

ALICE OF OLD VINCENNES

By MAURICE THOMPSON

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[CONTINUED.]

There was an awkward silence. She had touched Rene's vulnerable spot. He was nothing if not a devout Catholic, and his conscience rooted itself in what good Father Beret had taught him.

Father Beret was the humble, self-effacing, never tiring agent of good in his community. He preached in a tender singsong voice the sweet monotonies of his creed and the sublime truths of Christ's code. He was indeed the spiritual father of his people. No wonder Rene's scowling expression changed to one of abject self-concern when the priest's name was suddenly connected with his mind. The confessional loomed up before the eyes of his conscience and his knees smote together, spiritually if not physically.

"Now," said Alice brusquely, but with sweet and gentle firmness, "go to your fiancée, go to pretty and good Adrienne, and ask her to be your partner. Refresh your conscience with a noble draft of duty and make that dear little girl overflow with joy. Go, Rene de Ronville."

Rene felt his soul cowering, even shivering, but he fairly maintained a good face, and went away without saying another word.

"Ciel, ciel, how beautiful she is!" he thought, as he walked along the narrow street in the dreamy sunshine. "But she is not for me, not for me."

He shook himself and tried to be cheerful. In fact he hummed a creole ditty, something about "La belle Jeanette, qu'a brisé mon cœur."

Days passed, and at last the time of

the great event arrived. It was a frosty night, clear, sparkling with stars, a keen breath cutting down from the northwest. M. Roussillon, Mme. Roussillon, Alice and Lieutenant Beverley went together to the river house, whither they had been preceded by almost the entire population of Vincennes. Some fires had been built outside, the crowd proving too great for the building's capacity, as there had to be ample space for the dancers. Merry groups hovered around the flaming logs, while within the house a fiddle sang its simple and ravishing tunes. Everybody talked and laughed; it was a lively racket of clashing voices and rhythmic feet.

When the Roussillon party arrived it attracted condensed attention. Its importance, naturally of the greatest in the assembled popular mind, was enhanced—as mathematicians would say, to the nth power—by the gown of Alice. It was resplendent indeed in the simple, unaccustomed eyes upon which it flashed with a buff silken glory. Matrons stared at it, maidens gazed with fascinated and jealous vision, men young and old let their eyes take full liberty. It was as if a queen, arrayed in a robe of state, had entered that dingy log edifice, an apparition of dazzling and awe-inspiring beauty. The dancers swung together and stopped in confusion. But she, fortified by a woman's strongest bulwark, the sense of resplendency, appeared quite unconscious of herself.

Little Adrienne, hanging in blissful delight upon Rene's strong arm, felt the stir of excitement and wondered what was the matter, being too short to see over the heads of those around her.

"What is it? What is it?" she cried, tiptoeing and tugging at her companion's sleeve. "Tell me, Rene; tell me, I say."

Rene was gazing in dumb admiration into which there swept a powerful anger, like a breath of flame. He recol-



lected how Alice had refused to wear that dress when he had asked her, and now she had it on. Moreover, there she stood beside Lieutenant Beverley, hold-



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ing his arm, looking up into his face, smiling, speaking to him.

"I think you might tell me what has happened," said Adrienne, pouting and still plucking at his arm. "I can't see a thing, and you won't tell me."

"Oh, it's nothing," he presently answered rather fretfully. Then he stooped, lowered his voice and added: "It's Mlle. Roussillon all dressed up like a bride or something. She's got on a buff silk dress that M. Roussillon's mother had in France."

"How beautiful she must look!" cried the girl. "I wish I could see her." Rene put a hand on each side of her slender waist and lifted her high, so that her pretty head rose above the crowding people. Alice chanced to turn her face that way just then and saw the unconventional performance. Her eyes met those of Adrienne and she gave a nod of smiling recognition. It was a rose beaming upon a gillyflower. M. Roussillon naturally understood that all this stir and crowding to see was but another demonstration of his personal popularity. He bowed and waved a vast hand.

But the master of ceremonies called loudly for the dancers to take their places. Uncle Jazon attacked his fiddle with startling energy. Those who were not to dance formed a compact double line around the wall, the shorter ones in front, the taller in the rear.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

Vain.

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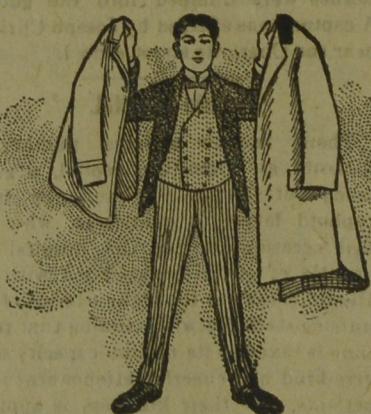
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