

ALICE OF OLD VINCENNES.

BY MAURICE THOMPSON.

[CONTINUED.]

Both men, stimulated to the finger tips by a draft 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 in the moonlight; if she could have noted the admirable—nay, the amazing—play as the men, regaining 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 masterly command of his weapon. The surprise called up all his caution and cleverness. Before he could adjust himself to such an unexpected condition he came near being spitted 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-priest 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 deftly 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 vitals presently. Yet there lingered with him a haunting half fear or tenuous awe,

which may have aided, rather than hindered, his excellent swordsmanship.

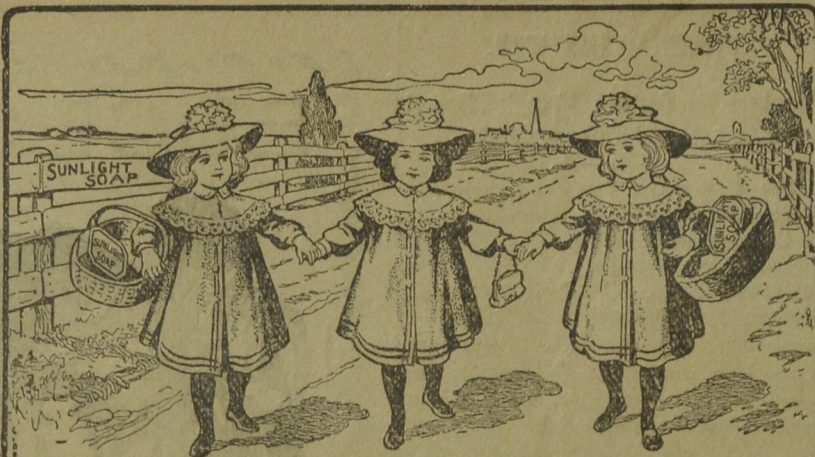
Underfoot it was slushy with mud, water and ice, the consistency varying from a somewhat solid crust to puddles that half inundated Hamilton's boots and quite overflowed Father Beret's moccasins—an execrable field for the little matter in hand. They gradually shifted position. Now it was the governor, then the priest, who had advantage as to the light. For some time Father Beret seemed quite the shifter and surer fighter, but (was 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 escape 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 acicular steel, split the moonlight back and forth, up and down, so that their meetings, 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 wide winged owl shot noiselessly 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

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turn 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 awhile as he backstepped 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 disarm him." Step by step 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 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, dexterous, vicious thrust. The blade leaped 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 sidestepped 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 vision 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 rapier sang a strange song above the sleeping girl, a lullaby with coruscations of death in every keen note.

Hamilton pressed, nay rushed, the point with a weight and at a pace

which could not last, but Father Beret withstood him so firmly that he made

no further headway. He even lost some ground a moment later.

"You 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 saintly 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 scoundrel yourself!" he retorted, hoarsely forcing the 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."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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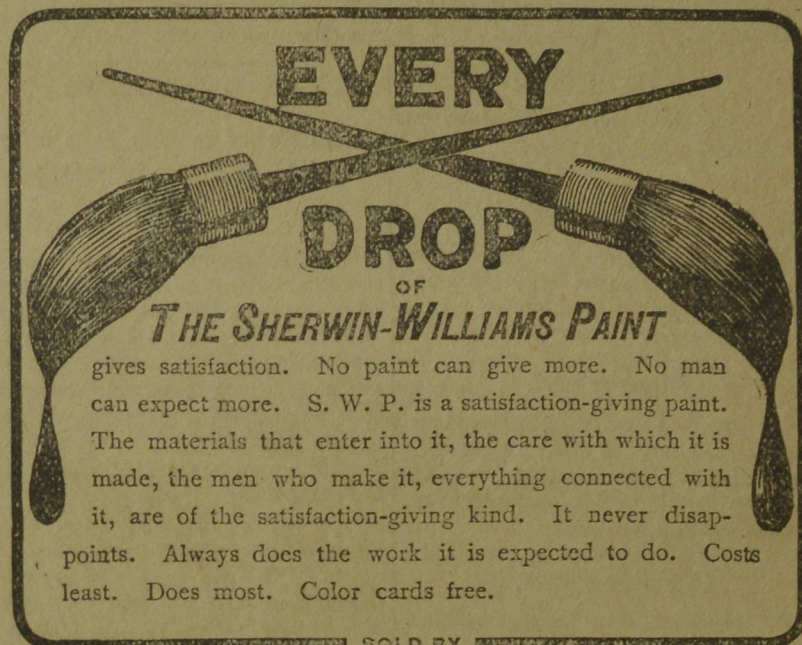
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