

# KATE VALLIANT.

With --the-- Circus!

(Continued.)

"There was a time when Fortune was less kind to me than she is now, and at the time I had to rely entirely on my brush for my bread," Mr. Valliant said airily.

"I should think that a man who could make a livelihood by his painting ought to be ashamed of himself if he ever gave it up," Miss Dacres said uncompromisingly.

"I am such a man, dear lady, yet I am not ashamed of myself," he replied. "I dare say I shall resume what has always been a favourite occupation of mine, in my hours of leisure here; perhaps decorate a boudoir for you, Lucy," he said gallantly.

"There's no room for a boudoir in this cottage, Mr. Valliant, and Lucy and I are too old-fashioned to feel the want of one. We have always lived in the way we were brought up—meals in the dining-room, and the rest of the time in the drawing-room. What women want with a boudoir I can't imagine, if they're not doing anything they're ashamed of."

"I certainly should like to have your paintings on the wall of the room I sit in most," Lucy said bashfully, at which little expression of sentiment Miss Dacres snorted angrily and Kate laughed.

Lucy went on turning over the water-color drawings, trying her hardest to say something appropriate and appreciative of each one. But as they were chiefly sketches of Italian and Scotch scenery, with both of which she was unfamiliar, the amiable task was a difficult one. At length she came to something about which she could find something to say.

"What a handsome woman and what lovely golden hair!" she exclaimed. "Who is it?"

Mr. Valliant looked disconcerted for an instant, then he recovered himself, and taking the portrait from Lucy's hand, he returned it to the portfolio, saying:

"It's a sketch of a model who used to sit to me in Rome. I didn't know it was there."

"And he doesn't seem too well pleased to see it there," Miss Dacres thought, as she stretched her hand out and begged to be allowed to look at it.

Mr. Valliant handed it to her with his courtliest air, but his courtliest air was thrown away upon her. She was absorbed in the contemplation of the portrait.

"Why look here, Lucy—only see, Dick she cried, 'only for the hair being light, and the complexion fair, it might be Vallence; it's exactly like her—exactly I believe, Mr. Valliant, your Roman model is living with us as parlor maid'."

They all crowded round Miss Dacres to look at the wonderful accidental likeness, and one and all were compelled to admit that it existed.

"Your parlor-maid must be a handsome woman. I wonder my artist's eye has overlooked her. The fact is I have been thinking too much of the mistress to give even a glance at the maid," Mr. Valliant said jestingly; and then he was allowed to put away the sketch of the Roman model in his portfolio again, and to his intense relief Miss Dacres suffered the subject to drop.

By-and-by Dr. Dacres started on his round, Kate went back to Blondin, and the two Miss Dacres walked home escorted to their door by Mr. Valliant. Vallence opened the door!

"Don't you see the likeness now, Mr. Valliant?" Miss Dacres cried, and as Vallence turned her face towards him, and looked at him steadily, Mr. Valliant saw the likeness, and looked as if he had seen a ghost.

"These vivid accidental resemblances are very startling," he exclaimed apologetically. "Thanks, no, I will not come in now. I am quite a creature of routine, and make a point of walking two or three miles before dinner every day. I shall pay my respects to you to-morrow morning."

He shook hands heartily with Miss Dacres, tenderly with Lucy, and took off his hat with impressive gallantry as he retreated from the doorway; and all the while Vallence, the parlor-maid, watched him with an amused smile.

"Ghastly like her," he muttered to himself, as he walked away, her expression and sardonic smile are precisely similar, only the other one had such angelic hair that it would have redeemed the features of a fiend. I'm glad this woman is dark; if she had been a mixture of lilies and roses, like the other one, I couldn't have stood it! I couldn't have lived in the place."

"That night, in the simplicity of her heart, which was overflowing with happiness, Lucy told Vallence of her engagement."

"I suppose you will stay here?" she added, "or do you think you would like to go with either Miss Dacres or me?"

"I think the young new mistress will rather choose her own servants, Miss."

"Then do you think either my place or Miss Dacres' will suit you, Vallence?"

"My house will be small, you know; I shall be quite contented with the delightful little nest Mr. Valliant has made for himself; I'll think about it Miss Lucy; perhaps, if Mr. Valliant asks me, I'll go and live with you."

"Why do you look as if you thought he wouldn't ask you?"

"Because I think he'd rather not see my face about his home, Mam; he doesn't like it, I'm sure of that; but you ask him if he does."

## CHAPTER XXVI.

SHALL IT BE SO?

Mr. Valliant proposed and Lucy had warmly seconded, the proposition of having a double wedding. But Kate had stoutly resisted the idea.

"There would be something unnatural in it," she said, in answer to her father's urgent plea that should be so. "If you have any memory at all, it would be painful to you, and to me it would seem like a ghastly joke."

"That's not at all a dutiful way of speak-

ing," her father told her; and Kate said she was sorry, but stood to her opinion.

Eventually it was decided that the elder couple should be married first. In every way it was more convenient, for Lucy would then be able to go from her brother's house, and Miss Dacres would be free to make her arrangements for her own future less hurriedly.

It was the night before the wedding, and Mr. Valliant was sitting in his own little dining-room, reading the Times, and thinking rather dolefully of the dull days that were in store for him. The mistake he had made in choosing the less well-endowed sister was one that he had not dared attempt to rectify. Lucy and her hundred and fifty a year were inevitable disagreeables that he had to grin and bear.

"After all, she'll be able to pay her mess; but if I'd known that would be all, I should have thought twice before I hampered myself with such an uninteresting woman," he was thinking, when a ring at the bell disturbed him.

"Some foolish message from Lucy probably," the bridegroom-elect thought, as his servant ushered in Vallence, the Dacres parlor maid.

"What is it? A note?" he asked lazily, half turning his head.

"Yes—of warning!" she replied; and something in her tone made Mr. Valliant spring from his chair.

"Who are you?"

"Ah! you needn't ask; you know all ready," she laughed mockingly. "You've half-remembered me half a dozen times. A thought of me has flashed across you oftener than you've liked, over and over again, while I've been waiting on you at table. I thought I'd give you a chance of doing the manly and plucky thing, by recognizing me and owning me; but you wouldn't take the chance. You've forced me to come and demand to be told what you mean to do."

"What I mean to do?" he repeated vaguely.

"Yes. What do you mean to do for me? You robbed me years ago, robbed me of everything a man can rob a woman of, and then you left me to fight for myself. You were too poor to help me then, you said; if I stayed with you, I should only be dragged down with you. But you're a flourishing gentleman now, and you're going to marry a lady with money. What do you mean to do for me?"

She seated herself opposite to him, and leaned her arms on her knees, and fastened her eyes on his face hungrily.

"I wonder I ever liked you, much less loved you, Leonard Valliant," she went on. "You're a vain old fribble now, and I despise you—that I do—as much as I ever liked you. But I don't mean you to sit down in comfort till the end of your days, and leave me to work for my living."

"What can I do?" he asked abjectly.

"Maintain me as comfortably as you live yourself," she said bluntly.

"I can't do that. I haven't the means."

"Your wife as will be to-morrow must do it then."

"Her income is small, much smaller than I fancied," he pleaded. "If I had money, I'd give it to you gladly."

"To get rid of me? I believe you."

"To make you happy," Mr. Valliant said speciously.

"You'd like to cut my throat this minute, if you dared," she said tauntingly. "You hoped I was dead, didn't you? Yet the day was when you thought more of my golden hair than you'll ever think of the old maid you're going to marry."

"You were always such a violent temper, you frightened me out of my love for you," he said deprecatingly. "Besides, you would have been wretched if you had seen me steeped in poverty, as I should have been if we had married."

"Don't make excuses for breaking your promise, you sneak!" she said contemptuously. "I only want to hear what you'll do for me now."

"Supposing I say—nothing!"

"And supposing if you do, I say I'll go straight to Miss Lucy Dacres, and tell her all I know about you, and show her some of your letters which I've kept."

"You won't do that, you'd gain nothing by it; come, be sensible, Lily! We rather dislike each other than otherwise now, and we can't do each other or ourselves any good by meeting and wrangling; let us part peaceably, and accept my assurance that if I can do anything for you, I will."

"That means you'll try and get me a place, doesn't it?"

"Certainly I will, if you mean to leave Dr. Dacres' service."

"Well, don't want your good offices with any one else, Mr. Valliant, but I've rather a fancy for coming here to live, and seeing how things are going on."

"Here! to live here?"

"Why not? I could make myself very comfortable," she said, sneeringly.

He got up, looking quite warm and haggard.

"Woman! what are you planning?" he said.

"A life of ease in your house, sir; surely that's not too much to ask for at your hands. You needn't tell me, I see it in your face that you hate me, but don't you make a mistake, it's not sentiment makes me want to come here. You can't hate me worse than I do you."

She tried to speak sharply and vindictively, but failed. Her voice softened and trembled, and her face worked passionately, as an incredulous smile played about her lips.

"My good woman, you deceive yourself," he said tolerantly. "If you come here the sight of my domestic felicity will be a continual still to you."

"And what will the sight of me be to you?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah! You may try to pass it off in that way," she said savagely, "and you may affect not to care about how I've lived since we parted, or what I mean to do now; but for all that you're afraid of me, Mr. Valliant; and as you're in my power you'd better keep friendly with me, and not thwart my little whims. Oh! it will be a lovely joke to come here and pretend I'm your humble servant; won't you be in a fix when I am in the room,

and you want to tell some of your lies to your wife. Shall I let my hair grow again, and do away with this black wig?"

Oh! how I laugh to myself when I hear Miss Dacres go on about my likeness to your Roman model!"

She had got up while speaking, and taken of her bonnet. Suddenly she snatched off the dark wig, and bent her head towards him.

"The gold has turned to grey, you see," she said; "all its brightness is gone, so it will never please your eyes again. There, I've worried you enough for once, Leonard! Shake hands, and I'll go."

He took her extended hand as if it had been a reptile, and she grew fierce again in an instant.

"Don't touch me as if I was something defiling," she cried. "I was good enough till I knew you, and I trust you."

"My good woman, I can't tell you how deeply I regret that you ever did know me."

"Coward!"

She flung the word at him, then turned and left the room, pressing her bonnet on her head, and attempting to tie it as she went. He seated himself at his reading table again, murmuring:

"What an unruddy, unreasonable creature she has become, and how very plain! The last person in the world I should choose for a handmaid. I really trust she will think better of her determination to come and serve us. What a very unpleasant page from the past to have turned over on the eve of my wedding."

He tried to dismiss her from his thoughts, but failed to do so entirely. Not that he feared she would betray him to Lucy, and avert the marriage. He knew the woman too well for that. She likes me too well to injure me," he said complacently. "Dear! dear! What a pity it is these creatures are so tenacious."

He smiled at the idea, and going over to his writing table made a clever little pen and ink sketch of Vallence as a barnacle firmly attached to himself as a ship floating on a summer sea.

Pleased with the success of this little artistic effort he made another, this time representing the Dacres' parlor maid as a water lily, whose roots and spreading leaves were impeding the progress of the little boat in which Lucy and himself were drifting along a river without a ripple disturbing the surface of its calm.

Having done them, and amused himself with them for a few minutes, he threw them on one side, and left them to be used or abused by the servant, who collected all such scraps for fire-lighting purposes in the morning.

The remainder of the evening he spent more profitably. Social life in Kailham had amused him from its novelty, and out of the materials he had at hand, he made rather an amusing little magazine story. In it a highly idealized study of himself, figured as the unconscious and unintentional winner of the heart of a rather realistically drawn Miss Gower.

By the time the story was finished he had come to the conclusion that had he pleased he might have married Nina, and eventually been the master of Blindon! This possibility was borne in upon him so strongly that in an unlucky moment he wrote a brief postscript to the story setting forth the death from poison of his idealized self's wife!

"Poor Lucy!" he said to himself compassionately, "some men in my position would rejoice in being rid of such a monotonous woman by death, but I'm not a bloodthirsty fellow, and though I mean to insure her life, I shall never do anything to shorten her days. Poor Lucy! I hope that wretched woman will never make it unpleasant for her."

He made his MS. up neatly, and addressed it to the editor of a magazine in which anything from his pen was tolerably sure of an immediate place.

Then he looked complacently at his wedding garments and button-hole, and wrote a sweet note to Lucy as an accompaniment to the bridal bouquet which he meant to send to her the first thing in the morning. When he had done all this it was time to go to bed, as he desired to look his freshest and best in the morning.

Lucy had not spent the eve of her wedding half so pleasantly or profitably. In the first place her spirit was weighted by the tradition that a lover, if residing in the neighborhood, ought to spend at least an hour of the evening before the happy day with his betrothed. This Mr. Valliant had not deemed it necessary to do, and this Maria had commented upon his not doing, rather strongly.

"I don't for a moment say that it would have been seemly for him to have come billing and cooing here continually, but I think it would have been only decorous on his part that he should have shown what would have been proper attention even from an octogenarian, on the eve of his marriage to the lady who is to be his wife," the elder sister remarked pityingly, and as if the remark were wrong from her by sympathetic outraged feeling.

"Mr. Valliant is far from being an octogenarian, Maria," Lucy replied reproachfully.

"Then his age can be no excuse for the neglect, Lucy! No, it's useless your shaking your head, and pretending not to think anything of it, it is neglect, and if you can't excuse it on the score of age and infirmities, there must be some other reason for it. Perhaps his feet hurt him. I saw yesterday that he could hardly hobble, his boots were so tight."

To this Lucy had no answer to make, the fact being that his hobbling had been painfully perceptible to her wistfully affectionate eyes. She, however, had attributed the defective gait to incipient gout, and had forced herself to find comfort in the reflection that though a painful it was an aristocratic form of suffering.

But later on in the evening she had been met by a more tangible difficulty than this.

Vallence's services had been called for several times, and no Vallence had appeared in answer to the calls. At length, when she did appear, her manner and appearance were so strange that Lucy's former prejudices arose against her in full force. She thought either the woman

had been drinking, or that the nervous excitement from which she was suffering was symptomatic of approaching madness.

With her mind filled with this idea, it was not pleasant to have presently to face and to respond to a proposition made by Vallence herself.

This proposition was nothing less than the startling and unexpected one that Vallence should go into service with Lucy on the latter's return from her brief wedding trip.

It was startling, because when Lucy had suggested the possibility a short time before, Vallence had rather scoffed at it, and since then Miss Dacres had made her plans for the arrangement of her future home, under the impression that Vallence would certainly accompany her.

"I thought Miss Dacres and you had settled that you were going with her?" Lucy reminded the woman.

"We had, mam; but to-night I've settled that I go with you!"

"You mean that you thought you would ask her if I should like it?" Lucy gently corrected.

"I mean't what I said," Vallence replied with sudden ferocity.

Lucy felt a momentary thrill of fear! It looked more like the eagerness of hate than the watchfulness of love, this desire on the part of the woman to go with her! The next instant she felt inclined to laugh at herself.

What had she ever done to excite even a feeling of annoyance against herself in Vallence's breast? The woman had never received anything but gentle words from her lips, and kindness at her hands. This more reassuring view of the case having struck her, she said cheerfully:

"Well, Vallence, all I can promise now is to consult Mr. Valliant; if he agrees—"

"—He'll agree fast enough," Vallence interrupted, and swung out of the room in a way that confirmed Lucy in her first impression, namely, that the woman had been drinking.

Now, as may be supposed, to a lady who had led such an uneventful life, this event on the eve of her wedding-day made an unpleasant impression. It recurred more than once when she stood at the altar by the side of her showy bridegroom, who looked quite beautiful in his new clothes and apparent freedom from care. It recurred to her again at intervals during the week's wedding trip. And finally it recurred to her with such uncomfortable vividness on the evening of their return to Kailham, that out of the fulness of her heart she spoke just as they were nearing their pretty little house.

"I haven't told you before, Leonard but I'd better tell you now, in order that I may be ready with a decided answer, but Vallence who has been parlor-maid with us at my brother's for some time wants to come and live with me now."

Mr. Valliant's face had been turned away from his wife during this speech, which he made no answer. So presently she gave him a little jog on the arm, and asked:

"Did you hear what I said, Leonard?"

"Eh! what?" he asked, turning his face beaming with smiles in a moment round to her.

Any one who had seen that face black with savage scowls just before, would have been staggered at the rapid transformation.

To be continued.

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