

Alice of Old Vincennes

By Maurice Thompson

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CHAPTER XVII

WHEN Hamilton, after running some distance, saw that he was gaining upon Alice and would soon overtake her, it added fresh energy to his limbs. He had quickly realized the foolishness of what he had done in visiting the room of his prison at so late an hour in the night. What would his officers and men think? To let Alice escape would be extremely embarrassing, and to be seen chasing her would give good ground for ridicule on the part of his entire command. Therefore his first thought, after passing through the postern and realizing that what sort of predicament threatened him, was to recapture her and return her to the prison room in the block-house without attracting attention. This now promised to be an easier task than he had at first feared; for in the moonlight, which on account of the dispersing clouds, was fast growing stronger, he saw her seem to falter and weaken. Certainly her flight was checked and took an eccentric turn, as if some obstruction had barred her way. He rushed on, not seeing that, as Alice swerved, a man intervened. Indeed he was within a few strides of laying his hand on her when he saw her make the strange movement. It was as if, springing suddenly aside, she had become two persons instead of one. But instantly the figures coincided again, and in becoming taller faced about and confronted him.

Hamilton stopped short in his tracks. The dark figure was about five paces from him. It was not Alice, and a sword flashed dimly but unmistakably in a ray of the moon. The motion visible was that of an expert swordsman placing himself firmly on his legs, with his weapon at guard.

Alice saw the man in her path just in time to avoid running against him. Lightly as a flying bird, when it whisks itself in a short semicircle past a tree or a bough, she sprang aside and swung around to the rear of him, where she could continue her course toward the town. But in passing she recognized him. It was Father Beret, and how grim he looked! The discovery was made in the twinkling of an eye, and its effect was instantaneous, not only checking the force of her flight, but stopping her and turning her about to gaze before she had gone five paces farther.

Hamilton's nerve held, startled as he was, when he realized that an armed man stood before him. Naturally he fell into the error of thinking that he had been running after this fellow all the way from the little gate, where, he supposed, Alice had somehow given him the slip. It was a mere flash of brain-light, so to call it, struck out by the surprise of this curious discovery. He felt his bellicose temper leap up furiously at being balked in a way so unexpected and withal so inexplicable. Of course he did not stand there reasoning it all out. The rush of impressions came, and at the same time he acted with promptness. Changing the rapier, which he held in his right hand, over into his left, he drew a small pistol from the breast of his coat and fired. The report was sharp and loud, but it caused no uneasiness or inquiry in the fort, owing to the fact that Indians invariably emptied their guns when coming into the town.

Hamilton's aim, although hasty, was not bad. The bullet from his weapon cut through Father Beret's clothes between his left arm and his body, slightly creasing the flesh on a rib. Beyond him it struck heavily and audibly. Alice fell limp and motionless to the soft wet ground, where cold puddles of water were splintered over with ice. She lay pitifully crumpled, one arm outstretched in the moonlight. Father Beret heard the bullet hit her, and turned in time to see her stagger backward with a hand convulsively pressed over her heart. Her face, slightly upturned as she reeled, gave the moon a pallid target for its strengthening rays. Sweet, beautiful, its rigid features flashed for a second and then half turned away from the light and went down.

Father Beret uttered a short, thin cry and moved as if to go to the fallen girl, but it then he saw Hamilton's sword pass over again into his right hand, and knew that there was no time for anything but death or flight. The good priest did not shrink what might have made the readiest of soldiers nervous. Hamilton was known to be a great swordsman and proud of the distinction. Father Beret had seen him fence with Farnsworth in remarkable form, touching him at will, and in ministering to the men in the fort he had heard them talk of the Governor's incomparable skill.

A priest is, in perhaps all cases but the last out of a thousand, a man

of peace, not to be forced into a fight; but the exceptional one out of the ten hundred it is well not to stir up if you are looking for an easy victim. Hamilton was in the habit of considering every antagonist immediately conquerable. His domineering spirit could not, when opposed, reckon with any possibility of disaster. As he sprang toward Father Beret there was a mutual recognition and, we speak guardedly, something that sounded exactly like an exchange of furious execrations. As for Father Beret's sword, they may have been a mere priestly formula of obfuscation.

The moon was accommodating. With a beautiful white splendor it entered a space of cloudless sky, where it seemed to slip along the dusky blue surface among the stars, far over in the west.

"It's you, is it?" Hamilton exclaimed between teeth that almost crushed one another. "You prowling hypocrite of hell!"

Father Beret said something. It was not complimentary, and it sounded sulphurous, if not profane. Remember, however, that a priest can scarcely hope to be better than Peter, and Peter did actually make the Simon pure remark when hard pressed. At all events Father Beret said something with vigorous emphasis, and met Hamilton half way.

Both men, stimulated to the finger-tips by the draught of imperious passion, fairly plunged to the inevitable conflict. Ah, if Alice could have seen her beautiful weapons cross, if she could have heard the fine, far-reaching clink, clink, clink, while sparks leaped forth dazzling even the moonlight, if she could have noted the admirable, nay, the amazing play, as the men, regarding coolness to some extent, gathered their forces and fell cautiously to the deadly work, it would have been enough to change the cold shimmer of her face to a flash of warm delight. For she would have understood every feint, lunge, parry, and seen at a glance how Father Beret set the pace and led the race at the beginning. She would have understood, for Father Beret had taught her all she knew about the art of fencing.

Hamilton quickly felt, and with a sense of its strangeness, the priest's mastery command of his weapon. The surprise called up all his caution and cleverness. Before he could adjust himself to such an unexpected condition, he became near being spiritual outright by a pretty pass under his guard.

The narrow escape, while it put him on his best mettle, sent a wave of superstition through his brain. He recalled what Barlow had jocularly said about the doings of the devil, or priest-devil, at Roussillon place on that night when the patrol guard attempted to take Gaspard Roussillon. Was this, indeed, Father Beret, that gentle old man, now before him, or was it an avenging demon from the shades? The thought flitted electrically across his mind, while he dived parried, feinted, lunged, giving his dark antagonist all he could do to meet the play. Priest or devil, he thought, he cared not which, he would reach his vital prey. Yet there lingered with him a haunting half-fear, or tenuous awe, which may have aided, rather than hindered, his excellent swordsmanship.

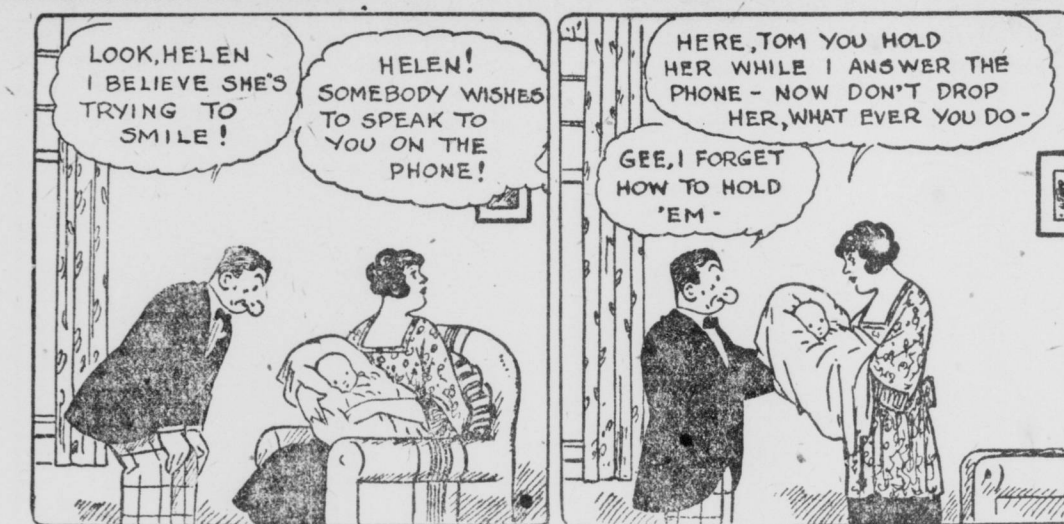
Under foot it was slushy with mud, water and ice, the consistency varying from a somewhat solid crust to puddles that half-inundated Hamilton's boots and quite overwhelmed Father Beret's moccasins. An exasperated field for the little matter in hand. They gradually shifted position. Now it was the Governor, then the priest, who had advantage as to the light. For some time Father Beret seemed quite the shiftilier and surer fighter, but (was it his age telling on him?) he lost perceptibly in suppleness. Still Hamilton failed to touch him. There was a baffling something in the old man's scoping now and again from what ought to have been an inevitable stroke. Was it luck? It seemed to Hamilton more than that—a sort of uncanny evasion. Or was it supreme mastery, the last and subtlest reach of the fencer's craft?

Youth forced age slowly backward in the struggle, which at times took on spurts so furious that the slender blades, becoming mere glints of adieu steel, split the moonlight back and forth, up and down, so that their lines, following one another in a well-nigh continuous stroke, sent a jarring noise through the air. Father Beret lost inch by inch, until the fighting was almost over the body of Alice; and now for the first time Hamilton became aware of that motionless something with the white, luminous face in profile against the ground; but he did not let even that unsettle his fencing gaze, which followed the sunken and dusky eyes of his adversary. A perspiration suddenly flooded his body, however, and began to drip across his face. His arm was tiring. A doubt crept like a chill into his heart. Then the priest appeared to add a cubit to his stature and waver strangely in the soft light. Behind him, low against the sky, a side-winged owl shot roislessly across, just above the prairie.

The soul of a true priest is double: it is the soul of a saint and the soul of a worldly man. What is most beautiful in this quality is the supreme courage with which the saintly spirit attacks the worldly and so often heroically masters it. In the beginning of the fight Father Beret let a passion of the earthly body take him by storm. It was well for Governor Henry Hamilton that the priest was so wrought upon as to unsettle his nerves, otherwise there would have been an evil heart impaled midway of Father Beret's rapier. A little later the saintly spirit began to assert itself, feebly indeed, but surely. Then it was that Father Beret seemed to be losing agility for a while as he backed away from Hamilton's increasing energy of assault. In his heart the priest was saying: "I will not murder him. I must not do that. He deserves death, but vengeance is not mine. I will listen him. Stop, stop he retreated, playing erratically to make an opening for a trick he meant to use.

It was singularly loose play, a sort of wavering, shifty, incomprehensible show of carelessness, that caused Hamilton to entertain a doubt, which was really a fear, as to what was going to happen; for, notwithstanding all this neglect of due precaution on the priest's part, to touch him seemed impossible, miraculously so, and every

DOINGS OF THE DUFFS—



OUT OUR WAY—By WILLIAMS



THEM DAYS IS GONE FOREVER—

Out of Tom's Line

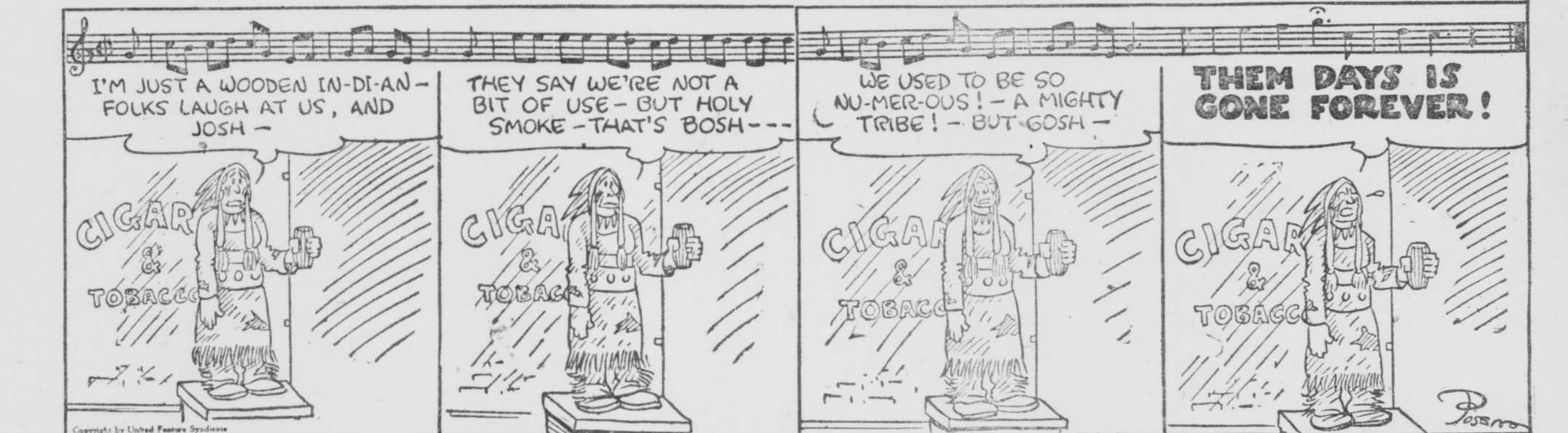


FRECKLES AND HIS FRIENDS—By BLOSSER



Lo, the Poor Indian

—By AL POSEN



THE OLD HOME TOWN—By STANLEY

OUR BOARDING HOUSE—By AHERN



THE PAIR OF STEEL RIM SPECTACLES JOHNATHAN HOKE LOST EARLY LAST WINTER, WERE FOUND TODAY, WHEN PHIL GORMAN SHOVELLED THE SAW DUST OUT OF HIS WELL KNOWN MAIN STREET BUTCHER SHOP



BUSTER BANGS IN ON A RAISE—



plan of attack dissolved into futility in the most maddening way. "Priest, devil or ghost!" raged Hamilton, with a froth gathering around his mouth; "I'll kill you, or—"

He made a lunge, when his adversary left an opening which appeared absolutely beyond defense. It was a quick, dextrous, vicious thrust. The blade leveled toward Father Beret's heart with a twinkle like lightning.

At that moment, although warily alert and hopeful that his opportunity was at hand, Father Beret came near losing his life; for as he side-stepped and easily parried Hamilton's thrust, which he had invited, thinking to entangle his blade and disarm him, he caught his foot in Alice's skirt and stumbled, nearly falling across her. It would have been easy for Hamilton to run him through, had he instantly followed up the advantage. But the moonlight on Alice's face struck his eyes, and by that indirect ray of vis-

ion which is often strangely effective, he recognized her lying there. It was a disconcerting thing for him, but he rallied instantly and sprang aside, taking a new position just in time to face Father Beret again. A chill crept up his back. The horror which he could not shake off enraged him beyond measure. Gathering fresh energy, he renewed the assault with desperate steadiness, the highest product of absolutely molten fury.

Father Beret felt the dangerous access of power in his antagonist's arm, and knew that a crisis had arrived. He could not be careless now. Here was a swordsman of the best school calling upon him for all the skill and strength and cunning that he could command. Again the saintly element was near being thrown aside by the worldly in the old man's breast. Alice lying there seemed mutely demanding that he avenge her. A riotous something in his blood clamored for a quick and certain act in this drama

by moonlight—a tragic close by a stroke of terrible yet perfectly fitting justice. There was but the space of a breath for the conflict in the priest's heart, yet during that little time he reasoned the case and quoted scripture to himself. "Domine, percutimus in gladio!" rang through his mind. "Lord, shall we smite with the sword?" Hamilton seemed to make answer

to this with a dazzling display of skill. The rapiers sang a strange song above the sleeping girl, a lullaby with curatations of death in every keen note. (To Be Continued.) The furnaces in London's famous Whitefriars glass works, recently extinguished because the plant was to be moved, had been alight continuously for nearly 250 years.