

The Devil's Own

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CHAPTER XII—Continued.

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"H—, thar ain't really no manner o' risk at all. Yer don't even hav' ter break the law, fer as I know. It's just got fer ter be done on the dead quiet, an' no question asked. I'll tell you all yer need ter know. 'Tain't such a long story. This yere Joe Kirby he's a frien' o' mine; I've know'd him a long time, an' he's in a—of a fix. Here's how it all happened: That was an ol' planter livin' down in Missouri at a place called Beaucaire's Landin'. His name was Beaucaire, an' he had a son named Bert, a good-fer-nothing cuss. I reckon. Wal, this Bert runned away a long while ago, an' never cum back; but he left a baby behind him—a gurl baby—which a quadroon slave give birth to. The quadroon's name was Della, an' the kid was called Rene. Git them names in yer head. Ol' Beaucaire he knew the gurl was his son's baby, so he brought her up with his own daughter, who was named Eloise. They was both bout the same age, an' nobody seemed ter know that Rene was a nigger. Fer sum reason ol' Beaucaire never set her free, ner the quadroon neither. Wal, Kirby he heard tell o' all this sumwhar down the river. Yer see he an' Bert Beaucaire run tergether fer a while, till Bert got killed in a row in New Orleans. I reckon he tol' him part o' the story, an' the rest he plucked up in Saint Louee. Enyhow, it looked like a d—good thing ter Kirby, who ain't passin' up many bets. Ol' Beaucaire was rich, an' considerable over a sport; people who hed seed the gurls sed they was both ov'em beauties an' Eloise—the white one—had an independent fortune lef her through her mother. So Kirby, he an' a feller named Carver—a tin-horn—planned it out betwixt 'em ter copper ol' Beaucaire's coin, an' pick up them gurls along with it."

"But how cud they do that?"

"Lucky mostly, I reckon, an' Kirby's brains. The plan was ter git Beaucaire inter a poker game, ease him long a bit, an' then break him; land, niggers, an' all. They didn't figure this wud be hard, fer he was a dead game gambler, an' played fer big stakes. It was luck, though, what giv' 'em their chance. Beaucaire had sum minin' claims up on the Fevre, an' hed ter go up there. It's a long, lonesome trip, I reckon, an' so the other two they went long. They got the ol' chap goin' and comin', an' finally codded him long till he put up his big bet on a sure hand. When he found out whut had happened the ol' gent got so excited he flung a fit, an' died."

"Leaving Kirby ownin' all the property?"

"Every picayune, niggers an' all. It was sum sweep, an' he hed signed bills o' sale. Wa'n't nobody cud git it away frum him. Wal! Joe didn't want fer ter make no fuss, ner scare the gurl none, so he went down ter Saint Louee an' made proof o' ownership afore a judge he know'd. Then, with the papers all straight, he, an' the sheriff, with Tim yere, the deputy, run up the river at night ter serve 'em quietly on the daughter—the white one, Eloise. Kirby he didn't aim ter be seen at all, but just long so that wudn't be no mistake. Yer see, them papers had ter be served afore they cud take away the niggers. Kirby wus goin' ter sell them down river, an' not bother 'bout the land fer awhile, till after he'd hed a chance ter shine up ter this yere gurl Eloise. He'd never seen her—but, enyhow, he got that notion in his hed."

"She was the daughter; the white one?"

"Sure; he hed the other by law. Wal, when they all got that, nobody was home, 'cept one o' the gurls who claimed fer ter be Rene—the one who was a nigger, that Kirby owned. Nobody know'd which was which, an' so they hed ter take her word for it. They cudn't do nuthin' legal till they found the other one, an' they wus sittin' round waitin' fer her ter turn up, when the nigger gurl they wus watchin' got away."

"How'd she do that?"

"Don't nobody seem ter know. Damn funny story. Way they tell it, somebody must've knocked Kirby down an' run off with her. Whoever did it, stole the boat in which Kirby an' the sheriff cum up the river, an' just naturally skipped out—the sheriff's nigger an' all. It was a slick job."

"Of course they chased them?"

"Best they cud, not knowin' which way the'd gone. They reckoned the whol' bunch must've got away tergether, so the sheriff he started fer Saint Louee, an' the others got onto a troop boat what happened ter cum long, and started north. Long 'bout the mouth on the Illinois they caught up with a nigger-stealer named Shrum. They had a fight in an' about his cabin, an' sum killin'. Two ov the women got away, but Kirby an' Tim got hold o' this gurl what hed claimed ter be Rene, an' a mulatto cook who was workin' fer Shrum. I reckon maybe you know the rest."

"I know they was run down by the Adventurer, an' hauled aboard. But how did Kirby learn his prisoner was white? Did she tell him?"

"I should say not. It was the mulatto cook who told him, although, I reckon, he hed his doubts afore that. I knew she wusn't no nigger the first minute I got eyes on her—they cain't fool me none on niggers; I was raised 'mong 'em. But so fur's the gurl's concerned, she don't know yet that Kirby's found out." He emitted a weak laugh. "It sorter skeered Joe ter be caught 'way up yere in this country, kidnappin' a white gurl. He didn't know what the h—ter do till I give him a p'nter."

"You were the one who suggested marriage?"

"Wal, I sed she cudn't do nuthin' gainst him onc he was married to her. I thought o' that right away. Yer see this wus how it happened: Kirby sed he'd like fer ter marry her, an' I sez, 'Why not, then? Thar's an ol' bum ov a preacher yere at Yellow Banks, a sorter hanger-on ter one o' them militia companies, what'll do enythin' to tell him to. I got the goods on him, an' he knows it.'

"But she wouldn't marry me," he says; "yer don't know the gurl."

"Don't I?" I asked sarcastic. "Wal, that ain't no gurl ever I see yet that won't marry a man if the right means are used. How kin she help herself? Yer leave it ter me."

"And he consented?"

"He wus d—n glad to, after I told him how it cud be done. But Tim he wudn't go in with us, an' that's why we got ter have another man."

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"All right, Dan; have another one on me—no? Wal! h—l; I s'pose I might as wal tell ye furst. Are yer game?"

"I'm game 'nough, Jack," assuming a familiarity I thought he would appreciate. "Only I don't want'r jump inter this yere thing without knowin' nuthin' 'bout it. What is it yer got lined up fer me ter do?"

"He helped himself to yet another liberal drink, and I was glad to note that the fiery liquor was already beginnin' to have its effect, increasing his recklessness of speech.

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