

# The Devil's Own

## A Romance of the Black Hawk War

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### CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

—15—

"They must have said much to deceive you," and I bent forward to touch her hand. "See, I am very much alive. Let me tell you—that will be the quickest way to understand. In the first place I did not drown when the boat was smashed, but was rendered helpless and borne away on the water. The Adventurer rescued me about daylight the next morning, and I was no sooner on board than I was told how the keelboat had been run down below on the river during the night and that your party had all been saved—two white men and two negro slaves. Of course, I knew you must be one of them."

"Then—then we were actually together, on the same boat, all the way up here!"

"Yes; I tried hard to find where you were concealed on board, but failed. Kirby guarded you with great care from all observation. Do you know why?"

"Yes," she answered, as though forcing herself to speak. "I do know now. I thought I knew then, but was mistaken. I supposed it might be because I looked so little like a negress, but now I realize it was his own conscience. He knew I was a white woman; he had become convinced that I was Eloise Beaucaire. Did you know that, also?"

"I learned the truth on the boat, from the same source where Kirby obtained his information. Elsie Clark told me."

"Elsie Clark! Who is she? How did she know?"

"A free negress, who had been employed by Amos Shrank. She was the other prisoner on the keelboat when you were captured, kept locked below in the cabin."

"How could she know who I was?"

"She did not. Only she was positive that you could not be Rene Beaucaire, because she knew that Rene, in company with her mother, had departed from Shrank's cabin before those raiders came. The two had already started for Beardstown."

She sat upright, all lassitude gone from her body, leaning eagerly toward me, her eyes alight with interest.

"Gone! Rene escaped them!" she exclaimed, her voice choking. "Oh, tell me that again. Was the girl sure?"

"Quite sure. She saw and spoke with both the women before they left in a wagon. They were on the Underground, bound for Canada, and safety."

"I am so glad—so glad," she said simply. "Now I am strong enough to hear the rest, Lieutenant Knox. You must tell me."

"There is not so much to tell, that I am cock-sure about." I began slowly. "Kirby had you securely hidden away somewhere on the second deck, while this Clark girl had been locked into a stateroom above. I possessed such a growth of beard and was altogether so disreputable looking as to be mistaken for a roustabout by the boat's officers, who set me at work to earn my passage. In this way I managed to talk with Elsie, but failed to locate your quarters. The only glimpse I gained of you was when you were being taken ashore. Then I followed, and a little later succeeded in getting you out of Kirby's hands. That is about all."

"Oh, no, it is not—you—you came late."

"Too late! Perhaps I may know what you mean."

"Do you? Surely not to blame me! I—I wish to tell you, Lieutenant Knox, but—I scarcely know how. It is all so dim, indistinct in my own mind—and yet I remember. Have I been drugged?"

"Without question. We have been riding all night and you were strapped to your horse. Probably you have no recollection of this?"

She shook her head in bewilderment.

"No; the last I remember I was with Kirby and another man. He—he was dressed like a minister, but—but he was half drunk, and once he swore at me. The place where we were was a little shack in the side of a hill, with stone walls. Kirby took me there from the steamer, together with a man he called Rale—Jack Rale. They locked me in and left me alone after dark. Then this other man, who dressed like a minister, came back with Kirby. They had food and something to drink with them, and lit a lamp so that we could see. It was awfully dismal and dark in there."

"She pressed her hands to her head despairingly. "I can remember all this, but later it is not so clear; it fades out, like a dream."

"Try to tell me all you can," I urged. "They fed you!"

"Yes, I managed to eat a little, but I would not drink. They both became angry then and frightened me, but they did compel me to swallow some of the stuff. Then I became dazed and partially helpless. I had no will of my own, no power of resistance."

"You were married to Kirby."

"Oh, God!—was I? I wondered; I did not really know; truly I did not know. I seem to remember that I stood up, and then signed some paper, but nothing had any meaning to me."

Is that true? Do you know that it is true?"

I grasped her hand and held it closely within my own.

"I am afraid it is true," I answered. "I know very little law, and it may be that such a ceremony is not legal. Yet I imagine those men were certain as to what they could do. Kirby had planned to marry you from the very first, as I explained to you before. He told me that on the Warrior the night your father died."

"Yes, you said so; but I did not quite understand—he planned then why?"

"Because he had heard of your beauty and that you were rich. Were these not reasons enough? But, after he had mistaken you for Rene, the only possible way in which he could hope to gain you was by force. Jack Rale suggested that to him and how it could be done. The other man was a friend of Rale's, a renegade preacher named Gaskins; he is dead."

"Dead! Killed!"

"Yes; we brought you away after a fight with those fellows. We left Rale bound and Kirby unconscious."

"Unconscious, hurt—but not dead?"

"He had a bad gash in his skull, but was alive."

Kennedy, puffing happily upon a pipe, came loitering about the corner of the hut and approached us. Eloise staggered to her feet, shrinking back against the wall of the shack, her eyes on his face.

"That man here!" she cried in terror. "That man! Why, he was at Beaucaire! He is the one to whom I claimed to be Rene."

Tim grinned at me, but did not appear particularly flattered at his reception.

"Not quite so fast, young lady," he said, stuttering a bit and holding the pipe in his hand. "I reckon I was thar all right, just as ye say, an' that I did yea a mighty mean turn, but I ain't such a darn ornary cuss as ye think—an' I cap!"

"No, you are not," I hastened to explain. "Miss Beaucaire does not understand, that is all. Kennedy here merely supposed he was doing his duty until he learned what Kirby contemplated. Then he refused to have any hand in it and the two quarreled. Shall I relate that part of the story?"

Her eyes softened, her lips almost smiling.

"Yes," she said. "I am glad to know; tell me all."

I described Tim's part in the whole tragedy swiftly, while he shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other and occasionally interjected some comment or correction.

"Then I shall count you my friend now," she said simply. "And I am so delighted to understand everything. There are four of us here, counting the mulatto girl, and we are in hiding not far from Yellow Banks."

Tim's eyes fell upon the map, lying outspread on the ground.

"An' what did ye think wus best, cap?" he inquired gravely. "Tain't likely we got all summer ter sit 'round yere an' taik in. 'Tain't such a bad place, but my notion is we ought ter be joggin' long."

"Mine also. Come over here, both of you, and I'll give you my idea. I shown you our chances in this way."

In a few words I explained my choice of route, pointing it out on the map and telling them briefly why I



"That Man Here! She Cried in Terror."

was afraid to seek refuge either at Fort Madison or Fort Armstrong, or, indeed, at any of the nearer settlements. Eloise said nothing, her gaze rising from the map to our faces as we debated the question, for Tim spoke his mind freely, his stubby forefinger tracing the course I had indicated.

"An' whar do yer reckon are them Injuns—the hostile ones; this yere bunch o' Black Hawk's? Spose we'd run inter a raidin' party o' them red bucks. I ain't got much hair, but I kin use what I hav' got."

"I am not sure, Tim, but I would even prefer that to being overtaken by Joe Kirby and the gang he'll probably have with him," I retorted, my gaze on the questioning face of the

girl. "However, there is little chance of our encountering such a party. The soldiers are all coming up from the South and are bound to force Black Hawk's warriors to the other bank of the Rock. There will be nothing but barren country east of here. What do you say, Miss Eloise?"

Her eyes met mine bravely, without shadow of doubt in them.

"I shall go wherever you say," she replied firmly; "I believe you will know best."

"Then I decide on this route. Once we get beyond the swamp those fellows are going to have a hard task following us, unless they have an Indian trailer along with them. We have been here several hours; the horses must be rested. Let's eat what we can again and then start."

Kennedy stood up and stared about us at the isolate scene, the expression of his face proving his dissatisfaction with the prospect.

"O' course, I'm a goin' long with yer, cap," he acknowledged, dryly. "I never was no quitter, but this yere trip don't look so d—d easy ter me, fer all that. I'll wake up that Clark gurl an' then saddle the horses."

I watched him round the corner of the cabin, not wholly at ease in my own mind, then gathered up the map and replaced it in my pocket, aware that Eloise had not moved from her position on the grass.

"Is he right?" she questioned, looking up at me. "Is there any real danger of Indians?"

"Some, perhaps; it is all Indian country, north and east of here—or has been. I am not denying that, but this danger does not compare, in my mind, with the peril which confronts us in every direction. I am trying to choose the least. Our greatest difficulty will be the lack of food—we possess no guns with which to kill game, only pistols, and an exceedingly small stock of ammunition. That is what troubles Tim; that, and his eagerness to get back down the river. He fails to realize what it would mean to you to fall again into Kirby's hands."

"Do you realize?"

"Do I? It is the one memory which controls me. Tell me, am I not right? You despise the fellow; you are willing to face any hardship so as to escape him?"

"I would rather die than have him touch me. Surely you cannot doubt that I could ever forgive?"

"No; that would be hard to conceive; and yet I wished to hear the words from your own lips. Will you answer me one thing more—why did you first assume the character of Rene, and why did you repose such instant trust in me?"

"I think I myself hardly knew," she admitted timidly. "It all happened, was born of impulse, rather than through any plan. Perhaps it was just the woman in me. After my father died, Della thought it best to tell us the story of Rene's birth. This—this was such a terrible tale, and later we sought all through his private papers, hoping he had taken some action to set those two free. There was no proof that he had; no mention, indeed, except a memorandum of intention to refer the matter to Lawyer Haines at the Landing. This merely served to confirm what Della had told us, and, as Haines had gone to St. Louis, we were unable to see him. We were all of us nearly crazed. So I suggested that we run away, and drew money out of my private account for that purpose. My only thought was to take a steamer up the Ohio, to some place where we were not known, and begin life over again. Oh, you cannot understand—I had no mind left; only a blind impulse to save them."

I caught her hand in mine and held it firmly.

"Perhaps I do understand. It was my knowledge of this very condition which first brought me to you."

"You heard about us on the boat—Warrior? Did father tell you?"

"No; it was Kirby. He was actually proud of what he had done—boasted to me of his success. I have never known a man so heartlessly concealed, Eloise, listen. You may have thought this was largely an accident. It was not; it was a deliberately planned, cold-blooded plot. I tell you that Joe Kirby is of the devil's own breed; he is not human. Rene's father told him first of the peculiar conditions at Beaucaire."

"Rene's father! Does—does he still live?"

"No; but he did live for years after he disappeared, supporting himself by gambling on the lower river. At one time he and Kirby were together. After he died Kirby investigated his story in St. Louis and found that it was true. Then he laid this plot to gain control of everything, including both of you girls. The man dreamed of owning Beaucaire, of possessing all it contained. He was willing to risk everything to carry out his hell-born scheme, and to ruin everyone who interfered with him. I am telling you all this, Eloise, because it is now time you should know. Will you not tell me just how it all came to you?"

Her hands clung to me, as though she dare not let go, her eyes were filled with a mingling of wonderment and pain.

"Why, of course. We thought it best not to go until after we could see the lawyer. I could not believe my father had neglected to set those two free—he loved them both. Della and Rene had gone down to the Landing that night to see if he had returned. We were both of us afraid to leave Rene alone—she was so despondent, so unstrung. It was dark and I was all alone in the house. Then these men came. They did not know me and I did not know them, but I was sure what they came for. I was terribly frightened, without an idea what to do—only I refused to talk. All I could do was to pray that the others might be warned and not return. They searched the house and then left this man Tim to guard me. He told me he was a deputy sheriff from St. Louis, and—I encouraged him to explain all he knew about the case. Then I made up my mind what to do—I would pretend to be Rene, and let them carry me off instead of her."

"But did you not realize the danger to yourself?"

"No, I suppose I didn't, or, rather, I did not care. All I thought about was how to save her. These were law officers; they would take me to St. Louis before a court. Then I could make myself known and would be set free. They couldn't do anything else, could they? There was no law by which I could be held, but—but, don't you see? The delay might give Rene time to escape. That was not wrong, was it?"

"Wrong! It was one of the bravest things I ever heard of. And I know the rest—your encounter with Kirby in the library. I overheard all of that through the open window, and how you learned from him that certain legal papers would have to be served on Eloise Beaucaire before any of the slaves could be touched, or removed from the estate. That knowledge only brought you new courage to play out your part. But why did you trust me enough to go with me? And, after trusting me so fully, why did you refuse to tell me who you really were?"

Her eyes fell before mine, and her cheeks were flushed.

"You think that strange? I did trust you, Lieutenant Knox, and I trusted you more completely the longer we were together. But—but I did not wholly understand. You were endeavoring to rescue Rene from slavery. I could not conceive what interest you might feel if I should confess myself Eloise. You were strange to me; we were there alone with the negro, and—and somehow it seemed a protection to me to claim a drop of black blood. Twice I thought to tell you—the words were on my lips—but something stopped them. Possibly, just a little, I was afraid of you."

"Then—but not now?"

"No, not now—not even a little; you have proven yourself all I ever hoped you would be. I am glad—so glad—to say that to you now, I am Eloise Beau—"

She stopped suddenly, the word half uttered, the smile fading from her lips.

"My God!" she burst forth. "But I am not! I am not! Why, I never felt the horror of it all before—I am not Eloise Beaucaire!"

A moment I stood motionless, seeming to hold my breath, my eyes open, struck silent by the intense bitterness of that cry. Then the reaction came, the knowledge that I must turn her thoughts elsewhere.

"Do not say that, or even think it." I urged, scarcely able to restrain myself from grasping her in my arms.

"Even if it shall prove true—legally true—some way of escape will be found. The others are safe, and you are going to need all your courage. Pledge me to forget, to ignore this thing. I need you."

Her hands fell nerveless and her questioning eyes sought my face.

"You are right, Lieutenant Knox," she said frankly. "I owe my loyalty now to you. I shall not yield again to despair; you may trust me—my friend."

The day was not ended when we finally retraced our way across the narrow dike to the mainland, prepared to resume our journey. The passage was slow and dangerous, and we made it on foot, leading the horses. The woods were already beginning to darken as we forded the north branch of the creek and came forth through a fringe of forest trees into a country of rolling hills and narrow valleys.

The two girls were already mounted, and Tim and I were busily tightening the straps for a night's ride, when, from behind us, back in the direction of the peninsula we had just quitted, there sounded the sharp report of a rifle. We straightened up, started, and our eyes met. There could be but one conclusion—our pursuers had found the trail.

### CHAPTER XV.

#### A Field of Massacre.

To my mind, seated on that island in the morass, a map spread before me, a hundred miles of travel had not appeared a very serious matter, but I was destined to learn my mistake.

The close proximity of the men seeking to overtake us—as evidenced by that rifle shot—awoke within us a sense of imminent danger and drove us forward through the fast gathering darkness at a perilous pace, especially as our mounts were not of the best.

We rested for an hour at midnight, on the banks of a small stream. The sky had lightened somewhat, and we could perceive the way fairly well when we again advanced, now traveling through a more open country, a prairie, interspersed with groves of

trees. Daylight overtook us at the edge of a slough, which bordered a little lake, where in the gray dawn, Tim, by a lucky shot, managed to kill a crippl'd duck, which later furnished us with a meager breakfast. In the security of a nearby cluster of trees, we ventured to build a fire, and, sitting about it, discussed whether to remain there or press on. It was decided to remain where we were and rest.

I need not dwell on the details of our flight. They remain in my memory in all clearness, each scene distinct, each incident a picture engraved on the mind. My map proved utterly useless, confusing me by its wrong location of streams, and its inaccuracy in the estimation of distances. We must have wandered far to