

Alice of Old Vincennes

By Maurice Thompson

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CHAPTER XVII

On the fifth day of February, 1779, Col. George Rogers Clark led an army across the Kaskaskia River and camped. This was the first step in his march toward the Wabash. An army! Do not smile. Fewer than two hundred men, it is true, answered the roll call, when Father Gibault lifted the Cross and blessed them; but every name told off by the company sergeant belonged to a hero, and every voice making response struck a full note in the chorus of freedom's morning song.

It was an army, small indeed, but yet an army; even though so rudely equipped that, could we now see it before us, we might wonder of what use it could possibly be in a military way.

We should nevertheless hardly expect that a hundred and seventy of such men, even if furnished with the latest and most deadly weapons of destruction, could do what those pioneers cheerfully undertook and gloriously accomplished in the savage wilderness which was to be the great central area of the United States of America.

We look back with a shiver of awe at the three hundred Spartans for whom Simonides composed his matchless epitaph. They wrought and died gloriously; that was Greek. The one hundred and seventy men, who, led by the backwoodsman, Clark, made conquest of an empire's area for freedom in the West, wrought and lived gloriously; that was American. It is well to bear in mind this distinction by which our civilization separates itself from that of old times. Our heroes have conquered and lived to see the effect of conquest. We have fought all sorts of wars and have never yet felt defeat. Washington, Jackson, Taylor, Grant, all lived to enjoy, after successful war, a triumphant peace. "These Americans," said a witty Frenchman, "are either enormously lucky, or possessed of miraculous vitality. You rarely kill them in battle, and if you wound them their wounds are never mortal. Their history is but a chain of impossibilities easily accomplished. Their undertakings have been without preparation, their successes in the nature of stupendous accidents." Such a statement may appear critically sound from a Gallic point of view; but it leaves out the dominant element of American character, namely, heroic efficiency. From the first we have had the courage to undertake, the practical common sense which overcomes the lack of technical training, and the vital force which never flags under the stress of adversity.

Clark knew, when he set out on his march to Vincennes, that he was not indulging a visionary impulse. The enterprise was one that called for all that manhood could endure, but not more. With the genius of a born leader he measured his task by his means. He knew his own courage and fortitude, and understood the best capacity of his men. He had genius; that is, he possessed the secret of extracting from himself and from his followers the last refinement of devotion to purpose. There was a certainty, from first to last, that effort would not flag at any point of the toilsome possible strain.

The great star of America was no more than a nebulous splendor on the horizon in 1779. It was a new world forming by the law of youth. The men who bore the burdens of its exacting life were mostly stalwart striplings who, before the dawn of adolescence fairly sprouted on their chins, could swing the ax, drive a plow, close with a bear or kill an Indian. Clark was not yet 27 when he made his famous campaign. A tall, brawny youth, whose frontier experience had enriched a native character of the best quality, he marched on foot at the head of his little column, and was first to test every opposing danger. Was there a stream to wade or swim? Clark enthusiastically shouted, "Come on!" and in he plunged. Was there a lack of food? "I'm not hungry," he cried, "Help yourself, men!" Had some poor soldier lost his blanket? "Mine is in my way," said Clark. "Take it, I'm glad to get rid of it!" His men loved him and would die rather than fall short of his expectations.

The march before them lay over a magnificent plain, mostly prairie, rich as the delta of the Nile, but extremely

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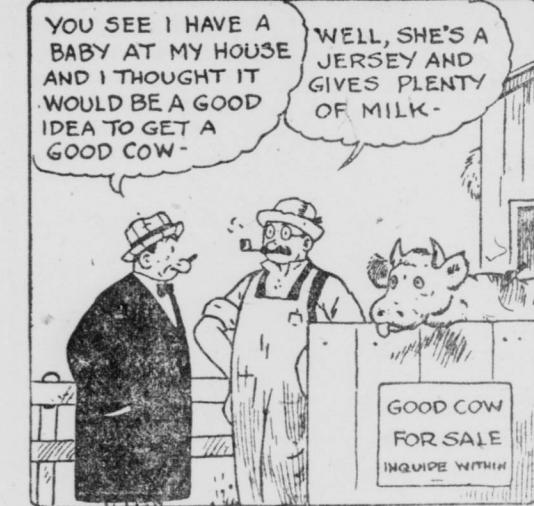
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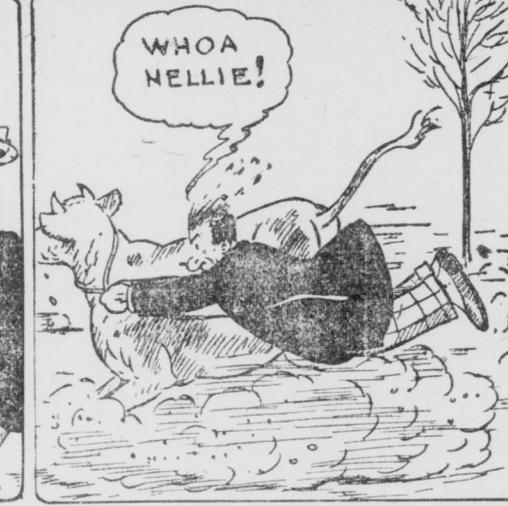
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DOINGS OF THE DUFFS—



OUT OUR WAY—By WILLIAMS



—By ALLMAN

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