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The VALIANTS of VIRGINIA

(MRS. MALLIE ERMINIE RIVES POST WHEELER)

ILLUSTRATED BY LAUREN STOUT

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—John Vallant, a rich society favorite, suddenly discovers that the Vallant corporation, which his father founded and which was the principal source of his wealth, has failed.

CHAPTER II—He voluntarily turns over his private fortune to the receiver for the corporation.

CHAPTER III—His entire remaining possessions consist of an old motor car, a white bull dog and Damory court, a neglected estate in Virginia.

CHAPTER IV—He learns that this estate came into the family by royal grant and has been in the possession of the Vallants ever since.

CHAPTER V—On the way to Damory court he meets Shirley Dandridge, an air-burn-haired beauty, and decides that he is going to like Virginia immensely.

CHAPTER VI—An old negro tells Shirley's fortune and predicts great trouble for her on account of a man.

CHAPTER VII—Uncle Jefferson, an old negro, takes Vallant to Damory court.

CHAPTER VIII—Shirley's mother, Mrs. Dandridge, and Major Bristow exchange reminiscences during which it is revealed that the major, Vallant's father, and a man named Sassoon, were rivals for the hand of Mrs. Dandridge in her youth. Sassoon and Vallant fought a duel on her account in which the former was killed.

CHAPTER IX—Vallant finds Damory court overgrown with weeds and creeps and neglected condition. Uncle Jefferson and his wife, Aunt Daphne, are engaged as servants.

CHAPTER X.

The Hunt.

He awoke to a musical twittering and chirping, to find the sun pouring into the dusty room in a very glory. He rolled from the blanket and stood upright, filling his lungs with a long deep breath of satisfaction. He felt singularly light-hearted and alive. The bulldog came bounding through the window, dirty from the weeds, and flung himself upon his master in a canine rapture.

"Get out!" quoth the latter, laughing. "Stop licking my feet! How the dickens do you suppose I'm to get into my clothes with your ridiculous antics going on? Down, I say! Hark!" He broke off and listened. "Who's that singing?"

The sound drew nearer—a lugubrious chant, with the weirdest minor reflections, faintly suggestive of the rag-time ditties of the music-halls, yet with a plaintive cadence.

"Good morning, Uncle Jefferson."

The singer broke off, set down the twig-broom that he had been wielding and came toward him. "Maw'nin', suh. Maw'nin', he said. "Dopes yo'-all sleep' good. Ah reck'n dem ar birds wike yo' up; dey's makin' seh er 'miration."

"Thank you. Never slept better in my life. Am I laboring under a delusion when I imagine I smell coffee?"

Just then there came a voice from the open door of the kitchen: "Calls yo'se'f er man, yo' triffin' recon-structed niggah! W'en marstah gwine'er git he brekfus' wid' yo' ramshack-kin' eroun' wid dat dawg all his Gawd's-blessid maw'nin'? Go fetch some mo' fish-wood dis minute. Yo' heah?"

A turbaned head poked itself through the door, with a good-natured leaf-brown face beneath it, which broadened into a wide smile as its owner bobbed energetically at Vallant's greeting. "Fo' de Lawd!" she exclaimed, wiping floury hands on a gingham apron. "Yo' sho' is up early, but Ah got yo' brekfus' ready, suh."

"All right, Aunt Daphne. I'll be back directly."

He sped down to the lako to plunge his head into the cool water and thereby sharpen the edge of an appetite that needed no honing.

He came up the trail again to find the reading-stand transferred to the porch and laid with a white cloth on which was set a steaming coffee-pot, with fresh cream, saltless butter and crisp hot biscuit; and as he sat down, with a sigh of pure delight, in his dressing-gown—a crepey Japanese thing redeemed from womanishness by the bold green bamboo of its design—Uncle Jefferson planted before him a generous platter of bacon, eggs and potatoes. These he attacked with a surprising keenness. As he buttered his fifth biscuit he looked at the dog, rolling on his back in morning ecstasy, with a look of humorous surprise.

"Chum," he said, "what do you think of that? All my life a single roll and a cup of coffee have been the most I could ever negotiate for breakfast, and then it was apt to taste like chips and wet-stones. And now look at this plate!" The dog ceased winnowing his ear with a hind foot and looked back at his master with much the same expression. Clearly his own needs had not been forgot-

ten. "Reck'n Ah bettah go ter git dat ar machine thing," said Uncle Jefferson behind him. "O' 'ooman, heah, she 'low ter fix up de kitchen dis maw'nin' en we begin on do house dis evenin'."

"Right-o," said Vallant. "It's all up-hill, so the motor won't run away with you. Aunt Daphne, can you get some help with the cleaning?" "He'p?" that worthy responded with fine scorn. "No, suh. Moughty few, in do town 'cep'n low-down yaller new-issue trash det ain' wu'f killin'! Ah gwineter go fo' dat house mahse' fo' long, hammah en tongs, en git it fix' up!"

"Splendid! My destiny is in your hands. You might take the dog with you, Uncle Jefferson; the run will do him good." When the latter had disappeared and truculent sounds from the kitchen indicated that the era of strenuous cleaning had begun, he reentered the library, changed the water in the rose-glass and set it on the edge of the shady front porch, where its flaunting blossom made a dash of bright crimson against the grayed weather-beaten brick. This done, he opened the one large room on the ground-floor that he had not visited.

It was double the size of the library, a parlor hung in striped yellow silk vaguely and tenderly faded, with a tall plate mirror set over a marble-topped console at either side. In one corner stood a grand piano of Circasian walnut with keys of tinted mother-of-pearl and a slender music-rack inlaid with morning-glories in the same material. From the center of the ceiling, above an oval table, depended a great chandelier hung with glass prisms. The chairs and sofas were covered with dusty slip-covers of muslin. He lifted one of these. The tarnished gold furniture was Louis XV, the upholstery of yellow brocade with a pattern of pink roses. Two Japanese hawthorn vases sat on teak-wood stands and a corner held a glass cabinet containing a collection of small ivories and faience.

He went thoughtfully back to the great hall, where sat the big chest on which lay the volume of "Lucie." He pushed down the antique wrought-iron hasp and threw up the lid. It was filled to the brim with textures: heavy portieres of rose-damask, table-

CHAPTER XI.

Sanctuary.

The tawny scudding streak that led that long chase had shot into the yard, turning for a last desperate double. It saw the man in the foreground and its bounding, agonized little wild heart that so prayed for life gave way. With a final effort, it gained the porch and crouched down in its corner, an abject, sweated, hunted morsel, at hopeless bay.

Like a flash, Vallant stooped, caught the shivering thing by the scruff, and as its snapping jaws grazed his thumb, dropped it through the open window behind him: "Sanctuary!" quoth he, and banged the shutter to.

At the same instant, as the place overflowed with a pandemonium of nosing leaping hounds, he saw the golden chestnut reined sharply down among the ragged box-rows, with a sham-faced though brazen knowledge that the girl who rode it had seen.

She sat moveless, her head high, one hand on the hunter's foam-flecked neck, and their glances met like crossed swords. The look stirred something vague and deep within him. For an unforgettable instant their eyes held each other, in a gaze rigid, challenging, almost defiant; then it broke and she turned to the rest of the party spurring in a galloping zig-zag: a genial-faced man of middle age in khaki who sat his horse like a cavalryman, a younger one with a reckless dark face and straight black hair, and following these a half-dozen youthful riders of both sexes, one of the lads heavily plastered with mud from a wet cropper, and the girls chiefly gasps and giggles.

The elder of the two men pulled up beside the leader, his astonished eyes sweeping the house-front, with its open blinds, the wisp of smoke curling from the kitchen chimney. He said something to her, and she nodded. The younger man, meanwhile, had flung himself from his horse, a wild-eyed roan, and with his arm thrust through its bridle, strode forward among the welter of hounds, where they scurried at fault, hither and thither, yelping and eager.

"What rotten luck!" he exclaimed. "Gone to ground after twelve miles! After him, Tawny! You mongrels! Do you imagine he's up a tree? After him, Bulger! Bring him here!" He glanced up, and for the first time saw the figure in tweeds looking on. Vallant was attracted by his face, its dash and generosity overlying its inherent profligacy and weakness. Dark as the girl was light, his features had the same delicate chiseling, the in-breeding, nobility and indulgence of generations. He stared a moment, and the somewhat supercilious look traveled over the gazer, from dusty boots to waving brown hair.

"Oh!" he said. His view slowly took in the evidences of occupation. "The house is open, I see. Going to get it fit for occupancy, I presume?" "Yes." The other turned. "Well, Judge Chalmers, what do you think of that? The unexpected has happened at last." He looked at the porch. "Who's to occupy it?" "The owner."

"Wonders will never cease!" said the young man easily, shrugging. "Well, our quarry is here somewhere. From the way the dogs act I should say he's bolted into the house. With your permission I'll take one of them in and see." He stooped and snapped a leash on a dog-collar.

"I'm really very sorry," said Vallant, "but I'm living in it at present." The edge of a smile lifted the carefully trained mustache over the other's white teeth. It had the perfectly courteous air of saying, "Of course, if you say so. But—"

Vallant turned, with a gesture that included all. "If you care to dismount and rest," he said, "I shall be honored, though I'm afraid I can't offer you such hospitality as I should wish."

The judge raised his broad soft hat. "Thank you, sir," he said, with a soft accent that delightfully disdained the letter "r." "But we mustn't intrude any further. As you know, of course, the place has been uninhabited for any number of years, and we had no idea it was to acquire a tenant. You will overlook our riding through, I hope. I'm afraid the neighborhood has got used to considering this sort of no-man's land. It's a pleasure to know that the Court is to be reclaimed, sir. Come along, Chilly," he added. "Our fox has a burrow under the house, I reckon—hang the cunning little devil!"

He waved his hat at the porch and turned his horse down the path, side by side with the golden chestnut. After them trooped the others, horses walking wearily, riders talking in low voices, the girls turning often to send swift bird-like glances behind them to where the straight masculine figure still stood with the yellow sunshine on his face. They did not leap the wall this time, but filed decorously through the swinging gate to the Red Road. Then, as they passed from view behind the hedges, John Vallant heard the younger voices break out together like the sound of a bomb thrown into a poultry-yard.

John Vallant stood watching till the last rider was out of sight. There was a warm flush of color in his face.

At length he turned with a ghost of a sigh, opened the hall door wide and stalking a hundred yards away, sat down on the shady grass and began to whistle, with his eyes on the door.

Presently he was rewarded. On a sudden, around the edge of the sill peered a sharp, suspicious little muzzle. Then, like a flash of tawny light, the fox broke sanctuary and shot for the thicket.

The brown ivied house in the village was big and square and faced the sleepy street. A one-storied wing contained a small door with a doctor's brass plate on the clapboarding beside it. Doctor Southall was one of Mrs. Merryweather Mason's paying guests—for she would have deemed the word boarder a gratuitous insult, no less to them than to her. Another was the major, who for a decade had occupied the big old-fashioned corner-room on the second floor, accompanied by a monstrous gray cat and waited on by an ancient negro named Jereboam, who had been a slave of his father's.

The doctor was a sallow taciturn man with a saturnine face, eyebrows like frosted thistles, a mouth as if made with one quick knife-slash and a head nearly bald, set on a neck that would not have disqualified a yearling ox.

On this particular morning neither the major nor the doctor was in evidence, the former having gone out early, and the latter being at the moment in his office, as the brassy buzz of a telephone from time to time announced. Two of the green wicker rocking-chairs on the porch, however, were in agitated commotion. Mrs. Mason was receiving a caller in the person of Mrs. Napoleon Gifford.

"After all these years!" the visitor was saying in her customary italics. (The broad "a" which lent a dulcet softness to the speech of her hostess was scorned by Mrs. Poly, her own "a's" being as narrow as the needle through which the rich man reaches heaven.) "We came here from Richmond when I was a bride—that's twenty-one years ago—and Damory Court was forsaken then. And think what a condition the house must be in now! Cared for by an agent who comes every other season from New York. Trust a man to do work like that!"

"I'm glad Vallant is to occupy it," remarked Mrs. Mason in her sweet flute-like voice. "It would be sad to see any one else there. For after all, the Vallants were gentlemen."

Mrs. Gifford sniffed. "Would you have called Devil-John Vallant a gentleman? Why, he earned the name by the dreadful things he did. My grandfather used to say that when his wife lay sick—he hated her, you know—he would gallop his horse with all his hounds full-cried after him under her windows. Then that ghastly story of the slave he pressed to death in the hogshead of tobacco."

"I know," acquiesced Mrs. Mason. "He was a cruel man and wicked, too. Yet of course he was a gentleman. In the South the test of a gentleman has never been what he does, but who he is. But his grandson, Beauty Vallant, who lived at Damory Court thirty years ago, wasn't his type at all. He was only twenty-five when the duel

occurred."

"He must have been brilliant," said the visitor, "to have founded that great corporation. It's a pity the son didn't take after him. Have you seen the papers lately? It seems that though he was to blame for the wrecking of the concern they can't do anything to him. Some technicality in the law, I suppose. But if a man is only rich enough they can't convict him of anything. Why he should suddenly make up his mind to come down here I can't see. With that old affair of his father's behind him, I should think he'd prefer Patagonia."

"I take it, then, madam," Doctor Southall's forbidding voice rose from the doorway, "that you are familiar with the circumstances of that old affair, as you term it?"

The lady bridled. Her passages at arms with the doctor did not invariably tend to sweeten her disposition. "I'm sure I only know what people say," she said.

"People?" snorted the doctor irascibly. "Just another name for a community that's a perfect sink of meanness and malice. If one believed all he heard here he'd quit speaking to his own grandmother."

"You will admit, I suppose," said Mrs. Gifford with some spirit, "that the name Vallant isn't what it used to be in this neighborhood?"

"I will, madam," responded the doctor. "When Vallant left this place (a mark of good taste, I've always considered it) he left it the worse, if possible, for his departure. Your remark, however, would seem to imply demerit on his part. Was he the only man who ever happened to be at the lucky end of a dueling-ground?"

"Then it isn't true that Vallant was a dead shot and Sassoon intoxicated?" "Madam," said the doctor, "I have no wish to discuss the details of that unhappy incident with you or anybody else. I was one of those present, but the circumstances you mention have never been desecrated upon by me."

"I see by the papers," said Mrs. Gifford, with an air of resignedly changing the subject, "they've been investigating the failure of the Vallant Corporation. The son seems to be getting the sharp end of the stick. Perhaps he's coming down here because they've made it so hot for him in New York. Well, I'm afraid he'll find this county disappointing."

"He will that!" agreed the doctor savagely. "No doubt he imagines he's coming to a kindly countryside of gentle-born people with souls and imaginations; he'll find he's lit in a section that's entirely too ready to hack at his father's name and prepared in advance to call him Northern scum and turn up its nose at his accent—a community so full of dyed-in-the-wool snobbery that it would make Boston look like a poor-white barbecue. I'm sorry for him!"

(Continued Next Week.)

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D. M. NORWOOD,
Laurens, S. C.

To the Presidents of the Various Democratic Clubs of Laurens County:

You will please take notice that under the rules of the Democratic party of South Carolina the various Democratic Clubs of the county shall meet on the 4th Saturday in April, which will be the 25th day of the month, for the purpose of reorganization of the various clubs, and the election of delegates to the County Convention which will convene on the 1st Monday in May, being the 4th day of said month, at the County Court House, Laurens, South Carolina.

Please bear these dates in mind and call your various clubs together on the date above mentioned.

John M. Cannon, Chairman,
Democratic Party of Laurens Co.
March 26, 1914.

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