The VALIANTS of VIRGINIA

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—John Valiant, a rich society favorite, suddenly discovers that the Valiant 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 auburn-haired beauty, and decides that he is going to like Virginia immensely.

CHAPTER VI.

Mad Anthony.

The old negro nodded his head. "Good watah," he said in the gentle quavering tones of extreme age. "Yas, Marse. He'p yo'se'f. Come f'om he centah ob de yerf, dat watah. En dah's folks say de centah of de yerf is all diah. Yo' reck'n dey's right, Mars' Chahmahs?"

"Now, how the devil do you know who I am, Anthony?" The judge set down his cup on the well-curb. "I haven't been by here for a year."

The ebony head moved slowly from side to side. "Ol' Ant'ny don' need no eyes," he said, touching his hand to his brow. "He see ev'ything heah."

The judge beckoned to the others and they trooped inside the paling. "I've brought some other folks with me, Anthony; can you tell who they are?"

The sightless look wavered over them and the white head shook slowly. "Don' know young mars,'" said the gentle voice. "How many yuddahs wid yo'? One, two? No, I don' know young mistis, eidah."

"I reckon you don't need any eyes," Judge Chalmers laughed, as he passed the sweet cold water to the rest. "One of these young ladies wants you to tell her fortune."

The old negro dropped his head, waving his gaunt hands restlessly. The judge beckoned to Betty Page, but she shook her head with a little grimace and drew back.

"You go, Shirley," she whispered, and with a laughing glance at the others, Shirley came and sat down on the lowest step.

Mad Anthony put out a wavering hand and touched the young body. His fingers strayed over the habit and went up to the curling bronze under the hat-brim. "Dis de li'l mistis," he muttered, "ain' afeahd ob ol' Ant'ny. Dah's fiah en she ain' afeahd, en dah's watah en she ain' afeahd. Wondah whut Ah gwine tell huh? Whut de coloh ob yo' hain, honey?"

"Black," put in Chilly Lusk, with a wink at the others. "Black as a crow."

Old Anthony's hand fell back to his knee. "Young mars' laugh at de ol' man," he said, "but he don' know. Dat de coloh dat buhn mah han's—de coloh ob gol', en eyes blue like er cat-bird's aig. Dah's er man gwine look in dem eyes, honey, en gwine make 'em cry en cry." He raised his head sharply, his lids shut tight, and swung his arm toward the North. "Dah's whah he come f'om," he said, "en heah"—his arm veered and he pointed straight toward the ragged hill behind them—"he stay."

Lusk laughed noiselessly. "He's pointing to Damory Court," he whispered to Nancy Chalmers, "the only uninhabited place within ten miles. That's as near as he often hits it, I fancy."

"Heah's whah he stay," repeated the old man. "Heap ob trouble wait heah fo' him too, honey,—heap ob trouble, heah whah li'l mistis fin' him."

"Come, Anthony," said Judge Chalmers, laying his hand on the old man's shoulder. "That's much too mournful! Give her something nice to top off with, at least!"

But Anthony paid no heed. "Gr'et trouble. Dah's fiah en she ain' afeahd, en dah's watah en she ain' afeahd. En Ah sees yo' gwine ter him, honey. Ah heah's de co'ot-house clock a-strikin' in de night—en yo' gwine. Don' wait, don' wait, li'l mistis, er de trouble-cloud gwine kyah him erway f'om yo' * * * When de clock strike thuh-teen—when de clock strike thuh-teen—"

The droning voice ceased. The gaunt form became rigid. Then he started and turned his eyes slowly about him, a vague look of anxiety on his face. For a moment no one moved. When he spoke again it was once more in his gentle quavering voice:

"Watah? Yas, Mars', good watah. He'p yo'se'f."

The judge set a dollar bill on the step and weighted it with a stone, as the rest remounted. "Well, good-by, Anthony,' he said. "We're mightily obliged."

He sprang into the saddle and the quartette cantered away. "My experiment wasn't a great success, I'm afraid, Shirley," he said ruefully.

"Oh, I think it was splendid!" cried Nancy. "Do you suppose he really believes those spooky things? I declare, at the time I almost did myself. What an odd idea—'when the clock strikes thirteen,' which, of course, it never does."

"Don't mind, Shirley," bantered Lusk. "When you see all 'dem troubles' coming, sound the alarm and we'll fly in a body to your rescue."

They let their horses out for a pounding gallop which pulled down suddenly at a muffled shriek from Betty Page, as her horse went into the air at sight of an automobile by the roadside.

"Now, whose under the canopy is that?" exclaimed Lusk.

"It's stalled," said Shirley. "I passed here this afternoon when the owner was trying to start it, and I sent Unc' Jefferson as first aid to the injured."

"I wonder who he can be," said Nancy. "I've never seen that car before."

"Why," said Betty gaily, "Ah know! It's Mad Anthony's trouble-man, of course, come for Shirley."

CHAPTER VII.

Uncle Jefferson.

A red rose, while ever a thing of beauty, is not invariably a joy forever. The white bulldog, as he plodded along the sunny highway, was sunk in depression. Being trammeled by the limitations of a canine horizon, he could not understand the whims of Adorable Ones met by the way, who seemed so glad to see him that they threw both arms about him, and then tied to his neck irksome colored weeds that prickled and scratched and would not be dislodged. So it was a chastened and shamed Chum who at length wriggled stealthily into the seat of the stranded automobile beside his master and thrust a dirty pink nose into his palm.

John Valiant lifted his hand to stroke the shapely head, then drew it back with an exclamation. A thorn had pricked his thumb. He looked

"Howdy Do, Anthony," He Said.

down and saw the draggled flower thrust through the twist of grass. "Oh, pup of wonders!" he exclaimed. "Where did you get that rose?"

Chum sat up and wagged his tail, for his master's tone, instead of ridicule, held a dawning delight. Perhaps the thing had not been intended as a disgrace, after all!

With the first sight of the decoration Valiant had had a sudden memory of a splotch of vivid red against the belted gray-blue of a gown. He grinned appreciatively. "And I warned her," he chuckled. "Told her not to be afraid!" He dusted the blossom painstakingly with his handkerchief and held it to his face—a live brilliant thing, breathing musk-odors of the mid-moon of paradise.

A long time he sat, while the dog dozed and yawned on the shiny cushion beside him. Of a sudden Chum sat up and barked in earnest.

Turning his head, his master saw approaching a dilapidated hack with side lanterns like great goggles and decrepit and palsied curtains. It was drawn by a lean mustard-tinted mule, and on its front sat a colored man of uncertain age, whose hunched vertebrae and outward-crooked arms gave him a curious expression of replete and bulbous inquiry. Abreast of the car he removed a moth-eaten cap.

"Evenin', suh," he said,—"evenin', evenin'."

"Howdy do," returned the other amiably.

"Ah reck'n yo'-ll done had er breck-down wid dat machine-thing dar. Yo' been hyuh 'bout er hour, ain' yo'?"

"Nearer three," said Valiant cheerfully, "but the view's worth it."

A hoarse titter came from the conveyance, which gave forth sundry creakings of leather. "Huyh! Huyh! Dat's so, suh. Dat's so! Hm-m. Reck'n Ah'll be gittin' erlong back." He clucked to the mule and proceeded to turn the vehicle round.

"Hold on," cried John Valiant. "I thought you were bound in the other direction."

"No, suh. Ah'm gwine back whah I come f'om. Ah jus' druv out hyuh 'case Miss Shirley done met me, en she say, 'Unc' Jeffe'son, yo' go 'treckly out de Red Road, 'case er gemman done got stalled-ed.'"

"Oh—Miss Shirley. She told you, did she? What did you say her first name was?"

"Dat's huh fust name, Miss Shirley. Yas, suh! Miss Shirley done said f' me ter come en git de gemman whut—whut kinder dawg is yo' got dar?"

"It's a bulldog. Can you give me a lift? I've got that small trunk and—"

"Dat's a right fine dawg. Miss Shirley she moghty fond ob dawgs, too."

"Fond of dogs, is she?" said Valiant. "I might have known it. It was nice of her to send you here, Uncle Jefferson. You can take me and my traps, I suppose?"

"'Pens on whah yo' gwineter," answered Uncle Jefferson sapiently.

"I'm going to Damory Court."

A kind of shocked surprise that was almost stupefaction spread over the other's face, like oil over a pool. "Dam'ry Co'ot! Dat's de old Valiant place. Ain' nobody lives dar. Ah reck'n ain' nobody live dar fer mos' er hun'erd yeahs!"

"The old house has a great surprise coming to it," said Valiant gravely. "Henceforth some one is going to occupy it. How is it anyway?"

"Measurin' by de coonskin en th'owin' in de tail, et's erbout two mile. Ain' gwineter live dar yo'se'f, suh, is yo'?"

"I am for the present," was the crisp answer.

Uncle Jefferson stared at him a moment with his mouth open. Then ejaculating under his breath, "Fo' de Lawd! Whut folks gwineter say ter dat!" he shambled to the rear of the motor and began to unship the steamer-trunk. "Whut yo' gwineter do wid dat-ar?" he asked, pointing to the car. "Ah kin come wid ole Sukey—dat's mah mule—en fotch it in de mawnin'. Ain't gwineter rain ter-night nohow."—

This matter having been arranged, they started jogging down the green-bordered road, the bulldog prospecting alongside.

"S'pose'n de Co'ot done ben sold en yo' gwineter fix it up fo' de new ownah," hazarded Uncle Jefferson presently.

Valiant did not answer directly. "You say the place hasn't been occupied for many years," he observed. "Did you ever hear why, Uncle Jefferson?"

"Ah done heerd," said the other vaguely, "but Ah disremembahs. Sump'in dat happened befo' Ah come heah f'om ol' Post-Oak Plantation. Reck'n Majah Bristow he know erbout it, er Mis' Judith—dat's Miss Shirley's mothah. Her fathah wus Gen'l Tawm Dandridge, en he died fo' she was bawn."

Shirley Dandridge! A high-sounding name, with something of long-linked culture, of arrogant heritage. In some subtle way it seemed to clothe the personality of which Valiant had had that fleeting roadside glimpse.

"Reck'n yo'-all come f'om New York?" inquired Uncle Jefferson, after a little silence. "So! Dey say dat's er pow'ful big place. But Ah reck'n ol' Richmon's big ernuf fo' me." He clucked to the leisurely mule and added, "Ah bin ter Richmon' onct. Yas, suh! Ah nevah see sech houses—mos' all bigger'n de county co'ot-house."

John Valiant expressed a somewhat absent interest. He was looking thoughtfully at the blossom in his hand, in an absorption through which Uncle Jefferson's reminiscences oozed on.

CHAPTER VIII.

What Happened Thirty Years Ago.

When Shirley came across the lawn at Rosewood, Major Montague Bristow sat under the arbor talking to her mother.

The major was massive-framed, with a strong jaw and a rubicund complexion—the sort that might be supposed to have attained the utmost benefit to be conferred by a consistent indulgence in mint-juleps. His blue eyes were piercing and arched with brows like sable rainbows, at variance with his heavy iron-gray hair and imperial. His head was leonine and he looked like a king who has humbled his enemy. It may be added that his linen was fine and immaculate, his black string-tie precisely tied and a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses swung by a flat black cord against his white waistcoat.

"Shirley," said her mother, "the major's brutal, and he shan't have his mint-julep."

"What has he been doing?" asked the other, her brows wrinkling in a delightful way she had.

"He has reminded me that I'm growing old."

Shirley looked at the major skeptically, for his chivalry was undoubted. During a long career in law and legislature it had been said of him that he could neither speak on the tariff question nor defend a man for murder, without first paying a tribute to "the women of the South, sah."

"Nothing of the sort," he rumbled.

Mrs. Dandridge's face softened to wistfulness. "Shirley, am I?" she asked, with a quizzical, almost a droll uneasiness. "Why, I've got every emotion I've ever had. I read all the new French novels, and I'm even thinking of going in for the militant suffragette movement."

The girl had tossed her hat and crop on the table and seated herself by her mother's chair. "What was it he said, dearest?"

"He thinks I ought to wear a worsted shawl and arctics." Her mother thrust out one little thin-slippered foot, with its slender ankle gleaming through its open-work stocking like mother-of-pearl. "Imagine! In May. He knows I'm vain of my feet! If you had ever had a wife, I have learned wisdom. But you mean well, and I'll take back what I said about the julep. You mix it, Shirley. Yours is even better than Ranston's."

"She makes me one every day, Monty," she continued, as Shirley went into the house. "And when she isn't looking, I pour it into the bush there."

Major Bristow laughed as he bit the end off a cigar. "All the same," he said in his big rumbling voice, "you need 'em, I reckon. You need more than mint-juleps, too You leave the whiskey to me and the doctor, and you take Shirley and pull out for Italy. Why not? A year there would do you a heap of good."

She shook her head. "No, Monty. It isn't what you think. It's—here." She lifted her hand and touched her heart. "It's been so for a long time. But it may—it can't go on forever, you see. Nothing can."

The major had leaned forward in his chair. "Judith!" he said, and his hand twitched, "it isn't true!" And then, "How do you know?"

She smiled at him. "You remember when that big surgeon from Vienna came to see the doctor last year? Well, the doctor brought him to me. I'd known it before in a way, but it had gone farther than I thought. No one can tell just how long it may be. It may be years, of course, but I'm not taking any sea trips, Monty."

He cleared his throat and his voice was husky when he spoke. "Shirley doesn't know?"

"Certainly not. She mustn't." And then, in sudden sharpness: "You shan't tell her, Monty. You wouldn't dare!"

"No, indeed," he assured her quickly. "Of course not."

"It's just among us three, Doctor Southall and you and me. We three have had our secrets before, eh, Monty?"

"Yes, Judith, we have."

She bent toward him, her hands tightening on the cane. "After all, it's true. Today I am getting old. I may look only fifty, but I feel sixty and I'll admit to seventy-five. It's joy that keeps us young, and I didn't get my fair share of that, Monty. For just one little week my heart had it all—all—and then—well, then it was finished. It was finished long before I married Tom Dandridge. It isn't that I'm empty-headed. It's that I've been an empty-hearted woman, Monty—as empty and dusty and desolate as the old house over yonder on the ridge."

"I know, Judith, I know."

"You've been empty in a way, too," she said. "But it's been a different way. You were never in love—really in love, I mean. Certainly not with me, Monty, though you tried to make me think so once upon a time, before Sassoon came along, and—Beauty Valiant."

The major blinked, suddenly startled. It was out, the one name neither had spoken to the other for thirty years! He looked at her a little guiltily; but her eyes had turned away. "Everything changed then," she continued dreamily, "everything."

The major's fingers strayed across his waistcoat, fumbling uncertainly for his eye-glasses. For an instant he, too, was back in the long-ago past, when he and Valiant had been comrades. It had been a curious three sided affair—he, and Valiant and Sassoon. Sassoon with his dissipated flair and ungovernable temper and strange fits of recklessness; clean, high-idealed, straight-away Valiant; and he—a Bristow, neither better nor worse than the rest of his name. He remembered that mad strained season when he had grimly recognized his own cause as hopeless, and with burning eyes had watched Sassoon and Valiant racing abreast. He remembered that glittering prodigal dance when he had come upon Valiant and Judith standing in the shrubbery, the candle-light from some open door engoldening their faces: hers smiling, a little flippant perhaps, and conscious of her spell; his grave and earnest, yet wistful.

"You promise, John?"

"I give my sacred word. Whatever the provocation, I will not lift my hand against him. Never, never!" Then the same voice, vibrant, appealing. "Judith! It isn't because—because—you care for him?"

He had plunged away in the darkness before her answer came. What had it mattered then to him what she had replied? And that very night had befallen the fatal quarrel!

The major started. How that name had blown away the dust! "That's a long time ago, Judith."

"Thirty years ago tomorrow they fought," she said softly, "Valiant and Sassoon. Evey woman has her one anniversary, I suppose, and tomorrow's mine. Do you know what I do, every fourteenth of May, Monty? I keep my room and spend the day always the same way. There's a little book I read. And there's an old hair-cloth trunk that I've had since I was a girl. Down in the bottom of it are some—things, that I take out and set round the room * * * and there is a handful of old letters I go over from first to last. They're almost worn out now, but I could repeat them all with my eyes shut. Then there's a tiny old straw basket with a yellow wisp in it that once was a bunch of cape jessamines. I wore them to that last ball—the night before it happened. The fourteenth of May used to be sad, but now, do you know, I look forward to it! I always have a lot of jessamines that particular day—I'll have Shirley get me some tomorrow—and in the evening, when I go downstairs, the house is full of the scent of them. All summer long it's roses, but on the fourteenth of May it has to be jessamines. Shirley must think me a whimsical old woman, but I insist on being humored."

He smiled, a little bleakly, and cleared his throat.

"Isn't it strange for me to be talking this way now!" she said presently. "Another proof that I'm getting old. But the date brings it very close; it seems, somehow, closer than ever this year.—Monty, weren't you tremendously surprised when I married Tom Dandridge?"

"I certainly was."

"I'll tell you a secret. I was, too. I suppose I did it because of a sneaking feeling that some people were feeling sorry for me, which I never could stand. Well, he was a man any one might honor. I've always thought a woman ought to have two husbands: one to love and cherish, and the other to honor and obey. I had the latter, at any rate."

"And you've lived, Judith," he said.

"Yes," she agreed, with a little sigh, "I've lived. I've had Shirley, and she's twenty and adorable. And I've had people enough, and books to read, and plenty of pretty things to look at, and old lace to wear, and I've kept my figure and my vanity—I'm not too old yet to thank the Lord for that! So don't talk to me about worsted shawls and horrible arctics. For I won't wear 'em. Not if I know myself! Here comes Shirley. She's made two juleps, and if you're a gentleman, you'll distract her attention till I've got rid of mine in my usual way."

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The major, at the foot of the cherry-bordered lane, looked back across the box-hedge to where the two figures sat under the rose-arbor, the mother's face turned lovingly down to Shirley's at her knee. He stood a moment watching them from under his slouched hat-brim.

"You never looked at me that way, Judith, did you!" he sighed to himself. "It's been a long time, too, since I began to want you to—'most forty years. When it came to the showdown, I wasn't even as fit as Tom Dandridge!"

(Continued Next Week.)