

KATE VALLIANT.

With --the-- Circus!

(Continued.)

'Yes, sir. Kate is the young lady's christian name, and tho' this has happened I'll say still that a nicer young lady than Miss Valliant never set foot in the town. 'Twas here, to Quibbs's, she was brought first as Miss Delarue, when the accident happened that made her acquainted with Dr. Dacres, as you may have heard. I feel almost as if something had happened to one of my own, sir.'

The waiter continued working up his praiseworthy emotion, as he remarked the expression of mingled anguish and embarrassment which crept over the party's face.

'Tell me quickly about the--' He could not get the word out, but the waiter was ready to help him.

'About the murder, sir--for murder there's no doubt it is, tho' manslaughter was the charge Mr. Valliant was taken up on? Well, sir, as far as I can make out from the many stories told, the lady was ill, and her brother (that's Dr. Dacres) left her a draught to be taken at night, which her husband threw out of the window, giving her in its place deadly poison from the effects of which the poor lady died last evening, speechless and convulsed. Water-cresses, sir, fresh picked this morning.'

Charlie pushed the neatly arranged plate of water-cresses, reclining gracefully against a salt-cellar full of the driest table salt, away from him with nervous haste, and almost moaned as he rose from the table.

'Has the messenger gone to Blindon yet?' he asked quickly. 'Go and see, and stop him if he hasn't. I--I'll not send the note--I mean I'll write another. Anyway, get the note back, will you? and look sharp.'

The waiter left the room looking his sharpest, but lingered in the hall for a minute or two to tell the porter what his mission was, and why he had been sent on it.

At the bar he paused again to narrate the episode for the amusement of the presiding goddess, a Miss Quibbs, who liked to know what went on in the coffee room. By the time he reached the yard, the messenger had left it for Blindon and Charlie Glanville's letter to Kate was beyond recall.

When he learnt this compromising fact, Charlie's wrath rose high, first against Mrs. Godfrey Wyndham for having urged him on to this ruinously expeditious course, and then against himself for having been influenced by her.

If he had only waited quietly at home, Kate's decent feeling of consideration would have caused her to send him such a definite refusal when her father's infamy was made public, as would have deterred him from coming and justified him in staying away in everyone's eyes, his own included.'

So the calculating brain told the weak heart of this lover, as he restlessly roamed about the yard at 'Quibbs's,' or made brief excursions into the adjoining market-place and streets, waiting for an answer to that letter to Kate, which he wished now he had not written.

'If I had only breakfasted first, like a sensible, reasonable man, instead of writing in a hot haste to announce himself like an impatient ass he might have left town by the next train and Kate would never have known he had been so near her? But now she would think him a coward if he slunk away without meeting her, and he shrank from the thought of living in her memory as that for the rest of her life.'

After a little time he mastered his reluctance to the inevitable interview. He recalled all he knew of Kate's sensitive pride, and reassured himself on the subject of being drawn into more intimate connection with the disgraced man. At the worst an interview with her would be painful, not dangerous. Kate's reality would be his best friend. She would make him understand at once that she felt an offer of marriage made in ignorance of what had happened, was cancelled by the sad and shameful circumstances now made known to him.

In this way he would comfort himself for having mixed himself up with such a dubious state of things, and for a few minutes he would succeed. Then dread of what the world would say, and his friends and family would say, if it ever became known that on the very day of the inquest he had ranged himself by the side of the 'murderer's daughter,' overwhelmed and shattered him.

And all the while Kate's letter of refusal which would have set his pusillanimous heart at rest was wending its way to him by post.

Wandering restlessly about the town, dreading, yet longing for, the return of the messenger from Blindon, he found himself one of the crowd that was hanging about the police-station.

A handsome pair of cobs standing close by attracted his attention, and on asking at their heads some question about their age and breed, he was startled by having this additional information given him.

'They belong to Miss Gower, sir; she has just driven Miss Valliant in to see her father.'

Charlie Glanville felt himself recoil from the cobs and the groom with such involuntary celerity and force, that he realized it would be a physical impossibility for him to approach Kate now.

The best thing he could do, since his whole system revolved so intensely against coming in contact with the crime-contaminated man, would be to leave the place before a pitiful appeal from Kate might make him seem a brute, even in his own eyes, for leaving her.

He was not responsible for this cruel overthrow of all his intentions. Kate in herself might be dear as ever to him; but, if her father should be proved a murderer--

The thought was not to be borne! He would get away from the maddening atmosphere of the place before it unmanned him utterly.

He began to retrace his steps towards Quibbs's Hotel hastily. Against his will his eyes would turn to that horrible door through which his love had passed to visit and identify herself with her father. He quickened his steps; but before he passed it Kate came out, her face drawn with suffering, pale with intense feeling hardly restrained.

Her step was slow, but not faltering, for she was clinging to the arm of a man whom Charlie's jealous heart told him was Dr. Dacres.

In an instant the hat of every man in the crowd was off his head, and in a silence that it seemed as if a breath would have disturbed, Kate, held up with tender care by her lover, reached the little carriage.

Then Nina took her seat and the reins, and as they drove off Dr. Dacres' voice broke the hushed spell:

'God bless you, my Kate. I shall be with you soon!'

And, as with one accord, the words-- 'He's a grand fellow!' broke from the lips of all the people round.

Conquering her physical weakness, successfully struggling with the nervous disinclination to face either suspicion or pity, Kate forced herself to lift her head and look round as she drove off. The thought that was in her mind, the motive that inspired her, was that no action or look of hers should give colour to the idea that she believed in her father's guilt.

So the brave young face, purified by its fervent desire to do what poor honour she could to her father in this hour of bitter baseness, was held aloft for an instant, and the calm, sweet eyes pleaded unconsciously for judgement to be deferred.

In that instant she saw Charlie Glanville.

He seemed to be trying to hide himself behind two or three intervening people; seemed to be striving to avoid meeting her eyes; seemed quite willing that she should drive away without speaking to him! Yes! he seemed, and was, all these things; and yet he was Charlie Glanville!

As the look in her eyes changed from pleading tenderness to proud reproach, the man who had loved her so well while the sun shone on her, realized what he had done, and what he had lost.

It was as if he were standing erect now. The moment for coming forward was past; he felt, as he saw the gesture with which she turned and pointed him out to Nina, though he could not hear her words. For his self-complacency's sake it was as well the wind wafted her words away from him, for they would have made him think himself a far less finer fellow than he had considered himself all along.

'Look there, Nina; bending his head to avoid me! That's the man I once thought I liked better than my Dick!'

When she got back to 'Quibbs's Hotel' at once, carrying the note with him.

CHAPTER XXXIII. AND LAST.

COMPLETELY LOST.

That Mrs. Valliant had died from the effects of a subtle poison was ascertained, as was also the fact that the poison had been administered to her in the wine-glass which had been found standing on the table by her bed-side. In the minds of six of the jurymen a prudent and reasonable doubt existed as to whether this poison might not have been prepared for her by some person or persons unknown, against whom they were quite ready to bring a verdict of 'Wilful Murder.' In the minds of the other six no prudent or reasonable doubt of any kind existed. They were not only ready, but eager to bring in a verdict of 'Wilful Murder' against Leonard Valliant.

For some cause or other these six men carried the day eventually. Whether they were citizens of more credit and renown than the other six, whether they were less hungry, and so were more calmly resigned to the lengthened period of unjust seclusion, or whether their argumentative powers were greater than their colleagues', is not important. It is enough that they prevailed, and Leonard Valliant was committed to appear before the magistrates on the charge of having caused his wife's death.

It was a rasping time for Kate and all who loved her. Firmly convinced as she was of her father's innocence of the great crime of which he was accused--content as she was that Dick--the one whose opinion was first in all the world to her now--shared her confidence, still she realized that the danger of her father of death and degradation for all time, was of magnitude.

Innocent as he might be--as he was, Kate felt sure--Mr. Valliant had no witnesses to call to prove that innocence or strengthen his assertion. Dr. Dacres could only swear that the medicine he had left for his sister had been innocuous, and that the sediment found in the glass by her side in the morning had been of a deadly poisonous nature. The members of the unhappy man's own household could not it seemed, say more for him on their oaths than this--that he had sent the servants to bed, declaring that he would give the sleeping-draught to their mistress. That they had gone to bed, and had been waked up to hear that their mistress was speechless and unconscious, and to find that a glass, the sediment about which contained poison, was standing by her side.

In vain poor Miss Dacres heroically mastered her own emotion, and told out, coherently and truthfully, how happily her sister had lived with this man, and how motiveless any attempt on her life on his part would have been. In vain Vallance, in clearly enunciated tones, and with discreetly chosen words, told how Mr. Valliant had loved and valued his wife, and taken unusually tender

care of her' (whilst this witness was giving her evidence, it was noticed for the first time Mr. Valliant looked conscious stricken). Wretched and broken he had been all along, but no shadow of guilt had crossed his face till the parlor maid, who had accompanied Mrs. Valliant from her old home to her new, had stepped into the witness box.

In vain--all in vain--that Dr. Dacres spoke out strongly his conviction that poison which had been administered to his sister had not been administered by the hand of her unhappy husband.

'It is a poison of peculiarly specious nature. It happens that not a chemist in this town has kept it for months; Dick said before the coroner and before the magistrates. And it was many days after, before the trial was made of this, that a new element of interest was introduced into what was called throughout the public press 'The Valliant Mystery.'

For two or three nights, it was whispered, Vallance, the faithful servant who had followed the fortunes of her mistress from that mistress's maiden home into her ill-starred married one, had been hysterically restless in her sleep. Calling now upon her 'master to forgive her,' now upon 'Leonard to keep his promise.' This unaccountable, and apparently uncalculated for unconscious emotion on her part, got whispered about, came to the ears of the police authorities, and shortly in default of any other clue to the mystery turning up, led to the arrest of Vallance on the charge of complicity with the crime.

Meantime Charlie Glanville had been suffering tortures of indecision that fell little short of those of anxiety which Kate was enduring.

The brief glimpse he had caught of Kate as she raised her head and bravely faced the crowd that day at the door of the police station, had revived in his failing heart all the love and admiration he had ever felt for her. That this was but a reflection of what it was evident the other man, Dr. Dacres was feeling for her still--that it was in fact partly offspring of jealousy--is not to be taken as a proof that this revived passion was not a strong and vehement one.

It swept over him in his re-actionary force with a violence that seemed to shatter and weaken him. As he made his way back to Quibbs's Hotel with unsteady, uncertain footsteps, his heart beat so violently, and his blood tingled so tumultuously through his veins, that his brain refused to work clearly, and a hundred unpractical resolutions--each one abandoned as soon as made--coursed through his mind.

It was evident, even to his excited mental vision, that the disgrace of the father had not been detrimental to the daughter's position with her accepted lover, though that lover stood in the nearest relation to the murdered woman. It was also evident that Kate had not been ready, as he believed she would have been, to throw the new love off at the old love's bidding. She must have received that letter which he had written entreating her to come back to him--to blot out all that intervened between the interruption to their early love-dream, and his proposed resumption of it. She must have received that letter, and yet she let another man call her his 'darling Kate,' and listened to his promise of being with her soon! Charlie forgot his own determination of an hour ago, to give her up, and get away from the shadow she might cast over him socially, as thrilled now to the recollection of how lovely and lovable she had looked in her dignified, self-forgetting grief, now to the remembrance of how the 'other fellow' had dared to look at and address her.

A dozen detached sentences from passers-by all eagerly discussing the great local criminal event, fell upon his ears as he made his way back to Quibbs's. From these he gathered that, instead of anything like surprise or pity being felt or condemnation expressed about Dr. Dacres' fidelity to Kate in this hour of her lamented downfall, with one accord men praised and extolled, and applauded him for it. Charlie felt himself to be a coward as he went along listening to the commendation bestowed upon the man who was staunch to her, while he (Charlie himself) had been so ready to let her go down by herself--if go down she must.

Eventually, as he neared the door of the hotel, his thoughts shaped themselves into the resolve to stay in Railham and see the case out. Kate's answer to his last letter--the one sent from Quibbs in the morning, would probably be an invitation to Blindon, and he would go there, and he would go and ask her to let him re-assume his old proper place by her side? Or better still (here procedure stopped in) better still! he would not disturb her by his presence, but would stay on at 'Quibbs's' giving her the feeling that he was within reach, within call, until the worst was known.

Then again the reflection that this thing against her father would never be forgotten! swept over his soul, swamping all his nobler and more generous feelings. And he would rage in a futile way against fate and circumstance, the spite of Mrs. Wyndham and Fred and the fondness which still bound him against his better judgement to Kate in her fallen fortunes.

He was soothing himself with the thought that such a fine unselfish nature as hers would realize that the absolute devotion of her life to him would be but an insufficient return for the generous magnanimity he was preparing himself to develop towards her, when the messenger came back from Blindon.

He held his hand out impatiently, expecting to have put into it her loving cry of gratitude, her prayer for him to go to her at once.

Instead of this the boy gave him--and gave him with a grin that showed a perfect understanding of it all--his own letter, unopened!

'Yes, this, all? Charlie asked rather feebly, and the boy answered with avidity:

'Yes sir, I heard Miss Valliant herself say, 'that's all the answer; and I come along straight, as quick as I could, think-

ing you'd be glad to have it sir, as I've been some time gone.'

He had lost her!

Lost her more completely than if he had never attempted to seek her again.

Up to this miserable time, she would--whoever she might have married--have looked back to him as to a dear old faithful friend. She could always have regarded kindly, he would always have had a claim on her memory, which would have been creditable to him. But now he had forfeited all this, and lost Kate Valliant completely.

He knew in that one glance which she had given him at the door of the police station, when he was sinking away behind bolder men and women, striving to escape observation for fear of being committed to the confession of her as his friend at least, he knew in that one glance that she had sounded and fathomed him? He knew that he stood revealed before her as a coward who was afraid that his love for her might not be for his own welfare! For his own worldly advancement! He knew that she would henceforth think of him as having stood aside and suffered another fellow to bear the brunt of the blows which might be directed against her! and knowing this he knew he had lost her!

It was no use his staying in Railham after this. He went away home again, and made the best he could of his story to Mrs. Godfrey Wyndham. But all the time, though he posed in his narrative now and again, as one who had been love-loyal to Kate and fearless of public obloquy for her, he felt that Mrs. Godfrey Wyndham knew, as well as he did himself, why he had lost Kate so 'completely' as he had.

Before Mr. Valliant's trial before the magistrates had come to its legitimate termination, it was ended by the confession of Anna Vallance. She freely admitted that she had placed the poisoned draught by her sleeping mistress's side, and then unnecessarily added:

'I would have poisoned fifty wives if he had them to get him to marry me at the last. But now, when I see there's no chance of that only a good chance of a halter for him, and a mad-house for me, I'll tell the truth while I can prove it's true. If I had carried this through and he had married me, I'd have made him a good wife; the only pray I've said for fifteen years is the prayer that I might be let to make him a good wife. I can't see him die for what he hasn't done, so as I can't be his wife, I'll die to spare him.'

Kate went home with her father when he came out of prison, a free man, cleared in the eyes and judgment of all of any suspicion of complicity in the crime of which the woman, who was back in the asylum now as a patient instead of an attendant, had been guilty. She stayed with him then, till the vivid colouring was worn off the most painful portions of the picture of this period of their lives. Then, when Time had kindly toned it all all down, Dr. Dacres took the girl he had rescued from the circus to his own house, where, as his wife she can surely be left in safety.

It is a trouble to Mrs. Gower that Nina has not made a brilliant marriage yet. The seasons are rolling over her head, and though she is beautiful still, she is no longer graced with that beauty of youth which can afford to wait.

Dr. Dacres and his wife sometimes speak of the persistent way in which Nina clings to an unmarried life, and with manly penetration and discernment he says:

'No one can like Nina Gower more than I do; but she was spoilt in her first season; she will always look too high.'

Honest fellow! he does not dream of what his wife feels sure of--that Nina has never looked above him.

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