The VALIANTS of VIRGINIA

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ILLUSTRATIONS by LAUREN STOUT

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CHAPTER I.

The Crash.

"Pulled!" ejaculated John Valiant Shanklin, and the hat he held dropped to the claret-colored rug like a huge white splotch of sudden fright. "The Corporation—failed!"

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

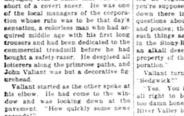
Never had his innocuous and buttered existence known a surprise more startling. He had swung into the room with all the nonchalant habits, the ingrained certitude of the man born with achievement ready-made in his hands. And a single curt statement—like the ruthless blades of a pair of shears—had snipped across the one splendid scarlet thread in the wool that constituted life as he knew it. He had hustled his lavender scarf that morning as vice-president of the Valiant Corporation—one of the greatest and most successful of modern-day organizations; he sat now in the fading afternoon trying to realize that the hour-talons, never warning, had toggled to its fall.

How acted and changeless it had always seemed—that great business fabric woven by the father he knew so dimly remember! His own invested fortune had been derived from the great corporation the elder Valiant had founded and controlled until his death. With almost unprecedented earnings, in 1893 he stood as a very tribunal of finance, a type and sign of brilliant organization. Now, on the heels of a trust's dissolution which would be a misnomer unjust, the vast structure had crumbled up like a cardboard. The ruins had drowned and the floods had come and it had failed!

The man on the desk had wrinkled in the receiving chair and was looking at the trim athletic back blotting the daylight, with a smile that was little short of a sweat sneer. He was one of the best managers of the corporation whose ruin was to be that day's sensation; a middle-aged 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 Valiant was but a decorative flibberhead.

Valiant 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



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

smudged plasterer, tools in hand—clerks, small men with cold, shiny shoes coats—all peering at the windows of the Valiant Corporation and, as well, he imagined, with a thrilling fear in their faces. As he watched, a car, so coarsely dressed, ran across the crowded, hurt-looking street, and stopped.

The novice has come up on the door," said the manager. I sent word to the police. Crowds are ugly some times."

Valiant drew a sudden sharp breath. The corporation had been in the hands of the receiver for six hours ready to be surrender assigns of widow and orphan. The present board of directors had by labor over which plodded aleiky faces had burned the midnight oil.

The elder 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, engrafted 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 Valiant faced him quickly.

The other laughed shortly. "A word to the wise," he quoted. "It's very 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 they mean to pay the piper. The fight ahead will be a hot one—I'm not tall enough, I'm afraid, for 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?" Valiant lowered over him, his breath coming fast, his hands clenched.

"You?" The manager laughed again with unpleasant laugh that estrayed the other's quivering nerves like hot needles. "Oh, no! Of course not! How should you? You've been too busy playing polo and at those fashionable proms. How many board meetings have you attended this year? Your vote is practically as cheap as a clock-work. But you're supposed to know. 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 Stump River Valley—to market an alkali desert that is the personal property of the directors of this corporation."

Valiant 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 Stump River Valley—and that makes him a big gamble and he lost.

The man looked at the other with a strange look. Emotions to which he had in his self-indulgent life he had been a stranger were running through his mind and were causing a hard lump by the throat. Foul and doubly blighting good and evil—a cesspool raking the chestnuts for unscrupulous men whose identity he now knew called on "pet" terms to share! In his pitiful egotism he had considered himself to be a figurehead, and he had been made a tool. A red rage surged over him. No one had ever seen so dim Valiants face such a look as grew on it now.

He turned from the window with a word opened the door. The elder man took his hand—a clasp that was a token of dangerous electric forces in the air—and he felt the pressure of a key in it. He smiled grimly. Not shocked, he said to himself with a touch of his self-boasting, manicured young lip—finally confronted by those who knew what they wanted". He shrugged his shoulders as he went back to his chair.

Valiant plunged down in the elevator to the street. He pushed past the ornation, a heavy, thick-set man with a square, shaven face, at the table on which lay a small black satchel with a padlock on its clasp, and numbers of tin boxes and bundles of crisp papers —he had been turning over in his mind the details of the task in whose wake was that throbbing metal miracle, the car with its high gilt and spun from shining capricor he polished brown pattens. Just then he was not sure why he had left the house without his hat.

Some knew him in an inner office of a downtown sky-scraper, the newly-appointed receiver of the Valiant Corpor