

The Devil's Own

A Romance of the Black Hawk War

Author of "Cochran," "Shea of the Irish Brigade," "When Wilderness Was King," etc. Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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By RANDALL PARRISH

"THE WORD OF A SOLDIER AND GENTLEMAN."

Synopsis—In 1832 Lieutenant Knox of the regular army is on duty at Fort Armstrong, Rock Island, Ill., in territory threatened by disaffected Indians. The commandant sends him with dispatches to St. Louis. He takes passage on the steamer *Warrior* and makes the acquaintance of Judge Beaucaire, rich planter, and of Joe Kirby (the Devil's Own), notorious gambler. Knox learns Judge Beaucaire has a daughter, Eloise, and a granddaughter, Rene, offspring of a son whom the judge has disowned. Rene's mother is a negress, and she and her daughter, never having been freed, are slaves under the law, although the girls have been brought up as sisters. Kirby induces the judge to stake his plantation and negro servants on a poker hand unfairly dealt by his partner, Carver, Kirby's partner. Kirby accuses the judge of cheating. Beaucaire, infuriated, drops dead. Knox tries to intercede. Kirby gives up his stolen winnings. Kirby and Carver then sail overboard. The Lieutenant swims ashore and reaches a hut. Kirby lies unconscious for ten days. Recovering, he finds he is in a cabin owned by Pete, a "free nigger," who had shot him. Kirby is taken to the hospital. His dispatches have been forwarded. Recovering from his wound, Knox sends Pete to bring Haynes, Beaucaire's lawyer, and they arrange, with Pete's help, to get the women to the cabin of an abolitionist, Amos Shrank, before Kirby comes. At the Beaucaire place Knox overhears a conversation between the sheriff and his deputy, and learns the truth about the situation. He is witness to an interview between Kirby and Rene Beaucaire.

CHAPTER VI—Continued.

"I know," she said distinctly, "I am no longer a free white woman; I am a negro and a slave."

"Oh, you know that, do you? Then you must also be aware that you are my property. Perhaps it will be well for you to remember this in answering my questions. Now tell me who informed you of all this?"

"I cannot answer."

"Cannot! You mean you will not. Well, young woman, I'll find means to make you, for I have handled your kind before. Where is Eloise Beaucaire?"

"Why do you seek to find her? There is no slave blood in her veins."

"To serve the necessary papers, of course."

He spoke incautiously, urged on by his temper, and I marked how quickly her face brightened at this intelligence.

"To serve papers! They must be served, then, before—before you can take possession? That is what I understood the sheriff to say. Then I am not really your slave—yet?" her voice deepening with earnestness and understanding. "Oh, so that is how it is—even if I am a negro I do not belong to you until those papers have been served. If you touch me now you break the law. I may not be free but I am free from you. I am glad to know that!"

"And d—n little good it is going to do you," he growled. "Sheriff or no sheriff, my beauty, you are going to St. Louis with me tonight; so I advise you to keep a grip on that tongue of yours. Do you think I am going to be foiled altogether by a technical point of law? Possession is the main thing, and I have you where you can't get away. You hear me?"

She had not moved, although her form had straightened and her hand no longer rested on the table. Kirby had stepped close in front of her, his eyes glowing with anger, his evident intention being to thus frighten the girl into compliance with his wishes, but her eyes, defiant and unafraid, looked him squarely in the face.

"I certainly hear," she replied calmly. "Your voice is sufficiently distinct. I am a slave, I suppose, and in your power; but I despise you, hate you—and you are not going to take me to St. Louis tonight."

"What can stop me? The sheriff? Pub! a few dollars will take care of him. The judge is a friend of mine."

"It is not the sheriff—not the judge; I place reliance on no friend of yours."

He grasped at her arm, but she stepped back quickly enough to avoid contact, and the red lips were pressed together in a thin line of determination. Her hand had suddenly disappeared within the folds of her skirt; but the angry man, apparently blinded by the violence of his passion, his eagerness to crush her spirit, thought only that she counted on outside aid for deliverance.

"You silly little fool," he snapped, his mustache bristling. "Why, what could you do to stop me? I could break your neck with one hand. So you imagine someone is going to save you. Well, who will it be? Those yokels down at the Landing? Haines the lawyer? You have a surprise up your sleeve for me, I suppose! H—! it makes me laugh; but you might as well have your lesson now as any other time. Come here, you wench!"

He caught her arm this time, brutally jerking her toward him, but as instantly staggered backward, grasping at the table, the flush of anger in his eyes changing to a look of startled surprise. A pistol was leveled full in his face, the polished black barrel shining ominously in the light of the overhead lamp.

"Now perhaps you know what I mean," she said. "If you dare to touch me I will kill you like a dog. That is no threat; it is true as God's gospel," and the very tone of her voice carried conviction. "You may say I am a slave—your slave! That may be so, but you will never possess me—ever! Life means nothing to me any more, and I never expect to go out of this house alive; I do not even care to. So I am not afraid of you. Do not drop your arms, you low-lived cur, for you have never been nearer death

"Yes—I—I suppose I must."

"Then listen, for you must know that every moment we waste here in talk only makes escape more difficult. I tell you the simple truth. I am Steven Knox, an officer in the army. It chanced I was a passenger on the boat when Judge Beaucaire lost his life. I witnessed the game of cards this man won, and afterward, when I protested, was attacked and flung overboard into the river by Kirby here and that fellow who is outside guarding the door. They believe me to be dead; but I managed to reach shore and was taken care of by a negro—Free Pete he calls himself; do you know him?"

"Yes—oh, yes; he was one of the Carlton slaves." Her face brightened slightly in its bewilderment.

"Well, I knew enough of what was bound to occur to feel an interest, and tonight he brought me here for the purpose of warning you—you, your mother and Eloise Beaucaire. He has his cart and mule out yonder; we intended to transport you across the river, and thus start you safely on the way to Canada."

"Then," she said slowly, seeming to catch at her breath, her voice trembling, "then it must be really true what these men say—Della is my mother? I am a slave?"

"You did not really know? You were not warned by anyone before their arrival?"

"No, there was no warning. Did anyone in this neighborhood understand?"

"Haines the lawyer did. He furnished me with much of the information I possess. But I am the one puzzled now. If the truth was not known to any of you how does it happen the others are gone?"

"So far as I am aware that is merely an accident. They walked over to the old Carlton place early this evening; there is sickness in the family, and they hoped to be of help. That is everything I know. They were to return two hours ago, for I was here all alone, except for the negroes in their quarters. I cannot conceive what has occurred—unless they have learned in some way of the trouble here."

"That must be the explanation; they have hidden themselves. And these men told you why they came?"

"The only one I saw at first did. He came in all alone and claimed to be a deputy sheriff. I was terribly frightened at first, and did not at all understand; but I questioned him and the man liked to talk. So he told me all he knew. Perhaps I should have thought he was crazy, only—only some things had occurred of late which led me to half suspect the truth before. I—I wouldn't believe it then, but—but I made him repeat everything he had heard. Horrible as it was I—I wanted to know all."

"And you acknowledged to him that you were Rene Beaucaire?"

"Her dark eyes flashed up into my face questioning."

"Why—why, of course. I—I could not deny that, could I?"

"Perhaps not; yet if none of them knew you, and you had claimed to be Eloise, they would never have dared to hold you prisoner."

"I never once thought of that; the only thing which occurred to me was how I could best protect the others. My plan was to send them warning in some way. Still now I am very glad I said I was Rene."

"Glad! Why?"

"Because it seems it is Eloise they must first find to serve their papers on. They dare not, take away the slaves until this is done. As for me, I am nothing—nothing but a slave myself; that is not true!"

To look into her eyes, her face, and answer was a hard task, yet one I saw no way to evade.

"Yes; I am afraid it is true."

"And—and then Della, the housekeeper, is actually my mother?"

"That is the story as it reached me."

She held tightly to the table for support, all the fresh color deserting her face, but the lips were firmly set and her head remained as proudly poised as ever above the round throat. Whatever might be the stain of alien blood in her veins, she was still a Beaucaire. Her eyes, filled with pain as they were, met mine unflinchingly.

"And—and knowing all this, convinced of its truth—that that I am colored," she faltered, doubtfully, "you can come here to help me?"

"I did; that can make no difference now."

"No difference! Why do you say that? Are you from the North, an abolitionist?"

"No; at least I have never been called one or so thought myself. I have never believed in slavery, yet I was born in a southern state. In this case I merely look upon you as a woman—as one of my own class. It does not seem as though I could ever consider you in any other way. You must believe this."

"Believe it! Why, you and I are caught in the same net. I am a slave to be sold to the highest bidder, and you—you have killed a man to save me. Even if I was willing to remain and face my fate I could not now, for that would mean you must suffer."

in all your miserable life than you are now. God knows I want to kill you; it is the one desire of my heart at this moment to rid the earth of such a beast. But I'll give you one chance—just one. Don't you dare call out or answer me. Do what I say. Now step back—back along the table; that's it, a step at a time. Oh, I knew you were a cowardly bully. Go on—yes, clear to that window; don't lower those hands an inch until I say you may. I am a slave—yes, but I am also a Beaucaire. Now reach behind you and pull up the sash—pull it up higher than that."

Her eyes dilated with sudden astonishment and terror. She had caught sight of me, emerging from the black shadow just behind her victim. Kirby also perceived the quick change in the face fronting him, read its expression of fright, and sought to twist his head so as to learn the truth. Yet before he could accomplish this or his lips could give utterance to a sound, my hands closed on his throat, crushing him down to the sill, and throttling him into silence between the vise of my fingers.

CHAPTER VII.

To Save a "Nigger."

It proved to be a short, sharp struggle, from the first the advantage altogether with me. With all the old-time dislike in my heart, all the hatred aroused by what I had overheard, I closed down on his throat, rejoicing to see the purple of his flesh turn into a sickening black, as he fought desperately for breath and as he lost consciousness and ceased from struggle. I was conscious of a pang in my wounded shoulder, yet it seemed to rob me of no strength but only added to my ferocity. The fellow rested limp in my hands. I believed I had killed him, and the belief was a joy as I tossed his helpless body aside on the floor and stepped through the open window into the room.

In my heart I hoped he was dead, and in a sudden feeling of utter contempt I struck the inert body with my foot. Then, as my eyes lifted, they encountered those of the girl. She had drawn back to the table, startled out of all reserve by this sudden approach unable to comprehend. The pistol yet remained clasped in her hand, while she stared at me as though a ghost confronted her.

"Who—who are you?" she managed to gasp in a voice which barely reached my ears. "My God! who—who sent you here?"

"It must have been God," I answered, realizing instantly that I needed to make all clear in a word.

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And—and you have done this for me."

"My eyes dropped to the upturned face of Kirby, on which the rays of light rested. The flesh was no longer black and horrid, yet remained ghastly enough to increase my belief that the man was actually dead—had perished under my hand. He was not a pleasant sight to contemplate, flung as he had been in a shapeless heap, and the sight brought home to me anew the necessity of escape before those others of his party could learn what had occurred.

"From whatever reason the deed was done," I said, steadying my voice, "we must now face the consequences. As you say, it is true we both alike have reason to fear the law if caught. Flight is our only recourse. Will you go with me? Will you trust me?"

"Go—go with you? Where?"

"First across the river into Illinois; there is no possible safety here. In a way your danger is even more serious than mine. I have not been seen—ever Kirby had no glimpse of my face—and might never be identified with the death of this man. But you will become a fugitive slave and could be hunted down anywhere this side of Canada."

"Then being with me would add to your danger."

"Whether it will or not counts nothing; I shall never let you go alone."

She pressed the palms of both her hands against her forehead as though in a motion of utter bewilderment.

"Oh, I cannot seem to realize," she exclaimed. "Everything is like a dream to me—impossible in its horror. This situation is so terrible; it has come upon me so suddenly I cannot decide; I cannot even comprehend what my duty is. You urge me to go away with you—alone?"

"I do; there is no other way left. You cannot remain here in the hands of these men; the result of such a step is too terrible to even contemplate. There are no means of determining where the others are—Della and Miss Eloise. Perhaps they have had warning and fled already." I urged desperately.

Her eyes were staring down at Kirby's body.

"Look, he—he is not dead," she sobbed excitedly. "Did you see them—one of his limbs moved, and—and why, he is beginning to gasp for breath."

"All the more reason why we should decide at once. If the fellow regains consciousness and lives, our danger will be all the greater."

"Yes, he would be merciless," her lips parted, her eyes eloquent of disgust and horror as she suddenly lifted them to my face. "I—I must not forget that I—I belong to him; I am his slave; he—he, that hideous thing there, can do anything he wishes with me—the law says he can." The indignant color mounted in her face. "He is half suspect of disloyalty, and as she suddenly lifted them to my face. "I—I must not forget that I—I belong to him; I am his slave; he—he, that hideous thing there, can do anything he wishes with me—the law says he can." The indignant color mounted in her face.

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"I believe it is," I said. "She is the legal heiress of Judge Beaucaire; the estate is hers by inheritance, as I am told there was no will. All this property, including the slaves, would legally remain in her possession until proper steps had been taken by others. Serving of the papers would be necessary. There is no doubt as to that."

She drew a deep breath and stepped toward me, gazing straight into my eyes.

"I believe in you," she said firmly. "And I trust you. You look like a real man. You tell me you serve in the army—an officer?"

"A lieutenant of infantry."

She held out her hand and my own closed over it, the firm, warm grasp of her fingers sending a strange thrill through my whole body. An instant she looked directly into my eyes, down into the very soul of me, and what I read in the depths of her brown orbs could never find expression in words. I have thought of it often since—that great, dimly lighted room, with the guard at the outer door; the inert, almost lifeless body huddled on the floor beside us, and Rene Beaucaire, her head clasped in mine.

"Lieutenant Knox," she said softly, yet with a note of confidence in the low voice, "I am going to trust you absolutely; there are reasons why I so decide which I cannot explain at this time. I have not known you long enough to venture that far. You must accept me just as I am—a runaway slave and a negress, but also a woman. Can you pledge such as I your word of honor—the word of a soldier and a gentleman?"

"I pledge it to you, Rene Beaucaire," I answered soberly.

"And I accept the pledge in all faith. From now on whatever you say I will do."

I had but one immediate purpose in my mind—to escape from the house as quickly as possible, to attain Pete's