

KATE VALLIANT.

With --the-- Circus!

(Continued.)

"Not for the world!" she cried in unfeigned dismay, "blame me, say what you like to me, but don't ruin the best prospect I've ever had. Godfrey, if it's any satisfaction to you that I should humble myself by confessing that I am going to marry for money and place, that I don't care for the man I'm going to marry, and that I do love you whom I'm leaving, you shall have that satisfaction, for I confess it all. But don't tell Philip Wyndham."

"Not for the world!" I deal him such a blow, the good honest fellow! Godfrey looked more splendid as he said this and stood further from her, than he had ever looked in her eyes before. But she never wavered in her intention of giving him up.

"Don't praise him to me, I can't bear it," she said angrily. "I would rather hear you abuse him for having come in your way. Why has he the place and the riches, boor and country bumpkin that he is? Why are you not in his place? Godfrey, if you were—if you were—"

"Good night, Miss Carroll," he interrupted sternly.

"You forgive me?"

"Make Philip a good wife and I'll forgive the sorry part you've played towards me."

"I won't be weak enough to ask you to forget me!"

"No, God help me, I can't do that!"

Then he turned away, and the best dancer in the room was lost to that ball to the chagrin of those who had been looking forward to having a reversionary interest in him after Miss Carroll had done with him.

As soon as she lost sight of his graceful gallant looking figure, and knew that he had gone, Blanche went in search of her sister.

"Are you ready to go, Lou?"

"Quite, are you?"

"Yes."

"Then he knows?"

"He knows."

"Blanche, tell me, how did he take it?"

Mrs. Beaufort asked, eagerly.

"Like the man he is; please stop asking questions. I'm tired and want to go home."

"Poor Godfrey! and equally poor Philip!"

Mrs. Beaufort uttered to herself.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRUGGLE FOR SUPREMACY

Philip Wyndham's sound, healthy, unsuspecting mind soon threw off the morbid, painful sense of mortification which had oppressed it when he parted with Blanche. "It was only natural, that a pure, proud woman, such as she felt sure Blanche was, should be reserved and distant, even with the man she was to marry, in these early days of their engagement. More especially since that man was nearly a stranger to her. He would soon win her trust and confidence and then love, and the delicate exhibition of love would surely soon follow."

He told himself these things over and over again on his journey down, and by the time Kate and he drove up to the lodge gates, his spirits were buoyant and his heart was light.

The gates were opened by a trim built, dapper looking young fellow, in place of Mrs. Curtis, the lodge keeper, and for a moment there was no recognition in Philip Wyndham's eyes as they rested on the stranger. But in another moment he had pulled up his horses, and was crying out—

"Why, Ralph! I'm glad to see you back! I hope you've done roving, and mean to stick to the Hasleton stables."

"That's what I'm telling him! Master Philip," old Mrs. Curtis hobbled out to say, but Ralph shook his head.

"I've been in the Circus too long, Master Philip—that is, Mr. Wyndham—to go back to the stables, now; well surely, this isn't Miss Kate! grown from the little girl who rode the pony bare-backed, to quite the young lady?"

"Yes, I'm Miss Kate still, Ralph," the girl said, holding out her hand to the old stable-boy, who had left them eight years ago for the fascinations of a circus. In the course of those years, Ralph Curtis had developed from a plucky rough rider into a daring, graceful, and accomplished circus-rider. And now, as the company to which he belonged were starting through the country towns about Hasleton, he had come home for a few days, to show old friends what a success the runaway stable-boy had achieved.

"I can make the old mother comfortable for the rest of her life, without her needing to work and more, sir," the young fellow said, with an affectionate glance at his proud and happy mother; "and I hope Miss Kate and you won't take it amiss, if I say that, when the troupe comes to Straceyleigh, I hope you'll come and see some of my feats. I'm the best man in the company, either through the hoops, on the bare-backed horses, or steeple-chase jumping."

"We'll come certainly, Ralph, and you come up to the house to-morrow, and tell us a few of your experiences; and, by the way, you can try a new mare I've just bought for a lady, over the hurdles for me; your hands are as good as ever, I suppose."

Little did Philip think as he gave this invitation that his old servant's acceptance of it would mar every plan he had made for his own life, and change the whole current of his sister Kate's career!

"I'll come surely sir," Ralph said, with sparkling eyes. He had not anticipated meeting with such a free and kindly welcome from the old master whose service he had quitted so unceremoniously long ago, and he longed to show them all at Hasleton how capable he now was of witting the world with his noble horse-manship.

"You'll see the mare pass through from the station presently; look her over, and let me have your verdict on her to-morrow; she's for the future Mrs. Wyndham."

Philip shouted back as he drove off. "My blessed heart! so the master's to be married at last; a grand London lady. I suppose! I wish he'd a' taken one we know'd about. They Londoners have queer ways; you can never tell what fashion they're going to be."

So Mrs. Curtis conjectured, and her son answered her according to his wider experience.

"Your grand London lady is very much like your country lady in these days. But I wish Miss Kate was the one to be married first! I'm sorry there's another coming to be mistress here while Miss Kate's at home."

"She'll be married before long, bless you Ralph. Young Mr. Glanville's here pretty often; don't be afraid! Our Miss Kate isn't going to be left to be a poor old maid without no man to take care of her."

"I wish she'd been married before Mr. Philip; Miss Kate oughtn't to have to take a back seat, and that's what she'll have to take when the master brings home a wife."

Ralph was saying this thoughtfully, when a groom came up leading the new purchase, and in the contemplation of the brown mare's perfect points the circus-rider forgot his fears for Miss Kate's future.

The next day the brown mare had a good deal of schooling, both from Ralph and Kate Valliant, and as she departed herself entirely to their satisfaction Philip wrote a glowing account of her charms to Blanche Carroll. In reply he received a letter from her, in which she said:

"Your half-sister appears to have an extraordinary circle of acquaintances! To spend the whole morning in the society of a circus-rider is surely hardly fitting for a young lady; if she is going to marry the man, I hope she will do it while there is still time for me to avert the consequences of the scandal that would ensue, from myself."

Philip read these astounding sentiments in a fog. At the first reading her meaning was not clear to him. Then he read them again, and realised that the woman he loved and was going to marry and put in the position of ruler over himself and his house and all that was his, suspected his sister—his mother's darling—the child who had been left to his guardianship—of a love affair with a circus-rider who had been left to his father's care, and his heart recoiled for the first time from Blanche Carroll. He said nothing of the contents of the letter to Kate. But she, seeing him receive and read and brood over it justly enough judged that those contents were not of a pleasing nature. "Could Blanche have broken off the engagement?" Kate asked the question of herself with a wild throb of hope expanding her heart. But she answered herself with a cruel, candid insight into the probabilities of the case immediately. Philip looked angry and disgusted, not miserably and dejected, as he would have done in the case of a rupture.

"(She shall not have it in her power to say anything of that kind about my little Kate in future)" he resolved, and so, with some little constraint, he asked Kate to give up her intention of having a little hurdle-practice on the lawn that morning under Ralph Curtis's auspices. It was hateful to the young man to thwart his sister even the pettiest pleasures. But he was driven on to do it now by his dread of the sharpest lash that can fall on a man—the lash of a cool collected, censorious, fluent woman's tongue!

Later on it seemed to him that Blanche had written in the strain she had in hopes of his goading him into breaking off the hastily formed engagement. "She neither loves me, nor respects me nor my sister, and she shall have her chance of freedom," he thought. And so he wrote manfully, dispassionately, and clearly, begging her to look well into her own heart, and if she could find no love for himself, no sympathy and compassion for his motherless sister there, to take back her promise and her freedom, and to believe that he would hold her blameless."

Meanwhile Blanche had told her sister of the line she had taken with regard to Kate.

"You've done a risky thing, take my word for it, Blanche; why can't you let the girl alone? she won't interfere with you."

"I'll take very good care of that, and I don't see that there was anything 'risky' in my expression of opinion."

"Some men would break with you for it."

"He won't do that," Blanche laughed, "but he may send his sister away, and spare me the sight of the air of authority she's sure to assume when I go as a guest to my future home."

"What makes you dislike the girl so heartily, Blanche? I believe your afraid she'll catch poor Godfrey's heart in the rebound."

Blanche reddened.

"I am so given to jealousy, am I not? I have such reason to feel afraid of the superior charms of Kate Valliant! I thought you knew me better than that, Louisa."

For all her sarcastic disclaimer, though Louisa had hit the right nail on the head. To keep Kate Valliant out of Godfrey Wyndham's way had been Blanche's one desire since she had seen Kate, and resolved upon renouncing Godfrey. Rather than endure that special form of heart and vanity pinch, which it would be to see Godfrey and Kate come together, Miss Carroll would have thought for a moment of giving up Hasleton!

It was more than a surprise to her when, in answer to her sneers about his sister, Philip shook his chain in the manner which has been described. She felt no alarm about his carrying his proposition that she should take back her freedom, and her promise, into execution, but she was incensed beyond description that he should have so disregarded her sovereignty as to have made it at all! So she wrote him back a letter which stung him more than her former one had

done; and yet he could not dispute the fact that she had right and prudent reason on her side.

"It would astonish so much of the world as knows us not a little, I think, if it were told that you offered to jilt me (that is what your offer comes to) because I had expressed some care and anxiety for your sister's honor—which I imagined was dear to you and bound up with your own. Pray, forget my remark about the circus rider, and if it is to be a match, and you approve of it, I will never have anything more to say."

"My poor dear Kate! you'll be nowhere with her," the disillusioned lover sighed, and, with all his heart, he wished that Charlie Glanville would not fear his fate too much, but would come to the point, and rescue Kate.

Godfrey Wyndham saw nothing of his family for some days after Blanche had made her revelation. By that time he had "got himself into form, and pulled himself together," as he expressed it, and his mother's voluble comments, and Fred's quiet sneers, on the subject of the engagement made no outward impression on him.

"She's the girl you knew at Oban, isn't she, Godfrey?" Fred asked.

"She told me she was the other night; I shouldn't have known it else," Godfrey replied, with a deeper meaning in his words than his sister fathomed.

"They live in a hideously out-of-the-way part of the town; who ever heard of Boomerang Road before?" Miss Fred went on superciliously. "My idea is that her mother keeps a boarding house for clerks in the city who like fresh air, and fancy they get it in the suburbs."

"If your idea is correct, Hasleton will be what my mother would call a 'pleasant change for her,' Godfrey answered carelessly.

"If she is as lovely as he says?" Fred went on.

"Who's he?"

"Phil—of course."

"What did he say about her? Godfrey asked, longing to hear that she was appreciated, and yet hating the fact of another than himself having the right to express that appreciation.

"Oh, he spoke sensibly enough on the whole, but Kate was rapturous about her beauty to mamma—"

Kate always was a brick of a girl, with out a bit of jealousy in her nature."

"I don't see anything particularly 'bricks' or 'magnanimous' in not being jealous of a cousin-in-law, eh, Fred?" he laughed in the soreness of his heart.

His sister as well as himself was suffering through Blanche Carroll's fickleness and falsity.

"(If it hadn't been for Blanche perhaps poor little Fred would have stocked him down in the end, and she'd have loved him, and been happy! Blanche will neither do the one nor the other!—and I shan't dare to look dear old Phil in the face. I'd better never see her again.)"

Yet all the while he was thinking thus, he was determining to take the agency of Lord Marlip's estates, which would place him close to Hasleton; at his gates, the good true fellow, at his very gates! Godfrey thought remorseful, ly.

Why?

CHAPTER VII.

"POOR PHILIP."

Hasleton was full of life and excitement. If any of the pleasure-loving people who were making it old walls resound with merriment from morning till night had secret carking reflections of their own to endure, they endured with such Spartan heroism outwardly that their sufferings were unknown and unsympathised with.

The Carrolls, mother and daughter were there of course. Without them there would have been no motive for the meeting in sylvan scenes of the Beauforts and the Laurence Wyndhams. For sparkling Mrs. Beaufort regarded Mrs. Laurence Wyndham as a kill-joy kind of woman, whom it was "not at all worth the while of any society person to cultivate." And she regarded Fredericka with something as near to aversion as she could bring her carelessly amiable self to feel for any one.

But though Mrs. Beaufort was antipathetic to the ladies of the Laurence Wyndhams family, she had a feeling of strong admiration (through which a soft gleam of pity shone) for Godfrey, the Laurence Wyndham's son. In her estimation he was as superior to Philip the squire of Hasleton, as her sister Blanche was to Fredericka. So in her woman's heart, in spite of her worldly mind, she was sorry for him in that he had lost Blanche, and more sorry still to see him at Hasleton.

He had come against his own conviction of what was wise and manly and honourable. He had come avowedly to see the pretty comfortable house which he was to occupy as Lord Marlip's agent but in reality to see Blanche, because Blanche had bidden him. He could not resist the temptation of being near her, though he had prayed and vowed never to look upon her again, and though it gave him poignant pangs of pain. It was a sharp stab to him every time her soft low voice struck in with a suggestion as to any of the arrangements and alterations that were to be made at Hasleton before she came to it as her home. For when she came she would be Philip's wife! lost to him (Godfrey) for ever! unless—well, unless good, kind, generous Philip died and left her free.

Godfrey, in spite of passion for her, could not bring himself to wish for this last fatal disengagement of his difficult love-knot. Philip in his perfect ignorance and unsuspecting of those past passages between his betrothed and his cousin was too confidently and affectionately anxious to see Blanche and Godfrey on friendly and familiar terms, for Godfrey not to struggle to strangle any wicked hope of his cousin-rival's death. Moreover, though Blanche's allusion to her future home and approaching marriage stung him to the quick, there was nothing calculated to pain him in her manner to the man she was to marry. To him she was as cool and indifferent as it

was possible for her to be contemporaneously with the constant putting forward of her claims to be his first, if not his only, consideration. Still, all things considered, in spite of the indefatigable zeal and indomitable perseverance with which Godfrey pursued every form of pleasure his was perhaps the heaviest heart in Hasleton.

His sister too had her skelton quietly locked up. Mixed up with the love she had nurtured, with encouragement, for Philip, there had been a desperate desire and longing to be the mistress of Hasleton. To see both man and house appropriated by another girl, roused all the latent cynicism and discontent of her nature, and polished up her powers of uttering unpleasant truths to the utmost.

Nor was Mrs. Carroll's happiness perfectly unqualified. The poor lady lived in hourly dread of something occurring to break off the engagement, and leaving both Blanche and herself stranded on the old dreary shore of pecuniary difficulties. And what these pecuniary difficulties had been to the poor lady, no one but herself knew. She had not known indeed how severe the unceasing strain had been, till the tension was slackened by the prospect of Blanche's immediate marriage to a wealthy man. Now her nerves were on the rack perpetually for fear Blanche herself might mar the prospect, and the tears she shed over her daughter's indifference to her fears and cautions were many and bitter.

Mrs. Laurence Wyndham's sorrows sprang from such an utterly mean and ignominious source, the sum of them was so entirely made up of ignoble regrets that her daughter was not to grasp the glories of Hasleton, and of vindictive against Philip for being about to marry in "the way he was, that she commands no sympathy."

As for Philip himself, the lord of all! the promoter of all the fun and revelry: the captain, caterer, steward and paymaster of the ship, as Admiral Beaufort called him facetiously, he realized day by day, hour by hour, the bitterness of the mistake he had made. But he kept a brave front, and made no outward sign of his severe inward suffering.

Lastly, how was it with Kate?

With Kate it was always as it seemed. She seemed to enjoy the fullness of life: the abundant occupation, the daily recurring excursions on horseback and in carriages to "sweet spots," and locally interesting places and points. And she did enjoy them, for Charlie Glanville was at her side generally on these occasions, and she did not look beneath the smiling surfaces of others for their hidden griefs and appointments. It is true that at times a passing cloud on her brother Philip's brow, would fling a corresponding shadow on her own, as her quick discernment told her "Phil was disappointed." But perhaps a minute after some attitude or trick of gait of Blanche's would show her in so gracious and beautiful a light in her lover's eyes, that these eyes would light up with happiness, and the light of that happiness would at once be reflected in the sympathetic windows to fair Kate's soul. And complacently allowing Philip's future to take care of it, she turned to the innocently intense enjoyment of her own present.

Perhaps Charlie Glanville was not the ideal lover for such a girl as Kate Valliant. He was only a fair, sunburnt young fellow, of middle height, rather broadly built, with a good deal of fun in his well opened blue eyes, and wide, laughing mouth. That he could not deliver himself of the humorous thoughts within him verbally, was just as often the result of his being stultified by Kate Valliant's superior prowess in badinage and repartee, as it was of his being a trifle clumsy in the management of his mother's tongue. Not that he was provincial, or ungrammatical; on the contrary, he was, if anything, too precise to be a good anecdotalist or "raconteur." But he was a thorough gentleman in look, word, deed, and thought. And as he was Kate saw him, and loved him.

There had been no words of plighting of troth or of open love spoken between them yet, but Kate openly expected "Charlie" to take his place by her side in every riding and driving excursion, and he openly deputed himself as if that place were his proper one, and all the other figures on the social canvas of this period of their lives openly acknowledged the young people's treatment of their own case to be a correct one. Nevertheless, they were not engaged. That is to say Charlie had never asked Kate to be his wife. Kate had never referred him to her brother. No engagement ring had been given and worn. Importunate friends had not even presumed to ask them when the wedding day was to be. Yet for all these things they knew, and every one about them knew, that they loved one another dearly and well.

The day had arrived on which "Cartil's Troupe," consisting of a hundred of the best trained horses, and the most daring and graceful equestriennes and equestrians in the world, were to arrive at and give one daylight and one lamplight performance at Straceyleigh. In accordance with their promise to Ralph Curtis Kate was striving to rouse her brother and their guests to the point of enthusiasm of going.

"Poor Ralph! Phil cut short my jumping lessons with him for some reason or other. It will be too hard on him if we snub him any more by not patronizing their performance to-day. Make Phil go, Blanche, he will go if you wish it."

To the afternoon performance only, Mrs. Laurence Wyndham intervened. "I couldn't think of going to such a low sort of thing in the evening myself, and I'm quite sure Fred wouldn't dream of it, but I have no objection to go in the afternoon if Philip has promised that the house party would patronise it."

"Phil never promised for his guests!" Kate was beginning (with a little laugh) at the praiseworthy endeavour her aunt was making to use the phraseology of the society papers, as if she were accustomed to hear it), when Blanche cut in:

"Nor for himself either, I have reason to know; the others will please themselves, but I should feel altogether out of it."

"Then naturally, my dear, if you stay away, Philip will stay with you." Mrs. Carroll hazarded this observation with some tremulousness. Her daughter might, she feared, scout the idea of Philip's company being essential to her. Fredericka on the contrary, anticipated one of those exhibitions of authority over him which were so stingingly painful to her. Neither of them were prepared for the rejoinder Blanche made.

"If the others and Kate go to this circus, I think it is unquestionably Philip's duty to go with them, and I shall not allow him to neglect his duty on my account."

"How kind it is of you to spare Phil," Kate said in good faith, and—

"How grateful Philip must feel to you for so publicly teaching him his duties as squire of the place, and brother of a rather horsey young lady," Fred sneered, unceremoniously smiting Kate in the desire to annoy Blanche.

"His duty as a brother of a rather horsey young lady," Kate laughed, "dear old Phil, tho' I should like him to go and encourage Ralph Curtis by being present, his staying home wouldn't prevent my going. I'm at home at Straceyleigh, and I've known Ralph ever since I was a little girl; you should have seen how proud he was the other day, when I took 'Nell Gwynn' over a rattling bank and water-jump—"

"I've no doubt he fully appraised your value in the saddle," Blanche said quietly, looking towards Philip, who came up to them at the moment.

"That he did; he said 'Miss Kate, you'd beat all the best circus riders I've ever seen, over the hurdles,' Kate told them, with a touch of gratified vanity.

Blanche smiled curiously. "Perhaps your friend the circus rider and you have prepared a surprise for Straceyleigh this afternoon," she said; "have you undertaken to try Nell Gwynn through the hoops—or are you going to make your own to a human wreath with Ralph Curtis, the Hasleton extensible boy, on eight bare backed steeds?"

"(It's not kind, it's not good of you to chaff about my sister and one of our old grooms in this way)," Philip murmured to his fiancée ("the others don't understand how purely idle and groundless it is; they may understand you").

"They may—only don't you misunderstand me," she replied in a low voice; don't trust that impulsive girl in that horsey atmosphere, without your protecting presence; she's quite capable of putting on a habit and making an unexpected appearance in the arena, on a 'managed mare,' or perpetrating some other piece of sensational nonsense."

"I shall go with her; to please me—will you come too, Blanche?"

To be continued.

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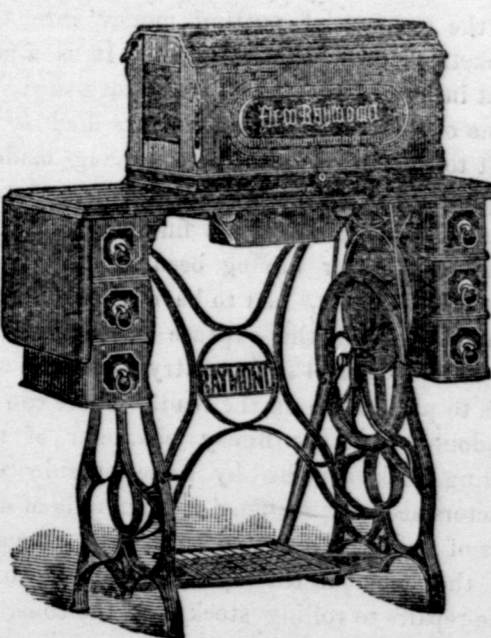
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