

ALICE of OLD VINCENNES

By MAURICE THOMPSON

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(Continued)

CHAPTER XIV. A PRISONER OF LOVE.

Alice put on her warmest clothes and followed Captain Farnsworth to the fort, realizing that no pleasant experience awaited her. The wind and rain still prevailed when they were ready to get forth, and, although it was not extremely cold, a searching chill went with every throb that marked the storm's waves. No lights shone in the village houses. Overhead a gray gloom covered stars and sky, making the darkness in the watery streets seem densely black. Farnsworth offered Alice his arm, but she did not accept it. "I know the way better than you do," she said. "Come on, and don't be afraid that I am going to run. I shall not play any trick on you."

"Very well, mademoiselle, as you like. I trust you."

They hastened along until a lantern in the fort shot a hazy gleam upon them.

"Stop a moment, mademoiselle," Farnsworth called. "I say, Miss Rousillon, stop a moment, please."

Alice halted and turned, facing him so short and so suddenly that the rapier in his hand pricked through her wrap and slightly scratched her arm.

"What do you mean, sir?" she demanded, thinking that he had thrust purposely. "Do I deserve this brutality?"

"You mistake me, Miss Rousillon. I cannot be brutal to you now. Do not fear me. I only had to say."

"Oh, you deem it very polite and gentle to jab me with your sword, do you? If I had one in my hand you would not dare try such a thing, and you know it very well."

He was amazed, not knowing that the sword point had touched her. He could not see her face, but there was a flash in her voice that startled him with its indignant contempt and resentment.

"What are you saying, Miss Rousillon? I don't understand you. When did I ever—when did I jab you with

my sword? I never thought of such a thing."

"This moment, sir, you did, and I do know you did. My arm is bleeding now."

She spoke rapidly in French, but he caught her meaning and for the first time became aware of the rapier in his hand. Even then its point was toward her and very near her breast. He lowered it instantly while the truth rushed into his mind.

"Forgive me," he murmured, his words barely audible in the tumult of wind and rain, but charged with the intensest feeling.

"Forgive me. I did not know. It was an accident. I could not do such a thing purposely. Believe me, believe me, Miss Rousillon. I did not mean it."

"I should like to believe you," she presently said, "but I cannot. You English are all, all despicable, mean, vile!"

"Some time you shall not say that," Farnsworth responded. "I asked you to stop a moment that I might beg you to believe how wretchedly sorry I am for what I am doing. But you cannot understand me now. Are you really hurt, Miss Rousillon? I assure you that it was purely accidental."

"My hurt is nothing," she said.

"I am very glad."

"Well, then, shall we go on to the fort?"

"You may go where you please, mademoiselle."

She turned her back upon him and without an answering word walked straight to the lantern that hung by the gate of the stockade, where a sentinel tramped to and fro. A few moments later Captain Farnsworth presented her to Hamilton, who had been called from his bed when the news of the trouble at Rousillon place reached the fort.

"So you've been raising trouble again, have you, miss?" he growled, with an ugly frown darkening his face.

"I beg your pardon," said Farnsworth. "Miss Rousillon was not to blame for—"

"To your eyes she'd not be to blame,"

he said, she burned up the fort and all of us in it," Hamilton growled, interrupting. "Miss, what have you been doing? What are you here for? Captain Farnsworth, you will please state the particulars of the trouble that I have just heard about. And I may as well notify you that I wish to hear no special lawyer's pleading in this girl's behalf."

Farnsworth's face whitened with anger. He bit his lip, and a silver run through his frame, but he had to conquer the passion. In a few words blunt and direct as musket balls he told all the circumstances of what had taken place, making no concealments to favor Alice, but boldly blaming the officer of the patrol, Lieutenant Barlow, for losing his head and attacking a young girl in her own home.

"I will hear from Barlow," said Hamilton after listening attentively to the story. "But take this girl and confine her. Show her no favors. I hold you responsible for her until tomorrow morning. You can retire."

There was no room for discussion. Farnsworth saluted and turned to Alice.

"Come with me," he gently said. Hamilton looked after them as they went out of his room, a curious smile playing around his firmly set lips.

"She's the most beautiful vixen that I ever saw," he thought. "She doesn't look to be a French girl either; decidedly English!" He shrugged his shoulders, then laughed dryly. "Farnsworth's as crazy as can be, the beggar; in love with her so deep that he can't see out. By Jove, she is a beauty! Never saw such eyes. And plucky to beat the deuce. I'll bet my head Barlow'll be daft about her next!"

Still, notwithstanding the lightness of his inward comments, Hamilton regarded the incident as rather serious. He knew that the French inhabitants were secretly his bitter enemies, yet probably willing, if he would humor their peculiar social, domestic and commercial prejudices, to refrain from active hostilities, and even to aid him in furnishing his garrison with a large amount of needed supplies. The danger just now was twofold—his Indian allies were deserting him, and a flotilla loaded with provisions and ammunition from Detroit had failed to arrive. He might, if the French rose against him and were joined by the Indians, have great difficulty defending the fort. It was clear that M. Rousillon had more influence with both creoles and savages than any other person save Father Beret. Urgent policy dictated that these two men should somehow be won over. But to do this it would be necessary to treat Alice in such a way that her arrest would add, instead of operating against the desired result—a thing not easy to manage.

prisoner straightway from Hamilton's presence to a small room connected with a considerable structure in a distant angle of the stockade. Neither he nor Alice spoke on the way. With a huge wooden key he unlocked the door and stepped aside for her to enter. A dim lamp was burning within, its yellowish light flickering over the scant furniture, which consisted of a comfortable bed, a table with some books on it, three chairs, a small looking glass on the wall, a guitar and some articles of men's clothing hanging here and there. A heap of dull embers smoldered in the fireplace. Alice did not falter at the threshold, but promptly entered her prison.

"I hope you can be comfortable," said Farnsworth in a low tone. "It's the best I can give you."

"Thank you," was the answer, spoken quite as if he had handed her a glass of water or picked up her handkerchief.

He held the door a moment while she stopped with her back toward him in the middle of the room; then she heard him close and lock it. The air was almost too warm after her exposure to the biting wind and cold dashes of rain. She cast off her outer wraps and stood by the fireplace. At a glance she comprehended that the place was not the one she had formerly occupied as a prisoner, and that it belonged to a man. A long rifle stood in a corner, a bullet pouch and powder horn hanging on a projecting hickory ramrod. A heavy fur topcoat lay across one of the chairs.

Farnsworth, who had given Alice his own apartment, took what rest he could on the cold ground under a leaky shed hard by. His wound, not yet altogether healed, was not benefited by the exposure.

In due time next morning Hamilton ordered Alice brought to his office, and when she appeared he was smiling with as near an approach to affability as his disposition would permit. He rose and bowed like a courtier.

"I hope you rested well, mademoiselle," he said in his best French. He imagined that the use of her language would be agreeable to begin with.

"I am sorry, monsieur, that I cannot say as much to you," she glibly responded. "If you lay upon a bed of needles the whole night through, your rest was better than you deserved. My own sleep was quite refreshing, thank you."

Instantly Hamilton's choler rose. He tried to suppress it at first, but when he saw Alice actually laughing, and Farnsworth, who had brought her in, biting his lip furiously to keep from adding an uproarious guffaw, he lost all hold of himself.

"I might have known better than to expect decency from a wench of your character," he said. "I hoped to do you a favor, but I see that you are not capable of accepting kindness politely."

"I am sure, monsieur, that I have but spoken the truth plainly to you. You would not have me do otherwise, I hope."

Her voice, absolutely witching in its softness, freshness and suavity, helped the assault of her eyes, while her dimples twinkled and her hair shone. Hamilton felt his heart move strangely, but he could not forbear saying in English:

"If you are so very truthful, miss, you will probably tell me where the flag is that you stole and hid."

It was always the missing banner that came to mind when he saw her.

"Indeed, I will do nothing of the sort," she promptly replied. "When you see that flag again you will be a prisoner, and I will wave it high over your head."

She lifted a hand as she spoke and made the motion of shaking a banner above him. It was exasperation sweetened almost to delight that took hold of the sturdy Briton. He liked pluck, especially in a woman, all the more if she was beautiful, yet the very fact that he felt her charm falling upon him set him hard against her; not as Hamilton the man, but as Hamilton the commander at Vincennes.

"You think to fling yourself upon me as you have upon Captain Farnsworth," he said, with an insulting leer and in a tone of prurient innuendo. "I am not susceptible, my dear. This more for Farnsworth's benefit than to insult her, albeit he was not in a mood to care."

"You are a coward and a liar!" she exclaimed, her face flushing with hot shame. "You stand here," she quickly added, turning fiercely upon Farnsworth, "and quietly listen to such words! You, too, are a coward if you do not make him retract! Oh, you English are low brutes!"

Hamilton laughed, but Farnsworth looked dark and troubled, his glance going back and forth from Alice to his commander as if another word would cause him to do something terrible.

"I rather think I've heard all that I care to hear from you, miss," Hamilton presently said. "Captain Farnsworth, you will see that the prisoner is confined in the proper place, which, I suggest to you, is not your sleeping quarters, sir."

"Colonel Hamilton," said Farnsworth in a husky voice, "I slept on the ground under a shed last night in order that Miss Rousillon might be somewhat comfortable."

"Humph! Well, see that you do not do it again. This girl is guilty of harboring an spy and resisting a lawful attempt of my guards to capture him. Confine her in the place prepared for prisoners and see that she stays there until I am ready to fix her punishment."

"There is no place fit for a young girl to stay in," Farnsworth ventured. "She can have no comfort or—"

"Take her along, sir. Any place is good enough for her so long as she behaves like a—"

"Very well," Farnsworth bluntly in-

terrupted, thus saving Alice the stress of a vile comparison. "Come with me, please, Miss Rousillon."

He pulled her toward the door, then dropped the arm he had grasped and murmured an apology.

She followed him out, holding her head high. No one looking on would have suspected that a sinking sensation in her heart made it difficult for her to walk or that her eyes, shining like stars, were so inwardly clouded with distress that she saw her way but dimly.

It was a relief to Hamilton when Helm a few minutes later entered the room with something breezy to say.

"What's up now, if I may ask?" the jolly American demanded. "What's this I hear about trouble with the French women? Have they begun a revolution?"

"That elephant Gaspard Rousillon came back into town last night," said Hamilton sulkily.

"Well, he went out again, didn't he?"

"Yes, but—"

"Stepped on somebody's toe first, eh?"

"The guard tried to capture him, and that girl of his wounded Lieutenant Barlow in the neck with a sword. Rousillon fought like a tiger, and the men swear that Satan himself appeared on the scene to help the Frenchman out."

"Moral: Be generous in your dealings with Frenchmen and French women and so get the devil on your side."

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"Why not shoot her yourself? You oughtn't to shirk a dirty job like that and force it upon your men."

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"Yes, slightly, and I don't think I've been treated fairly in the matter, sir."

"How so?"

"I stood the brunt, and now Captain Farnsworth gets the prize." He twisted his mouth in mock expression of maudlin disappointment. "I'm always cheated out of the sweets. I never get anything for gallant conduct on the field."

"Poor boy! It is a shame. But I say, lieutenant, has Rousillon really escaped, or is he hidden somewhere in town? Have you been careful?"

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"Moral again," Helm interposed. "Keep on the good side of the French."

"That's sensible talk, sir," assented Barlow.

"Bah!" exclaimed Hamilton. "You might as well talk of keeping on the good side of the American traitors. A bloody murrain seize the whole race!"

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"They have been telling me a cock and bull story concerning the affair at the Rousillon cabin," Hamilton said, changing his manner. "What is this about a disguised and wonderful man who rushed in and upset the whole of you? I want no romancing. Give me the facts."

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"The facts," he said, speaking with serious deliberation, "are not clear. It was like a clap of thunder the way that man performed. As you say, he did fling the whole squad all of a heap, and it was done that quickly. He snapped his thumb and finger demonstratively with a sharp report, 'nobody could understand it.'"

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"A pretty officer of his majesty's army you are, Lieutenant Barlow! First a slip of a girl shows herself your superior with the sword and wounds you, then a single man wipes up the floor of a house with you and your guard, depriving you at the same time of both vision and memory, so that you cannot even describe your assailant!"

"He was dressed like a priest," muttered Barlow, evidently frightened at his commander's scathing comment. "That was all there was to see."

"A priest! Some of the men say the devil. I wonder"—Hamilton hesitated and looked at the floor. "This Father Beret, he is too old for such a thing, isn't he?"

"I have thought of him—it was like him—but he is, as you say, very old to be so tremendously strong and active. Why, I tell you that men went from his hands against the walls and floor as if shot out of a mortar. It was the strangest and most astounding thing I ever heard of."

A little later Barlow seized a favorable opportunity and withdrew. The conversation was not to his liking.

Hamilton sent for Father Beret and had a long talk with him, but the old man looked so childishly inoffensive in spirit and so collapsed physically that it seemed worse than foolishness to accuse him of the exploit over which the entire garrison was wondering. Farnsworth sat by during the interview. He looked the good priest curiously and critically over from head to foot, remembering, but not mentioning, the most underhand punch in the side received from that energetic right arm now lying so flabbily across the old man's lap.

When the talk ended and Father Beret haubly took his leave, Hamilton turned to Farnsworth and said:

"What do you think of this affair? I have cross questioned all the men who

took part in it, and every one of them says simply priest or devil. I think old Beret is both, but plainly he couldn't hurt a chicken; you can see that at a glance."

Farnsworth smiled, rubbing his aide reminiscently, but he shook his head.

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