

Alice of Old Vincennes

By Maurice Thompson

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THE doughty Captain felt a sudden and imperious thirst seize his throat. The liquor flooded his veins before his lips touched the cup. He had been abstaining lately, now his besetting appetite rushed upon him. At one gulp he took in the fiery yet smooth and captivating draught. Nor did he notice that Father Berot, instead of joining him in the potation, merely lifted his cup and set it down again, smacking his lips with gusto.

There followed a silence, during which the aromatic breath of the bottle increased the agonizing fascination. Then Father Berot again filled Farnsworth's cup and said:

"Ah, the blessed monks, little thought they that their matchless brew would ever be sipped in a poor missionary's hut on the Wabash! But, after all, my son, why not here as well as in sunny France? Our object justifies any impropriety of time and place."

"You are right, Father. I drink to our object. Yes, I say, to our object." In fact, the drinking preceded his speech, and his tongue already had a loop in it. The liquor stole through him, a midst of bewildering and enchanting influence. The third cup broke his sentences into unintelligible fragments; the fourth made his under jaw sag loosely, the fifth and sixth, taken in close succession, tumbled him limp on the floor, where he slept blissfully all night long, snoring covered with some of Father Berot's bed clothes.

"Per casum obliquum, et per indirectum," muttered the priest, when he had returned the bottle and cup to their hiding-place. "The end justifies the means. Sleep well, my son. Ah, little Alice, little Alice, your old Father will try—will try!"

He fumbled along the wall in the dark until he found the rapier, which he took down; then he went out and sat for some time motionless beside the door, while the clouds thickened overhead. It was late when he arose and glided away shadow-like toward the fort, over which the night hung black, chill and drearily silent. The moon was still some hours high, but smothered by the clouds; a fog slowly drifted from the river.

Meantime Hamilton and Helm had spent a part of the afternoon and evening, as usual, at cards. Helm broke off the game and went to his quarters rather early for him, leaving the Governor alone and in a bad temper, because Farnsworth, when he had sent for him, could not be found. Three times his orderly returned in as many hours with the same report; the captain had not been seen or heard of. Naturally this sudden and complete disappearance, immediately after the reprimand, suggested to Hamilton an unpleasant possibility. What if Farnsworth had deserted him? Down deep in his heart he was conscious that the young man had good cause for almost any desperate action. To lose Captain Farnsworth, however, would be just now a calamity. The Indians were drifting over rapidly to the side of the Americans, and every day showed that the French could not long be kept quiet.

Hamilton sat for some time after Helm's departure, thinking over what he now feared was a foolish mistake. Presently he buckled on Alice's rapier, which he had lately been wearing as his own, and went out into the main area of the stockade. A sentinel was tramping to and fro at the gate, where a hazy lantern shone. The night was breathless and silent. Hamilton approached the soldier on duty and asked him if he had seen Captain Farnsworth, and receiving a negative reply, turned about puzzled and thoughtful to walk back and forth in the chill, foggy air.

Presently a faint yellow light attracted his attention. It shone through a porthole in an upper room of the blockhouse at the farther angle of the stockade. In fact, Alice was reading by a sputtering lamp a book Farnsworth had sent her, a volume of Ronsard that he had picked up in Canada. Hamilton made his way in that direction, at first merely curious to know who was burning oil so late; but after a few paces he recognized where the light came from, and instantly suspected that Captain Farnsworth was there. Indeed, he felt sure of it. Somehow he could not regard Alice as other than a saucy hoyden, incapable of womanly virtue. His experience with the worst element of Canadian French life and his peculiar cast of mind and character colored his impression of her. He measured her by the women with whom the courtes of bois and half-breed trappers consorted in Detroit and at the posts eastward to Quebec.

Alice, unable to sleep, had sought forgetfulness of her bitter captivity in the old poet's charming lyrics. She

sat on the floor, some blankets and furs drawn around her, the book on her lap, the stupidly dull lamp hanging beside her on a part of the swivel. Her hair lay loose over her neck and shoulders and shimmered around her face with a cloud-like effect, giving to the features in their repose a setting that intensified their sweetness and sadness. In a very low but distinct voice she was reading, with a slightly quavering intonation:

"Mignonne, allons voir si la rose,
Que ce matin avait desclose
Sa robe de pourpre au soleil,"

When Hamilton, after stealthily mounting the rough stairway which led to her door, peeped in through a space between the slabs and felt a stroke of disappointment, seeing at a glance that Farnsworth was not there. He gazed for some time, not without a sense of villainy, while she continued her sweetly monotonous reading. If his heart had been as hard as the iron swivel-balls that lay beside Alice, he must still have felt a thrill of something like tender sympathy. She now showed no trace of the vivacious sauciness which had heretofore always marked her features when she was in his presence. A dainty gentleness, touched with melancholy, gave to her face an appealing look all the more powerful on account of its unconscious simplicity of expression.

The man felt an impulse pure and noble, which would have borne him back down the ladder and away from the building, had not a stronger one set boldly in the opposite direction. There was a short struggle with the sacred remnant of his better nature, and then he tried to open the door; but it was locked.

Alice heard the slight noise and breaking off her reading turned to look. Hamilton made another effort to enter before he recollected that the wooden key, or notched lever, that controlled the cumbersome wooden lock, hung on a peg beside the door. He felt for it along the wall, and soon laid his hand on it. Then again he peeped through to see Alice, who was now standing upright near the swivel. She had thrown her hair back from her face and neck, the lamp's flickering light seemed suddenly to have magnified her stature and enhanced her beauty. Her book lay on the tumbled wraps at her feet, and in either hand she grasped a swivel-shot.

Hamilton's combative disposition came to the aid of his baser passion when he saw once more a defiant flash from his prisoner's face. It was easy for him to be fascinated by this trait as much as others had suffered by it; but, in the case of Alice, Hamilton's mingled resentment and admiration were but a powerful irritant to the coarsest and most dangerous side of his nature.

After some fumbling and delay he fitted the key with a steady hand and moved the wooden bolt creaking and jolting from its slot. Then flinging the clumsy door wide open, he stepped in.

Alice started when she recognized the midnight intruder, and a second deeper look into his countenance made her brave heart recoil, while with a sinking sensation her breath almost stopped. It was but a momentary weakness, however, followed by vigorous reaction.

"What are you here for, sir?" she demanded. "What do you want?"

"I am neither a burglar nor a murderer, Mademoiselle," he responded, lifting his hat and bowing, with a smile not in the least reassuring.

"You look like both. Stop where you are!"

"Not so loud, my dear Miss Ronsillon; I am not deaf. And besides the garrison needs to sleep."

"Stop, sir; not another step."

She poised herself, leaning slightly backward, and held the iron ball in her right hand ready to throw it at him.

He halted, still smiling villainously.

"Mademoiselle, I assure you that your excitement is quite unnecessary. I am not here to harm you."

"You cannot harm me, you cowardly wretch!"

"Humph! Pride goes before a fall, wench," he retorted, taking a half-step backward. Then a thought arose in his mind which added a new shade to the repellent darkness of his countenance.

"Miss Ronsillon," he said in English and with a changed voice, which seemed to grow harder, each word deliberately emphasized, "I have come to break some bad news to you."

"You would scarcely bring me good news, sir, and I am not curious to hear the bad."

He was silent for a little while, gazing at her with the sort of admiration from which a true woman draws away appalled. He saw how she loathed him, saw how impossible it was for him to get a line nearer to her by any turn of force or fortune. Brave, high-headed, strong as a young leopard, pure and sweet as a rose, she stood before him fearless, even aggressive, showing him by every line of her face and form that she felt her infinite superiority and meant to maintain it. Her whole personal expression told him he was defeated; therefore he quickly seized upon a suggestion caught from a transaction with Long-Hair, who had returned a few hours before from his pursuit of Beverley.

"It pains me, assure you, Miss Ronsillon, to tell you what will probably grieve you deeply," he presently added, "but I have not been unwavering of your tender interest in Lieutenant Beverley, and when I had bad news from him, I thought it my duty to inform you."

He paused, feeling with a devil's satisfaction the point of his statement go home to the girl's heart.

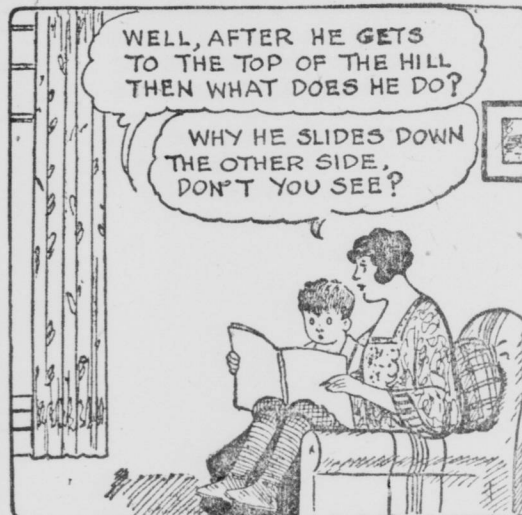
The wind was beginning to blow outside, shaking open the dark clouds and letting gleams of moonlight flicker on the thinning fog. A ghostly ray came through a crack between the logs and lit Alice's face with a pallid white gleam. She moved her lips as if speaking, but Hamilton heard no sound.

"The Indian, Long-Hair, whom I sent upon Lieutenant Beverley's trail, reported to me this afternoon that his pursuit had been quite successful. He caught his game."

Alice's voice came to her now. She drew in a quivering breath of relief.

"Then he is here—he is—you have

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J. WILLIAMS

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—By AL POSEN



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him a prisoner again?"

"A part of him, Miss Ronsillon. Enough to be quite sure that there is one traitor who will trouble his king no more. Mr. Long-Hair brought in the Lieutenant's scalp."

Alice received this horrible statement in silence; but her face blanched and she stood as if frozen by the shock. The shifty moon-glimmer and the yellow glow of the lamp showed Hamilton to what an extent his devilish cruelty hurt her; and somehow

it chilled him as if by reflection; but he could not forgo another thrust.

"He deserved hanging, and would have got it had he been brought to me alive. So, after all, you should be satisfied. He escaped my vengeance and Long-Hair got his jaw. You see, I am the chief sufferer."

These words, however, fell without effect upon the girl's ears, in which was booming the awful, storm-like roar of her excitement. She did not see her persecutor standing there;

her vision, unhindered by walls and distance, went straight away to a place in the wilderness, where all mangled and disfigured Beverley lay dead. A low cry broke from her lips; she dropped the heavy swivel-balls; and then, like a bird, swiftly, with a rustling swoop, she went past Hamilton and down the stair.

For perhaps a full minute the man stood there motionless, spellfrozen, amazed; and when at length he recovered himself, it was with difficulty

that he followed her. Everything seemed to hinder him. When he reached the open air, however, he quickly regained his activity of both mind and body, and looked in all directions. The clouds were breaking into parallel masses with streaks of sky between. The moon peeped forth just in time to show him a flying figure, which, even while he looked, reached the postern, opened it and ward along the course twice before

slipped through.

With but a breath of hesitation between giving the alarm and following Alice silently and alone, he chose the latter. He was a swift runner and light footed. With a few bounds he reached the little gate, which was still oscillating on its hinges, dashed through and away, straining every muscle in desperate pursuit, gaining rapidly in the race, which bore eastward along the course twice before

chosen by Alice in leaving the stockade.

(To Be Continued.)

Tenants Must Have Family

LONDON, April 4.—In giving a piece of land near Ebury square, St. W., to the city of Westminster, the Duke of Westminster has stipulated that the tenants of any houses built on the grounds must be people with children.