliant. You're not paying my assent much of a compliment in your round about speech!" Miss Dacres interrupted.

"Dear lady, come with Lucy and myself into my little salon, where we will discuss the future arrangement and disposition of my little nest of rooms. You will soon realize that compliments between us would be an attempt to pass the base metal of conventionalities where the real golden coin of perfect love and trust are already current. Dacres, my dear friend, I leave you in Kate's charge. Make yourself quite at home—ah, indeed, you are. My poor roof is nothing if it is not a home and shelter for those who are near and dear to me."

"Doesn't he speak beautifully?" Lucy whispered to her sister, as they retraced through the little warmly-carpeted and carpeted hall together. "What a lovely girl—woman I am, after all, Maria! I hope he means all he says, for your sake, Miss Dacres replied, looking round scrutinizingly on the luxuriant shaven countenance which distinguished Mr. Valliant's upbraidery. "Dear me! she went on, critically, as Mr. Valliant, craving their pardon for absenting himself to write a letter or two, left the sisters alone. "Dear me! looking round this room it seems incredible that a man could have chosen the things; it all looks too womanish for me."

"You never said that Mr. Valliant's taste before, Maria," Lucy said, with asperity.

"I had never been admitted to a view of his interior before, my dear, but I do say that a piano back draped with an Indian shawl is too effeminate an arrangement for a bachelor's house."

"You must remember he has had a wife. He is a widower," Lucy said placidly.

"Goodness me! No, I haven't forgotten it," (though I believe the man has

himself, she thought); but the prevailing taste here isn't the taste of Kate's mother, who died a dozen years ago. But there, Lucy, I'll confess I'm not in the mood to judge Mr. Valliant to-day. We've lived together all your life, my dear, and Mr. Valliant has been the cause of the first secrecy there's ever been between us! If he makes you a good husband, I'll forgive him for that, though, Lucy, I'll forgive him for that."

"Why, Maria, you're crying! What is it you can't forgive him for? If his attentions to the family for my sake have misled you, you must, in justice, at least, excuse him from any intentional—"

"Oh! yes. His has been the harmless ness of the dove, of course, my dear, and I'm only a silly old woman for having thought so lightly of him that I didn't fancy for a moment he was teaching my only sister to deceive me."

"I'm sure you can't complain. As soon as we understood each other, we told you and Dick of our engagement."

"I trust he values you for yourself," Miss Dacres said, sentimentally. "My dear Maria, if worldly good had been his object he would have chosen you."

"If I had thought of marriage, I should have done so earlier in life, Miss Dacres said resignedly. Young people have a chance of fittingly forming themselves to live with each other, and of parting off their rough edges, and learning to give way. But the chances are sadly against middle aged and elderly people, Lucy, and I hope you won't start with any sentimental delusion as to Mr. Valliant caring for you for your own sake! If you want happiness, my dear, confide to his comfort, and leave him to look after his pleasures himself. A man who swatches the back of his piano in an Indian shawl, and burns incense in his sitting rooms, knows what he likes and will have it."

CHAPTER XXV. AN ACCIDENTAL LIKENESS. If there was one thing Kate Valliant disliked more than being in company with her father at this period, it was being left alone ostensibly—of an open purpose left alone—with Dick.

At Blinton all the regulation lovers' attitude was allowed them by Mr. Dacres. Dr. Dacres was invited there twice a week, and after dinner the cozily-furnished and lighted library was at their service, and he was invited to which to come to a clearer understanding and appreciation of one another.

Other incidental visits he was permitted, or rather expected, to pay, and then fortuitous circumstances generally brought about to him, delightful result of a quiet half-hour with Kate. But to Kate these quiet hours and half-hours were not delightful. She spent them chiefly in wondering what she should think to talk about when she lived with him alone.

Idea had flowed freely enough, and words to express them had fallen glibly enough from her lips, in the old days of happy, youthful intercourse with Charlie Glanville. But with Dr. Dacres, much as she really liked him grateful as she really felt to him for his goodness to her, silence always seemed the better part for her.

Therefore, this day, when she was left to do the honors of her father's library, Dick, though she had suffered a qualm of apprehension on first hearing of her father and Lucy having agreed to be man and wife, she was almost glad of having the engagement to talk about.

It was something definite, something of material interest to Dick and herself, something that could be surmised about, hoped about, feared about, doubted about, perhaps even gently ridiculed. In fact it was a topic about which she had longed to talk. Kate felt quite at ease as she reflected thus, and addressed him with an air of happy confidence that cheered and refreshed him.

"What did you think when you heard papa and Lucy had agreed to be Darcy and Joan? I longed for you to be there when he announced it to Miss Dacres and me—when he and Lucy came in late you know, Dick? It was killing! My dear child you are no longer motherless; this dear lady has promised to be my wife! I believe I should have laughed if I hadn't felt furious with him for reminding me of my dear mother whom he neglected, and if I hadn't remembered that poor peace loving Lucy will have a time of it between him and Miss Dacres."

"I don't see why Maria need interfere," Dick rejoined. He was not profoundly interested in his sister Lucy's mature love affair; he would rather have conversed about it on his own. But Kate would not allow the conversation to wander out of a track that she found easy travelling. "They've lived together so long, the break-up of your marrying will be nothing to the break-up of Lucy's marrying, for that matter poor Miss Dacres being left quite alone."

"It's better than if it had been the other way round. Maria has a much better income than Lucy."

"His age!" How! Kate asked, not that she cared how, or why, or anything about it in reality, but it was good solid conversational ground to keep upon. It was safer and easier, and pleasanter than discussing their own future; which Dick was rather fond of doing.

"My Uncle Richard left Maria three hundred a year, Lucy has only one hundred and fifty from the sale of my father's practice. Maria's a female Rothschild compared to Lucy; but she's such a good generous old thing, that no one would ever have suspected she was the wealthier sister of the two."

The wealthier papa didn't suspect it, Kate said meditatively.

"My dear child, don't accuse, by implication even, your father of being mercenary in such a small way. He has given me the impression of being very well off himself. Two or three hundred a year more or less can't be any very great object to a man who says he would have hired Blinton had it been to be."

"It was safe to say that as he knew it wasn't to let, wasn't it? Kate laughed,

and 'a toad's beauty in a duck's eye.' If Mr. Valliant's superficialities and false genial ways were as poison and a taint to Kate, still it behooved Kate to remember that to Lucy they were of pleasant flavor and beautiful.

In fact the spirit of tolerance for everything connected with Kate was upon Dr. Dacres, and her father was very early connected with her, and therefore came in for the largest share of Dick's forbearance.

Mr. Valliant had written his letters and was back entertaining the two ladies in what he was pleased to call his "little salon," when Dick and Kate went in. That is to say he was entertaining Lucy with spirited sketches of his past career, which, as they had no foundation in fact, did credit to his claim to being a master of fiction.

He threw off these little verbal sketches very airily and gracefully, and as he hung each one up for a moment or two before Lucy's wondering, and admiring eyes, looking plaintively to Maria, as if she would ask:

"Can you wonder that I have preferred him to independence, peace, you, and old maidenhood? This is at least what Lucy vaguely wished to express, but Maria read the glance another way, and translated it thus:

"Dear him! mark what you have lost and pray that Heaven may make you good for something else!"

In the course of that hour which Dick and Kate had devoted to bickering and making it up again, Miss Dacres had undergone a terrible revolution of feeling. The shock of finding her sister preferred to herself, was to her so unreasonably and unaccountable that she made frantic mental efforts to grasp something tangible and real, and in these she got hold of some truths. She knew that when she expounded these truths she would lay herself out to the charge of being bad and malignant, and with all her heart she wished that they had dawned upon herself out some really fine water-color drawings, and avowed himself the artist, Maria turned a distrustful eye upon them, and would have liked to have tested him on the spot by putting him with pencil and brush at once upon a new drawing-board.

To be continued.

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2. The words must be written in rotation and numbered 1, 2, 3 and so on, for facilitating in deciding the winners.

3. Letters cannot be used often than they appear in the words "The Illustrated Agriculturist." For instance the word "egg" cannot be used as there is but one "g" in three words.

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