

ALICE of OLD VINCENNES

By MAURICE THOMPSON

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(CONTINUE.)

Hamilton laughed grimly. He had thought just what Helm was saying. Beverley's attention to Alice had not escaped his notice.

"Speaking of that girl," he remarked after a moment's silence, "what am I to do with her? There's no place to keep her, and Farnsworth insists that she wasn't to blame." He chuckled again and added:

"It's true as gospel. He's in love with her too. Seems to be glad she shot him. Says he's ashamed of himself for ever suspecting her of anything but being a genuine angel. Why, he's got as flabby as a rabbit and mumbles like a fool."

"Same as you or I at his age," said Helm, taking a chew of tobacco. "She is a pretty thing. Beverley doesn't know his foot from his shoulder blade when she's anywhere near him. Boys are boys. I'm a sort of boy myself."

"If she'd give up that flag I'd let her go," said Hamilton. "I hate to confine her. It looks brutal and makes me feel like a tyrant."

"Have you ever happened to notice the obvious fact, Governor Hamilton, that Alice Roussillon and Father Beret are not all the French in Vincennes?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I don't for a moment believe that either the girl or the priest knows a thing about where that flag is. They are both as truthful and honorable as people ever get to be. I know them. Somebody else got that flag from under the priest's floor. You may depend upon that. If Miss Roussillon knew where it is she'd say so and then dare you to make her tell where it's hidden."

"Oh, the whole town is rotten with treason! That's very clear. There's not a loyal soul in it outside of my forces."

"Thank you for not including me among the loyalists."

"Humph! I spoke of these French people. They pretend to be true, but I believe they are all traitors."

"You can manage them if you try. A little jolly kindness goes a long way with 'em. I had no trouble while I held the town."

Hamilton bit his lip and was silent. Helm was exasperatingly good tempered, and his jocularly was irresistible. While he was yet speaking a guard came up, followed by Jean, the hunchback, and, saluting, said to Hamilton:

"The lad wants to see the young lady, sir."

Hamilton gazed quizzically at Jean, who planted himself in his habitual attitude before him and stared up into his face with the grotesque expression which seems to be characteristic of hunchbacks and unfledged birds—the look of an embodied and hideous joke.

"Well, sir, what will you have?" the governor demanded.

"I want to see Alice, if you please."

"What for?"

"I want to give her a book to read."

"Ah, indeed. Where is it? Let me see it."

Jean took from the breast of his loose jerkin a small volume, dog eared and mildewed, and handed it to Hamilton. Meantime he stood first on one foot, then on the other, gnawing his thumb nail and blinking rapidly.

"Well, Helm, just look here!"

"What?"

"Haven't you ever read it?"

"Read what?"

"This novel."

"Never read a novel in my life; never expect to."

Hamilton laughed freely at Helm's expense, then turned to Jean and gave him back the book.

It would have been quite military had he taken the precaution to examine between the pages for something hidden there, but he did not.

"Go give it to her," he said, "and tell her I send by compliments, with great admiration of her taste in literature."

He motioned the soldier to show Jean to Alice. "It's a French story," he added, addressing Helm, "enough to make a pirate blush. That's the sort of girl Mlle. Roussillon is!"

"I don't care what kind of a book she reads," blurted Helm. "She's a fine, pure, good girl. Everybody likes her. She's the good angel of this miserable frog hole of a town. You'd like her yourself if you'd straighten up and quit burning tow in your brain all the time. You're always so furious about something that you never have a chance to be just to yourself or pleasant to anybody else."

"If I had got furious at you every time there was overwhelming provocation for it," Hamilton said, "you'd have been long since hanged or shot. I fancy that I have shown angelic forbearance. I've given you somewhat more than a prisoner's freedom."

"So you have, so you have," assented Helm. "I've often been surprised at your generous partiality in my case. Let's have some hot water with something else in it. What do you say? I won't give you any more advice for five minutes by your watch."

"But I want some advice at once."

"What about?"

"That girl."

"Turn her loose. That's easy and reputable."

"I'll have to, I presume, but she ought to be punished."

"If you'll think less about punishment, revenge and getting even with everybody and everything you'll soon begin to prosper."

Hamilton winced, but smiled as one quite sure of himself.

Jean followed the soldier to a rickety log pen on the farther side of the stockade, where he found the prisoner restlessly moving about like a bird in a rustic cage. It had no comforts, that gloomy little room. There was no fireplace, the roof leaked, and the only furniture consisted of a bench to sit on and a pile of skins for a bed. Alice looked charmingly forlorn peeping out of the wraps in which she was bundled against the cold, her hair fluffed and rimmed in shining disorder around her face.

The guard let Jean in and closed the door, himself staying outside.

Alice was as glad to see the poor lad as if they had been parted for a year. She hugged him and kissed his drawn little face.

"You dear, good Jean!" she murmured. "You did not forget me."

"I brought you something," he whispered, producing the book.

Alice snatched it, looked at it and then at Jean.

"Why, what did you bring this for, you silly Jean? I didn't want this. I

don't like this book at all. It's hateful. I despise it. Take it back."

"There's something in it for you, a paper with writing on it. Lieutenant Beverley wrote it on there. It's shut up between the leaves about the middle."

"Sh-s-sh! Not so loud. The guard'll hear you." Alice breathlessly whispered, her whole manner changing instantly. She was trembling, and the color had been whisked from her face as the flame from a candle in a sudden draft.

She found the note and read it a dozen times without a pause, her eyes leaping along the lines back and forth with pathetic eagerness and concentration. Presently she sat down on the bench and covered her face with her hands. A tremor first, then a convulsive sobbing shook her collapsed form. Jean regarded her with a drolly sympathetic grimace, elevating his long chin and letting his head settle back between his shoulders.

"Oh, Jean, Jean!" she cried at last, looking up and reaching out her arms.

"Oh, Jean, he is gone, gone, gone!"

Jean stepped closer to her while she sobbed again like a little child.

She pulled him to her and held him tightly against her breast while she once more read the note through blinding tears. The words were few, but to her they bore the message of desolation and despair. A great haunting, hollow voice in her heart repeated them until they echoed from vague distance to distance.

It was written with a bit of lead on the half of a mildewed fly leaf torn from the book:

Dear Alice—I am going away. When you read this think of me as hurrying through the wilderness to reach our army and bring it here. Be brave, as you always have been; be good, as you cannot help being; wait and watch for me; love me, as I love you. I will come. Do not doubt it. I will come, and I will crush Hamilton and his command. Courage, Alice dear; courage and wait for me. Faithfully ever,

BEVERLEY.

She kissed the paper with passionate fervor, pouring her tears upon it in April showers between which the light of her eyes played almost fiercely, so poignant was her sense of a despair which bordered upon desperation.

"Gone, gone!" It was all she could think or say. "Gone, gone!"

Jean took the offending novel back home with him, hidden under his jerkin, but Beverley's note lay upon Alice's heart, a sweet comfort and a crushing weight, when an hour later Hamilton sent for her and she was taken before him. Her face was stained with tears and she looked pitifully distressed and disheveled, yet despite all this her beauty asserted itself with subtle force.

Hamilton felt ashamed looking at her, but put on sternness and spoke without apparent sympathy:

"Miss Roussillon, you came near committing a great crime. As it is, you have done badly enough, but I wish not to be unreasonably severe. I hope

you are sorry for your act and feel like doing better hereafter."

"She was trembling, but her eyes looked steadily straight into his. They were eyes of baby innocence, yet they irradiated a strong womanly spirit just touched with the old perverse, mis-

chievous light which she could neither banish nor control. When she did not make reply Hamilton continued:

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

Well Again.

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