

The VALIANTS of VIRGINIA
By HALLIE ERMINE RIVES
ILLUSTRATIONS by LAUREN STOUT



SYNOPSIS.

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. He voluntarily turns over his private fortune to the receiver for the corporation. His entire remaining possessions consist of an old motor car, a white bull dog and Damory court, a neglected estate in Virginia. On the way to Damory court he meets Shirley Dandridge, an auburn-haired beauty, and decides that he is going to like Virginia immensely. Shirley's mother, Mrs. Dandridge, and Major Bristol 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. Vallant explores his ancestral home. He is surprised by a fox hunting party which invades his estate. He recognizes Shirley at the head of the party. He gives sanctuary to the cornered fox. Gossipa discusses the advent of the new owner and recalls the tragedy in which the elder Vallant took part.

CHAPTER XII—Continued.

Till the sun was high John Vallant lay on his back in the fragrant grass, meditatively watching a bucanerian chicken-hawk draw widening circles against the blue and listening to the vibrant tattoo of a "pecker-wood" on a far-away tree, and the timorous whistle of a bob-white. The whole place was very quiet now. For just one thrilling moment it had burgeoned into sound and movement: when the sweaty horses had stood snorting and stamping in the yard with the hounds scampering between their legs and the riding-coats winking like rubies in the early sunshine!

Had she recognized him as the smugged thinker of the stalled car? "She saw me drop that wretched brute through the window," he chuckled. "I could take oath to that. But she didn't give me away, true little sport that she was. And she won't. I can't think of any reason, but I know. Was she angry? I wonder!"

At length he rose and went back to the house. With a bunch of keys he had found he went to the stables, after some difficulty gained access, and propped the crazy doors and windows open to the sun. The building was airy and well-lighted and contained a dozen roomy box-stalls, a spacious loft and a carriage-house. The straw bedding had been unre-moved, mice-gnawed sacking and rotted hay lay in the mangers, and the warped harness, hanging on its pegs, was a smelly mass of mildew and decay. He found a stick, mowed away the festooning cobwebs, and moved the debris piece-meal.

"There!" he said with satisfaction. "There's a place for the motor—if Uncle Jefferson ever gets it here."

It was noon when he returned, after a wash-up in the lake, to the meal with which Aunt Daphne, in a costume dimly suggestive of a bran-meal poultice with a gingham apron on, regaled him. Fried chicken, corn-bread so soft and fluffy that it had to be lifted from the pan with a spoon, browned potatoes, and to his surprise, fresh milk. "Ah done druv ouah ol' cow ovah, sub," explained Aunt Daphne. "Case she gotter be milked, er she run dry ez de Red Sea fo' de chillon ob Izril."

"Aunt Daphne," inquired Vallant with his mouth full, "what do you call this green thing?"

"Dat? Dat's jes' turnip-tops, sub, wid er hunk er bacon in de pot. Laws-



She Bit Her Lips as He Snapped the Offending Bolt Short Off.

er-me, et er'ny do me good ter see yo' git arter it dat way, sub. Reck'n yo' got er appertite! Hyuh, Hyuh!"

"I have. I never guessed it before, and it's a magnificent discovery. However, it suggests unwelcome reflections. Aunt Daphne, how long do you estimate a man can dine like this on—well, say on a hundred dollars?"

"Er hun'd dollahs, sub? Dat's er right smart heap o' money, deed et is! Well sub, 'pen's on what yo' raises. Ef yo' raises yo' own garden-sass en chick'ns en algs, Ah reck'n yo' kin live longah dan dat ar Methusalem, en still haf mos' of it in de ol' stock-in."

"Ah! I can grow all those things myself, you think?"

"Yo' cert'n'y kin," said Aunt Daphne. "Ev'ybody do. De chick'ns done peck fo' deyselfs en de yuddah things—yo' o'ny gotter 'courage 'em en dey jes' grows." Vallant ate his dessert with a thoughtful smile wrinkling his brow

As he pushed back his chair he smote his hands together and laughed aloud. "Back to the soil!" he said. "John Vallant, farmer! The miracle of it is that it sounds good to me. I want to raise my own grub and till my own soil. I want to be my own man! And I'm beginning to see my way. Crops will have to wait for another season, but there's water and pasture for cattle now. There's timber—lots of it—on that hillside, too. I must look into that."

He filled his pipe and climbed the staircase to the upper floor. There were many bedrooms with great four-posted, canopied beds and old-fashioned carved furniture of mahogany and curly-maple, and in one he found a great cedar-lined chest filled with bed-linen and nappery. In these rooms were more evidences of decay. The bedroom he mentally chose for his own was the plainest of all, and was above the library, fronting the vagonade garden. It had a great black desk with many glass-knobbed drawers and a book-rack.

He lingered longest in a room whose door was painted The Hilarium. It had evidently been a nursery and schoolroom. Here on the walls were many shelves wound over with networks of cobwebs, and piled with the oddest assemblage of toys. There were school-books, too, thumbed and dog-eared, from First Reader to Caesar's Gallic Wars, with names of small Vallants scrawled on their fly-leaves. He carefully relocked the door of this room; he wanted to dust those toys and books with his own hands.

In the upper hall again he leaned from the window, sniffing the far-flung scent of orchards and peach-bloom fence-rows. The soft whirring sound of a bird's wing went past, almost brushing his startled face, and the old oaks seemed to stretch their bent limbs with a faithful brute-like yawn of pleasure. In the room below he could hear the vigorous sound of Aunt Daphne's hard-driven broom and the sound flooded the echoing space with a comfortable commotion.

He went to his trunk and fished out a soft shirt on which he knotted a loose tie, exchanged his Panama for a slouch hat, and whistling the bar-carole from Tales of Hoffmann, went gaily out. "I feel tremendously alive today," he confided to the dog, as he tramped through the lush grass. "If you see me ladie the muck out of that fountain with my own fair hands, don't have a fit. I'm liable to do anything."

His eye swept up and down the slope. "There probably isn't a finer site for a house in the whole South," he told himself. "The living-rooms front south and west. We'll get scrumptious sunsets from that back porch. And on the other side there's the view clear to the Blue Ridge."

He skirted the lake. "Only to grub out some of the lilies—there's too many of them—and straighten the rim—and weed the pebble margin to give those green rocks a show. I'll build a little wharf below them to dive from, and—yes, I'll stock it with spotted trout."

He was but a few hundred yards from the house, yet the silence was so deep that there might have been no habitation within fifty miles. All at once he stopped short; there was a sudden movement in the thicket beyond—the sound of light fast footfalls, as of some one running away.

He made a lunge for the dog, but with a growl Chum tore himself from the restraining grasp and dashed into the bushes. "A child, no doubt," he thought as he plunged in pursuit, "and that lubberly brute will scare it half to death!"

He pulled up with an exclamation. In a narrow wood-path a little way from him, partly hidden by a windfall, stood a girl, her skirt transfixed with a wickedly jagged sapling. He saw instantly how it had happened; the windfall had blocked the way, and she had sprung clear over it, not noting the screened spear, which now held her as effectually as any railroad spike.

In another moment Vallant had reached her and met her face, flushed, half defiant, her eyes a blue gleam of smoldering anger as she desperately, almost savagely, thrust wild tendrils of flame-colored hair beneath the broad curved brim of her straw hat. At her feet lay a great armful of cape jessamines.

A little thrill, light and warm and joyous, ran through him. Until that instant he had not recognized her.

CHAPTER XIII.

John Vallant Makes a Discovery. "I'm so sorry," was what he said, as he knelt to release her, and she was grateful that his tone was unminged with amusement. She bit her lips, as by sheer strength of elbow and knee he snapped the offending bolt short off—one of those quick exhibitions of reserved strength that every woman likes. "I don't know how I could have been so silly—thank you so much," said Shirley, panting slightly from her exertions. "I'm not the least bit hurt—only my dress—and you know very well that I wasn't afraid of that ridiculous dog." A richer glow stole to her cheeks as she spoke, a burn-

ing recollection of a rose, which from her horse that morning at Damory Court, she had glimpsed in its glass on the porch.

Both laughed a little. He imagined that he could smell that wonderful hair, a subtle fragrance like that of sun-dried seaweed or the elusive scent that clings to a tuft of long-plucked Spanish moss. "Chum stands ab-solved, then," he said, bending to sweep together the scattered jessamine. "Do you—do you run like that when you're not frightened?"

"When I'm caught red-handed. Don't you?" He looked puzzled. She pointed to the flowers. "I had stolen them, and I was trying to 'scape off wid 'em' as the negroes say. Shocking, isn't it? But you see, nobody has lived here since long before I was born, and I suppose the flower-thieving habit has become in-grown."

"But," he interrupted, "there's acres of them going to waste. Why on earth shouldn't you have them?"

"Of course I know better today, but there was a—special reason. We have none and this is the nearest



"It Won't Hurt," Reassured the Would-Be Operator.

place where they grow. My mother wanted some for this particular day." "Good heavens!" he cried. "You don't think you can't go right on taking them? Why, you can 'scape off' with the whole garden any time!"

A droll little gleam of azure mischief darted at him suddenly out of her eyes and then dodged back again. "Aren't you just a little rash with other people's property?"

"Other people's?" "What will the owner say?" He bent back one of the long jessamine stems and wound it around the others. "I can answer for him. Besides, I owe you something, you know. I robbed you this morning—of your brush."

She looked at him, abruptly serious. "Why did you do that?" "Sanctuary. His two beady eyes begged so hard for it. Twenty ravenous hounds," she said, "and a dozen galloping horses. And look what a poor shivering little red-brown morsel I am!"

For just an instant the bronze-gold head gave a quick imperious toss, like a high-mettled pony under the flick of the whip. But as suddenly the shadow of resentment passed; the mobile face under the bent hat-brim turned thoughtful. She looked again at him. "Do you think it's wrong to kill things?" she asked gravely.

"Oh, dear, no," he smiled. "I haven't a single ism. I'm not even a vegetarian."

"But you would be if you had to kill your own meat?" "Perhaps. So many of us would. As a matter of fact, I don't hunt myself, but I'm no reformer."

"Why don't you hunt?" "I don't enjoy it." He flushed slightly. "I hate firearms," he said, a trifle diffidently. "I always have. I don't know why. Idiosyncrasy, I suppose. But I shouldn't care for hunting, even with bows and arrows. I would kill a tiger or a poisonous reptile, or anything else, in case of necessity. But even then I should hardly enjoy it. I know some animals are pests and have to be killed. Some men do, too. But I don't like to do it myself."

"Wouldn't that theory lead to a wholesale evasion of responsibility?" "Perhaps. I'm no philosopher. But a blackbird or a red fox is so pretty, even when he is thieving, that I'd let him have the corn. I'm like the Lord High Executioner in 'The Mikado' who was so tender-hearted that he couldn't execute anybody and planned to begin with guinea-pigs and work up. Only I'm afraid I couldn't even manage the guinea-pigs."

She laughed. "You wouldn't find many to practice on here. Do you raise guinea-pigs up North?"

"No, never."

"Do you like the general plan of the place?"

"Do I like it?" cried John Vallant. "Do I like it!"

A quick pleasure glanced across her face. "It's nice of you to say it that way. We ask that question so often it's become mechanical. You see, it's our great show-place."

At that moment a patter of footsteps and shrill shrieks came flying over the last-year's leaves beyond the lilac bushes. It's Rickey Snyder, she said, peering out smilingly as two children, pursued and pursued, burst into view. "Hush!" she whispered; "I wonder what they are up to."

The pair came in a whirl through the bushes. The foremost was a seven-year-old negro girl, in a single short cottonade garment, wizened, barelegged and bareheaded, her black wool parted in little angular patches and tightly wrapped with bits of cord. The other was white and as freckled as a turkey's egg, with hair cropped like a boy's. She held a carving-knife cut from a shingle, whose edge had been deeply ensanguined by poke-berry juice. The pursued one stumbled over a root and came to earth in a heap, while the other pounced upon her like a wildcat.

"Hold still, you limb of Satan," she scolded. "How can I do it when you won't stay still?"

"Oh, lawd," moaned the prostrate one, in simulated terror; "oh, Doctah, good Doctah Snyder, has Ah gitter hab dat operation? Is yo' sho' gwine ter twitter aroun' mah insides wid dem knives en saws en things?"

"It won't hurt," reassured the would-be operator; "no more than it did Miss Poly Gifford. And I'll put your liver right back again."

"Wait er minute. Ah jes' remembahs Ah fo'got ter make mah will. Ah leahs—"

"Nonsense!" objected the other irritably. You made it yesterday. They always do it beforehand."

"No, sub; Ah done clean ferget et. Ah leahs mah thimble ter de Mefodis church, en mah black en white kitten ter Rickey Snyder, en—"

A twig snapped under Vallant's foot. Both scrambled to their feet, the black girl to look at them with a wide self-conscious grin. Rickey, tossing her short hair back from her freckled face, came toward them.

"My goodness, Miss Shirley," she said, "we didn't see you at all." She looked at Vallant. "Are you the man that's going to fix up Damory Court?" she inquired, without any tedious formalities.

"Yes," said Vallant. "Well," she said critically, "you've got your job cut out for you. But I should say you're the kind to do it."

"Rickey!" Shirley's voice tried to be stern, but there was a hint of laughter in it. "What did I say now?" inquired Rickey. "I'm sure I meant it to be complimentary."

"It was," said Vallant. "I shall try to deserve your good opinion."

"But what a ghastly play!" exclaimed Shirley. "Where did you learn it?"

"We were playing Miss Poly Gifford in the hospital," Rickey answered. "She's got a whole lot of little pebbles what they cut out—"

"They did. She keeps them in a little pasteboard box like wedding-cake, with a blue ribbon around it. She was showing 'em to Miss Mattie Sue yesterday. She was telling her all about it. She said all the women there showed each other their cuts and bragged about how long they were."

"You certainly have a highly developed taste for the dramatic," said Shirley. "I wonder what your next effort will be."

"It's tomorrow," Rickey informed her. "We're going to have the duel between Vallant and Sassoon."

The smile was stricken from John Vallant's face. A duel—the duel—between Vallant and Sassoon! He felt his blood beat quickly. Had there been such a thing in his father's life? Was that what had blighted it?

"Only not here where it really happened, but in the Meredith orchard. Greenie's going to be—"

"Ah ain'," contradicted Greenie. "Ah ain' gwine ter be dat Vallant, no-how!"

"You are, too!" insisted Rickey, wrathfully. "You needn't be so picky and choosy—and after she kills Sassoon, we put the bloodhounds on her trail."

Greenie tittered. "Dey ain' no dawg aroun' heah'd tech me," she said, "en 'sides—"

"But, Rickey," Shirley interposed, "that wasn't a murder. That was a duel between gentlemen. They don't—"

"I know it," assented Rickey cheerfully. "But it makes it more exciting. Will you come, Miss Shirley, deed and double? I won't charge you any admission."

"I can't promise," said Shirley. "By the way, isn't it about time Miss Mattie Sue had her tea?"

"It certainly is, Miss Shirley!" said Rickey, with penitence emphasis. "I clean forgot it, and she'll row me up the gump-stump! Come on, Greenie," and she started off through the bushes.

Shirley looked at Vallant with a deepening of her dimple. "Rickey isn't an aristocrat," she said; "she's what we call here poor-white, but she's got a heart of gold. She's an orphan, and the neighborhood in general, and Miss Mattie Sue Mabry in particular, have adopted her."

He hardly heard her words for the painful wonder that was holding him. His father had taken a man's life. Was it this thought—whatever the provocation, however justified by the customs of the time and section—that had driven him to self-exile? He recalled himself with an effort, for she was speaking again.

"You've found Lovers' Leap, no doubt?"

"No. This is the first time I've been so far from the house. Is it near here?"

"I'll show it to you." She held out her hand for the bunch of jessamine and laid it on the broad roots of a tree that were mottled with lichen. "Look there," she said suddenly; "isn't that a beauty?"

She was pointing to a jimson-weed on which had settled, with glassy wings vibrating, a long, ungainly, needlelike insect with an odd sword-like beak. "What is that?" he asked.

"A snake-doctor. If Uncle Jefferson were here he'd say, 'Bettah watch out! Dah's er snek roun' 'erbout heah sho!' He'll fill you full of darky superstitions."

Suddenly the slim path between the trees took a quick turn, and fell away at their feet. "There," she said. "This is the finest view at Damory Court."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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