

KATE VALLIANT.

With the Circus!

(Continued.)

I did not know that Miss Valliant had a father—I mean expected a father, she said nervously. 'I am sorry my brother should be out, for I really hardly know that I ought to allow you to speak of your daughter's marriage with my brother as being a settled thing.'

She paused in a painful embarrassment and indecision, and he looked at her tolerantly out of his fine eyes, and arched the fine eyebrows in gentle surprise.

'It cannot be a settled thing until I have seen your brother, and seen reason to give my consent—allow me?' she had dropped her scissors in her astonishment at the tables being turned in this astounding way, and he picked them up and returned them with a winning smile, that made her of the same opinion as the cook with regard to him on the spot.

The news of the engagement was so utterly unexpected by us—my sister and myself—that we can hardly believe it true,' she said deprecatingly. 'My brother's happiness is our first consideration, of course—'

'Of course,' he softly assented as the lady stumbled in her speech and stopped short. Very properly—You with your delicate perception and appreciation of the anxieties and responsibilities we must feel concerning those who are dear to us, will understand my ardent desire to assure myself of the worthiness of the man who has won the treasure of my daughter's love.'

She felt apologetic, but knew that her sister would question her by-and-by as to how she had stood to the family gains. Therefore she subdued the inclination to beg his pardon, and faltered out:

'You can hardly wonder at our being more surprised than pleased at the engagement, Miss Valliant being quite a stranger to us, and having come to the town under such extraordinary circumstances, we—naturally hoped my brother would have looked higher in fact.'

'Looked higher?'

'No, I didn't mean that,' Miss Lucy murmured in a paroxysm of contrition, embarrassment, and admiration for the suggestion of manly respect which Mr. Valliant had infused into his tone; 'I don't mean higher, I mean nearer, but now that you have come I feel sure everything about Miss Valliant will be explained quite to our satisfaction; not that I should object to her or have objected to her, but Maria, my sister, is very proud and very peculiar—'

Well she may be of such a sister as you, he put in, sotto voce, as if he were compelled to speak this truth, even at the risk of seeming to interrupt her, and his well-managed tones carried straight to Miss Lucy's ears, and made her blush with pleasure. From that moment she ceased to be antagonistic to the engagement. The daughter of so charming, gentlemanly, polished, and good-looking a man must be worthy even of her brother Dick.

Melted by his evidently uncontrollable admiration of her, which he managed to express with artistic tact, Miss Lucy chatted away freely with her interesting visitor for another half-hour, and still Miss Dacres had not returned from the marketing, which she always conducted in person. Half-a-dozen times at least she was on the brink of inviting him to stay to luncheon, but the thought of Maria mercifully intervened, and staved off the imprudence. But in spite of this effort of self-control, she felt herself growing so intimate with Mr. Valliant that she unconsciously decided to range herself shoulder to shoulder with him should it come to a case of taking sides on the marriage question.

The novelty and excitement, the flutter of feeling caused by her belief that he was as favourably impressed by her as she was by him, brought light and colour to her face, and rejuvenated her manner. She was laughing and talking in unchecked enjoyment of the unwonted pleasure of the society of an attractive man, when the door opened, and her sister came in with an ominously unsmiling visage, and a wintry demeanour.

'Your face was red, and you were blinking like a school-girl,' she said, unfavourably, to Lucy, afterwards; and that horrid man was looking as if he thought himself quite too killing for an old maid like you to retain her senses in his presence.'

'Whatever his faults, as Miss Valliant's father, may be, at least I am sure he is free from anything like deceit,' Lucy retorted, hotly, for that allusion to her age was nettling just as she was feeling younger than she had felt for years.

'When I came home, and heard the name of your visitor, I was staggered at his audacity in pushing himself in here; but when I went in and saw him, I ceased to be surprised; his audacity would carry him to any place where he thought he might get good for himself.'

'What good for himself can he get by coming here, Maria?'

'Perhaps he may think he'll get you. There's no fool like an old one.'

'Does that remark apply to him, or to me?' Miss Lucy asked with a heightened color and a trembling voice.

'Oh! I don't know. Really, Lucy, already the man is the cause of our talking nonsense. Don't let us speak of him again till Dick comes home.'

'I think Dick will be sorry you didn't ask Mr. Valliant to luncheon,' Lucy ventured to remark; but Miss Dacres tossed her head like a war-horse at the idea, and insisted on the irritating topic being dropped for the time.

Mr. Valliant had not made any struggle to retain his position after Miss Dacres returned. There was no good end to be gained by staying. He would have had to appear ungallantly obstinate had he done so, and as it was open to him to retreat gracefully under cover of Miss Lucy's obviously friendly feeling, he retreated. As he turned, after his part-

ing bow, to march erectly through the hall, he came face to face with the parlor maid, who had been rung for to open the door for him. She looked at him earnestly, he thought, but that was nothing. 'Most women did look at him earnestly and admiringly,' he told himself with careless vanity. He did not take more than a moment's notice of her. Her primly arranged, dull, dark hair, and had, sallow complexion were not interesting to him. He walked away with a jaunty step, and she watched him from the door-way.

'So your name is Valliant, you wretch; and you've forgotten me as clean as if you'd never seen me before to-day. What'll your gain be here? Whose savings will you wheedle into your hands here, and then turn your back on the fool who gives them to you? I should have known you if you'd dyed your hair and skin any color under the sun; but you're blinder than I am, and your memory's not so good!'

Meanwhile Mr. Valliant strolled on, looking out for a pretty, unpretentious, little house, within easy distance of that handsome, substantial home over which his beloved daughter was soon going to rule.

To say that Dr. Dacres was delighted to make the acquaintance of Mr. Valliant would be asserting too much; but he was very well pleased to see him, and quite willing to let the question of the father's long neglect of the daughter rest undisturbed. He did not even enter sympathetically into Kate's aversion to the idea of her father settling down in Railliam.

'He's quite a man of the world, and a very amusing one. At least, he prepared to welcome him as a pleasant neighbor,' he expostulated, when Kate was expressing her keen annoyance at the prospect.

'You put the picture in a more odious light than ever. Fancy any decent woman with a moderately sound heart looking upon her father as a pleasant neighbor—nothing more. Besides, I don't even think we shall find him a pleasant neighbor. He is so awfully artificial that I feel when he's with me as if we were playing a game of his being my papa and my being his daughter. That game will become a very monotonous one, Dick.'

She had never got so far as calling her lover Dick until her father appeared on the boards. Then it seemed to Dr. Dacres that she crept closer to him. Naturally he could not bring himself to regret her father's coming.

'The artificiality will wear off as you get to know more of one another, and you'll be very glad by-and-by, dear, that your father is near you when old-age creeps on him.'

'No, because he'll stand up and fight promissively against old age,' Kate said, stoutly; 'he'll treat it as something to be ashamed of and suppressed. Oh, dear, dear! I do wish I could be proud of my father, and love him and trust him, as I was proud of and loved and trusted Phil. He irritates me to such an extent when he pretends that he has been sacrificing his own feelings all these years in leaving me to Phil's care, that I can hardly keep from telling him I now better.'

'He's been a shuttlecock between those unpleasant battles, extravagance and impenitency; if he had been well off all his life, he'd have been a very good fellow and affectionate father I've no doubt. As it is, he's tolerant to him, and remember—'

This conversation took place when Mr. Valliant had been in Railliam two or three days. During these days he had contrived to make a favourable impression on everyone he came near, including even Miss Dacres. This he had accomplished by the lofty, noble-minded, manly resignation he displayed to that coldness and lack of affection on Kate's part, which he attributed to his having misguidedly left her for so many years to the pernicious influence of her brother Philip Wyndham.

'It was my unhesitating obedience to her poor mother's wishes that led me into the error of surrendering my child; my dear wife thought it would be for Kate's worldly advantage. I was bound by the wishes of my dear wife, but I foresee what would happen, and I was always on the watch. Kate has been left unprotected for by her brother, but happily she has a father still!'

This style of talk administered repeatedly, with the accompaniment of a generous, largehearted, manly manner had its weight.

Miss Dacres admitted that there was a good deal of truth and reason in what Mr. Valliant said about the silly way in which his wife had fettered him with regard to the management of their daughter. But Miss Lucy had nothing but unqualified approbation to express for the course she had pursued.

'It was chivalrous, and just like what she should have expected of him,' she said, and she told everyone she knew, 'in confidence,' that she felt sure the daughter of such a man would make dear Dick a good wife, for that it was almost certain she must inherit some of his good qualities.'

Therefore she acquiesced almost willingly when her sister proposed that they should invite Mr. Valliant and his daughter to luncheon in quite a friendly way, and so get to know them better.

'And after lunch we can show Kate the house, and give her some hints as to how she had better arrange when we are gone,' Lucy said brightly.

'Not so fast, Lucy. I mean this to be a test to Miss Valliant. If she behaves nicely, and shows a proper regard for Dick, I shall be quite ready to entertain the idea of her marrying him, and then I will make myself practically useful to her. But just at first, especially after the opposition I have shown to the match, it would be foolish to behave as if everything was satisfactorily settled.'

Miss Dacres spoke prudently, but not unkindly. So kindly in fact that Lucy was emboldened to remark:

'I hope you won't do anything unkind to hurt Mr. Valliant's feelings, Maria! The peculiar position he has been placed in with regard to his daughter, makes him deserving of all consideration, I

think. Ah! if she had been left to his care, there would have been no running away and circus riding on her part. It makes him shudder to think what risks that poor girl has been compelled to run.'

'He is certainly a most agreeable man,' Miss Dacres said musingly.

'Quite an acquisition to our circle here,' Lucy said triumphantly; 'I only wonder that he can be content to settle down in such a humdrum place.'

'He craves rather for the sympathy of one true friend than for the frothy intercourse with the many, which might be essential to the interior person,' Miss Dacres said pensively, and Lucy's heart beat more rapidly in surprise and grateful recognition of her sister's generously appreciative sentiments.

'(Maria was always clear sighted; she values him as he deserves—what a friend! what a brother he would be to a woman.)'

Miss Lucy Dacres had seen rather much of Mr. Valliant, it may be assumed, during the last few days. He filled her thoughts even when he was not present. Filled them to such an extent that as she was putting the finishing touches to the luncheon table on the day Mr. Valliant and Kate were coming to them in 'quite a friendly way,' she said to the parlor maid:

'I am tired of that foliage plant in the middle of the table, Vallance. Mr. Valliant prefers a flat arrangement of sprays and trails of ivy.'

'Does he, really?' Vallance said quickly, 'how good of him to remember—' she checked her sarcastic utterance, and added humbly:

'I beg your pardon, Miss Lucy, if I've no patience to listen to what folks who are here to-day and gone to-morrow 'like' and 'prefer,''

'But I hope he'll be here for a great many days, and his likes and preferences will have to be considered here,' Miss Lucy answered gaily. Then she had an after thought, and added:

'He will be of importance, you must remember, Vallance, as the father of Mrs. Dacres.'

'Poor dear! she'd be better without him,' muttered Vallance.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"IT BOOTS NOT TO DELAY!"

Whatever dubious passages there might have been in Mr. Valliant's past, whatever might have been his sins of omission and selfish extravagance, it must be conceded to him at this juncture that he meant to deal fairly and well, considerably and straightforwardly—according to his lights—with all those with whom he had come in contact in Railliam.

Beginning with Kate, it seemed to him that it must be an unqualified blessing to a girl who had laid herself open to the suspicion of being a mere waltz and stray, to have such a man as himself come forward as her father. He knew that he made a favorable impression on the majority of people—on women especially—when first they knew him. And after all, it was by women's opinion that Kate would be tried, and would finally stand or fall! What, therefore, could possibly be more advantageous to her than his presence here at this critical juncture?

Taking Dr. Dacres into consideration secondly, Mr. Valliant felt that it was really a capital thing for that most excellent fellow to be able to point to such a clever and prepossessing man as Mr. Valliant knew himself to be, as the father of the lady who was to be Mrs. Dacres. His (Mr. Valliant's) appearance on the scene was not only opportune, it was really providential, for the young people! The tears came into Mr. Valliant's eyes as he thought of the exemplary manner in which he was fulfilling his important part.

Glancing in a gracefully casual way towards the Misses Dacres, he could not but perceive how materially his presence aided them in the difficult task they had to master of adjusting themselves to their altered position. When Miss Dacres blushed sourly, and Lucy sorrowfully, that sinned they would no longer be wanted by Dick, Mr. Valliant was ready to soothe them with the assertion, made in a cheerful, fellow-suffering way, that soon he, too, 'would be no longer needful to Kate.' It never entered their minds to remind him that he never had been needful to his daughter! And even had this truth occurred to them, they liked him far too well already to thrust it prominently into notice. That he was a most affectionate father, who had been cheated out of his daughter's companionship and love by the weak will of her mother and adverse circumstances, was an established article of faith with both sisters before he had interviewed them many times! That he was yearning for the sympathy of a kindred soul, and that he thought she possessed the article, was Lucy's private and firm conviction.

Towards Railliam generally, too, he meant very well, very kindly, and justly and liberally. He meant to take a nice little, many-gabled house of the cottage-villa order, that he had found at the country end of Railliam's prettiest street. And he meant to pay rent and taxes, and all other expenses incidental to the occupation of that house, out of the income which he meant to secure to himself by securing the hand and furthering the happiness of a most estimable fellow-creature.

In other words, he meant to marry Lucy Dacres, and 'Why not?' he and she (she especially) were both ready to ask defiantly of that unkind portion of the world which might feel inclined to jeer or carp at his choice, and her delighted acceptance of it.

For it is a fact, that she, a mature woman, who somehow or other had not played successfully the game of love in her youth, was ready now to try her hand at it again, and to take for her partner an adept in the game, who had never suffered himself to lose skill for lack of practice.

Not that he was actuated by mercenary motives entirely in coming to this decision with regard to Lucy Dacres. He really wished to be able to retire from that game of life in which, wherever he won, it was by tricks, and not by honors.

He wished to retire from it before circumstances compelled him to play it even less honorably and straightforwardly than he had done hitherto. And here was the right opening for him. A quiet country town, offering him no baleful attractions of Nap or billiards, or betting, in which, by means of the income of a most estimable and amiable lady whose heart was free and whose fortune was unincumbered, he might make a home for himself within easy reach of his only child.

He had so made up his mind to carry out this plan with all convenient speed, that when he sat down at the Dacres' friendly family luncheon, he almost seemed to have a right to enquire what was the cause of the disturbance in Lucy's mind, which was so eloquently expressed in her face and manner.

The dear lady was in that condition of agitation which can only be properly described by the word fussiness. Her sentences were short and disjointed, her eyes were roving and watchful, her hands trembled so when she was endeavoring to help him to some of that easily served dish, a sweetbread, that he was impelled to say in an undertone:

'You really must tell me what has upset you so?'

By reason of Miss Dacres being at the head of the table on the other side of him, and having her eyes and attention firmly fixed on him, she grasped this remark as clearly as her sister did, and replied to it instead of allowing Lucy to do so.

'You may well ask why Lucy is in such a flutter, Mr. Valliant. It's most absurd of her; but she really is allowing herself to be put out too much about a trifling matter. Our parlour-maid suddenly declares that she is not well enough to wait at table to-day, and my sister is afraid things won't go smoothly.'

'Is that nasty-looking, dark-faced woman the parlour-maid?' Kate asked. Kate had not thrown herself very heartily into the general conversation before this. The fact of having been taken in tow early in the morning by her dear papa, and of his having brought her triumphantly in his wake to the harbour of his house and anchored her there, had been detrimental to her equanimity.

'She is dark, but not nasty-faced,' Miss Dacres said, and Lucy added:

'I shouldn't have minded so much if I didn't believe it was her temper; but I feel sure something has put her out, and she shows it by pretending to be ill just when she can be spared least,' Lucy explained confidentially to Mr. Valliant, who, to Kate's amusement, took the matter quite as if he had been the master of the house and appealed to to arrange the difficulty.

'A parlour-maid whose temper cannot be trusted in an emergency is not a desirable person to employ; but in a little family gathering like the present—if I may be allowed the word—'

Both the Misses Dacres begged that he would use it, and Kate's distaste to her father's presence began to change into amusement, as she recognized that in the eyes of her future sister-in-law her father was still an attractive and desirable man. Involuntarily she turned to Dr. Dacres. She had something to say that she was sure he, and he only at the table, would understand.

'Have you seen the 'Three Old Maids of Lee,' illustrated by Caldecott?' she asked, and before he could answer Lucy chimed in:

'Oh! has Caldecott illustrated that dear old song? I am so fond of it! I sing it!'

'Then we shall have the pleasure of hearing it rendered in a way that will make Caldecott's illustrations needless to us,' Mr. Valliant put in, and Kate said:

'No, no singing can show us the silly old women, each one trying to grab a special bit of the attention of a silly old man, as clearly as the pictures do.'

'He draws them very old, doesn't he?' her father asked gently.

'Well, not so very—not what you would call old,' Kate replied, 'at least I mean they wouldn't seem so out-of-the-way old to you as to be beyond being made love to, you know. I should call them very silly old things.'

'Your youth ought to be more generously considerate to middle-aged loves and hopes and fears,' Dr. Dacres laughed out, seeing that both his sisters looked vexed. But his championship was as water unto wine compared with that of Mr. Valliant.

'No, said that gentleman; 'my dear Kate expresses the opinion of the majority of unthinking, unformed minds, it is difficult for a girl, whatever her latent powers may be, to gauge the superior attractions of a lovely sweet woman whose charms are ripened and enriched by time and experience. Youth is as powerless to understand this charm as it is to rival it.'

As each one of the Misses Dacres thought she the lovely and sweet woman he had in his mind's eye as he spoke, each one smiled at him the smile of approving partisanship. This being the case, it mattered little to Mr. Valliant that his daughter and Dr. Dacres thought him an old fool. The spinster sisters whose incomes were quite under their own control, were on his side. He could not help speculating as to whether all the old silver on the table belonged to Dick, or if some of it was the property of the sisters. The size and date on an old silver bowl that held the salad gave him the opportunity of satisfying his mind on that point.

'You are lucky to have a piece of James the Second silver of that size,' Dacres, he said, as Lucy pressed the salad on him with the recommendation that 'she had made it herself.'

Accordingly he swallowed a portion of the mass of green vegetables sodden in vinegar and heated with mustard, which he would otherwise have avoided.

'That bowl is—ah! No, that bowl isn't mine, mine is much smaller,' Dr. Dacres said. Then he added: 'You'll have to make love to my sisters, Kate, if you want that bowl for your salads; it belongs to them.'

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