

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 Gihault 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 our best men, even if furnished with the latest and most deadly engines of destruction, would 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 Simonde 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 heroism has always been of life—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 marvellous 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 does not 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 gentleness, 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 toposmost 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 eat 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

difficult to traverse. The distance, as the route led, was about 170 miles. On account of an open and rainy winter all the basins and flat lands were inundated, often presenting leagues of water ranging in depth from a few inches to three or four feet. Cold winds blew, sometimes with spits of snow and dashes of sleet, while thin ice formed on the ponds and sluggish streams. By day progress meant wading, ankle-deep, knee-deep, breast-deep, with an occasional spurt of swimming. By night the brave fellows had to sleep, if sleep they could, on the cold ground in soaked clothing under water-heavy blankets. They flung the leagues behind them, however, cheerfully stimulating one another by joke and challenge, defying all the bitterness of weather, all the bitings of hunger, all the toll, danger and deprivation of a trackless and houseless wilderness, looking only eastward, following their youthful and intrepid commander to one of the most valuable victories gained by American soldiers during the War of the Revolution.

Colonel Clark understood perfectly the strategic importance of Vincennes as a post commanding the Wabash, and as a base of communication with the many Indian tribes north of the Ohio and east of the Mississippi. Francis Vigo (may his name never fade) had brought him a comprehensive and accurate report of Hamilton's strength and the condition of the fort and garrison. This information confirmed his belief that it would be possible not only to capture Vincennes, but Detroit as well.

Just seven days after the march began, the little army encamped for a night's rest at the edge of a wood, and here, just after nightfall, when the fires were burning merrily and the smell of broiling buffalo steaks burdened the damp air, a wizened old man suddenly appeared, how or from where nobody had observed. He was dirty and in every way disreputable in appearance, looking like an animated mummy, bearing a long rifle on his shoulder, and walking with the somewhat halting activity of a very old, yet vivacious and energetic simian. Of course it was Uncle Jazon, "Uncle Jazon sul generis," as Father Beret had dubbed him.

"Well, here I am!" he cried, approaching the fire by which Colonel Clark and some of his officers were cooking supper, "but ye can't guess in a mile o' who I am to save yer lives and lights."

He danced a few steps, which made the water gush out of his tattered moccasins, then doffed his non-descript cap and nodded his scapless head in salutation to the commander. Clark looked inquiringly at him, while the old fellow grimaced and rubbed his shrunken chin.

"I smelt yer fat fryin' somethin' like a mile away, an' it set my in'ard's to grumblin' for a snack; so I jes' thought I'd drop in on ye an' chaw witties wi' ye."

"Your remarks are decidedly against dry snuff," remarked the Colonel with a dry smile. He had recognized Uncle Jazon after a little sharp scrutiny. "I suppose, however, that we can let you gnaw the bones after we've got off the meat."

"Thank 'ee, thank 'ee, plenty good. A feller at's as hungry as I am kin go through a bone like a fesh through water."

Clark laughed and said: "I don't see any teeth that you have worth mentioning, but your gums may be unusually sharp."

"Yas-s, 'bout as sharp as yer wit, Colonel Clark, an' sharper'n yer eyes, a long shot. Ye don't know me, do ye? Take another squint at me, an' see' ye kin 'member a good lookin' man!"

"You have somewhat the appearance of an old scamp by the name of Jazon that formerly loafed around with a worthless gun on his shoulder, and used to run from every Indian he saw down yonder in Kentucky," Clark held out his hand and added cordially: "How are you, Jazon, my old friend, and where upon earth have you come from?"

Once Jazon pounced upon the hand and gripped it in his own knotted fingers, gazing delightedly upon it. Clark's browed and laughing face.

"Where'd I come from? I come from ever-where. First time I ever got lost in all my born days. I've been a trolpin' 'round in the water seems like a week, crazy as a pizen rat, not a knowin' north from south, nor my big toe from a turnip! Who's got some tobacco?"

On the army's track, which he came to far westward, Uncle Jazon saw him first in the distance, and his old, educated eyes made no mistake. "Yander's that youngster Beverley," he exclaimed. "Ef it ain't I'm a squaw!"

Nor did he parley further on the subject; but set off at a rickety trot to meet and assist the fagged and excited young man.

Clark had given Uncle Jazon his flask, which contained a few gills of

DOINGS OF THE DUFFS—



OUT OUR WAY—By WILLIAMS

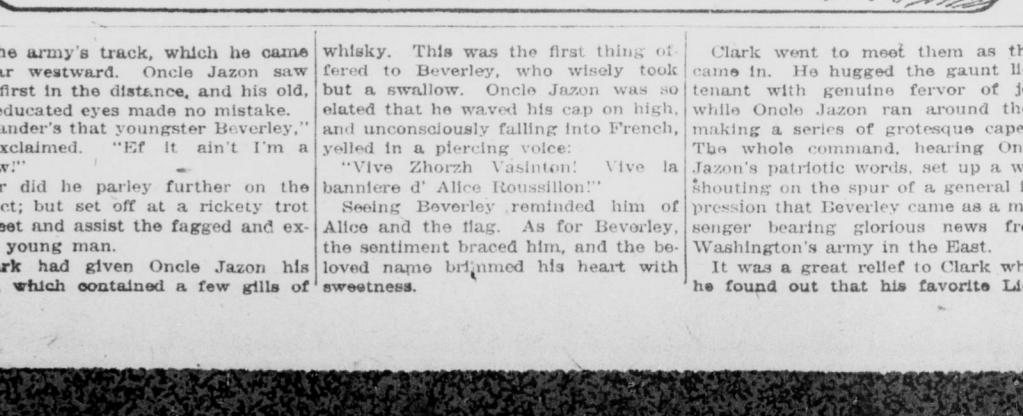
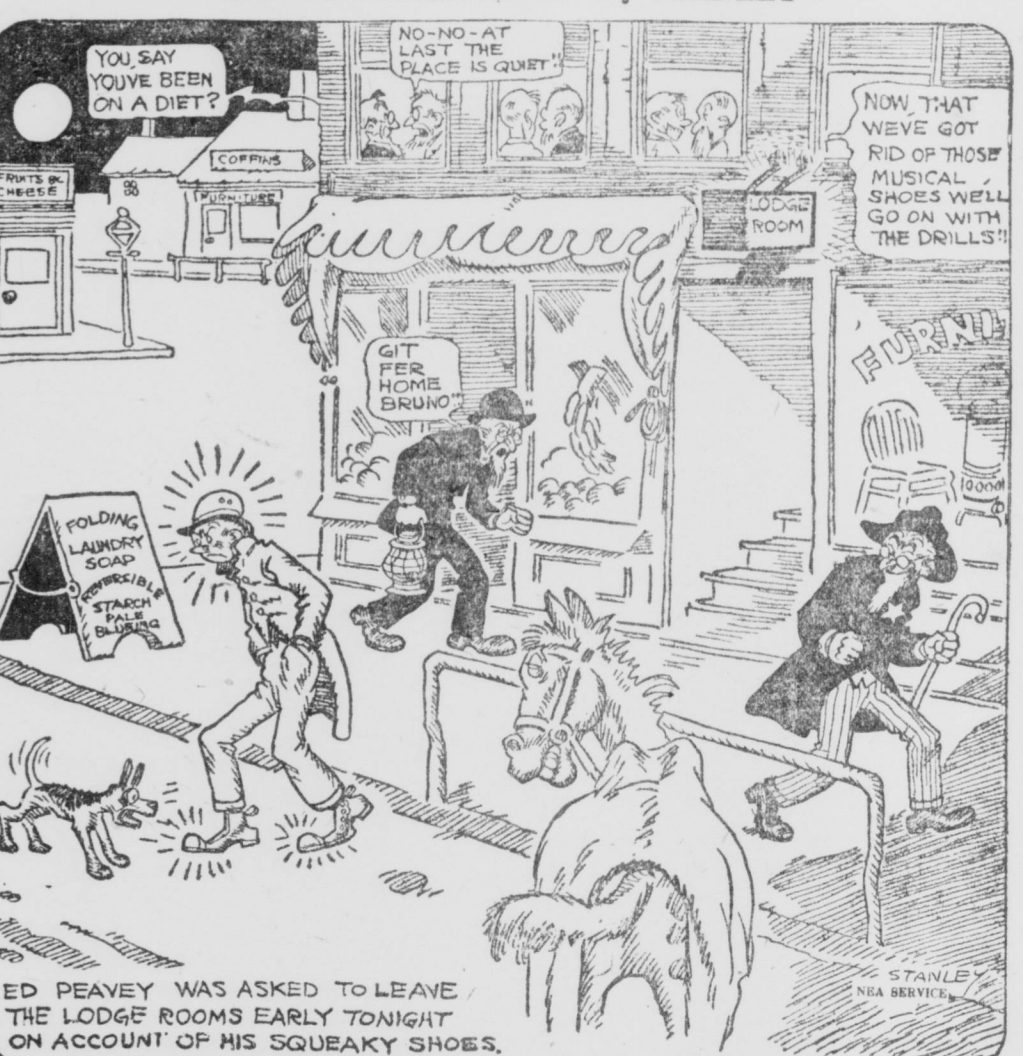


WHY GIRLS ARE LEFT HOME

THEM DAYS IS GONE FOREVER—

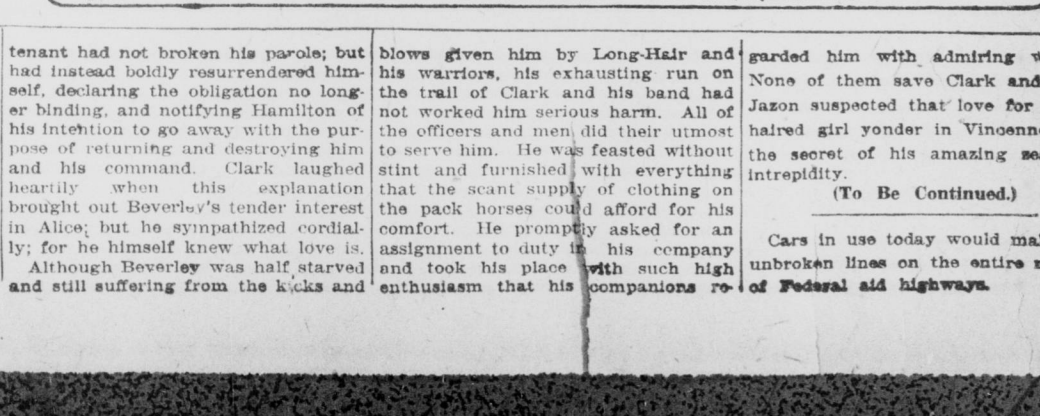


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