

KATE VALLIANT.

—OR—
With --the-- Circus!

(Continued.)

But now, since that squall which Blanche had created, all this was altered. It seems to me Charlie has to be dragged here. Mrs. Wyndham remarked angrily, and then she went on to enumerate various ways in which, if she were a young woman, she should punish him for such lame and halt devotion.

The votive offerings of tea roses and camellias ceased altogether, and at a concert at Swailebridge, Charlie came in late in the first place, and then pleaded an excruciating headache as an excuse for maintaining a stolid silence until the second part of the programme began. When the ache attained such proportions that he declared he must leave at once, as the howling made him mad.

"I should certainly let Mr. Glanville know what I thought of his conduct, and what other people must think of it, if I were in your place, Fred," Mrs. Wyndham said to her daughter, with ill-suppressed fury, when they got themselves through the crowd and into the carriage without the aid of an escort.

"It's all owing to Blanche," Fred replied. Then she went on savagely, "I don't care a bit for myself, but I'm sorry for Godfrey; Blanche will lay herself out to an extent to please young men. I could see she was furious with me that night I went in and found her fawning on Charlie, flattering him and being confidential with him, and looking up at him as if he was a god; but if he's fool enough to let his head be turned by her, I don't care, only I'm sorry for Godfrey."

"I call it disgraceful," Mrs. Wyndham said; not that she believed for an instant that there was any foundation for the scandal Frederica was beginning to build up. But her daughter was nearer to her than her daughter-in-law, and her daughter's temper affected her happiness and comfort more than Blanche did. And, in truth, she did not dare to disagree with Fred!

For that young home ruler had it in her power to make things go very crankily at Hasselton when she pleased. Since her engagement she had taken to active superintendence of the household management, incited thereto by the noble determination to make the most of any income that should be her own to handle, and the desire to be enabled to outshine Blanche.

One immediate result of her household management was that three of the oldest and best servants in the house gave warning and left. The cook, to whose care everything in the way of groceries had been entrusted for years, suddenly found that sugar for puddings was to be dealt out to her by the spoonful, according to the quantity required for puddings made from Miss Wyndham's special receipt book. The butler was told the system for checking the number of bottles of wine taken from the cellar was insufficient. "Miss Fred would re-catalogue the wine, have a book of her own, keep the keys, and only render them up to the butler when wine had to be brought up from the cellar."

The horses were cut off their corn. The head gardener was interrogated sharply, and suspiciously as to where some grapes, which were on sale at a grocer's in the town, and which happened to be of the same kind as the Hasselton hot-house ones, came from. On the gardener failing to give them information on this point, he was made to count the remaining bunches in the hot-house and given a book in which he was ordered to enter every bunch out. These restrictions were relaxed a little when it was found that the grocer himself grew the grapes in his own hot-house. But they lasted long enough to gail the gardener, who relinquished the post he had held at Hasselton for thirty years.

Altogether Miss Wyndham's system of household management—fraught, as it was, with mean suspicion and doubt of everyone's integrity and honesty—made her more unpopular at Hasselton than any Wyndham who had ever entered its portals. It brought about such a number of sudden and unexpected changes, that Mrs. Wyndham hardly knew whether there would be a cook in the house in the evening to prepare the dinner, or a butler to decant the wine. And the system was always more rigorously enforced when Fred was "put out."

Accordingly the nominal mistress of the house made a point of agreeing with her daughter, even when the agreement involved the aspersions of her daughter-in-law's character.

The following day the accommodating mother found that all her attempts to still the storm by pouring the oil of acquiescence on Fred's troubled spirit had been unavailing. Frederica, feeling that she was powerless to punish Charlie for having mortified her by his neglect, revelled in the consciousness of having the power to make other people uncomfortable. Accordingly, she went on what the servants called "the ramp" through the house early in the day.

She made her first raid upon the cook with a request that the latter would never again on her own responsibility send up any cold game, or cook any fresh dishes for the dining-room breakfast, without an order from either Mrs. or Miss Wyndham.

"Then you'll have to get up earlier than you do, miss, and come down to see what's in the larder," cook retorted.

"You must send me a written list of all that is left cold in the larder each morning with my early tea."

"While I'm writing the list my work will stand still, and the other servants won't stand that," cook protested.

"Then you shall make out the list the last thing at night, for have it I will; Fred went on working up her anger as she proceeded."

time in writing lists of all the cold victuals."

Now this spirit of disaffection which Frederica had evolved in cook spread rapidly through the house, and rendered life very unendurable to Mrs. Wyndham for the next few days. Her husband's was not a temper that softened or sweetened under adverse circumstances of the most trivial description, and it must be conceded to manly prejudice that a deformed and spoiled dinner, and a generally disorganised household are not trivial circumstances. At any rate, Mrs. Wyndham's wrath was roused by them to the point of bitterness which provoked his wife to revolt against her daughter's regime.

"It's not my fault that a decent servant won't stay in the house, but it's hard that I should have to bear the brunt of everybody's ill-temper," she said, with a sudden gust of self-assertion, after listening unintermittently to her husband's snarls for half-an-hour.

"Whose temper have you to bear the brunt of, Mrs. Wyndham, in addition to your own?" he asked sarcastically.

"She did not dare to say 'Yours,' but took refuge in a jermiad against Frederica."

"Fred does not make herself as pleasant in the house as she might. She finds fault with the servants when they don't deserve it, and interferes with them terribly."

"She always was a most agreeable girl," her father laughed. "Young Glanville will have a pleasant, easy time of it with her."

Instantly Mrs. Wyndham turned round and sideled with her daughter.

"She's a very clever girl, Mr. Wyndham, and her temper is too much like your own for it to be becoming on your part to find fault with it. Besides, I don't wonder very much at her being a little irritable now. Charlie Glanville is very neglectful of her. I really think he ought to be called to account for his conduct."

"Neglectful of her, is he?" Mr. Wyndham was nettled into being interested at once. It was to him incomprehensible that any one should dare to be neglectful of anything belonging to him.

"He hardly ever comes now without he is asked; and he seems absent and forced when he does come. I don't blame him so much," Mrs. Wyndham went on, "fearing she was kindling a fire which she might not be able to extinguish, and yet unable to resist the temptation of dealing a blow at Blanche, I don't blame him so much as I do Blanche. She's behaving shamefully, I think, trying to make him disinterested with Fred."

Mr. Wyndham glinted at her sharply. You don't like Blanche, I know, and I lo; take care how you try and make me believe that she is at the bottom of young Glanville's neglect?"

"He is there a great deal, and she has a most pernicious influence over him," Mrs. Wyndham retorted vehemently.

"I'll speak to Godfrey about it."

"Oh! I don't do anything so rash and uncalculated for," she cried. "Really, Mr. Wyndham, I hardly dare speak to you about anything, you go off in such a way about it. I don't mean for a moment that I think there's anything wrong about Blanche, only I fancy she wouldn't let any consideration for Fred stand in the way of fostering his fancy for Kate Valliant."

"If you can tell me what you really mean straightforwardly for once, perhaps I can advise you," he said; and then by degrees he learnt the story of how Charlie Glanville had been shocked out of his love for Kate, temporarily, by those stories to her detriment which were now known to be untrue.

"The young fellow is sick of his bargain from what you tell me, and I'm not going to have my daughter forced down any man's throat; Fred had better break it off with him," Mr. Wyndham said, when he had listened to his wife's narrative.

"Sick of his bargain! sick of Fred! it's unnatural of you, her father, to suggest such a thing."

"My dear, he's showing it forth as plainly as he can, and if Fred is a wise girl she'll let him go before he breaks away. She doesn't care for him. I know your daughter better than you do, Mrs. Wyndham, and when she sees the place that Roper has bought, she'll be very glad that Charlie Glanville neglected her."

"Mr. Roper is older than you are," the mother said thoughtfully, then she added: "not that Fred is romantic, and Mr. Roper certainly has most excellent qualities and might make any sensible girl happy; but has he said anything? Are you certain?"

"I'll relieve your anxiety to this extent, old lady; if Fred likes to be off with the present love she may be on with the Roper as soon as she pleases."

"I shall certainly advise Fred not to put up with coldness and neglect from a man before marriage at any rate," Mrs. Wyndham said with dignity. And the result of this conversation was, that Charlie Glanville had his order of release before he even asked for it.

"Roper to the rescue! Blanche cried gaily, when Charlie confided his dismissal to her. "I know it's on account of the gentleman who has floated into fortune on his erated waters that you have been let off so easily; he has bought that fine old place. Blenner, you know, and Godfrey says old Roper hankered after Fred from the time she wore red shoes and a blue sash, and was bad down at dessert to say sharp and disagreeable things." "Bless old Roper and his constancy! Charlie said fervently. "And now shall I write to Kate?"

"At once, yes, Mrs. Godfrey said, with unthoughted alacrity. "Kate will be a charming companion for me, ten times more interesting than that fatuous little Lady Marlspit."

So Charlie wrote to Kate Valliant.

CHAPTER XXIX.

KATE HAS A LETTER.

"Kate," Nina Gower said, going into Kate's room early one morning, "Mamma says you'll look at these patterns and just settle which shade you'll have." And

as she spoke Nina threw a number of patterns of ivory satin down before Kate, who pushed the patterns aside without noticing them, and jerked out: "Nina, I can't think of such rubbish! I've had a letter—such a letter!"

She spread her hands out over an open letter that was lying on the table before her, and looked up pathetically and apologetically.

"From Dr. Dacres?" Nina Gower had fought with and subdued (not killed) her own love for the only man who had as yet had the power to stir her heart. But the victory she had gained had not made her indifferent or callous to his weal or woe. She was far more jealous for him with regard to Kate than he was for himself, and anything like limp feeling towards him on Kate's part tried her sorely.

Kate shook her head in a desponding way.

"From whom then? Do speak Kate! Is it from your father? Is he worrying you about anything?"

Nina had settled herself by the drooping figure, and tried to turn the downcast face towards herself. But Kate's head went lower and lower, until it rested on the letter which appeared to be the source of her trouble.

"Dear Kate, it's not from that—that man who has left you so long without a word or a sign, is it? If it is, leave it unanswered till you have told Dr. Dacres about it; let him reply to it."

"He can't," Kate gulped out. "It's a letter no one but myself can answer; and oh! how I wish it had never come; how I wish he had never thought of writing it. Nina, he has loved me all the time; he has been tricked into seeming not to care for me; he loves me still, he isn't engaged to Fred any longer, and he asks me to go back and be his own Kate again."

"Does he?" Nina said, shortly, coloring with indignation. She knew that she was unreasonable in feeling indignant with the young man for having relapsed into fidelity, and with the young woman for rejoicing at the relapse. But her reasoning faculties would not play freely when Dr. Dacres' happiness was in the balance. It would be too grim a satire on trustfulness and self-abnegation if Kate repaid his trust in her by throwing him over at the first opportunity, as if her own (Nina's) conquest over her love, and perfect, complete renunciation of him were all in vain.

Kate smarted under the want of sympathy shown in the cold, abrupt answer, and felt herself to be a most miserable sinner indeed, since even Nina had no kind, sympathetic words for her. It was a fearful drag on her piteous eloquence to be asked, "Does he?" in chilling, repelling tones, just when she was longing to enlarge on the magnanimity and manliness with which Charlie took all the blame to himself. Still, Nina was her best friend, the only one to whom she could dare to speak of her misery and happiness, her weakness and struggles, if she made any of the latter.

Finally she drew herself up with an air of dignity and ease which was far from being her portion, and said: "He does, Nina. I don't wonder at your being surprised. After all my foolish conduct it is astounding to find a man willing and anxious to take me back just as if nothing had happened. But he does more than this, poor Charlie—he blames himself for it all, and—and—oh! altogether it makes me seem a wicked, ungrateful little wretch for ever having let Dr. Dacres in front of him—I mean above him."

Poor Kate gasped out the last sentence or two without any attempt to combine dignity with ease.

"I'm glad you're so touched by his generosity remembering that he has misjudged you for months," Nina said softly. "Poor, dear pet! How Dr. Dacres' generosity in never misjudging you at all, stranger though you were, badly as appearances were against you, must thrill you."

"It does," Kate said solemnly, but Nina Gower saw that the girl's heart was not in her words.

Indeed Kate had no room for any other sentiment in her heart and mind than grateful surprise towards Charlie Glanville, for remembering her and coming back to his allegiance to her. She had not yet grasped the fact that she was not glad of the renewed proffer of his love. That her sovereignty over him should be recognized by him and proclaimed to others, was delightful, at the first blush! The onus that was laid on her by this recognition and proclamation was a matter she had not considered yet.

Now into these subtleties of feeling, into this elation and forgetfulness, this gratitude and selfishness, this softness unconsciously felt for the one side, and hardness as equally unconsciously felt for the other, Miss Gower was unable to enter. No fond recollections of Charlie Glanville's boyish gallantry and devotion appealed to her, for she had never been cognizant of it. All her interest and sympathy was enlisted on the side of the man whom she had once been so near loving—or, may it not rather be said, whom she had once loved! She knew that Dick Dacres' happiness was seriously involved in the question, and so she decided it at once in her own mind. Let what would come to that other man, Kate Valliant was in Nina's estimation bound by every principle of honor and gratitude to marry Dr. Dacres.

"Do you mean to show him the letter?" Kate flashed a glance of indignation at the speaker.

"Show such a letter as this! What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking if it's a letter you can't show to the man you're going to marry directly, that you had better tear it up and think no more about it."

"Perhaps I had better think no more about the man you want me to show it to, as it is from the man I may be going to marry directly."

"You won't do anything rash and silly, under the mistaken notion that you're displaying romantic fidelity, will you, Kate?"

"You won't jeer me out of doing anything," Kate said doggedly. If Miss

Gower had not so openly arranged her forces against the absent lover, Kate would have been alive to the claims Dick had upon her.

As it was, if Nina is so keen about his interests, let her take care of them altogether; the girl thought, in a paroxysm of discontent with herself and everybody else. Then, as Miss Gower made no answer to her proclamation that she was 'not going to be jeered out of doing anything,' Kate re-read Charlie Glanville's letter, and found it less touching than she had done when first perusing it.

"He needn't take it so entirely for granted that I have been breaking my heart about him all this time; and I don't see why 'we have reason to be grateful for the remainder of our lives for Blanche having spoken the truth at last! I believe she only did it to spite Fred. Oh dear! thinking of those two seems to make me mean and spiteful."

Then she looked at Nina, and felt restored to her original faith in humanity by the sight of the pure, true face of the girl, out of whose mouth words of spite and meanness were never known to issue.

"Nina, I'll leave it to Dick; it's only fair he should know this, so I'll tell him how I've hesitated, and everything. Then if he says he would rather be without a girl who has been fearfully tempted to go back to an old lover, I suppose I must go."

"Will you speak to my mother about it first?"

"No; no one else must know that Charlie has humbled himself till I've decided. If I go back to him he will have triumphed, and then his triumph will be known."

"And Dr. Dacres' humiliation will be public property at the same time! I see! Mr. Glanville's pride is to be protected in any case. Dr. Dacres is to be the only sufferer in the eyes of the world."

"Perhaps he won't suffer."

"Perhaps he does not love you? you'll say next, Kate! Ask yourself, what but love could have made him want to marry you? Be reasonable, dear, give him credit for being sincere."

"I wish this letter had never come."

"But as it has come!"

"Oh, don't go over all the arguments for and against the cause it pleads again, Nina. I can't help wishing it hadn't come. It's not coming would have saved me so much pain and perplexity. Poor Dick; it's horrible that he should care for a girl who is in doubt as to whether she likes another man better or not."

Nina said nothing; but she thought this speech promised better for Dr. Dacres than any other Kate had made during the conversation.

The whole of that day Kate remained in doubt and indecision, and did not, therefore, write that reply to Charlie Glanville which was to put the latter out of suspense.

She read his letter over several times, and each time it touched her less. It was not exactly that the language in which his offer was couched was self-consciously generous and magnanimous. But the whole tone gave her an undefined impression of his feeling that he was these things.

"If I marry him, and he goes on feeling that he is generous and magnanimous about me all our lives, what a strain it will be on my gratitude and humility," she thought; and then again she fell to wishing more fervently than ever that "Dick would come and talk to her about it."

But the day passed, and no Dick came. In the morning a messenger brought a brief note from him.

"Dearest Kate,—Was on the point of starting to see you, but am called away to Lucy."

"Yours ever, 'Dick.'"

"He won't be here to-night," Kate added disappointedly, after communicating the contents of this note to Nina. I wonder if Mrs. Valliant is ill."

"One thing, if she is, she has got that nice, steady, middle-aged person, Valence with her," Mrs. Gower remarked; and Kate laughingly declared that she felt half inclined to go into Bailham and tender her filial services to her step-mother.

"I wouldn't go out this evening if I were in your place, girls. It's raining, and if Mrs. Valliant is not well, it would do her more harm than good if you carried the damp atmosphere into the room in your clothes."

"Poor Lucy!" Kate said pityingly; "she won't be half so comfortable in that overheated, over-perfumed little house of my father's as she was in the High Street."

"We'll drive in to Bailham to-morrow morning early and enquire for her. Nina, my child just see if I haven't dropped a stitch. I wish I could manage to knit stockings with two needles, four begin to present too many difficulties for it to be real relaxation work any longer. Kate, how restless you are. Where are you going?"

"To my room to write."

"Can't you write your letters here sociably with Nina and me?"

"It's rather an important letter, Mrs. Gower."

"Really? I hope it's about that lace for trimming that I begged you to write for last week. And Nina tells me you wouldn't choose the white satin this morning. Let us look at the patterns again by lamplight; you see, my dear, it's rather more important to have a color that looks well by artificial light than a faultless daylight one for you only wear it once on the day, and then it's nearly covered with flowers and veil. Nina, where are the patterns of ivory satin?"

Nina brought the patterns, and glanced anxiously at Kate. The latter knelt down by Mrs. Gower's side.

"Before I choose one I want to tell you something," she whispered. And then, without reserve she poured out the whole story of the letter and the state of excited decision into which it had plunged her.

"All day I have been hoping that Dick would come and help me, now I find he can't come to-night; and I must not sleep till I've ended it. I must write to Mr. Glanville to-night."

To be continued.

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