

ALICE OF OLD VINCENT.

BY MAURICE THOMPSON.

[CONTINUED.]

"Well, if you don't use profane language, father, there's no telling how much you think in expletives. What is your opinion of a man who tumbles a poor, defenseless girl into prison and then refuses to let her be decently cared for? How do you express yourself about him?"

"My son, men often do things of which they ought to be ashamed. I heard of a young officer once who maltreated a little girl that he met at night in the street. What evil he would have done, had not a passing kind hearted man reminded him of his honor by a friendly punch in the ribs, I dare not surmise."

"True, and your sarcasm goes home as hard as your fist did, father. I know that I've been a sad dog all my life. Miss Roussillon saved you by shooting me, and I love her for it. Lay on, father; I deserve more than you can give me."

"Surely you do, my son, surely you do, but my love for you will not let me give you pain. Ah, we priests have to carry all men's loads. Our backs are broad, however; very broad, my son."

"And your fists are heavy, father; mighty heavy."

The gentle smile again flickered over the priest's weather beaten face as he glanced sidewise at Farnsworth and said:

"Sometimes, sometimes, my son, a carnal weapon must break the way for a spiritual one. But we priests rarely have much physical strength. Our dependence is upon"—

"To be sure; certainly," Farnsworth interrupted, rubbing his side. "Your dependence is upon the first thing that offers. I've had many a blow, but yours was the solidest that ever jarred my mortal frame, Father Beret."

The twain began to laugh. There is nothing like a reminiscence to stir up fresh mutual sympathy.

"If your intercostals were somewhat sore for a time on account of a contact with priestly knuckles, doubtless there soon set in a corresponding uneasiness in the region of your conscience. Such shocks are often vigorously alternative and tonic; eh, my son?"

"You jolted me sober, father, and then I was ashamed of myself. But where does all your tremendous strength lie? You don't look strong."

While speaking Farnsworth leaned near Father Beret and grasped his arm. The young man started, for his fingers, instead of closing around a flabby, shrunken old man's limb, spread themselves upon a huge, knotted mass of iron muscles. With a quick movement Father Beret shook off Farnsworth's hand and said:

"I am no Samson, my son. Non sum qualis eram." Then, as if dismissing a light subject for a graver one, he sighed and added, "I suppose there is nothing that can be done for little Alice."

He called the tall, strong girl "little Alice," and so she seemed to him. He could not, without direct effort, think of her as a magnificently maturing woman. She had always been his spoiled pet child, perversely set against the holy church, but dear to him nevertheless.

"I came to ask that very question, father," said Farnsworth.

"And what do I know? Surely, my son, you see how utterly hopeless an old priest is against all you British. And besides"—

"Father Beret," Farnsworth huskily interrupted, "is there a place that you know of anywhere in which Miss Roussillon could be hidden if"—

"My dear son!"

"But, father, I mean it."

"Mean what? Pardon an old man's slow understanding. What are you talking about, my son?"

Father Beret glanced furtively about, then quickly stepped through the door—

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way, walked entirely around the house and came in again before Farnsworth could respond. Once more seated on his stool he added interrogatively:

"Did you think you heard something moving outside?"

"No."

"You were saying something when I went out. Pardon my interruption."

Farnsworth gave the priest a searching and not wholly confiding look.

"You did not interrupt me, Father Beret. I was not speaking. Why are you so watchful? Are you afraid of eavesdroppers?"

"You were speaking recklessly. Your words were incendiary; ardentia verba. My son, you were suggesting a dangerous thing. Your life would scarcely satisfy the law were you convicted of insinuating such treason. What if one of your prowling guards had overheard you? Your neck and mine might feel the halter. Quod avertat dominus."

He crossed himself and in a solemn voice added in English: "May the Lord forbid! Ah, my son, we priests protect those we love."

"And I, who am not fit to tie a priest's shoe, do likewise. Father, I love Alice Roussillon."

"Love is a holy thing, my son. Amare divinum est et humanum."

"Father Beret, can you help me?"

"Spiritually speaking, my son?"

"I mean can you hide Mlle. Roussillon in some safe place if I take her out of the prison yonder? That's just what I mean. Can you do it?"

"Your question is a remarkable one. Have you thought upon it from all directions, my son? Think of your position, your duty as an officer."

A shrewd polemical expression beamed from Father Beret's eyes, and a very expert physiognomist might have suspected duplicity from certain lines about the old man's mouth.

"I simply know that I cannot stand by and see Alice—Mlle. Roussillon—forced to suffer treatment too beastly for an Indian thief. That's the only direction there is for me to look at it from, and you can understand my feelings if you will. You know that very well, Father Beret. When a man

loves a girl he loves her; that's the whole thing."

The quiet, inscrutable half smile flickered once more on Father Beret's face, but he sat silent some time with a sinewy forefinger lying alongside his nose. When at last he spoke it was in a tone of voice indicative of small interest in what he was saying. His words rambled to their goal with the effect of happy accident.

"There are places in this neighborhood in which a human being would be as hard to find as the flag that you and Governor Hamilton have so diligently and unsuccessfully been in quest of for the past month or two. Really, my son, this is a mysterious little town."

Farnsworth's eyes widened and a flush rose in his swarthy cheeks.

"Hang the flag!" he exclaimed. "Let it lie hidden forever. What do I care? I tell you, Father Beret, that Alice Roussillon is in extreme danger. Governor Hamilton means to put some terrible punishment on her. He has a devil's vindictiveness. He showed it to me clearly awhile ago."

"You showed something of the same sort to me, once upon a time, my son."

"Yes, I did, Father Beret, and I got a load of slugs in my shoulder for it from that brave girl's pistol. She saved your life. Now I ask you to help me save hers, or if not her life what is infinitely more, her honor."

"Her honor!" cried Father Beret, leaping to his feet so suddenly and with such energy that the cabin shook from base to roof. "What do you say, Captain Farnsworth? What do you mean?"

The old man was transformed. His face was terrible to see, with its narrow, burning eyes deep under the shaggy brows, its dark veins writhing

snake-like on the temples and forehead, the projected mouth and chin, the hard lines of the jaws, the iron gray gleam from all the features—he looked like an aged tiger stiffened for a spring.

Farnsworth was made of right soldierly stuff, but he felt a distinct shiver flit along his back. His past life had not lacked thrilling adventures and strangely varied experiences with desperate men. Usually he met sudden emergencies rather calmly, sometimes with phlegmatic indifference. This passionate outburst on the priest's part, however, surprised him and awed him, while it stirred his heart with a profound sympathy unlike anything he had ever felt before.

Father Beret mastered himself in a moment and, passing his hand over his face, as if to brush away the excitement, sat down again on his stool. He appeared to collapse inwardly.

"You must excuse the weakness of an old man, my son," he said, in a voice hoarse and shaking. "But tell me what is going to be done with Alice. Your words—what you said—I did not understand."

He rubbed his forehead slowly, as one who has difficulty in trying to collect his thoughts.

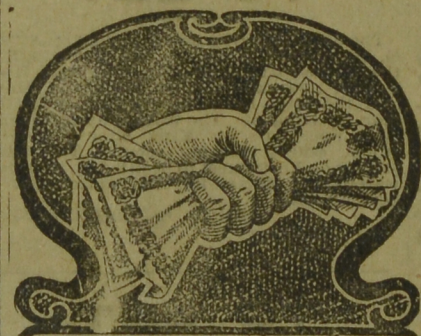
"I do not know what Governor Hamilton means to do, Father Beret. It will be something devilish, however—something that must not happen," said Farnsworth.

Father Beret, like most men of strong feeling who have been subjected to long years of trial, hardship, multitudinous dangers and all sorts of temptation, and who have learned the lessons of self control, had an iron will, and also an abiding distrust of weak men. He saw Farnsworth's sincerity, but he had no faith in his constancy, although satisfied that while resentment of Hamilton's imperiousness lasted he would doubtless remain firm in his purpose to aid Alice.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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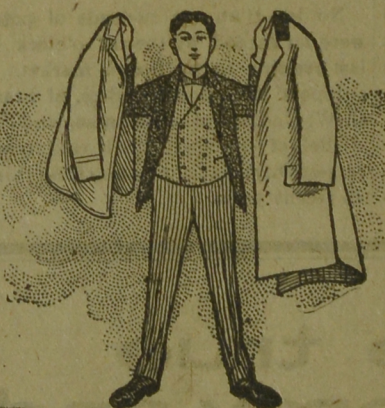
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