

EIGHT

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 enwrapped 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 deadly 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, percutiens 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 connotations of death in every keen note.

Hamilton pressed, nay rushed, the fight with a weight and a pace

which could not last, but Father Beret withstood him so firmly that he made no farther headway. He even lost some ground a moment later.

"You Jesuit hypocrite!" he snarled. "You lowest of a vile brotherhood of fiends!"

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.

"Like 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!"

Hamilton felt nearer his grave than ever before in all his wild experience for somehow doom, shadow and fortune, like the atmosphere of an awful dream, enshrouded those words, but he was no working to quit at the height of desperate conflict. He was strong expert and game to the middle of his heart.

"I'll add a traitor Jesuit to my list of dead," he panted forth, rising again to the extremest tension of his power.

As he did this Father Beret settled himself as you have seen a mighty horse do in the home stretch of a race. Both men knew that the moment had arrived for the final act in their impromptu play. It was short, a due condensed and crowded into fifteen seconds of time, and it was rapid beyond the power of words to describe.

A bystander, had there been one, could not have seen what was finally done or how it was done. Father Beret's sword seemed to be revolving—it was a halo in front of Hamilton for a mere point of time. The old priest seemed to crouch and then make a quick motion as if about to leap backward. A wrench and a snap, as of something violently jerked from a fastening, were followed by a semicircular flight of Hamilton's rapier over Father Beret's head to stick in the ground ten feet behind him. The duel was over, and the whole terrible struggle had occupied less than three minutes.

With his wrist strained and his fingers almost broken, Hamilton stumbled forward and would have impaled himself had not Father Beret turned the point of his weapon aside as he lowered it.

"Surrender or die!"

That was a strange order for a priest to make, but there could be no mistaking its authority or the power behind it. Hamilton regained his footing and looked dazed, wheezing and puffing like a porpoise, but he clearly understood what was demanded of him.

"If you call out, I'll run you through," Father Beret added, seeing him move his lips as if to shout for help.

The level rapier now re-enforced the words. Hamilton let the breath go noisily from his mouth and waved his hand in token of enforced submission.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" he demanded, after a short pause. "You seem to have me at your mercy. What are your terms?"

Father Beret hesitated. It was a question difficult to answer.

"Give me your word as a British officer that you will never again try to harm any person not an open, armed enemy in this town."

Hamilton's gorge rose perversely. He croaked himself with lofty reserve and folded his arms. The dignity of a lieutenant governor leaped into him

and took control. Father Beret correctly interpreted what he saw.

"My people have borne much," he said, "and the killing of that poor child there will be awfully avenged if I but say the word. Besides, I can turn every Indian in this wilderness against you in a single day. You are indeed at my mercy, and I will be merciful if you will satisfy my demand."

"I am willing to give you my word," he presently said. "And let me tell you," he went on more rapidly, "I did not shoot at her. She was behind you."

"Your word as a British officer?" Hamilton again stiffened and hesitated, but only for the briefest space, then said:

"Yes, my word as a British officer."

Father Beret waved his hand with impatience.

"Go, then, back to your place in the fort, and disturb my people no more. The soul of this poor little girl will haunt you forever. Go!"

Hamilton stood a little while gazing at the face of Alice with the horrible vividness of remorse. What would he not have given to rub his eyes and find it all a dream?

He turned away, a cloud scudded across the moon, here and yonder in the dim town creaks crowded with a lone, desolate effect.

Father Beret plucked up the rapier that he had wrenched from Hamilton's hand. It suggested something.

"Hold!" he called out. "Give me the scabbard of this sword."

Hamilton, who was striding vigorously in the direction of the fort, turned about as the priest hastened to him.

"Give me the scabbard of this rapier. I want it. Take it off."



"Surrender or die!"

The command was not gentle voiced. A hoarse half whisper winged every word with an imperious threat.

Hamilton obeyed. His hands were not firm. His fingers fumbled nervously, but he hurried, and Father Beret soon had the rapier sheathed and secured at his belt beside his mate.

A good and true priest is a burden bearer. His motto is, *Alter alterius onera portate* (Bear ye one another's burdens). His soul is enriched with the costly sorrows of those whom he relieves. Father Beret scarcely felt the weight of Alice's body when he lifted it from the ground, so heavy was the pressure of his grief. All that her death meant, not only to him, but to every person who knew her, came into his heart as the place of refuge consecrated for the indwelling of pain. He lifted her and bore her as far toward Roussillon place as he could, but his strength fell short just in front of the little Bourcier cottage, and, half dead, he staggered across the veranda to the door, where he sank exhausted.

After a breathing spell he knocked. The household, fast asleep, did not hear, but he persisted until the door was opened to him and his burden.

Captain Farnsworth unlocked his bloodshot eyes at about 8 o'clock in the morning, quite confused as to his place and surroundings. He looked about drowsily with a sheepish half knowledge of having been very drunk. A purring in his head and a dull ache reminded him of an abused stomach. He yawned and stretched himself, then sat up, running a hand through his tousled hair. Father Beret was on his knees before the cross, still as a statue, his clasped hands extended upward.

Farnsworth's face lighted with recognition, and he smiled rather bitterly. He recalled everything and felt ashamed, humiliated, self debased. He had outraged even a priest's hospitality with his brutal appetite, and he hated himself for it.

"I'm a shabby, worthless dog," he muttered, with petulant accent. "Why don't you kick me out, father?"

The priest turned a collapsed and bloodless gray face upon him, smiled in a tired, perfunctory way, crossed himself absently and said:

"You have rested well, my son. Hard as the bed is, you have done it a compliment in the way of sleeping. You young soldiers understand how to get the most out of things."

"You are too generous, father, and I can't appreciate it. I know what I deserve, and you know it too. Tell me what a brute and fool I am. It will do me good. Punch me a solid jolt in the ribs, like the one you gave me not long ago."

"Qui sine peccato est, primus in pldem mittat," said the priest. ("Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.")

Just then some one knocked on the door. Father Beret opened it to one of Hamilton's aids.

"Your pardon, father, but, hearing Captain Farnsworth's voice, I made bold to knock."

"What is it, Bobby?" Farnsworth called out.

"Nothing, only the governor has been having you looked for in every nook and corner of the fort and town. You'd better report at once or he'll be having us drag the river for your body."

"All right, lieutenant. Go back and keep mum; that's a dear boy, and I'll shuffle into Colonel Hamilton's august presence before many minutes."

The aid laughed and went his way whistling a merry tune.

"Now I am sure to get what I deserve, with usury at 40 per cent in advance," said Farnsworth dryly, shrugging his shoulders with undismayed dread of Hamilton's wrath. But the anticipation was not realized. The governor received Farnsworth stiffly enough, yet in a way that suggested a suppressed desire to avoid explanations on the captain's part and a reprimand on his own. Alice's white face had impressed itself indelibly on his memory, so that it met his inner vision at every turn. He was afraid to converse with Farnsworth lest she should come up for discussion; consequently their interview was curt and formal.

It was soon discovered that Alice had escaped from the stockade, and some show of search was made for her by Hamilton's order, but Farnsworth looked to it that the order was not carried out. He thought he saw at once that his chief knew where she was.

Hamilton's uneasiness, which was that of a strong, unscrupulous nature trying to justify itself amid a confusion of unmanageable doubts and misgivings, now vented itself in a resumption of the repairs he had been making at certain points in the fort. These he completed just in time for the evening of Clark.

(Continued next Saturday.)

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