

KATE VALLIANT.

With --the-- Circus!

(Continued.)

During the long hours of that dreadful day, poor harmless Lucy's state continued precarious. Towards the end of it she suddenly sank, and died from the influence of some subtle poison which could not be characterized yet! And all the while, in addition to the reasonable and natural and accountable horror Mr Valliant felt at his wife's quickly increasing dangerous illness, and then sudden death, he had the soul-subduing, crushing, maddening knowledge that he was suspected.

Not that suspicion was openly directed against him until after she died. But those words of her brother in which he had asked the cruel question, "What had he substituted for the draught he had thrown out of the window?" rang in his ears all day.

He knew that he had not given her another—good, bad or indifferent—in its stead. But how was he to impress this knowledge upon others. He and he only had been in the bed-room and dressing room with her, from the time he went upstairs and found her sleeping, till that awful hour when her struggles and contortions and inarticulate cries had roused him! And a glass had been found empty by the side of her bed the slight moisture around which was even now being analyzed by his brother-in-law.

"What would it be found to contain? What could it be found to contain that could criminate him, an innocent man and stigmatize him in the eyes of all who heard of it as a cowardly murderer?" These latter were his thoughts when he was told of her death. Then the horror grew! Before he had time to fear it, or rather before he had time to shape his fear and contemplate it, he was arrested on the charge of having poisoned his wife; arrested on the charge of man slaughter.

Then the wretched man remembered that the day before, when poor Lucy had been alive and only a little invalid, he had begged that his daughter Kate might be sent to the following day to help to nurse Lucy. The day had arrived, and was crammed to its utmost capacity with danger, misery degradation and terror; but no daughter had come to stand by his side, and mutely testifies that she did not believe him to be guilty of this foul thing, of which he was accused.

He had been taken away and lodged at the police station for the night, there to await the result of the inquest on the morning. Before the news of Mrs. Valliant's death reached Blindon, a few lines from poor harrassed Dick to Nina Gower put her in possession of the leading facts of the case, and a line or two at the end of the note showed Nina that Dick, however things might go, would be as staunch as she had always felt he would be, however he were tried.

"Should the evidence be as damning as we fear it will be, help me to spare my poor Kate as much as we can. My duty in life lies clearly cut before me. I am to take her away from all that may remind her of this ghastly episode, and soothe her mind into the least sad remembrance she can have of it."

"For having written those words of ferocity, no man shall ever put you out of my heart," Nina thought, glancing in him and in her love for him, unrequited though it always had been, and would be. Then, though she could not obliterate the recollection of the way Kate had wavered towards Charlie Glanville that very morning, she pledged herself to herself afresh, to do all that woman could do to guard, and save and spare Kate against insidious attacks from malice, scandal and old love, and—herself.

"Poor papa! I'll go to him at once," Kate declared, when they told her of Mrs. Valliant's death. "He'll want me, I'm sure. He'll want some one to be kind to him; kinder than servants can be. I may go, Mrs. Gower, may I not?"

"Not to-night, my dear girl, not to-night. Wait till Mr. Dacres comes and fetches you to your father," Mrs. Gower said persuasively. But Kate pleaded the more vehemently, as soon as this slight opposition was made to her project.

Then Nina reasoned with her. "There must be sad confusion at the cottage. Kate. Your poor father will need you more to-morrow than he does to-night."

"I hope Dick and my father will stay together, and comfort each other to-night," Kate said thoughtfully. "Dick is so good. I should like to be with him now. He will grieve for poor Lucy very much. He is very fond of his sisters; but his grief will be so many. Shall I go to-morrow morning, the very first thing? Do you promise that, Mrs. Gower?"

"Yes," Mrs. Gower promised that the first thing in the morning she would herself drive Kate in to see Miss Dacres and Dick.

"Why don't you say to see my father to-night?" Kate objected, and they had not the heart to tell her that she should be allowed to see her father at all, it would be at a police station.

"Let her have one night of comparative peace and happiness, poor child! Guilty or not guilty, as her father may be, the shame of such an accusation having been brought against her father, will put out the light of Kate's life," Mrs. Gower said to Nina, but Nina thought differently.

"No woman's life can be dark who has Dr. Dacres' love, mother, and he'll never take that from Kate."

"Nor you from him," Mrs. Gower thought despondently, for it was the one cloud on her horizon, that her beautiful daughter should be so steadily set against glorifying any other man's life, as Dr. Dacres had not wanted her to glorify his.

"Don't you think this, if it's brought home to Mr. Valliant, will make a difference to Dr. Dacres about Kate?"

"It won't make him love her more—it can't do that, nothing can—but it will

make him more tender, if that's possible, to her, and he will be more fearful of her being hurt by other people."

"I suppose you know him better than I do, Nina; but your father and I said to each other directly we heard it, that it might be the means of ruining the poor child's prospects with both these men who want to marry her, now. In fact, I should think him perfectly justified in breaking with Kate, if her father is convicted of this awful crime."

"I know him well enough to know that after all, Kate will be dearer to him than ever. He couldn't change for an expedient consideration from—away from a girl he loves as he loves her."

"But he is, mother; don't you know that yet? Can't I hold the love I had for him to be such a sacred thing that another shall never follow it if he were not?"

"You still nurse the feeling—the mistaken feeling, my poor child!" Mrs. Gower said, sadly and reproachfully.

"I don't nurse it, but God keeps it alive," Nina said quietly. "We won't speak of it any more, mother. I only spoke of it now that you might understand how it is I can be so sure of him—so certain that he will stand firm as a rock by Kate now."

"We had better leave the task of telling her the worst to him, I think," Mrs. Gower said wearily.

"No, I'll spare him that agony," Nina declared. "I've been thinking it over, and I've come to the conclusion that the one thing I can do for him now is to spare him the pain of telling her. When she has heard it from me he shall comfort her."

"Poor Miss Dacres will never like the match now, however things go," Mrs. Gower remarked, and Nina said:

"If this trouble makes Kate turn to him entirely, he will be able to bear disapproval from other people."

"But supposing she has turned to the other man? For whom?"

"She wouldn't have spoken of Dick if she had gone back to the other one. You shan't suggest any other possible obstacle or hindrance, mother dear. I have borne for myself what I couldn't bear for Dick and Kate."

The next was a wild day for them all—a day full of stormy feelings of sorrow, of dismal forebodings, and (to Kate) of unspoken horror.

How Nina Gower executed her self-imposed task, and made Kate acquainted with the sickening truth, that her father had been arrested on a charge of the manslaughter of his unfortunate wife, need not be told here. All that need be said is that Nina told the tale briefly, tenderly, mercifully, and Kate listened to it motionlessly and speechlessly.

This was while the cobs were being put in, just before they were brought round.

With an amount of nerve and self-control that was heroic in the eyes of Mrs. Gower and Nina, Kate put on her hat and cloak. Then she pressed her hands tightly over her face for a few moments, and still in silence waited.

Presently Nina told her:

"Kate, dear, the cobs are round. Can you start, or (with a sudden sympathetic thought of the pain it would be to Kate to drive through the town in an open carriage), or would you rather have the brougham, as mamma suggested?"

"No, no," Kate answered sharply, under the influence of the new pain. "People would think I believed that my father had done this, and that I was ashamed. I'm ready."

She rushed downstairs, and was in the pony-carriage in a moment, realizing agonizingly that the pitying glance the room was bestowing upon her, was only the forerunner of hundreds that would be showered upon her presently. And Kate was proud and hated pity.

This was the first result of her resolve to conquer herself—to put consideration for herself out of court altogether. In her endeavour to show that she did not think her father guilty, she exposed herself to the pity of the crowd.

For by this time little unimportant, Railham was crowded from every town within reach of it by rail, from every village and hamlet within a radius of eight or nine miles, a continuous stream of eagerly expectant people had poured into the place ever since day-break. That a gentleman recently married should have been charged with the murder—or at least, manslaughter—of his wife of a few weeks' standing, was the most appetizing dish of scandal that this part of the country had been called upon to discuss for many a long year. It gave an extra flavour to the case that the accused should be of prepossessing and gentlemanly appearance, and extremely well dressed, according to the 'own special reporter' of every local journal. It acquired the most delicious piquancy from the fact that the interesting unconvicted criminal 'stood in the near relation of father to a lady, who shortly, under more auspicious circumstances, would have been united in the bonds of marriage to the principal and much-respected medical practitioner of Railham—Dr. Dacres.

All this had been written, printed, published, read, thought, and spoken about Kate before she was driven through Railham on her way to the police station.

"For to this depth of degradation she insisted on being driven first."

"Won't you stop and see Dr. Dacres as we go through? Won't you go in and speak to Miss Dacres?" Nina had asked but Kate had shaken her head in the negative.

"My father first. No one else will ever forgive me as I do about the impossibility of his having done it, so no one else will be quite to him what I may be. Why, my mother loved him; that's enough to prove to me that he couldn't have done it, but you see other people didn't know my mother, so they won't know that."

Against this brave loving confession of faith Nina could not argue, nor would she have argued if she could. Kate was going in the right way, and thought that way might estrange her from Dick just at the time, it would bring her nearer to him in the end.

So Nina with her head in the air, with her heart strung up to the utmost tension in its determination to back up Kate to the utmost, drove rapidly but steadily through the same streets along which she had once driven to help and rescue the injured circus rider.

As for Kate, she stood—or rather sat—the stares and murmurs, and half suppressed interjections that greeted her on her way, gallantly.

That they had condemned him already before he had been tried, that they were less eager for his innocence to be proved and his acquittal guaranteed than for some further revelation of a startling character, was patent to his daughter, as she was driven through the thronged street, white with upturned faces. That their pity for her was dashed with contempt for her pusillanimity in going near him now, was also patent to her. And as the 'tone' of the multitude made itself more manifest against him, so did her loyalty and love towards him grow.

There was a little difficulty it seemed at first about getting to see him. But Mr. Gower's influence as a magistrate, and an appeal from Dick (of which she was not yet made aware) finally opened the doors to her, and Kate at last stood in the presence of all that was real in her father.

Of all that was real! For with the loss of his liberty, and the falling of the shadow of suspicion of a ghastly crime upon him, all that was tricky and meretricious, unreal and ridiculously juvenile and fantastic, had been cast off like a plague-infected garment. Mr. Valliant, stripped of all his showy frothiness, humbled, broken, contrite, yet without neither aljeet nor guilty, was a father to whom Kate could turn, and did turn, without fear or hesitation.

"Poor dear father," she began at once as she went in. Aren't you glad I'm here? I am!"

"Kate! my daughter!"

"Yes, your real daughter at last," she cried, laughing a little hysterically. "I thought it wouldn't matter so much that people said if you and I were together now. You won't mind the others while you have me, will you, father? and I can't care for anything that doesn't hurt you. Do I comfort you?—let me comfort you?" she continued, hanging about his neck. And to his credit be it said, Leonard Valliant was glad that at least, moment that he had not been able to dye his hair or pick out his eyebrows that morning.

"(She loves me, my child clings to me as I am!)" he thought, almost reverencing his own grey hair and furrowed brow, as Kate quivered into his arms.

Then the whole pathos of the situation revealed itself to him. This exhibition of his daughter's loyalty to him might wreck her for life.

"Think of Dacres, my dear, think of Dacres," he whispered, lifting her up and and trying to put her away from him. "Let me go, poor old hulk that I am, let me drift, but give me the happiness of thinking it's all right with you and Dacres."

"My mother would have asked for no greater happiness than being with you if she could have helped or comforted you, and I'm her child and yours, Papa."

On the whole Leonard Valliant was not an unhappy man when those words rang in his ears, unjustly accused, placed in desperate straits, in danger of losing life, or at least liberty, as he was. He had the capacity left him of knowing and appreciating a noble nature! and now, the noblest nature he had ever met, charged the heart and soul of his own child, and was ready to lie down and serve him.

He could not be unhappy for himself—but for her!

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE OLD LOVE AGAIN.

Charlie Glanville waited for an answer to his letter to Kate with admirable patience for thirty-six hours! At the expiration of that period of time no answer coming, his patience broke down, and he went to Mrs. Godfrey Wyndham for sympathy and counsel.

"I know Kate, and I know if she meant to give me an answer at all, I should have had that answer by this time," he said gloomily.

The grand young matron had some other interest uppermost in her mind by this time, and did not care to be worried by him.

Still he was an element that had to be considered in her future life, for her lines were cast in this region, and so were his. In days to come he would be about her path socially, and sometimes might have it in his power to make that path pleasant for the moment to her. Remembering this, she forced herself to take a surface interest in his perplexity.

"If I were you I'd get the answer from her own lips; writing is such a bore. I never write a note if I can help it, but I don't mind what I say if the person is near to hear me say it. Go and make Kate settle the question, and then come back, and tell me how she looks, and what the people are like she's living with, and how she was dressed; I used to think sometimes that Kate would let go a sitch or two if she hadn't a maid at her heels and a dressmaker within reach."

"You go in for dress more than Kate did, Mrs. Godfrey, but she used to look awfully neat in her habit."

"Well, she'll be able to have the maid at her heels whenever she isn't in the habit, when she comes back with you; and do you know, Mr. Glanville, I shall be very glad to see her back, anyway, neat or untidy. I like Kate better than any of Godfrey's people, and I'm disgusted with them beyond everything, for the way they behaved to her, poor girl. Kate's a thorough lady, and I won't keep you from her a minute longer. Go at once, and bring back her promise to come here again as Mrs. Charlie Glanville."

"Do you mean go-to-day?"

"Why not?"

"Won't she think it too impatient and presuming of me, after having left it so long, and having been engaged to another one in the meantime?"

"She won't like you the less for being impatient; trust me, she won't punish you for that; if you loiter and hesitate, the other man, being on the spot, may persuade her to marry him without further delay. If you want her, take my advice, and go after her to-day."

"There's no doubt my wanting her, but I don't want to do anything that would look rough—"

"Your going after her might look masterful, and women like a man the better for being that—before they're married! but it wouldn't look rough. Now go—I won't have you waste your time here."

Her impatience to get rid of him was not due so much to the desire she had that he should straightforwardly secure Kate as it was to the fact that he was in the way of the preparations that were being made for her reception at luncheon of the house-party from Lord Marlspit's. A Royal and a Serene Highness (both young) were included in this party. But one of them, youthful as he was, would soon be omnipotent in fashion's world, and Blanche longed for the hint, which is an order, to the effect that her beautiful presence was desired at court.

One who had the gracious power of giving this hint, was coming with the rest of Lord Marlspit's guests; therefore it is not surprising that Blanche gracefully sped Charlie Glanville on his way to woo Kate.

When he got himself away from her presence he felt that he had no anchorage ground. While he could sit and talk to Mrs. Godfrey Wyndham about Kate, he had a restful sense of security, and while her sanguine words soothed him, he felt as if he were not losing time, and running the risk of losing Kate.

But as soon as he left Mrs. Godfrey, and was cast upon himself, he felt like a drifting useless log. There was no one to whom he could go and speak about her, and his hopes and fears concerning her. His own family laughed at and derided his penchant, as they lightly dubbed it, for her now, and were more than a trifle vexed that he had let Frederica Wyndham slip. Being thus thrown upon himself, he found himself a very weak and shaky foundation upon which to build up a satisfactory edifice of anticipation and hope. Suspense was intolerable to him, for action, while in a state of suspense, seemed impossible. "The worst will be waiting," he resolved, and if once I can see her, it won't be the worst—she'll chuck that doctor fellow over when I tell her how I've loved her through it all!"

As soon as he had made up his mind to go to all, he was prompt and decided enough. He started by a train that enabled him to catch a train on the Great Eastern line, and by means of traveling all night he reached Railham on the day after Mrs. Valliant's death—the morning on which poor Kate visited her father at the police station.

Alighting at "Quibbs' Hotel," he became aware of the fact that the crowd and excitement which he had noticed at the railway station, and attributed to the weekly market, had become larger and stronger. On his way to the coffee-room he saw himself the object of universal attention and curious regard, and little thinking that he was being put down as either the 'counsel for the crown,' or the counsel retained for the prisoner; he accepted the sensation he was causing as a fitting tribute to his style and bearing.

Ordering breakfast at once, he sat down and wrote a note to Kate, telling her that within an hour or two of her reception of it he should call at Blindon and try to blot out from her mind the ugly interval that had passed between their parting and what he prayed might be a happy meeting. Having sent off this letter to Blindon by a messenger, he turned his attention to the breakfast spread before him on a round table in the corner of the coffee-room, and the remarks that fell from the lips of the men who came in and out, and chatted with the waiter, and one another.

Hearing a burly farmer say to a little knot around him that it was the ugliest looking case he'd heard of since that poor young bravo died, Charlie Glanville scented murder, and pricked up his ears.

"To my mind it falls harder on the doctor than on anyone else. He was going to marry the daughter, you know, but this'll stop that, sure enough."

"Rather, for even if it hadn't been his own sister that's been foully dealt with, a man like Dr. Dacres couldn't take the daughter of a man who'll swing for this—for his wife!"

"Now to my mind I shall think Dr. Dacres more the man I've always thought him if he sticks to Miss Valliant through this; the first speaker said vehemently; and then a murmur rose that the corner had come, and the group of men, to whose disjointed conversation Charlie Glanville had been listening with aching ears, broke up and dispersed hurriedly.

"Has anything unusual happened in the town?" Charlie asked nervously, as the waiter stammered near enough to his table to flick a fly off with the serviette he wore upon his arm.

"Unusual, sir, most unusual, sir; thought that you knew about it sir, and had come upon the business probably sir, seeing you are a stranger. Quite an unprecedented event in Railham—a lady known and respected throughout the neighbourhood murdered by her own husband, a gentleman who had won golden opinions since he came among us sir. Miss Valliant's father, the father of the young lady who is—was, that is to be married to Dr. Dacres."

"Good heavens! Kate's father? Charlie dropped his knife and fork, and let his hands fall prone on his knees.

His exclamation was not intended for the waiter or for anyone; it was simply forced out of his mouth, by the horror in his mind.

To be continued.

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