

Alice of Old Vincennes

By Maurice Thompson

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FATHER BERET was thinking of Alice. His brain, playing double, calculated with lightning swiftness the chances and movements of that whirlwind rush of light, while at the same time it swept through a retrospect of all the years since Alice came into his life. How he had watched her grow and bloom; how he had taught her, trained her mind and soul and body to high things, loved her with a fatherly passion unbounded, guarded her from the coarse and lawless influence of her surroundings. Like the tolling of an infinitely melancholy bell, all this went through his breast and brain, and, blending with a furious current of whatever passions were deadly dangerous in his nature, swept as a storm bearing its awful force into his sword-arm.

The Englishman was a lion, the priest a gladiator. The stars aloft in the vague, dark, yet splendid, amphitheater were the audience. It was a question. Would the thumbs go down or up? Life and death held the chances even; but it was at the will of Heaven, not of the stars. "How has he must follow the stroke ordered from beyond the astral clusters and the dusky blue."

Hamilton pressed, nay rushed, the fight with a weight and at a pace which could not last. But Father Beret withstood him so firmly that he made no farther headway; he even lost some ground a moment later.

"You damned Jesuit hypocrite!" he snarled; "you lowest of a vile brotherhood of liars!"

Then he rushed again, making a magnificent show of strength, quickness and accuracy. The sparks hissed and crackled from the rasping and ringing blades.

Father Beret was, in truth, a Jesuit, and as such a zealot; but he was not a liar or a hypocrite. Being human, he resented an insult. The salty spirit in him was strong, yet not strong enough to breast the indignation which now dashed against it. For a moment it went down.

"Liar and coward, yourself!" he retorted, hoarsely forcing his words out of his throat. "Spawn of a beastly breed!"

Hamilton saw and felt a change pass over the spirit of the old priest's movements. Instantly the sword leaping against his own seemed endowed with subtle cunning and malignant treachery. Before this it had been difficult enough to meet the fine play and hold fairly even; now he was startled and confused; but he rose to the emergency with admirable will power and cleverness.

"Murderer of a poor orphan girl!" Father Beret added with a hot concentrated accent; "death is too good for you."

Hamilton felt nearer his grave than ever before in all his wild experience, for somehow doom, shadowy and formless, like the atmosphere of an awful dream, enmeshed those words, but he was not weakling to quit at the height of desperate conflict. He was strong, expert, and game to the mid of his hair.

"I'll add a traitor Jesuit to my list of dead," he panted forth, rising yet again to the extreme tension of his power.

As he did this Father Beret settled himself as you have seen a mighty horse do in the home stretch of a race. Both men knew that the moment had arrived for the final act in their impromptu play. It was short, a duel condensed and crowded into fifteen seconds of time, and it was rapid beyond the power of words to describe. A bystander, had there been one, could not have seen what was finally done or how it was done.

Father Beret's sword seemed to waver, revolve, it was a halo in front of Hamilton for a mere point of time. The old priest seemed to crouch and then make a quick motion as if about to leap backward. A wrench and a snap, as of something violently jerked from a fastening, were followed by a semicircular flash of Hamilton's rapier over Father Beret's head to stick in the ground ten feet behind him. The duel was over, and the whole terrible struggle had occupied less than three minutes.

With his wrist strained and his fingers almost broken, Hamilton stumbled forward and would have impaled himself had not Father Beret turned the point of his weapon aside as he lowered it.

"Surrender, or die!"

That was a strange order for a priest to make, but there could be no mistaking its authority or the power behind it. Hamilton regained his footing and looked dazed, wheezing and puffing like a porpoise, but he clearly understood what was demanded of him.

"If you call out I'll run through," Father Beret added, seeing him move his lips as if to shout for help.

The level rapier now reinforced the words. Hamilton let the breath go noiselessly from his mouth and waved his hand in token of enforced submission.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" he demanded after a short pause. "You seem to have me at your mercy. What are your terms?"

Father Beret hesitated. It was a question difficult to answer.

"Give me your word as a British officer that you will never again try

to harm any person, not an open, armed enemy, in this town."

Hamilton's gorge rose perversely. He erected himself with lofty reserve and folded his arms. The dignity of a lieutenant governor leaped into him and took control. Father Beret correctly interpreted what he saw.

"My people have borne much," he said, "and the killing of that poor child there will be avfully avenged if I but say the word. Besides, I can turn every Indian in this wilderness against you in a single day. You are indeed at my mercy, and I will be merciful if you will satisfy my demand."

He was trembling with emotion while he spoke and the desire to kill the man before him was making a frightful struggle with his priestly conscience; but conscience had the upper hand. Hamilton stood gazing fixedly, pale as a ghost, his thoughts becoming more and more clear and logical. He was in a bad situation. Every word of Father Beret had spoken, was true and went home with force. There was no time for parley or subterfuge; the sword looked as if, eager to find his heart, it could not be held back another moment. But the wan, cold face of the girl had more power than the rapier's hungry point. It made an abject coward of him.

"I am willing to give you my word," he presently said. "And let me tell you," he went on more rapidly, "I did not shoot at her. She was behind you."

"Your word as a British officer?"

Hamilton again stiffened and hesitated, but only for the briefest space, then said:

"Yes, my word as a British officer."

Father Beret waved his hand with impatience.

"Go, then, back to your place in the fort and disturb my people no more. The soul of this poor little girl will haunt you forever. Go!"

Hamilton stood a little while gazing at the face of Alice with the horrible wistfulness of remorse. What would he not have given to rub his eyes and find it all a dream!

He turned away; a cloud scudded across the moon; here and yonder in the dim town cocks crowed with a lonesome, desultory effect.

Father Beret plucked up the rapier that he had wrangled from Hamilton's hand. It suggested something. "Hold!" he called out, "give me the scabbard of this sword!"

Hamilton, who was striding vigorously in the direction of the fort, turned about as the priest hastened to him.

"Give me the scabbard of this rapier; I want it. Take it off."

The command was not gently voiced. A hoarse, half-whisper winged every word with an imperious threat.

Hamilton obeyed. His hands were not firm; his fingers fumbled nervously; but he hurried, and Father Beret soon had the rapier sheathed and secured at his belt beside its mate.

A good and true priest is a burden-bearer. His motto is: "After aliteris onera portate." Bear ye one another's burdens. His soul is enriched with the cast-off sorrows of those whom he relieves. Father Beret scarcely felt the weight of Alice's body when he lifted it from the ground, so heavy was the pressure of his grief. All that her death meant, not only to him, but to every person who knew her, came into his heart as the place of refuge consecrated for the indwelling of pain. He lifted her and bore her as far toward Roussillon place as he could, but his strength fell short just in front of the little Boucicard cottage, and half-dead he staggered across the veranda to the door, where he sank exhausted.

After a breathing spell he knocked. The household, fast asleep, did not hear; but he persisted until the door was opened to him and his burden.

Captain Farnsworth unclosed his bloodshot eyes, at about 8 o'clock in the morning, quite confused as to his place and surroundings. He looked about drowsily with a sheepish half-knowledge of having been very drunk. A purring in his head and a dull ache reminded him of an abused stomach. He yawned and stretched himself, then sat up, running a hand through his tousled hair. Father Beret was on his knees before the cross, still as a statue, his clasped hands extended upward.

Farnsworth's face lighted with recognition, and he smiled rather bitterly. He called everything and felt ashamed, humiliated, self-debased. He had outraged even a priest's hospitality with his brutish appetite, and he hated himself for it. Disgust nauseated his soul with the physical sinking and squirming that grew upon him.

"I'm a shabby, worthless dog!" he muttered, with petulant accent; "why don't you kick me out, Father?"

The priest turned a collapsed and bloodless gray face upon him, smiled in a tired, perfunctory way, crossed himself absently and said:

"You have rested well, my son. Hard as the bed is, you have done it a compliment in the way of sleeping. You young soldiers understand how to get the most out of things."

"You are too generous, Father, and I can't appreciate it. I know what I deserve, and you know it, too. Tell me what a brute and fool I am; it will do me good. Punch me a solid jolt in the ribs, like the one you gave me not long ago."

"Qui sine peccato est, primus lapidem mittat," said the priest. "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

He had gone to the fourth and was talking from the embers an earthen saucer, or shallow bowl, in which some fragrant broth simmered and steamed.

"A man who has slept as long as you have, my son, usually has a somewhat delicate appetite. Now, here is a soup, not especially satisfying to the taste of a gourmet like yourself, but possessing the soothing quality that is good for one just aroused from an unusual nap. I offer it, my son, propter stomachum tuum, et frequenter tuas infirmitates (on account of thy stomach, and thine often infirmities). This soup will go to the right spot."

While speaking he brought the hot bowl to Farnsworth and set it on the bedcover before him, then fetched a big horn spoon.

The fragrance of pungent roots and herbs, blent with a savory waft of buffalo meat, greeted the Captain's sense, and the anticipation itself cheered his aching throat. It made

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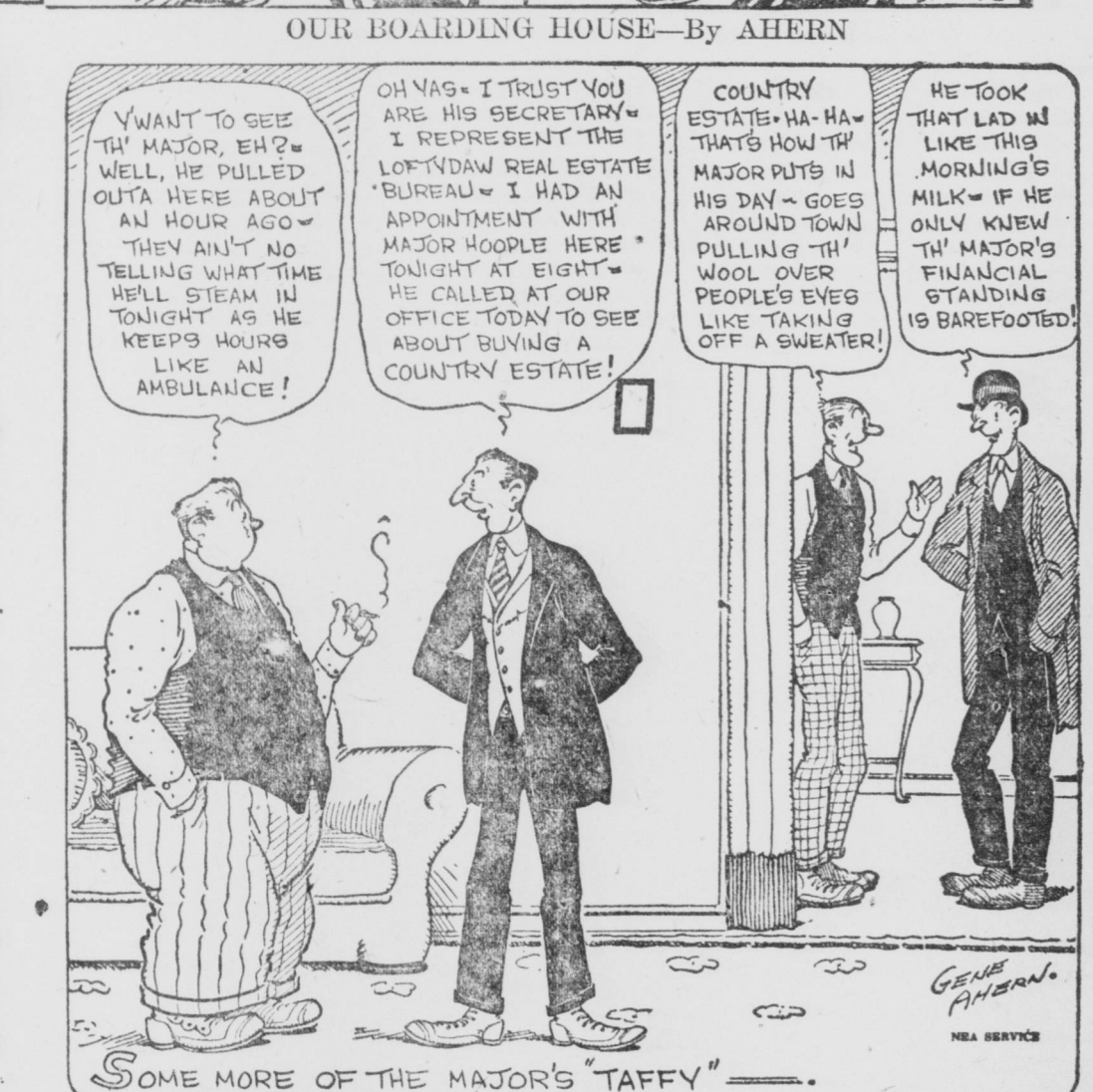
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him feel greedy and in a hurry. The first spoonful, a trifle bitter, was not so pleasant at the beginning, but a moment after he swallowed it a hot prickling set in and seemed to dart through him from extremity to extremity.

Slowly, as he ate, the taste grew more agreeable, and all the effects of his debauch disappeared. It was like magic; his blood warmed and glowed, as if touched with mysterious fire.

"What is this in this soup, Father

Beret, that makes it so searching and refreshing?" he demanded, when the bowl was empty.

Father Beret shook his head and smiled drolly.

"That I cannot divulge, my son, owing to a promise I had to make to the aged Indian who gave me the secret. It is the elixir of the Miamis. Only their consecrated medicine men hold the recipe. The stimulation is but temporary."

Just then some one knocked on the

door. Father Beret opened it to one of Hamilton's aides.

"Your pardon, Father, but hearing Captain Farnsworth's voice I made bold to knock."

"What is it, Bobby?" Farnsworth called out.

"Nothing, only the Governor has been having you looked for in every nook and corner of the fort and town. You'd better report at once, or he'll be having us drag the river for your body."

"All right, Lieutenant, go back and keep mum, that's a dear boy, and I'll shuffle into Colonel Hamilton's august presence before many minutes."

The aide laughed and went his way whistling a merry tune.

"Now I am sure to get what I deserve, with usury at 40 per cent in advance," said Farnsworth dryly, shrugging his shoulders with undissembled dread of Hamilton's wrath.

But the anticipation was not realized. The Governor received Farnsworth stiffly enough, yet in a way that suggested a suppressed desire to avoid explanations on the Captain's part and a reprimand on his own.

In fact, Hamilton was hoping that something would turn up to shield him from the effort of his terrible midnight adventure, which seemed the darker the more he thought of it.

He had a slow, numb conscience, lying deep where it was hard to reach, and when a qualm somehow entered it, he endured in secret what most

men would have cast off or confessed. He was haunted, if not with remorse, at least by a dread of something most disagreeable in connection with what he had done.

Alice's white face had impressed itself indelibly on his memory, so that it met his inner vision at every turn. He was afraid to converse with Farnsworth lest he should come up for discussion; consequently their interview was curt and formal.

(To Be Continued)