

KATE VALLIANT.

With the Circus!

(Continued.)

This was not at all the way in which Lucy had intended to make known her betrothal. The event was denuded of its proper importance by being mentioned in this hurried and cursory manner. But what could she have done other than she did under the circumstances? So she threw aside the coy and bashful part which she had picked up just previously, and gave Mr. Valliant to understand that there must be no indecision, concealments, or delvings in the dark, as regarded himself. She did it, indeed, because she over-valued him, and thought other people would estimate her the more highly now that he had selected her to be the sharer of his future life. It almost irritated her to know that she was a middle-aged woman, and he an elderly man. She felt as if injustice had been dealt out to her by Fate, in that she had not been allowed to meet him and win him when she had been young and better worth meeting and winning a man than she was now. In fact, she felt discontented with her age, and annoyed that she had lived many years already in the world, and dispirited at the conviction that she could not expect to live so many more. Feeling thus, it was no wonder that she wanted to have her engagement known and ratified, in order that she might get all the honor and glory out of it that was to be got, and gather it all to herself.

It is not conducive to a man's self-esteem that he should have to ask his son-in-law's permission to be happy, is it? Mr. Valliant asked, with that false genial manner of his, which was so apt to impress the majority as being the airiest essence of light-heartedness and good feeling. "But that is the position I am in with my good friend Dr. Dacres. He assures me that he will compensate me for stealing my daughter by giving me his sister."

He took Miss Lucy's thin, nicely kept, pale hand in his as he spoke, and pressed his lips upon it, and Lucy felt that this was indeed the realization of some old, long past dream. To have her hand kissed and solicited by a tall, good-looking, strikingly gentlemanly man of the world, was blissfully bewildering to the dear old lady, who had never been the object of any but the most blunderingly honest, straightforward and unprepossessing advances in her youth. For one wild instant she hoped that Dick would prove an obstructionist, in order that Mr. Valliant—Leonard, she was beginning to call him to herself—might do doughty deeds for her sake, or at any rate, show himself ready to do doughty deeds. But Dick was almost heartlessly acquiescent. It seemed to strike him as being rather comical, that was all.

"Dear old soul!" he said affectionately to his sister Lucy, leaning across to hold his hand out to her. "I don't see why Mr. Valliant and you shouldn't jog along together, if it pleases you. I'm sure there's no just cause or impediment on your side, Lucy."

They were idle words, idly spoken to fill up a little conversational gap, and it seemed, to Miss Dacres at least, that it was mere touchiness on Mr. Valliant's part to cavil and seem annoyed by them. But this he did, in an affectedly hilarious way it is true.

"I hardly see why my dear friend Dacres should lay the stress he does on there being no impediment to our union on the lady's side. Even in joke I should shrink from asserting that my only child was a hindrance to my forming a second matrimonial alliance! But as Dacres is himself about to remove that charming obstacle from my path, I hardly understand (as I said before) why he should allude to her."

"Good Heavens!" Dr. Dacres cried, "I wasn't alluding to Kate, or you, or any one or anything connected with you, Mr. Valliant. I merely meant what I said, that my sister Lucy has no back numbers of her autobiography to tear up and destroy before entering on the new life with you!"

"Fair Portia's counterfeit was in the ugliest casket of all, I believe, Mr. Valliant. You're not paying my sister much of a compliment in your round about speech," Miss Dacres interrupted.

"Dear lady, come with Lucy and myself into my little salon, where we will discuss the future arrangement and disposition of my little nest of rooms. You will soon realize that compliments between us would be an attempt to pass the base metal of conventionalities where the real golden coin of perfect love and trust are already current. Dacres, my dear friend, I leave you in Kate's charge. Make yourself quite at home—as, indeed, you are. My poor roof is nothing if it is not a home and shelter for those who are near and dear to me."

"Doesn't he speak beautifully?" Lucy whispered to her sister, as they rustled through the little warmly-curtained and carpeted hall together. "What a lucky girl—woman I am, after all, Maria!"

"I hope he means all he says, for your sake," Miss Dacres replied, looking round scrutinizingly on the luxurious sham ornamentalism which distinguished Mr. Valliant's upholstery. "Dear me!" she went on, critically, as Mr. Valliant, craving their pardon for absenting himself to write a letter or two, left the sisters alone: "Dear me! looking round this room it seems impossible that a man could have chosen the things; it all looks too womanish for me!"

"You never said that of Mr. Valliant's taste before, Maria," Lucy said, with asperity.

"I had never been admitted to a view of his interior before, my dear; but I do say that a piano back draped with an Indian shawl is too effeminate an arrangement for a bachelor's house."

"You must remember he has had a wife. He is a widower," Lucy said plaintively.

"Goodness me! No, I haven't forgotten it," (though I believe the man has

himself, she thought); "but the pervading taste here isn't the taste of Kate's mother, who died a dozen years ago. But there, Lucy, I'll confess I'm not in the mood to judge Mr. Valliant to-day. We've lived together all your life, my dear, and Mr. Valliant has been the cause of the first secrecy there's ever been between us! If he makes you a good husband, I'll forgive him for that, though, Lucy, I'll forgive him for that."

"Why, Maria, you're crying! What is it you can't forgive him for? If his attentions to the family for my sake have misled you, you must, in justice, at least, exonerate him from any intentional—"

"Oh! yes. His has been the harmless ness of the dove, of course, my dear, and I'm only a silly old woman for having thought so highly of him that I didn't fancy for a moment he was teaching my only sister to deceive me."

"I'm sure you can't complain. As soon as we understood each other, we told you and Dick of our engagement."

"I trust he values you for yourself alone," Miss Dacres said, sententiously.

"My dear Maria, if worldly good had been his object he would have chosen you."

"If I had thought of marriage, I should have done so earlier in life, Miss Dacres said resignedly. Young people have a chance of fittingly forming themselves to give with each other, and of paring off their rough edges, and learning to give away. But the chances are sadly against middle aged and elderly people, Lucy, and I hope you won't start with any sentimental delusion as to Mr. Valliant caring for you for your own sake! If you want happiness, my dear, conduce to his comfort, and leave him to look after his pleasures himself. A man who swatches the back of his piano in an Indian shawl, and burns incense in his sitting rooms, knows what he likes and will have it."

CHAPTER XXV. AN ACCIDENTAL LIKENESS.

If there was one thing Kate Valliant disliked more than being in company with her father at this period, it was being left alone ostentatiously—of set and open purpose left alone—with Dick.

At Blinton all the regulation lovers' latitude was allowed them by Mrs. Gower. Dr. Dacres was invited there to dine twice a week, and after dinner the cosy-furnished and lighted library was at their service for an hour or so, in which to come to a clearer understanding and appreciation of one another.

Other incidental visits he was permitted, or rather expected, to pay, and then fortuitous circumstances generally brought about to him, delightful result of a quiet half-hour with Kate. But to Kate these quiet hours and half-hours were not delightful. She spent them chiefly in wondering what she should find to talk about when she lived with him altogether.

Ideas had flowed freely enough, and words to express them had fallen glibly enough from her lips, in the old days of happy, youthful intercourse with Charlie Glanville. But with Dr. Dacres, much as she really liked him grateful as she really felt to him for all his goodness to her, silence always seemed the better part for her.

Therefore, this day, when she was left to do the honor of her father's table to Dick, though she had suffered a qualm of apprehension on first hearing of her father and Lucy having agreed to be man and wife, she was almost glad of having the engagement to talk about.

It was something definite, something of material interest to Dick and herself, something that could be surmised about, hoped about, feared about, doubted about, perhaps even gently ridiculed. In fact it was a topic about which a lot could be said. Kate felt quite at ease as she reflected thus, and addressed him with an air of happy confidence that cheered and refreshed him.

"What did you think when you heard papa and Lucy had agreed to be Darby and Joan? I longed for you to be there when he announced it to Miss Dacres and me—when he and Lucy came in late you know, Dick? It was killing! My dear child you are no longer motherless; this dear lady has promised to be my wife! I believe I should have laughed if I hadn't felt furious with him for reminding me of my dear mother whom he neglected, and if I hadn't remembered that poor peace loving Lucy will have a time of it between him and Miss Dacres."

"I don't see why Maria need interfere," Dick rejoined. He was not profoundly interested in his sister Lucy's mature love affair; he would rather have conversed about his own. But Kate would not allow the conversation to wander out of a track that she found easy travelling. "They've lived together so long; the break-up of your marrying will be nothing to the break-up of Lucy's marrying, for that means poor Miss Dacres being left quite alone."

"It's better than if it had been the other way round. Maria has a much better income than Lucy."

"Has she? How?" Kate asked, not that she cared how, or why, or anything about it in reality, but it was good solid conversational ground to keep upon. It was safer and easier, and pleasanter than discussing their own future; which Dick was rather fond of doing.

"My Uncle Richard left Maria three hundred a year, Lucy has only one hundred and fifty from the sale of my father's practice. Maria's a female Rothschild compared to Lucy; but she's such a good generous old thing, that no one would ever have suspected she was the wealthier sister of the two."

Perhaps papa didn't suspect it, Kate said meditatively.

My dear child, don't accuse, by implication even, your father of being mercenary in such a small way. He has given me the impression of being very well off himself. Two or three hundred a year more or less can't be any very great object to a man who says he would have hired Blinton had it been to let."

It was safe to say that as he knew it wasn't to let, wasn't it? Kate laughed.

This cottage was rather a come down from Blinton.

"This cottage is pretty got up," Dr. Dacres said, looking round admiringly on the dodo of dull red Indian matting, and the walls above it well covered with trophies of blue-and-white china, and hammered bronze shields and brackets.

All that stuff is cheap enough Kate said contemptuously.

"Not the less pretty for being cheap."

"But less good as evidence of my father being well off," Kate argued. "It's no use, Dick; I know you are putting me down as an unfortunate daughter, but I do distrust Mr. Valliant, and I do think if he had known Miss Dacres is so much better off than Lucy, he would have asked Maria to be mother me."

"He will soon be undeceived, that's one comfort," Dick said.

"But he can't retreat very well; he can't say 'Then I will not marry you, my pretty maid' to Lucy when he hears that Maria has the most money. At least I hope he won't let it; if he has made a mean mistake, he ought to suffer for it."

"Let us hope he has not made a mistake, for Lucy will suffer for it if he has."

"Do you think it's possible she can care for him?"

"Why not?"

He's nearly a stranger to her. I can't fancy caring for a man one doesn't know much about—hasn't known for years—I'm a hasn't learnt to know, at least—Poor Kate, conscious that she had strayed out of the safe conversational track floundered fearfully for a moment or two then stopped, in cruel embarrassment, as she saw a shade of pained feeling, of sorrowful mortification, lower over Dr. Dacres' face.

"Oh Dick! she said, passionately, I'm always saying something brutal; but you oughtn't to be so quick to feel; you ought not to fancy that I could be thinking of myself and you when I speak of people like papa and Lucy."

"Don't try to explain dear."

"I'd rather you'd quarrel with me than speak in that way, she cried aggrieved and angrily distressed at the calm, hurt manner he stupidly suffered himself to adopt. "I'd rather you'd say out something sharp, and get it over than look as if there was lot more wrath to come which you were magnanimously bottling up for the present. Charlie Glanville and I used to spare savagely for five minutes very often, and then it was over and we thought no more about it and liked each other better than—"

"For mercy's sake, spare me the hearing of your experiences with Mr. Glanville and their result," he said, getting up. "No, thank you, no more luncheon. Shall we go and see what the others are doing?"

"Yes," Kate said, springing to his side, and clasping his arm persistently and confidently; "and, look here, Dick, do fly, out at me if I vex you, and get it over in a minute. You'll sadden and tame me out of all likeness to my proper self—you'll crush me, Dick, if you seem to brood over things and grow gloomy over every little mistake I make. I shall grow afraid to speak for fear of—"

"Little Kate, if you're in dread of me as your future husband, say so now, and let me be friend, brother—let me fill any relation towards you that you can trust fearlessly—only let me take care of you, my darling."

She stood back from him in amazement.

"It isn't possible that you're offering to give me up?"

"To give up the best hope of my life—the hope of being your husband—if the doing so will make you happier. Yes, this is possible, Kate; this is what I'm doing."

"I won't take your offer, she said, coaxingly; it's too noble and grand and magnanimous. I suppose I'm very conceited to think it all these things, and to assume it would be an awful sacrifice on your part. But, you see, I know it. What you've saved you prize, don't you, Dr. Dick? Now come in, and let us look at papa and Lucy, and give them the benefit of our sage example and advice."

"Do you mean that you really think we can show them an example of happiness?" he asked eagerly. "I can say 'yes,' if you can, Kate."

"Happiness is such a difficult, such an impossible thing to grasp," she said quickly. "Just the day, just the hour, just the minute, we have it, and then—comes the thought of what is behind and what is before, and bright happiness gets clouded and smudged. Now, do you know I should be quite happy, quite happy now with you, I should really, if I didn't think of Philip being gone for ever, and—well, yes, I'll be honest—and of Charlie Glanville being gone from me forever, just as much as if he was dead, for he's going to be married to that circumspet little wrap, Fred, who'll never let him remember me kindly for an instant without letting her sting into him."

"You remember him kindly, whatever he may do, Kate; you're very faithful," he said quietly, and Kate responded to the justice and the commendation of his words by saying:

"And you're very nice not to be nasty about it. I don't believe you have a bit of envy or jealousy in your nature. I feel much better than I did when we began talking—feel much nearer happiness you know. If we get over all our compulsory duets as pleasantly as we've got over this one, Dick, we ought to be really a very happy pair."

"Now we had better go and have a look at the other happy pair, and don't you go on the look out for flaws in your father," he answered, laughingly, a careless incredulity as to the existence of any such flaws floating through his mind. In the estimation of Dr. Dacres, Mr. Valliant was merely a vain, elderly gentleman, imbued with an overweening idea of his own importance, and endowed with a fatiguingly artificial manner. But if Lucy liked him and could tolerate the conceit, and be patient under the monotonous indiction of that manner, which never could forget itself and relapse into naturalness, what matter? He thought of such homely adages as 'one man's meat is another man's poison,' and

and 'a toad's beauty in a duck's eye.' If Mr. Valliant's superficialities and falsely genial ways were as poison and a toad to Kate, still it behooved Kate to remember that to Lucy they were of pleasant flavor and beautiful.

In fact the spirit of tolerance for everything connected with Kate was upon Dr. Dacres, and her father was very nearly connected with her, and therefore came in for the largest share of Dick's forbearance.

Mr. Valliant had written his letters and was back entertaining the two ladies in what he was pleased to call his 'little salon,' when Dick and Kate went in. That is to say he was entertaining Lucy with spirited sketches of his past career, which, as they had no foundation in fact, did credit to his claim to being a master of fiction.

He threw off these little verbal sketches very airily and gracefully, and as he hung each one up for a moment or two before Lucy's wondering, and admiring eyes, looking plaintively to Maria, as if she would ask:

"Can you wonder that I have preferred him to independence, peace, you, and old maidenhood? This at least is what Lucy vaguely wished to express, but Maria read the glance another way, and translated it thus:

"Hear him! mark what you have lost and pray that Heaven may make you such a man."

In the course of that hour which Dick and Kate had devoted to bickering and making it up again, Miss Dacres had undergone a terrible revulsion of feeling. The shock of finding her sister preferred to herself, was to her so unreasonable and unaccountable that she made frantic mental efforts to grasp something tangible and real, and in these she got hold of some truths. She knew that when she expounded these truths she would lay herself open to the charge of baffled and malignant, and with all her heart she wished that they had dawned upon her at an earlier stage. But at an earlier stage, she humbly admitted to herself, the scales of ridiculous vanity had been upon her eyes. These had fallen now, and she was seeing Mr. Valliant as he really was!—a boastful, good-looking piece of stucco, with very little good burnt brick or solid stone about him.

The revulsion of feeling was so complete indeed, that even when he lapsed into truthfulness by accident, Maria did not believe him. For example, when he brought out some really fine water-color drawings, and avowed himself the artist, Maria turned a distrustful eye upon them, and would have liked to have tested him on the spot by putting him to work with pencil and brush at once upon a new drawing-board.

To be continued.

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