

KATE VALLIANT.

With --the-- Circus!

(Continued.)

She repeated her remark.

"Why not have her then?" he said carelessly.

"I thought—I want to tell you, she seemed so odd when she proposed it."

"Her oddness won't interfere with us. Her fellow servant may suffer from it, but that won't affect us. Let her come it she presses it; she may be a comfort to you."

It was perhaps fortunate that he should have so readily agreed to take Vallance into their service. Lucy felt when the house door was opened by Vallance herself, who looked quite at home. That she regarded them more scrutinizingly than kindly was apparent. Still, that was her way, and if Mr. Valliant didn't mind it, his peace loving wife resolved on giving Vallance a trial at least.

Meantime a series of circumstances, trifling in themselves, had brought about a condition of affairs that made Kate feel and acknowledge remorsefully and repentantly that she had erred even to sinning in having acted on impulse and emotion in the various crises of her life, instead of on principle. And this conviction was brought home to her, let it be told, by no new affliction consequent on her former conduct threatening her. It was brought home poignantly and painfully by the offer of the restoration of a long cherished joy and happiness to herself, which would involve the clouding of a life that she knew had been far more nobly lived than her own.

The temptation to snatch the joy, to secure the happiness—even at the cost which she fully counted, to another—was cruelly strong.

"Shall it be so, shall it be so?" she shall be left crying and praying, till the trifling circumstances which resulted in the consequences which forced this cry and prayer from her lips, have been recounted.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A REVELATION.

Mrs. Godfrey Wyndham was weary of most things before she had been six months married. By this, it is not meant to be understood that she was tired of her husband, or out of love with him, or indifferent to him. But after all he occupied but a very small portion of her time, she found. She had treated him so prosaically during their engagement that there was not a particle of romance left on his side to commence a country life with. And a country life unless it could be on a grand, extensive and exciting scale, was a dull life necessary to Vallance.

Godfrey had his out-of-doors business and pleasures to attend to, and they were quite sufficiently absorbing to prevent time ever hanging heavy on his hands. He had his duties as Lord Marispit's agent to attend to. He had his gun and pointers and setters in autumn and winter, and his fishing rod in summer. When he was not fully occupied with these, he had his luxuriously furnished home and his beautiful wife to turn to, and turn to them he always did with pleasure.

Being so fully and happily employed himself, it never occurred to him that his wife—loved and loving, well dressed, amiable, and placed as she was—could be dull. Vallance had always posed as such a Queen of Indolence, such a Goddess of Calm, that he never guessed that her spirit was more restless than the material part of her. But the truth was that the calm and the indolence had been maintained for many years by reason of the profound enervation she had, and there was nothing better for her to get if she moved than as she sat still. Accordingly she sat still, and wished for the time to come when she should be her own mistress, and have money in her purse! These wishes were both gratified now, and still a vague unrest and a nameless longing filled her breast. What was the use of being her own mistress, when there was nothing—or nothing much—within reach of her that she desired to do? And what was the use of the money in her purse, since it could not buy her an entrance into some charmed circle where she would be a recognized Queen or leader, which would be perpetually widening its recognition of her claim to supremacy in it.

No, in her new sphere, there was but scanty scope for her. Do what she would, she could not be the centre of attraction to any circle that had any very great self-widening powers. Beautiful as she was, stately as she was, interesting as she was, on account of her beauty, and stateliness and story, young Lady Marispit—little, rather plain Lady Marispit—overshadowed her in the circle that was above and outside Hasselton, and Mrs. Wyndham, her mother-in-law, overshadowed her within it! Overshadowed her by mere force of place and purse! and Godfrey, her husband, seemed to think it natural and right that it should be so.

It was Vallance's first experience of living in the country, and as she had not a single genuine country taste, she found it dull. If she had compassed her ambition, married Philip, and reigned at Hasselton in her youth, it must have been brighter and different, she believed; for she would have had the power of filling the house with a succession of guests, who would have been more or less amusing. But in this house to which Godfrey had taken her there was not scope enough for her to display her talent and tact as hostess. There was no motive for gathering a number of people together in a house in which there was no brilliant room, and with an income that would not permit her to arrange such a series of entertainments as in her eyes alone justified people in dragging others into the country.

It was a galling reflection to her that this monotony would in all probability continue to reign while she remained in her prime. She did not go so far as to

wish Mrs. Wyndham to die, but it certainly gave her no great satisfaction to see that her mother-in-law possessed one of those tough constitutions which may reasonably be expected to hold out to a good old age. Vallance felt that her glory would be paling before she sat on the family throne, and at times she almost regretted that she had not bided her time and wedded with 'a man in possession' instead of having been satisfied with an heir.

To this mind diseased, Frederica was not the right person to minister. Since her engagement, Miss Wyndham had developed in arrogance, and to no one did she more delight in displaying the pleasing quality than to her brother's wife. Still the memory rankled in Fred's breast that Philip had preferred Vallance smart for having created that feeling of preference strengthened.

"I'll keep friends with her while she can be of any use to me," the time-serving young lady would say, honestly enough to her mother. And Mrs. Wyndham would applaud the sentiment, and ask herself and daughter:

"Why, indeed, should Fred or any of them put themselves out of the way for a nasty, haughty, selfish, overbearing creature like the one poor Godfrey had been foolish enough to marry?"

Accordingly, Frederica behaved to her sister-in-law exactly as it suited her own ends for the hour to behave. If the Godfreys were going to have a dinner or evening party, at which Fred desired to appear, the later would be sweetest to Vallance while the invitation hung in the balance. The best flowers in the Hasselton conservatory, the most precious of the old family plate, the finest grapes and melons from the vineries and hot houses, and the best game that the larder were (according to the season) offered to Mrs. Godfrey Wyndham then. But as Vallance so found that these offerings were resuscitated and flung in her face, if they did not bring forth what Fred deemed a fitting harvest, she (Vallance) ceased to regard them as kindnesses or gifts, but looked upon them rather in the light of bribes or inducements to do something which was not congenial to her, which they therefore had no right to. Accordingly the flowers and fruit, the plate and game graced her hospitable table rather more frequently than her sister-in-law did. And when made the object of such neglect, Fred grew vindictive.

Once, and once only, goaded on by the reproaches of his mother and sister, did poor Godfrey attempt to set this crooked natter straight between the squaws of his tribe.

He did it on the occasion of invitations going out to a dinner that Vallance felt appallingly sure about, for all her best people, her 'right' people, had already given their promises to come.

"You'll find places for Fred and Charlie won't you?" he asked, when she read him out her list.

The way in which she lifted up her head and looked at him was answer enough.

"I think mother feels a little hurt at their being left out so often, that's why I asked," he explained, hastily. "I tell her our table is not elastic."

"And if it were, why should Fred deprecate it whenever we have other friends?" she asked.

"That I leave to you, dear. You certainly have the right to select your own guests. Only I thought I had better tell you that my mother didn't seem too well pleased yesterday. She said, at least, that you had found time to write a note thanking her for the flowers and game, but not to write an invitation to Fred yet, and asked me if that was coming. I told her I didn't know, and she got rather angry."

"Did she?" Vallance said indifferently. "You can tell her, if you like, that I should think it cheaper to buy my flowers and game from the regular dealers than to pay the price of having Fred at all our dinner parties. She is not ornamental, you must allow that; and she doesn't say things prettily enough to make her useful. She tries to be sharp and sensible, and her efforts only result in her being ill-natured. Why should I spoil the harmony of my little isolated bits of social pleasure by having her invariably?"

"My mother says it looks like studied neglect; and she says Charlie Glanville doesn't like it."

Vallance laughed incredulously. "Poor Charlie Glanville, what does he like very much in these days, I wonder? Not his prospects with regard to Fred, I'm sure. I wonder if it would make the poor fellow happier if I told that it was altogether a mistake that notion your people put into his head about Philip having been annoyed with Kate about Ralph the groom? I'm ready to tell him now that Philip scorned the idea. He knew Kate too well to entertain it for a moment, though I was jealous of Kate's authority at Hasselton, and tried to get Philip angry with her. Poor Charlie! I'm sure he would be grateful to anyone who reinstated dear Kate Valliant in his good opinion."

Godfrey felt indignant with and ashamed of his wife's policy as she unfolded it. He saw that her intention now was to throw his sister off the poor little place she held in Charlie Glanville's estimation, and reinstate Kate on her throne in his heart. It was only just that Kate should be reinstated by the hand that had helped to pull her down. But the way in which his wife pursued doing it angered him.

And, after all, what good would it do either Kate or Charlie now? Kate was about to be married to a man whom Godfrey had ascertained was in every way a finer fellow than the lover of Kate's youth. And Charlie would be a capital match for his (Godfrey's) sister, if he were not made to feel discontented and disgusted with her.

"I would advise you to let things remain as they are; no good can come from further interference," he said, restraining himself by an effort from saying 'mischievous interference.'

But he restrained himself also from urging any further Frederica's claims to

be present at their dinner party.

After this open hostility reigned between the sister-in-law, Frederica, to whom generous feeling never had been, nor ever would be, a snare, made a practice of enlarging to all and sundry upon the subject of the pernicious vanity which was including Mrs. Godfrey 'to launch out in the way she did,' as Fred phrased it. Then she generally added, kindly:

"It's not as if she had been accustomed to such a way of living, you know. Brooming Road was not at all the kind of nursery in which one would expect such tastes to grow. Poor Mrs. Carroll was half dependent on her eldest daughter's husband, who happened to be a rich and liberal old fool; but even as it was, she had a hard task to make both ends meet, poor woman, and Vallance was accustomed to 'society' in very shady ways only. It's such a change for her that her head is quite turned by it."

Some way or other these speeches, uttered in confidence to nearly everyone Fred knew who knew her sister-in-law, got themselves repeated—in the enlarged and decorated way in which ill-natured speeches do get themselves repeated—to the latter lady, who aloofly collected all this ammunition, and discharged it back with vigor upon Fred's weakest points. One, cleverly aimed at Charlie Glanville, shattered the little remnant of faith that young man had left in his auld little betrothed.

"I suppose Fred never let you believe any of the evil reports that were spread about poor Kate Valliant?" Mrs. Godfrey said to him confidentially one night, when he came home with Godfrey, after a hard day's shooting, to a friendly and informal dinner.

"She told me of them first," he said, stricken into truth by the suddenness of the question.

"But she must have told you at the same time, that they were untrue; because she knew that they were, you see, so she must have told you. She never even heard of them until I told her myself there was no foundation for them, and she knew all the while that they only arose out of my mistaken endeavor to make poor Philip more careful of appearances for his sister than he was. Not that he need have been," she added, with the beautiful candour that is born of not having the fear of any one before one's eyes, "but I was annoyed that she should have any influence over her brother, and so I found fault with, and tried to make him harsh to her."

"You were more cruel than you meant to be," he said earnestly. "Mrs. Godfrey you set a ball rolling that has crushed down on me very heavily."

"I retraced what I had suggested, and my worse suggestion, only amounted to this—that there should be no appearance of friendship or comradeship between a young lady and a groom. The wretched rumors that arose afterwards were never raised by me, and Fred knew all along that they were wholly, entirely, heartlessly untrue."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I was not here when the poor girl ran away, or was driven from her home; had I been, I should have told you what I have always taken for granted Fred had told you. But the truth is you were infatuated with Fred at the time, Mr. Glanville, and so never cared to make any inquiries about your half-forgotten old friend, Kate."

"My old friend Kate is my dear love Kate still, and as for my being 'infatuated' with Fred—I know I never—Mrs. Godfrey you're so beautiful you must be kind; is it too late for you to help me now?"

He was standing up leaning his back against the mantel board, looking down into the face of his hostess, who, in her tea gown of crimson plush, with her crimson-satin-slipped feet stretched out on the fender stool, was looking at him, far too beautiful not to be kind. And she was looking up at him, feeling a little contempt for the weakness which had let Kate slip from him, a little pity for his evident discontent now, and a good deal of amusement in the knowledge that the power now put in her hands by him, to pay off her little debts to Frederica. Indeed, instead of being filled with the spirit of kindness equal to, and corresponding with, her gracious beauty, she was half-hoping that 'Godfrey would come down from dressing, ask 'what they were talking about,' and so enable her to ventilate the subject of Fred's ill nature thoroughly before her brother and lover.

The door opened, and it was going to be according to her wish, Vallance thought. But instead of Godfrey's full many voice, his sister's jarring one fell upon their ears in the words:

"I thought you were alone, Blanche, or I shouldn't have come in unannounced. Charlie, you didn't tell me you were coming home with Godfrey. I took it for granted that you were going to dine at Lord Marispit's, as Blanche told me there was a big shoot there to-day. I came to stay the evening with you Blanche, thinking you were alone."

Mrs. Godfrey smiled the faintest assent that could be construed into a welcome, and Charlie fell of his own injuries blurted out:

"I say, Fred, why did you let me go on believing that pack of lies about Kate Valliant, when you knew there wasn't a word of truth in them?"

The quick angry blood flew up to the roots of Fred's hair, and there was more 'asp than usual' in the tone in which she answered:

"I was not the originator of what you eloquently call 'the pack of lies' at any rate, Charlie; and I didn't know it concerned you particularly to know whether what was said about her was true or false. I'm glad you're here to hear the last news about her; she continued sharply, 'Her dreadful old father has appeared upon the scene again, and has married an old maid with money; the sister of Kate's husband, or husband that is to be. What a delectable family circle it will be, won't it, with a rescued circus rider for its centre?'"

"I wonder you can jeer about Kate," Blanche said lazily, you seemed to be so

desperately fond of Philip (I shall never forget seeing you creep into the room in the dead of night to look at him, poor fellow, the night after he died. I did pity you so, poor girl!), and Philip idolized Kate, you know."

"How well you time your reminiscences, Blanche!" Fred sneered. "You want to make Charlie jealous of my poor cousin, I suppose."

"I'm not likely to be that," Charlie muttered ungraciously; and Blanche pointed the almost insulting indifference shown me in the remark by a smile.

"We might have had a pleasant evening than we are likely to have now, if, as you hadn't burst in upon so unceremoniously, Fred," Mrs. Godfrey said, as her husband and the announcement of the dinner came simultaneously into the room. "It's always a source of awkwardness when people have a habit of bursting into other people's houses without going through the preliminary courtesy of inquiring whether the visited wish for the visitor or not."

"What the awkwardness now?" Godfrey asked, carelessly. "Come on, Fred. Charlie, take my wife, will you?"

"The awkwardness is that Blanche forgets I'm her husband's sister, and treats me as if I were a poor relation," Fred said resentfully.

"No," Blanche laughed, with irritating good humor; "the awkwardness really is that you forgot to tell Charlie Glanville there was no truth, and nothing but ill-nature, in those shameful reports about poor Kate Valliant; but, having won such a prize as you are, Fred, he can afford to forgive you for being the cause of his losing Kate."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CHARLIE WRITES TO KATE.

It was not often that Charlie Glanville 'bore malice,' as the vivid and lingering recollection of a wrong done sometimes called, but in this instance he could not forget that he had been tricked and deceived into thinking evil of the girl he loved, and this by the girl he was engaged to marry.

The more he thought about it—and he thought about it very often, even when he was out shooting—which was a remarkable proof of the intensity of his feeling on the subject—the more certain he felt that there would be no happiness in either of their lives if he and Frederica married.

If they had married first, and he had found her out afterwards, the knowledge that they were irrevocably joined together would have made him look as leniently as possible upon the perfidy of which his wife had been guilty for love of him; at least, for his own household comfort's sake, he would have tried to look upon it in this light.

But as it was, he could not help remembering that the irrevocable step was not yet taken, and with the remembrance came the conviction that it would be a bad thing for him if he ever took it.

He could not help thinking how he should detest her sharp, incisive, self-satisfied ways, when he stood before the altar with her, and not only then, but ever after.

How her voice grated on him already, now that he knew all the things it had insinuated against Kate were false!

How intolerably it would jar on his nerves all the days of his life he married her—if that day ever came!

If that day came! The more he thought about it, the more he felt that it never ought to come.

For his manhood's sake, he ought to struggle against uniting himself to one who would in his estimation, render the union an ignoble one. And for her sake, for the sake of her own self-respect (poor and small as he deemed the latter), it would be well that she should marry a man who would not start in the matrimonial run for the connubial happiness stakes heavily handicapped by the knowledge that his wife was a spiteful liar.

In fact, to break off the engagement would be to offer her a fairer chance of happiness than could ever be her portion with him.

It was a horrible task to have to tell her this. He almost felt the stab of the ironical, sharp glance, and the stinging, blistering sensation her words would cause him, as he thought over the inevitable interview.

He was not afraid of her having him up for breach of promise. The extenuating circumstances he could plead as cause of the breach would bear too hardly on her to risk having them revealed in court. But he was afraid of losing Godfrey's friendship.

Since Philip's death, Godfrey had come to lead the list of Charlie's intimates. They were sporting friends, as well as close social connections, and the strength of the bond between sporting friends who never do violence to one another's sporting articles of faith, is one that no man or woman can correctly estimate.

In addition to this bond there was another. Each man had, according to his lights, loved and valued Philip above all other men. Naturally, with the brother-in-lawship of the future to cement these bonds, they grew to be intensely firm and strong.

So it came about that, on account of Godfrey, he (Charlie Glanville) hesitated through many days to break off the engagement which he had come to loathe. Meanwhile, Frederica was going through the well-deserved torture of knowing that all those about her were 'wondering why' her fiancée was so negatively in his attentions.

Though he had never been in love with her, he had, previous to this, behaved very much as if he had been. That is to say, he had written and come quite as often as she desired him to write or come, and he had sent her flowers, found a place at her side immediately whenever they met in public or private gatherings, and generally worn his blue ribbon very conspicuously.

To be continued.

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