



The VALIANTS of VIRGINIA

By HALLIE ERMINIE RIVES
ILLUSTRATIONS by LAUREN STOUT



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CHAPTER I.

The Crash.

"Falled!" ejaculated John Vallant blankly, and the hat he held dropped to the claret-colored rug like a huge white blotch of sudden fright. "The Corporation—falled!"

The young man was the glass of fashion, from the silken ribbon on the spotless Panama to his pearl-gray gaiters, and well favored—a lithe stalwart figure, with wide-set hazel eyes and strong brown hair waving back from a candid forehead.

Never had his innocuous and but-ter-fly existence known a surprise more startling. He had swung into the room with all the nonchalant habits, the ingrained certitude of the man born with achievement ready-made in his hands. And a single curt statement—like the ruthless blades of a pair of shears—had snipped across the one splendid scarlet thread in the woof that constituted life as he knew it. He had knotted his lavender scarf that morning a vice-president of the Vallant Corporation—one of the greatest and most successful of modern-day organizations; he sat now in the fading afternoon trying to realize that the huge fabric, without warning, had toppled to its fall.

How solid and changeless it had always seemed—that great business fabric woven by the father he could so dimly remember! His own invested fortune had been derived from the great corporation the elder Vallant had founded and controlled until his death. With almost unprecedented earnings, it had stood as a very Gibraltar of finance, a type and sign of brilliant organization. Now, on the heels of a trust's dissolution which would be a nine-days' wonder, the vast structure had crumbled up like a cardboard. The rains had descended and the floods had come, and it had failed!

The man at the desk had wheeled in his revolving chair and was looking at the trim athletic back blotting the daylight, with a smile that was little short of a covert sneer. He was one of the local managers of the corporation whose ruin was to be that day's sensation, a colorless man who had acquired middle age with his first long trousers and had been dedicated to the commercial treadmill before he had bought a safety-razor. He despised all loiterers along the primrose paths, and John Vallant was but a decorative figurehead.

Vallant started as the other spoke at his elbow. He had come to the window and was looking down at the pavement. "How quickly some news spreads!"

For the first time the young man noted that the street below was filling with a desultory crowd. He distinguished a knot of Italian laborers talking with excited gesticulations—a

good living abroad. There's a boat leaving tomorrow."

A dull red sprang into the younger face. "You mean—"

"Look at that crowd down there—you can hear them now. There'll be a legislative investigation, of course. And the devil'll get the hindmost." He struck the desk-top with his hand. "Have you ever seen the bills for this furniture? Do you know what that rug under your feet cost? Twelve thousand—it's an old Persian. What do you suppose the papers will do to that? Do you think such things will seem amusing to that rabble down there?" His hand swept toward the window. "It's been going on for too many years, I tell you! And now some one'll pay the piper. The lightning won't strike me—I'm not tall enough. You're a vice-president."

"Do you imagine that I knew these things—that I have been a party to what you seem to believe has been a deliberate wrecking?" Vallant towered over him, his breath coming fast, his hands clenched hard.

"You?" The manager laughed again—an unpleasant laugh that scraped the other's quivering nerves like hot sandpaper. "Oh, lord no! How should you? You've been too busy playing polo and winning bridge prizes. How many board meetings have you attended this year? Your vote is prodded as regular as clockwork. The people down there in the street won't ask questions about patent-leather pumps and ponies; they'll want to hear about such things as rotten irrigation loans in the Stony-River Valley—to market an alkali desert that is the personal property of the president of this corporation."

Vallant turned a blank white face. "Sedgwick?"

"Yes. You know his principle: It's all right to be honest, if you're not too damn honest." He owns the Stony-River Valley bag and baggage. It was a big gamble and he lost."

Vallant was staring at the other with a strange look. Emotions to which in all his self-indulgent life he had been a stranger were running through his mind, and outre passions had him by the throat. Fool and doubly blind! A poor-pawn, a catspaw raking the chestnuts for unscrupulous men whose ignominy he was now called on, to force, to share! In his pitiful egotism he had consented to be a figurehead, and he had been made a tool. A red rage surged over him. No one had ever seen on John Vallant's face such a look as grew on it now.

He turned and without a word opened the door. The older man took a step toward him—he had a sense of dangerous electric forces in the air—but the door closed sharply in his face. He smiled grimly. "Not crooked," he said to himself; "merely callow. A well-meaning, manicured young fellow wholly surrounded by men who knew what they wanted!" He shrugged his shoulders and went back to his chair.

Vallant plunged down in the elevator to the street. He pushed past the guarded door, and threading the crowd, made toward the curb, where his bulldog, with a bark of delight, leaped upon the seat of a burnished car, rumbling and vibrating with pent-up power. There were those in the sullen anxious crowd who knew whose was that throbbing metal miracle, the chauffeur spick and span from shining cap-visor to polished brown puttees, and recognized the white face that went past, peited it with muttered sneers. But he scarcely saw or heard them, as he stepped into the seat, took the wheel from the chauffeur's hand and threw on the gear.

He drove mechanically past a hundred familiar things and places, but he saw nothing, till the massive marble fronts of the upper park side ceased their mad dance as the car halted before a tall iron-grilled doorway with wide glistening steps, between windows strangely shuttered and dark.

He sprang out and touched the bell. The heavy oak parted slowly; the confidential secretary of the man he had come to face stood in the gloomy doorway.

"I want to see Mr. Sedgwick."

"You can't see him, Mr. Vallant."

"But I will!" Sharp passion leaped into the young voice. "He must speak to me."

The man in the doorway shook his head. "He won't speak to anybody any more," he said. "Mr. Sedgwick shot himself two hours ago."

symmetrical, exquisitely perfect. The little group with whom she sat looked somewhat out of place in that mixed assemblage. Smartly groomed and palpably members of a set to whom John Vallant was a familiar, they had had only friendly nods and smiles for the young man at whom so many there had gazed with jaundiced eyes.

To the general public which read its daily newspaper perhaps none of the gilded set was better known than "Vanity Vallant." The new Panhard he drove was the smartest car on the avenue, and the collar on the white bulldog that pranced or dozed on its leather seat sported a diamond buckle. To the spacewriters of the social columns, he had been a perennial inspiration. The patterns of his waistcoats, and the splendors of his latest bachelors' dinner at Sherry's—with such



He Had Suddenly Remembered That It Was His Twenty-fifth Birthday.

Where the devil does he come in meanwhile?"

The receiver pursed his lips. "I knew his father," he said. "He had the same crazy zoltic streak."

He gathered the scattered documents and locked them carefully with the satchel in a safe. "Spectacular young ass!" he said explosively.

"I should say so!" agreed Fargo. "Do you know I used to be afraid my Katharine had a leaning toward him. But thank God, she's a sensible girl!"

Dusk had fallen that evening when John Vallant's Panhard turned into a cross-street and circled into the yawning mouth of his garage.

A little later, the bulldog at his heels, he ascended the steps of his club, where he lodged—he had disposed of his bachelor apartments a fortnight ago. The cavernous seats of the lounge were all occupied, but he did not pause as he strode through the hall. He took the little pile of letters the boy handed him at the desk and went slowly up the stairway.

He wandered into the deserted library and sat down, tossing the letters in the magazine-littered table. He had suddenly remembered that it was his twenty-fifth birthday.

In the reaction from the long strain he felt physically spent. He thought of what he had done that afternoon with a sense of satisfaction. A reversal of public judgment, in his own case, had not entered his head. He knew his world—its comfortable facility of forgetting, and the multitude of sins that wealth may cover. To preserve at whatever personal cost the one noble monument his father's genius had reared, and to right the wrong that would cast its gloomy shadow on his name—that had been his only thought. What he had done would have been done no matter what the outcome of the investigation. But now, he told himself, no one could say the act had been wrong from him. That, he fancied, would have been his father's way.

He smiled—a slow smile of reminiscence—for there had come to him at that moment the dearest of all those memories—a play of his childhood.

He saw himself seated on a low stool, watching a funny old clock with a moon-face, whose smiling lips curved up like military mustachios, and wishing the lazy long hands would hurry. He saw himself stealing down a long corridor to the door of a big room strewn with books and papers, that through some baleful and mysterious spell could not be made to open at all hours. When the hands pointed right, however, there was the "Open Sesame"—his own secret knock, two fierce twin raps, with one little lonesome one afterward—and this was un-failing. Safe inside, he saw himself standing on a big, polar-bear-skin, the door tight-locked against all comers, an expectant baby figure with his little hand clasped in his father's. The white rug was the magic entrance to the Never-Never Country, known only to those two.

He could hear his own shrill treble: "Wishing-House, Wishing-House, where are you?"

Then the deeper voice (quite unrecognizable as his father's) answering: "Here I am, Master; here I am!"

And instantly the room vanished and they were in the Never-Never Land, and before them reared the biggest house in the world, with a row of white pillars across its front a mile high.

John Vallant felt an odd beating of the heart and a tightening of the throat, for he saw a scene that never faded from his memory. It was the one hushed and horrible night, when dread things had been happening that he could not understand, when a big

man with gold eye-glasses, who smelled of some curious sickish-sweet perfume, came and took him by the hand and led him into a room where his father lay in bed, very gray and quiet.

The white hand on the coverlet had beckoned to him, and he had gone close up to the bed, standing very straight, his heart beating fast and hard.

"John!" the word had been almost a whisper, very tense and anxious, very distinct. "John, you're a little boy, and father is going away."

"To—to Wishing-House?"

The gray lips had smiled then, ever so little, and sadly. "No, John."

"Take me with you, father! Take me with you!"

His voice had trembled then, and he had had to gulp hard.

"Listen, John, for what I am saying is very important. You don't know what I mean now, but sometime you will." The whisper had grown strained and frayed, but it was still distinct. "I can't go to the Never-Never Land. But you may sometime. If you . . . if you do, and if you find Wishing-House, remember that the men who lived in it . . . before you and me . . . were gentlemen. Whatever else they were, they were always that. Be . . . like them, John . . . will you?"

"Yes, father."

The old gentleman with the eye-glasses had come forward then, hastily.

"Good-night, father—"

He had wanted to kiss him, but a strange cool hush had settled on the room and his father seemed all at once to have fallen asleep. And he had gone out, so carefully, on tiptoe, wondering, and suddenly afraid.

CHAPTER III.

The Turn of the Page.

John Vallant stirred and laughed, a little self-consciously, for there had been drops on his face.

Presently he took a check-book from his pocket and began to figure on the stub, looking up with a wry smile. "To come down to brass tacks," he muttered, "when I've settled everything (thank heaven, I don't owe my tailor!) there will be a little matter of twenty-eight hundred odd dollars, a passe motor and my clothes between me and the bread-line!"

Everything else he had disposed of—everything but the four-footed comrade there at his feet. "But I'd not sell you, old chap," he said, softly; "not a single lick of your friendly pink tongue; not for a beastly hundred thousand!"

He withdrew his caressing hand and looked again at the check-stub. Twenty-eight hundred? He laughed bleakly. Why, he had spent more than that a month ago on a ball at Sherry's! This morning he had been rich; tonight he was poor!

What could he do? He could not remember a time when he had not had all that he wanted. He had never borrowed from a friend or been dunned by an importunate tradesman. And he had never tried to earn a dollar in his life; as to current methods of making a living, he was as ignorant as a Pueblo Indian.

He rose grimly and dragged his chair facing the window. The night was balmy and he looked down across the darker sea of reefs, barred like a gigantic checker-board by the shining electric signs of the theater district laid their wide swath of colored radiance. The manifold calls of the street and the buzz of trolleys made a dull tonal background, subdued and far-away.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



"It's Very Good Living Abroad There's a Boat Leaving Tomorrow."

smudged plasterer, tools in hand, with crowds at its doors ready to clamor for money entrusted to it, the aggregate savings of widow and orphan, the piteous hoarded sums earned by labor over which pined sickly faces had burned the midnight oil!

The older man had turned back to the desk to draw a narrow typewritten slip of paper from a pigeonhole. "Here," he said, "is a list of the bonds of the subsidiary companies recorded in your name. These are all, of course, engulfed in the larger failure. You have, however, your private fortune. If you take my advice, by the way," he added significantly, "you'll make sure of keeping that."

"What do you mean?" John Vallant faced him quickly.

The other laughed shortly. "A word to the wise," he quoted. "It's very

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CHAPTER II.

Vanity Vallant.

"The witness is excused."

In the ripple that stirred across the court room at the examiner's abrupt conclusion, John Vallant, who had withstood that pitiless hall of questions, rose, bowed to him and slowly crossed the cleared space to his counsel. The chairman looked severely over his eye-glasses, with his gavel lifted, and a statuesque girl, in the rear of the room, laid her delicately gloved hand on a companion's and smiled slowly without withdrawing her gaze, and with the faintest tint of color in her face.

Katharine Fargo neither smiled nor flushed readily. Her smile was an index of her whole personality, languid,

Some hours later, in an inner office of a downtown sky-scraper, the newly-appointed receiver of the Vallant Corporation, a heavy, thick-set man with narrow eyes, sat beside a table on which lay a small black satchel with a padlock on its handle, whose contents—several bundles of crisp papers—he had been turning over in his heavy hands with a look of incredulous amazement. A sheet containing a mass of figures and memoranda lay among them.

The shock was still on his face when a knock came at the door, and a man entered. The newcomer was gray-haired, slightly stooped and lean-jawed, with a humorous expression on his lips. He glanced in surprise at the littered table.

"Fargo," said the man at the desk, "do you notice anything queer about me?"

His friend grinned. "No, Buck," he said judicially, "unless it's that necktie. It would stop a Dutch clock."

"Hang the haberdashery! Read this—from young Vallant." He passed over a letter.

Fargo read. He looked up. "Securities aggregating three millions!" he said in a hushed voice. "Why, unless I've been misinformed, that represents practically all his private fortune."

The other nodded. "Turned over to the corporation with his resignation as a vice-president, and without a blessed string tied to 'em! What do you think of that?"

"Think! It's the most absurdly idiotic thing I ever met. Two weeks ago, before the investigation . . . but now, when it's perfectly certain they can bring nothing home to him—"

He paused. "Of course I suppose it'll save the corporation, eh? But it may be ten years before its securities pay dividends. And this is real money.

Did Not Impress Landlord

Innkeeper Could Serve Excellent Luncheon, But Evidently Was Not of Literary Mind.

They are telling in Westchester a story about Richard Harding Davis and Governor Morris.

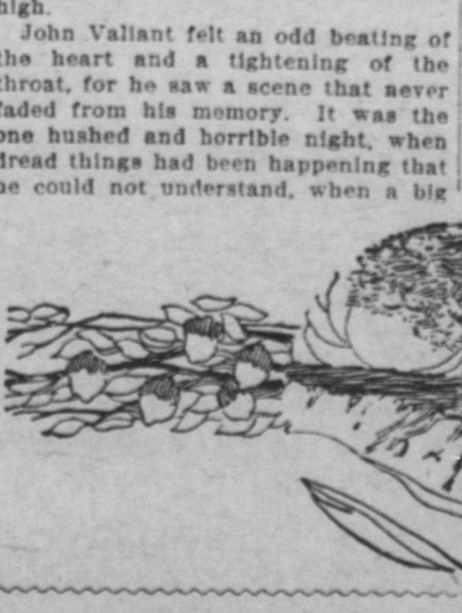
These two writers, it appears, were motoring the other day, and stopped at an inn for luncheon. The luncheon was excellent, and after it was over Mr. Morris went out to look over the car, leaving Mr. Davis alone.

Mr. Morris, in good spirits from his fine meal, said genially to the landlord: "Landlord, you'll be interested, perhaps, to know that my companion is Mr. Richard Harding Davis."

The landlord tried his best to look impressed and interested.

"You don't say," he remarked. "And what business might he be in?"

A few minutes later Mr. Morris took



his seat in the car, and Mr. Davis remained behind to settle the bill. As he counted his change Mr. Davis in his turn said to the landlord: "Landlord, my friend there is Governor Morris."

Again the landlord looked impressed and puzzled.

"Morris? Morris?" he said. "The name sounds familiar. Meat line, ain't it, sir?"

Nature's Adjustment.

In the case of all fish which take care of their young, a curious adaptation of natural law to circumstances is found. Those which take the greatest pains and care in sheltering their offspring have the fewest eggs, perhaps less than one hundred at a lay, while on the other hand, species of fish which pay not the slightest attention to their young produce hundreds of thousands, and even millions of eggs, at a single lay.

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