

The Devil's Own

A Romance of the Black Hawk War

By Randall Parrish

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Illustrated by Lewin Myers

CHAPTER IV.

Kirby Shows His Hand.

That scene, with all its surroundings, remains indelibly impressed upon my memory. It will never fade while I live. The long, narrow, dingy cabin of the little *Warrior*, its forward end unlighted and in a shadow, the single swinging lamp, suspended to a blackened beam above where the table had stood, barely revealing through its smoky chimney the after portion showing a row of stateroom doors on either side, some standing ajar, and that crowd of excited men surging about the fallen body of Judge Beaucaire, unable as yet to fully realize the exact nature of what had occurred, but conscious of impending tragedy. The overturned table and chairs, the motionless body of the Judge, with Kirby standing erect just beyond, his face as clear-cut under the glare of light as a cameo, the revolver yet glistening in



The Revolver Yet Glistening in His Extended Hand.

his extended hand, all composed a picture not easily forgotten. Still this impression was only that of a brief instant. With the next I was upon my knees, lifting the fallen head, and seeking eagerly to discern some lingering evidence of life in the inert body. There was none, not so much as the faint flutter of a pulse, or suggestion of a heart throb. The man was already dead before he fell, dead before he struck the overturned table. "Judge Beaucaire is dead," I announced gravely. "Nothing more can be done for him now."

The pressing circle of men hemming us in fell back silently, reverently, the sound of their voices sinking into a subdued murmur. As I stood there, almost unconscious of their presence, still staring down at that upturned face, now appearing manly and patrician in the strange dignity of its death mask, a mad burst of anger swept me, a fierce yearning for revenge—a feeling that this was no less a murder because nature had struck the blow. With hot words of reproach upon my lips I gazed across toward where Kirby had been standing a moment before. The gambler was no longer there—his place was vacant.

"Where is Kirby?" I asked, incredulous of his sudden disappearance.

For a moment no one answered; then a voice in the crowd croaked hoarsely:

"He just slipped out through that after door to the deck—him and Bill Carver."

"And the stakes?"

Another answered in a thin, piping treble.

"I reckon them two cusses took along the most of it. Eynhow 'tain't yere, 'cept maybe a few coins that roiled under the table. It wasn't Joe Kirby who picked up the swag, for I was a watchin' him, an' he never onct let go ov his gun. Them damn sneak Carver must a did it, an' then the two ov 'em just sorter naturally faded away through that door thar."

McAfee swore through his black beard, the full truth swiftly dawning upon him.

"Hell!" he exploded. "So that's the way of it. Then them two was in cahoots from the beginnin'. That's what I told the judge last night, but he said he didn't give a whoop; that he knew more poker than both ov 'em put together. I tell yer them fellers stole that money, an' they killed Beaucaire—"

"Hold on a minute," I broke in, my mind cleared of its first passion, and realizing the necessity of control. "Let's keep cool, and go slow. While I believe McAfee is right, we are not going to bring the judge back to life by turning into a mob. There is no proof of cheating, and Kirby has the law behind him. When the judge died he didn't own enough to pay his funeral expenses. Now see here; I happen to know that he left two young daughters. Just stop, and think of them. We saw this game played, and there isn't a man here who believes it was played on the square—that two such hands were ever dealt, or drawn, in poker. We can't prove that Kirby manipulated things to that end; not one of us saw how he worked the trick. There is no chance to get him that

way. Then what is it we ought to do? Why, I say, make the thief disgorge—and hanging won't do the business.

"Leave this settlement with me. Then I'll go at it. Two or three of you pick up the body, and carry it to Beaucaire's stateroom—forward there. The rest of you better straighten up the cabin, while I go up and talk with Throckmorton a moment. After that I may want a few of you to go along when I hunt up Kirby. If he proves ugly we'll know how to handle him. McAfee?"

"I'm over here."

"I was just going to say that you better stay here, and keep the fellows all quiet in the cabin. We don't want our plan to leak out, and it will be best to let Kirby and Carver think that everything is all right; that nothing is going to be done."

I waited while several of them gently picked up the body, and bore it forward into the shadows. I slipped away, silently gained the door, and unobserved, emerged onto the deserted deck without. The sudden change in environment sobered me, and caused me to pause and seriously consider the importance of my mission. Nothing less potent than either fear, or force, would ever make Kirby disgorge. Quite evidently the gambler had deliberately set out to ruin the planter, to rob him of every dollar. Even at the last moment he had coldly insisted on receiving a bill of sale so worded as to leave no possible loophole. He demanded all. The death of the judge, of course, had not been contemplated, but this in no way changed the result. That was an accident, yet I imagined, might not be altogether unwelcome, and I could not rid my memory of that shining weapon in Kirby's hand, or the thought that he would have used it had the need arose. Would he not then fight just as fiercely to keep, as he had to gain? Indeed, I had but one fact upon which I might hope to base action—every watcher believed those cards had been stacked, and that Beaucaire was robbed by means of a trick. Yet, could this be proven? Would any one of those men actually swear that he had seen a suspicious move? If not, then what was there left me except a mere bluff? Absolutely nothing.

Unarmed, never once dreaming of attack, I advanced alone along the dark, narrow strip of deck, leading toward the ladder which mounted to the wheelhouse. There were no lights, and I was practically compelled to feel my way by keeping one hand upon the rail. I had reached the foot of the ladder, my fingers blindly seeking the iron rungs in the gloom, when a figure, vague, suddenly emerged from some denser shadow and confronted me. Indeed the earliest realization I had of any other presence was a sharp pressure against my breast, and a low voice breathing a menacing threat in my ear.

"I advise you not to move, you young fool. This is a cocked pistol tickling your ribs. Where were you going?"

The black night veiled his face, but language and voice, in spite of its low gumble, told me the speaker was Kirby. The very coldness of his tone served to send a chill through me.

"To have a word with Throckmorton," I answered, angered at my own fear, and rendered reckless by that burst of passion. "What do you mean by your threat? Haven't you robbed enough men already with cards without resorting to a gun?"

"This is not robbery," and I knew by the sharpness of his reply my words had stung, "and it might be well for you to keep a civil tongue in your head. I overheard what you said to those men in the cabin. So you are going to take care of me, are you?" There was a touch of steel in the low voice. "Now listen, you brainless meddler. Joe Kirby knows exactly what he is doing when he plays any game. I had nothing to do with Beaucaire's death, but those stakes are mine. I hold them, and I will kill any man who dares to interfere with me."

"You mean you refuse to return any of this property?"

"Every cent, every nigger, every acre—that's my business. Beaucaire was no child; he knew what he was betting, and he lost."

"That may be true, Kirby. I am not defending his action, but surely this is no reason, now that he is dead, why you should not show some degree of mercy to others totally innocent of any wrong. The man left two daughters, both young girls, who will now be homeless and penniless."

He laughed, and the sound of that laugh was more cruel than the accompanying words.

"Two daughters!" he sneered. "According to my information that strains the relationship a trifle, friend Knox—at least the late judge never took the trouble to acknowledge the fact. Permit me to correct your statement. I happen to know more about Beaucaire's private affairs than you do. He carries one daughter only. I have never met the young lady, but I understand from excellent authority that she possesses independent means



"I Advise You Not to Move, You Young Fool."

through the death some years ago of her mother. I shall therefore not worry about her loss—and, indeed, she need meet with none, for if she only prove equal to all I have heard I may yet be induced to make her a proposition."

"A proposition?"

"To remain on the plantation as its mistress—plainly, an offer of marriage. If you please. Not such a bad idea, is it?"

I stood speechless, held motionless only by the pressing muzzle of his pistol, the cold-blooded villainy of the man striking me dumb. This then had probably been his real purpose from the start. He had followed Beaucaire deliberately with this final end in view—of ruining him, and thus compelling his daughter to yield herself.

"And you actually mean that you propose now to force Judge Beaucaire's daughter to marry you?"

"Well, hardly that, although I shall use whatever means I possess. I intend to win her if I can, fair means, or foul."

I drew a deep breath, comprehending now the full iniquity of his plot, and bracing myself to fight it.

"And what about the other girl, Kirby? For there is another girl."

"Yes," rather indifferently, "there is another."

"Of course you know who she is?"

"Certainly—a nigger, a white nigger; the supposed illegitimate daughter of Adelbert Beaucaire, and a slave woman. There is no reason why I should fret about her, is there? She is my property already by law." He laughed again, the same ugly sneering laugh of triumph. "That was why I was so particular about the wording of that bill of sale—I would rather have her than the whole bunch of field hands."

"You believe then the girl has never been freed—either she, or her mother?"

"Believe? I know. I tell you I never play any game with my eyes shut."

"And you actually intend to—to hold her as a slave?"

"Well, I'll look her over first before I decide—she would be worth a pot full of money down the river."

The contemptuous, utterly indifferent manner in which he voiced his villainous purpose, would have crazed any man. To me this utterance was the last straw, breaking down every restraint, and leaving me hot, and furious with anger. I forgot the muzzle of the pistol pressed against my side, and the menacing threat in Kirby's low voice. The face of the man was indistinct, a mere outline, but the swift impulse to strike at it was irresistible, and I let him have the blow—a straight-arm jab to the jaw. My clinched knuckles crunched against the flesh, and he reeled back, kept from falling only by the support of the deckhouse. There was no report of a weapon, no outcry, yet, before I could strike again, I was suddenly gripped from behind by a pair of arms, which closed about my throat like a vise, throttling me instantly into silent helplessness. I struggled madly to break free, straining with all the art of a wrestler, exerting every ounce of strength, but the grasp which held me was unyielding, robbing me of breath, and defeating every effort to call for help. Kirby, dazed yet by my sudden blow, grew eager to take a hand in the affray, struck me a cowardly blow in the face, and swung his undischarged pistol to a level with my eyes.

"D—you!" he ejaculated, and for the first time his voice really exhibited temper. "I'd kill you with this, but for the noise. No, by God! there is a safer way than that to settle with you. Have you got the skunk, Carver?"

"You can bet I have, Joe. I kin choke the life out o' him—shall I?"

"No; let up a bit—just enough so he can answer me first. I want to find out what all this means. Now look here, Knox, what is all this to you? Why are you butting in on my game? Was Beaucaire a friend of yours?"

"I can hardly claim that," I admitted. "We never met 'till I came aboard this steamer. All I am interested in is justice to others."

"To others? Oh, I suppose you mean those girls—you know them then?"

"I have never even seen them," I said.

"I see; a self-appointed squire of dames; actuated merely by a romantic desire to serve beauty in distress. Extremely interesting, my dear boy. But, see here, Knox," and his tone changed to seriousness. "Let the romance go, and talk sense a minute. You are not going to get very far fighting me alone. You haven't even got the law with you. Even if I cheated Beaucaire, which I do not for a moment admit, there is no proof. The money is mine, and so is the land and the niggers. You can

be ugly, of course, but you cannot overturn the facts. Now, you acknowledge that what has occurred is personally nothing to you; Beaucaire was no special friend, and you don't even know the two girls—all right then, drop the whole matter. I hold no grudge on account of your striking me, and am even willing to share up with you to avoid trouble."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then, of course, we shall be compelled to shut your mouth for you. Self-preservation is the first law."

I looked about at them both, scarcely able to distinguish clearly even their outlines in the dense gloom. The seriousness of the situation, coupled with my helplessness, and inability to achieve the object proposed, was very evident. It might, under the circumstances, have been the part of wisdom for me to have sought some means of compromise, but I was young, and hot, fiery blood swept through my veins. The words of Kirby stung me with their breath of insult—his sneering, insolent offer to pay me to remain still.

"You must rank me as one of your own kind," I burst forth. "Now you listen to a plain word from me. If that was intended as an offer, I refuse it. You, and your confederate, have coolly robbed Beaucaire, and propose to get away with the spoils. Perhaps you will, but that end will not be accomplished through any assistance of mine. At first I only felt a slight interest in the affair, but from now on I am going to fight you fellows with every weapon I possess."

Kirby chuckled, apparently greatly amused.

"Quite glad, I am sure, for the declaration of war. Fighting has always agreed with me. Might I ask the nature of those weapons?"

"That remains for you to discover," I ejaculated sharply, exasperated by his evident contempt. "Carver, take your dirty hands off of me."

In spite of the fact of their threat, the ready pistol pressing against my ribs, the grip of Carver's fingers at my throat, I did not anticipate any actual assault. That either would really dare injure me seemed preposterous. Indeed my impression was, that Kirby felt such indifference toward my attempt to block his plan, that he would permit me to pass without opposition—certainly without the slightest resort to violence. The action of the two was so swift, so concerted, as though at some secret signal, that, almost before I realized their purpose, they held me helplessly struggling, and had forced me back against the low rail. Here I endeavored to break away, to shout an alarm, but was already too late. Carver's hands closed remorselessly on my throat, and when I managed to strike out madly with one free fist, the butt of Kirby's pistol descended on my head, so lacerating my scalp the dripping blood blinded my eyes. The blow partially stunned me, and I half fell, clutching at the rail, yet dimly conscious that the two straining men were upfitting my useless body, Carver swearing viciously as he helped to thrust me outward over the wooden bar. The next instant I fell, the sneering cackle of Kirby's laugh of triumph echoing in my ears until drowned in the splash as I struck the black water below.

I came back to the surface dazed and weakened, yet sufficiently conscious to make an intelligent struggle for life. The over-hang of the rapidly passing boat still concealed me from the observation of those above on the deck, and the advantage of permitting them to believe that the blow on my head had resulted in drowning, together with the knowledge that I must swiftly get beyond the stroke of that deadly wheel, flashed instantly through my brain. It was like a tonic, reviving every energy. Waiting only to inhale one deep breath of air, I plunged back once more into the depths, and swam strongly under water. The effort proved successful, for when I again ventured to emerge, gasping and exhausted, the little *Warrior* had swept past, and become merely a shapeless outline, barely visible above the surface of the river.

Slowly treading water, my lips held barely above the surface, I drew in deep draughts of cool night air, my mind becoming more active as hope returned. The blow I had received was a savage one, and pained dully, but the cold water in which I had been immersed had caused the bleeding to cease, and likewise revived all my faculties. The very fact that no effort was made to stop was sufficient proof that Throckmorton in the wheelhouse remained unconscious of what had occurred on the deck below. My fate might never be discovered, or suspected. I was alone, submerged in the great river, the stars overhead alone piercing the night shadows. A log swept by me, white bursts of spray illuminating its sides, and I grasped it gratefully, my fingers finding grip on the sodden bark. Using this for partial support, and ceasing to battle so desperately against the down-sweep of the current, I managed finally to work my way into an eddy, struggling onward until my feet at last touched bottom at the end of a low, out-cropping point of sand. This proved to be a mere spit, but I waded ashore, water streaming from my clothing, conscious now of such complete exhaustion that I sank instantly outstretched upon the sand, gasping painfully for breath, every muscle and nerve throbbing.

The night was intensely still, black, impenetrable. It seemed as though no human being could inhabit that desolate region. I lifted my head to listen for the slightest sound of life, and strained my eyes to detect the distant glimmer of a light in any direction. Nothing rewarded the effort. Yet surely here on this long-settled west bank

of the Mississippi I could not be far removed from those of my race, for I knew that all along this river shore were cultivated plantations and little frontier towns irregularly served by passing steamboats.

The night air increased in chillness as the hours approached dawn, and I shivered in my wet clothes, although this only served to arouse me into immediate action. Realizing more than ever as I again attempted to move my weakness and exhaustion from the struggle, I succeeded in gaining my feet, and stumbled forward along the narrow spit of sand, until I attained a bank of firm earth, up which I crept painfully, emerging at last upon a fairly level spot, softly carpeted with grass, and surrounded by a grove of forest trees. The shadows here were dense, but my feet encountered a depression in the soil, which I soon identified as a rather well-defined path leading inland. Assured that this must point the way to some door, as it was evidently no wild animal trail, I felt my way forward cautiously, eager to attain shelter, and the comfort of a fire.

I came suddenly to a patch of cultivated land, bisected by a small stream, the path I was following leading along its bank. Holding to this for guidance, within less than a hundred yards I came to the house I was seeking, a small, log structure, overshadowed by a gigantic oak, and standing isolated and alone. Believing the place to be occupied by a slave, or possibly some white squatter, I advanced directly to the door, and called loudly to whoever might be within.

There was no response, and, believing the occupant asleep, I rapped sharply. Still no voice answered, although I felt convinced of some movement inside, leading me to believe that the sleeper had slipped from his bed and was approaching the door. Again I rapped, this time with greater impatience over the delay, but not the slightest sound rewarded the effort. Shivering there in my wet clothes, the stubborn obtuseness of the fellow awakened my anger.

"Open up, there," I called commandingly, "or else I'll break down your door."

In the darkness I had been unobservant of a narrow slide in the upper panel, but had scarcely uttered these words of threat when the flare of a discharge almost in my very face fairly blinded me, and I fell backward, aware of a burning sensation in one shoulder. The next instant I lay outstretched on the ground, and it seemed to me that life was fast ebbing from my body. Twice I endeavored vainly to rise, but at the second attempt my brain reeled dizzily and I sank back unconscious.

(To Be Continued.)

Daily Thought.
The one thing of value in the world is the active soul.—Emerson.

FASHION WAR ENDED IN COMPROMISE



Paris has learned a lesson. Fashion makers there have come to the realization that the day is past when they can dictate American styles. While America was wearing short skirts during early period of the world war—Paris was not attempting anything new in dress. When war ended Paris took up the short skirt, but America had passed on to the long light bobble. Paris stood by its short skirt. America bobbed on. Now the compromise hour has arrived. Paris lengthened its skirt. America shortened hers and here is the new fall style. The material is serge, satin, silk tricolette or tafeta—with lace a favored trimming and any color you may desire.

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