

KATE VALLIANT.

With --the-- Circus!

(Continued.)

But it was hard, very hard! She kept on worrying herself by wondering if he ever called Fred his 'darling,' as he had called her (Kate). Fred had not the appearance of being any one's darling! She was too self-satisfied, and nipping and rasping in her manner and her tone! Kate looked at her wonderingly. How could she have found favor in Charlie Glanville's eyes? And yet if she had not done so, why was he kneeling at her feet, holding a skein of silk in his dear awkward, silly hands.

Into the midst of these pleasing reflections Mrs. Wyndham plunges. 'Yes, he says it's perfectly iniquitous that the horse should be kept in the stable in this way; your father really ought to have seen about having it used. I'm speaking about that horse your poor brother let you ride. Mr. Glanville says we really must use it a little more.'

'Speaking about my mare, Nell Gwynn?'

'Yes, the horse your brother let you ride,' Mrs. Wyndham responded graciously.

'Phil didn't let me ride her? She's my own, my very own; Philip gave her to me, Mrs. Wyndham. Dear thing! I'll take her out to-day.'

In her excitement Kate rose, and was crossing to ring the bell and order her mare round, when Mrs. Wyndham interposed.

'Stop, Kate; you must remember your poor brother is not here to lend her to you now; you must ask Mr. Wyndham when he comes home, if he hasn't any objection to your riding her sometimes when we—when Fred doesn't want her.'

'When Fred doesn't want to ride my mare?' Kate cried, irrepresible contempt flaming forth at the idea. 'Fred couldn't ride Nell Gwynn, Mrs. Wyndham; don't let her try; besides, she's my own, and I won't have anyone else ride her.'

Kate was in arms at last. Men might come, and men might go; but no one should infringe her rights with the mare.

'Is she not for general use, she shall not be kept here,' Mrs. Wyndham cried angrily. 'This is too much; to be told in my own house, at my own table, by a girl who is living on my charity, that horse must be kept for her sole use.'

Kate's hand was on the bell, but she paused before ringing it, to look at the infuriated speaker. And no one could accuse her of having too much color now.

'Am I living on your charity?'

'On our kindness,' Mrs. Wyndham said, cooling down a little, 'kindness that will be gladly extended, ungrudgingly extended, my dear, while you conduct yourself nicely and properly.'

'If I keep my mare to myself and ride her, that will be conducting myself hastily and improperly, won't it?'

'What folly to talk in such a way,' Mrs. Wyndham said, waxing wroth again. 'You might as well say the house is yours because poor Philip let you rule it while he lived. Come! come! no more about the horse, if you please. I shall have it sold.'

'Will you?'

'What a termagant she is,' Frederica said laughing, as Kate went on, tingling all over, not with rage, but with outraged wounded feeling.

'The horse is quiet enough, isn't it,' the mother asked.

'Oh! yes,' the daughter replied, with the calm indifference of ignorance. 'I can ride her easily enough; only Kate likes to pretend that it's a fiery steed, not to be managed by anyone but herself.'

'Ah, I wish Kate were different,' Mrs. Wyndham sighed. And so, doubtless, she did. If Kate, for instance, had been plain, dull and uninteresting, her lines would have been cast in pleasanter places at Hasselton just now.

'Mr. Glanville is coming here to-morrow at twelve; why don't you ride then? The coachman shall go with you, and if Mr. Glanville wishes to join you—'

'—He may, yes, I see,' Frederica laughed, and Kate shall be told when we're starting, not before—now mind, mamma, not before.'

Kate Valliant rode far and fast that afternoon. The rapid movement through the fresh air cleared her mind and freed the blood to circulate freely in her veins, giving her a sense of bounding, strong life again. The future had been staring her out of countenance in the house, but out in the open she faced it fairly, dismal as it was.

The knowledge that she was moneyless, homeless, (save for the 'kind charity' of the Wyndhams), and loveless, had at first threatened to overwhelm her. 'I can't live here, even if they'll keep me,' she had said to herself a dozen times while putting on her habit. Then the counteracting, crushing thought had jumped in, 'But I have nowhere to go and I can do nothing!'

Do not let anyone run away with the notion that this is an exaggerated picture of friendlessness in a girl of Kate's position in life. She had not lacked invitations to go, and stay for a week or two, with several people since Philip died. But the invitations had been, though hearty, indefinite, as invitations are apt to be when the invited one is quite unable to make any other return than the one perhaps, of getting those who invite her into disfavor with her own people. One old school friend for example wrote to her:

'There is nothing I should like so much as to ask you to spend the next six months with me; but you know what my life is, dear Kate. My husband will entertain so much that I should have to seem to neglect you, as your deep mourning would preclude your going into society.'

Others, with equal prudence and consideration, refrained because they feared to appear interfering if they took her away from the Wyndhams so soon. Even the Glanvilles, though they would not have opposed the engagement had it been a bona fide one before her brother's death,

thought it would be just as well if the affair went off now that it was known that Kate hadn't a penny of her own. They reminded themselves of her father, and thought how disagreeable it would be if he turned up at any time, and became a burden on Charlie! So his mother contented herself with writing a note of condolence to Kate, in which she said that some day when Mrs. Wyndham was coming, she (Mrs. Glanville) hoped Kate would be able to accompany her aunt to see them.

'She's not my aunt, and Charlie shouldn't have let his mother write that,' Kate had thought, as she tore the note in two.

CHAPTER XVI.

MISTAKEN ALL ROUND.

'Now for my story,' the maimed circus-riider said, turning in the bed so that she could get a clear view of Miss Gower's face.

'My name isn't Delarue—that you guessed at once, didn't you? I wanted a name in a hurry a little while ago, and I took the first I saw; it was stamped on a packet of envelopes. It's the only thing that didn't belong to me that I've ever taken in my life; was it thieving?'

'No,' Nina didn't think it could be called thieving.

'Well, my real name is Valliant—Kate Valliant—and my home, or what was my home once, is a dear old place in Somersetshire—Hasselton it's called. It belonged to my brother, Philip Wyndham till—the other day; and there I've lived with him since I was ten years old till—he died. There were only two of us, and Philip was the dearest—'

A burst of tears stopped the telling of the story; here, and for sympathy Nina wept too. They were crying away when Dr. Dacres came in; and as the patient felt he could be trusted, she continued the telling of her story presently when she came shining out from her tear-fall like the sun after a shower.

Phil was the dearest brother that ever lived. He was ten years older than me, and when I left school he made me quite mistress of Hasselton, and took me everywhere with him that's why I ride so well. I hunted three times a week in the season from the time I left school and before that when mamma was alive, I always had good ponies as a child. But while I lived with Philip I always had the best light-weight carriers that money could buy, and Nell Gwynn's the most perfect of the lot.

'I can't tell you much more about my life at Hasselton with my brother; she went on, her voice growing hoarse with emotion; it was too bright, too happy in every way while he lived. He was engaged to be married to such a beautiful girl, and some of the wedding dresses even were made, when—when he killed suddenly, awfully—some day I'll tell you how.'

'Before I could think of anything but that I'd lost my brother, his uncle came to take the property and make Hasselton his home. He isn't a bad man on the whole, but his wife is a beast.'

'She began preaching at me while I was half-stunned, telling me how sad it was that my brother had made no provision for me. As if I didn't know it was 'sad' quite as well as she did; but I couldn't bear her to say it of Phil. Then she would go on saying at me about my hunting and Phil's extravagance till I flamed at her, and we had a quarrel and said awful things to each other. I think I said the worst things, because all I said was true.'

'Will you believe it?' she continued, opening her lovely grey hazel eyes very wide, and raising herself up on her elbow in her excitement, 'they said my own dear mare, Nell Gwynn, that Philip had given me, wasn't mine any more! They put their own daughter—put a girl who sat smirking sideways in the saddle about—on Nell Gwynn! And the mare has such perfect manners that she didn't do what I would have done—thrown the pretender, as I kicked her to death!'

Her eyes flashed furiously as she spoke, and Dr. Dacres interposed:

'If you must dramatise your story we cannot listen to it, Miss Valliant; you must keep quiet.'

She moved her head impatiently, but managed to give him a smile that looked grateful, and therefore touched him greatly.

'(Poor child?) he thought, 'she must have had some hard knocks to think so much of a little kindness; what a fine nature it is, to be sure.' He was absolutely ignorant of the quality of her nature as yet, but her eyes were so fine that he accepted them as indicative of all her mental and moral qualities and qualifications. This is an infrequent habit with men, especially before marriage.

'May I go on?—thank you! I won't get out of bounds again. Well, Nell Gwynn didn't do what I would have done, but carried her waspish, incapable burden about till the sight maddened me too. My precious 'Aunt,' as she would make me call her while my brother was alive, cut off all my friends. Those who were nearest and dearest to me never came near me after Philip died.'

There was such stifled pain and wrath in her voice as she said this, that Dr. Dacres started. His lovely patient had stabbed him unintentionally by her passionate regret.

'I'm getting tired, and I'll tell you the rest quietly, Miss Valliant went on. 'One night we had a great row. Mrs. Wyndham told me that Philip's greatest friend was going to ride the next day with her daughter Frederica, and that Fred was to ride my Nell Gwynn! She shouldn't do that, I was determined. So after dinner that day I dressed myself in my habit, and took all the bracelets and rings and other jewellery mamma and Philip had given me—I had no money—and went out to the stable and saddled Nell Gwynn myself while the grooms were at supper, not that they'd have stopped me, they all hate that old beast, Mrs.

Wyndham, and rode away to a town where I knew there was a circus at the time.'

I showed them how I could ride and I got them to move away that same night by giving them a lot of my jewellery, and I've bound myself and Nell Gwynn to stay with them three years, only they don't know her as Nell Gwynn any more than they know me as Miss Valliant. I changed her name to Blue Rind, and my own to Delarue. That's my story up to the time of the tumble. Do you both think me a very silly hateful girl?'

Dr. Dacres said nothing but somehow his silent judgment quite satisfied Kate. Nina Gower said warmly:

'I think you must make up your mind to give up the circus and stay here with us altogether; mustn't she Dr. Dacres? I think so I hope so he assented quickly and Kate held out a pitifully thin and frail, but most grateful hand to him.

'What made you think of the circus?' he asked.

'Oh! I forgot the most tragic part of my story after all. When I joined the troupe I thought I should find a friend among them in the person of an old groom of my brother's, who had been in the company some years; but when I asked for him, poor fellow, they told me he had gone to a hospital only a few days before, and he died soon after of rapid lung disease. So there I was, quite quite friendless, and among such queer people.'

'You're not friendless any more, Kate,' Miss Gower bent over and kissed her as she spoke, and as she raised her head from imprinting that caress on Kate's white brow, Nina caught Dr. Dacres' glance fixed upon her approvingly.

'Dear, Bonnie Kate,' the daughter of the house thought, with a glow of happiness, 'her escapade has been the means of making me know him. It may be the means of bringing us together. As Kate will recover, I ought to bless the day she was thrown.'

I am going to fetch my mother and tell her all you've told us, Nina said aloud. Don't look frightened dear, mother is the last person in the world to deliver you up to the enemy. Then she went away leaving the doctor alone with his patient.

Do you think me a very headstrong hateful girl? she asked seriously. What I did was wrong I know. I ought to have stayed in the shelter of Mr. Wyndham's house, and have borne every thing from Mrs. Wyndham, and have seen Fred ride my mare, and monopolise my—'

She paused and he asked quietly:

'Your household rights were you going to say?'

'You know Dr. Dacres, that I was not going to say anything of the sort, she replied impatiently. But no matter, well, I couldn't see Nell Gwynn badly ridden, and my friends tricked into seeming friendliness with Fred. My life had been so free and happy; and successful with dear Philip you can't wonder that I felt the loss of other things more keenly after I lost him. You can't wonder that I revolted at meeting failure on all sides.'

'I should like to see everything you loved and valued restored to you, Miss Valliant,' and he felt almost as if he were relinquishing something in saying it.

'They never can be—at least, not all I loved and valued. My brother and my home are gone for ever.'

'Your friends are left. You won't hide yourself away from them altogether?'

'If you mean my uncle, Mr. Wyndham, and his perfidious wife and daughter, I'll tell you this at once—wild horses shall not drag me back to them!'

'You spoke of other friends, Miss Valliant?'

'He can find me if he cares to take the trouble to search and follow,' she said, blushing a little, and Dr. Dacres' heart throbbled painfully. The friends whom his bewitching patient lamented so deeply, were all condensed into that one 'he' who might 'find' her 'an' he' willed.'

'I shall, with your permission, make all necessary arrangements with the manager to-day, and give him to clearly understand that your engagement must be cancelled,' he said presently.

'Oh, don't! I shall forfeit the mare if you do. Nell Gwynn's the only bit of the old life that's left to me. Don't let me lose the mare,' she said piteously.

'I will take care of her interests as well as yours. Nell Gwynn is at this moment in my stables, and there she will remain till you are well enough to ride her.'

She caught his hand and hugged it as a grateful child might have done. Only unfortunately for him, she was not merely a grateful, engaging child. She was a beautiful and attractive young woman.

'I can never do enough for you, Dr. Dacres. First you save my life, then you save my mare. How good you are! How I ought to love you!'

He brought his professional visit to a close soon after this, leaving his patient with Mrs. Gower and Nina. The daughter of the house had carried her point, and Mrs. Gower pleaded as earnestly as even Nina desired that Kate Valliant should remain with them.

'But it must be all fair and above board, Nina,' her father insisted. 'I'll write to the uncle, and your mother shall write to the aunt, and if her story holds water, when we've heard the other side, then this shall be her home, and I'll treat her as a daughter, as far as is consistent with my duty to you.'

'Don't write to those people till I'm strong enough to speak for myself, if they come here after me,' Kate pleaded, and her plea was granted.

Meanwhile Dr. Dacres visited her daily. Visited her, he admitted to himself, long after there was any surgical or medical excuse for his doing so. Kate was soon sound in limbs and flesh, but she remained weak and languid, and this was obviously a case that he could discover. At times she would be vivacious enough, and in her vivacious moods she was invariably grateful and tender and affectionate towards him. There-

fore he prayed and panted for their re-appearance when they were over, and for their continuance when they re-appeared.

But though he prayed for them, and enjoyed them, and was miserable when they were superseded by periods of languor and depression, these tender vivacious moods of Kate Valliant were dangerous to him in the present, and might be destructive in the future. In short he was allowing himself to love the girl of whom he knew nothing, save that she was lovely and wilful. And though he guarded his secret from others, he did not hide it from himself.

He guarded it so well from others that though it absorbed his mind and thought to the exclusion of everything that was not connected with his professional duties, not even his wistfully suspicious sisters suspected it. Or rather they did not suspect that the 'circus-riider,' as they called her, had anything to do with it, but rather feared that Dick's frequent visits to Blindon were made in the forlorn hope of winning the heiress of Blindon to be his wife.

It hurt their pride woefully to think that their brother Dick should be wasting his time on a girl whom they decided, without much knowledge of her, would only marry for love, if ambition could be gratified at the same time. It never occurred to them that Nina was foolish enough to find sweet delight in cherishing the same mistake that vexed them, namely, that Dr. Dacres came to Blindon so often because she was there.

They were all blind. As the summer days rolled on, and the evenings stretched themselves out, every spare hour that Dr. Dacres had on those evenings was spent under the verandah at Blindon, smoking with Mr. Gower, or reading and talking with the girls. And all the while Kate Valliant went on imploring them to 'wait just a little longer' before they wrote to her detested relations and told them of her whereabouts.

Kate's secret was well kept. Not even to his own sisters did Dr. Dacres mention that the circus rider after whom they soon ceased to enquire was in reality a well-born young lady, and now the chosen friend and companion of Miss Gower of Blindon. The vigilant sisters knew that the girl was at Blindon, but they had an idea she was hovering somewhere between the lady's maid's sanctum and the housekeeper's room, and they said to one another sometimes 'What a mercy it was that the girl had been rescued from the loose life of the circus, and put in the way of learning to become a valuable domestic in a gentleman's house.'

As for 'Nell Gwynn,' they knew nothing about her. Their tastes were not horsey, and they never visited their brother's stables.

It was inevitable under these circumstances that misapprehension should thicken on all sides. Mr. Gower began to grow, not exactly displeased, and not exactly alarmed, but a little perplexed on the subject of the frequency of the young doctor's visits.

'I'm delighted to see him, and I think Dacres is a very good fellow; but why does he come so often?' Mr. Gower asked his wife, and she with more delicate discernment than was evinced by any of the others, replied:

'It is impossible to say with certainty but perhaps he prizes what he has saved' Kate is very lovely, and he is not blind. 'You think it's Kate?'

'Why surely you don't think it's Nina?' her mother asked quickly. Mrs. Gower was the sweetest natured woman that it is possible to imagine. But Nina was a jewel in her mother's eyes, that deserved a far more splendid setting than the country surgeon could ever give her.

'Don't you make sure that I'm wrong and you're right, old lady,' her husband said, shaking his head sagaciously. 'I'm very much mistaken if Nina's not of my opinion, too, and I'm afraid she doesn't regard it in the same light as I do. She was wonderfully willing to give up going to town! What did that mean?'

'It meant that she's not a frivolous girl, and that she can well afford to wait,' her mother said proudly.

'If meant that she was a great deal too well pleased to stay down here within daily reach of Dr. Dacres,' Mr. Gower said, shaking his head ominously; and the mother resolved to speak to her daughter on the subject—when a fitting opportunity arose.

Just before this, Kate had empowered them to write to her relatives, and the situation was made more complicated by the fact of the relatives having made no sign.

The opportunity which Mrs. Gower professed to be seeking of speaking to her daughter came at last, and the mother took it, sorely against her inclination.

'Dear Nina, do you think our pretty little Kate will make up her mind to settle near us?' she began nervously.

'Oh! no, mother! she's longing for the day when Mr. Charles Glanville will follow and find her, and take her back in triumph as his wife, to crow over her ill-natured cousin Fred!'

'Mr. Charles Glanville has had plenty of time to find her, or at least to write to her, since we wrote to her uncle and aunt.' 'They mayn't have told him that they have heard from you. Kate was speaking of them last night, and she said they were 'capable of any meanness, and any amount of lying, in order to catch Charlie Glanville for Fred.' Kate is a brick, mother, she has such firm faith in his fidelity, though he has given her cause to doubt him, and though he does seem lax in his quest of her.'

'I am afraid she has damaged her cause with him by this escapade of hers; no prudent man would like to marry a girl who ran away from home, and took up the dubious life of the circus.'

'He won't mind when he knows how hardy she was treated; he'll understand how glibly badly those Wyndhams behaved to her. Oh, I do hope Kate's love will have a smooth ending.'

'Do you think she is still much attached to him?'

'Yes! but I hope he won't try her patience too long. It doesn't hurt her a bit that the Wyndhams should show

themselves quite indifferent to her. But her eyes sparkle curiously when the letters come each day, and I have to tell her there are 'none for her.' I hope he won't try her patience too long. A man ought to find it very easy to forgive Kate.'

'Don't you think,' Mrs. Gower began hesitatingly, 'that what looks to you like patience, may be indifference? Has it struck you that Dr. Dacres may be consoling Kate for Mr. Glanville's defection?'

'No it hasn't,' Nina said, with prompt decision, and Mrs. Gower's heat fell. Her daughter would not speak with such certainty were she in doubt.

'Nina must think he comes here to see her, and Nina is not one to annex a man who is not ready to surrender himself to her,' the mother thought, and her spirit sank at the prospect of the difficulties that might be placed in Nina's way by her father.

The struggle must be made; that 'one word more,' must be said.

'My dear Nina, if you see Kate that he does not come here to see her, Kate Valliant, for whose sake does he come? Will you tell me that?'

'For mine,' Nina said confidently with a happy blush.

To be continued.

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