



The Devil's Own
 A Romance of the Black Hawk War
 By **Randall Parrish**
 Author of "Contraband," "Shea of the Irish Brigade,"
 "When Wilderness was King," etc.
 Illustrated by **Erwin Meyer**

sounded ter me like ye hit him with a pole-ax. I got his gun, an' that's what's makin' this skunk hold so blame still—oh, yes, I will, Jack Rale; I'm just a achin' fer ter let ye hav' it."
 "And the other fellow? He hit me."
 "My ol' frien', Gaskins; that's him, all right." The deputy gave vent to a short, mirthless laugh. "Oh, I rapped him with the butt; had ter do it. He'd got hold of a club somehar, an' was goin' ter give yer another. It will be a while, I reckon, fore he takes much interest. What'll I do with this red-headed gink?"

I succeeded in reaching my feet, and stood there a moment, gaining what view I could through the darkness. The short struggle, desperate as it had been, was not a noisy one, and I could hear nothing about us to indicate any alarm. Kennedy had one hand knee pressed into Rale's abdomen and the star-rays reflected back the steel glimmer of the pistol held threateningly before the man's eyes. The horses beyond stood motionless, and the two women in the saddles appeared like silent shadows. I stood up once more, peering through the darkness and listening. Whatever was to be done I must decide, and quickly.

"Have Rale stand up, but keep him covered. Don't give him any chance to break away; now wait—there is a harist rope hanging to this saddle; I'll get it."
 It was a strong cord and of good length, and we proceeded to bind the fellow securely in spite of his objections, I taking charge of the pistol, while Tim, who was more expert, did the job in a workmanlike manner.

"Now gag him, Tim," I said quietly. "Yes, use the neckerchief. That will



"Now Gag Him, Tim," I said quietly. "Yes, use the neckerchief. That will do; all we can hope for is a few hours' start."

"Is Kirby dead?"
 "I'm afraid not, but he has got an ugly bump and lost some blood; his head struck a rock when he fell. It will be a while, I imagine, before he wakes up. How about your man?"

He crossed over and bent down above the fellow, feeling with his hands in the darkness.

"I reckon he's a goner, cap," he admitted, as though surprised. "Gosh, I must've hit the cuss harder than I thought—fair caved in his head, the pore devil. I reckon it's no great loss ter nobody."

"But are you sure he is dead? That will put a different aspect on all this, Kennedy!" I exclaimed gravely, facing him as he arose to his feet. "That and the belief I now have that Kirby has already consummated his plan of marriage with Miss Beaucaire."

"You mean he has—"

"Yes, that he has forced the girl to assent to some form of ceremony, probably legal in this country. I overheard enough between him and Rale to suspect it, at least, and she is even now under the influence of some drug. She hasn't spoken, nor does she seem to know what is going on about her. They strapped her into the saddle."

"The h— they did."

"It has been a hellish affair all the way through, and the only way in which I can serve her, if this is so, is by getting her away—as far away as possible, and where this devil can never find her again. What bothers me right now is your case."

"Mine? Lord, what's the matter with me?"

"Considerable, I should say. You can't be left here alone to face the result of this night's work. If Gaskins is dead from the blow you struck him these two fellows will swear your life away just for revenge. Even if you told the whole story, what chance would you have? That would only expose us, and still fall to clear you. It would merely be your word against theirs—you would have no witnesses, unless we were caught."

"I reckon that's true; I wasn't thinkin' 'bout it."
 "Then there is only the one road to take, Tim," I insisted. "We've got to strike the trail together."

"Where?"

"I cannot answer that now; I haven't thought it out yet. We can talk that matter over as we ride. I have a map

with me, which will help us decide the best course to choose. The first thing is to get out of this neighborhood beyond pursuit. If you only had a horse."

"That's two critters down in the creek bottom. I reckon that Kirby an' Gaskins must've tied 'em thar."

"Good; then you will go; you agree with me?"

"That ain't nuthin' else fer me ter do—hangin' ain't never bin no hobby o' mine."

"Then let's start," decisively. "Pick up one of those horses down on the bottom and turn the other one loose. I'll lead on down the trail and you can

meet us at the ford—once across the creek we can decide which way to travel; there must be four hours of darkness yet."

I picked up the trailing rein of my horse and slipped my arm through it. Tim faded away in the gloom like a vanishing shadow. The young woman next me, strapped securely to her saddle, made no movement, exhibited no sign of interest; her head and body drooped, yet her hands grasped the pommel as though she still retained some dim conception of her situation. The face under her hood was bent forward and shaded and her eyes, although they seemed open, gave no heed to my presence. I touched her hands—thank God, they were moist and warm, but when I spoke her name it brought no response.

I started forward on foot, leading my horse, the others trailing after through the darkness. Knowing nothing of the way, I was thus better able to pick the path, yet I found this not difficult, as it was rather plainly outlined by the forest growth on either side. The trail was clay with a few small stones embedded in it, and the horses made little noise in their descent, except once when Elsie's animal slipped and sent a loosened bit of rock rolling down to splash in some pool below. We came to the bank of the creek at last, a narrow stream, easily fordable, but with a rather steep shore line beyond, and waited there a moment until Tim emerged from out the black woods at our right and joined us. He was mounted, and, believing the time had arrived for more rapid movement, I also swung up into saddle and ranged the girl's horse beside mine.

They were not stock to be proud of, yet they did fairly well, Tim's mount evidently the best of the four. The going was decidedly better once we had topped the bank. We may have ridden for two miles without a word, for, although I had no intention of proceeding far in this direction, I could discover no opportunity for changing our course so as to baffle pursuit. That Kirby and Rale would endeavor to follow us at the earliest opportunity was most probable. They were neither of them the sort to accept defeat without a struggle, and, after the treatment they had received, the desire for revenge would be uppermost. Nor thus far would there be any difficulty in their picking up our trail, at least as far as the creek crossing, and this would assure them the direction we had chosen.

Then suddenly, out of the mysterious darkness which closed us in, another grove loomed up immediately in our front, and the trail plunged sharply downward into the depths of a rugged ravine. I was obliged to dismount and feel my way cautiously to the bottom, delighted to discover there was a smoothly flowing, narrow stream, running from the eastward between high banks, overhung by trees. It was a dismal, gloomy spot, a veritable cave of darkness, yet apparently the very place I had been seeking for our purpose.

"Kennedy."

"Right yere, sir. Lord, but it's dark—found anything?"

"There is a creek here. I don't know where it flows from, but it seems to come out of the east. One thing is certain, we have got to get off this trail, if we can lead the horses up stream a way and then circle back it would keep those fellows guessing for a while. Come here and see what you think of the chance."

"Ye let me go ahead with the nigger gurl, an' then follow after us, leadin' Miss Beaucaire's boss. By jeminy crickets, 'tain't deep'nough fer ter drown us enyway, an' I ain't much afereed o' the dark. Thar's likely ter be sun place whar we kin get out up thar. Whar the h— are them hosses?"

We succeeded in locating the animals by feeling and I waited on the edge of the bank, the two reins wrapped about my arm, until I heard the others go splashing down into the water. Then I also groped my own way cautiously forward, the two horses trailing behind me, down the sharply shelving bank into the stream. Tim chose his course near to the opposite shore, and I followed his lead closely, guided largely by the splashing of Elsie's animal through the shallow water. Our movement was a very slow and cautious one, Kennedy halting frequently to assure himself that the passage ahead was safe. Fortunately the bottom was firm and the current not particularly strong, our greatest obstacle being the low-hanging branches which

swept against us.
 I think we must have waded thus to exceed a mile when we came to a fork in the stream and plumped into a tangle of uprooted trees, which ended our further progress. Between the two branches, after a little search, we discovered a gravelly beach, on which the horses' hoofs would leave few permanent marks. Beyond this gravel we plunged into an open wood, through whose intricacies we were compelled to grope blindly, Tim and I both afoot, and constantly calling to each other, so as not to become separated. I had lost all sense of direction, when this forest finally ended, and we again emerged upon open prairie, with a myriad of stars shining overhead.

CHAPTER XIV.

The relief of thus being able to perceive each other and gain some view of our immediate surroundings after that struggle through darkness cannot be expressed in words. We were upon a rather narrow tongue of land, the two diverging forks of the stream closing us in. So, after a short conversation, we continued to ride straight forward, keeping rather close to the edge of the wood, so as to better conceal our passage. Our advance, while not rapid, was steady, and we must have covered several miles before the east began to show gray, the ghastly light of the new dawn revealing our tired faces. Ahead of us stretched an extensive swamp, with pools of stagnant water shimmering through lush grass and brown fringes of cat-tails bordering their edges. Some distance out in this desolation, and only half revealed through the dim light, a somewhat higher bit of land, rocky on its exposed side, its crest crowned with trees, arose like an island. Tim stared across at it, shading his eyes with one hand.

"If we was goin' ter stop enywhar, cap," he said finally, "I reckon thar ain't no better place then thar, pervidin' we kin git thar."

I followed his gaze, and noticed that the mulatto girl also lifted her head to look.

"We certainly must rest," I confessed. "Miss Beaucaire seems to be sleeping, but I am sure is thoroughly exhausted. Do you see any way of getting across the swamp?"

He did not answer, but Elsie instantly pointed toward the left, crying out eagerly:

"Sure, Ah do. The lan' is shaler 'long thar, sah—yer kin see shale rock."

"So you can; it almost looks like a dyke. Let's try it, Tim."

It was not exactly a pleasant passage, or a safe one, but the continual increase in light aided us in picking our way above the black water on either hand. I let my horse follow those in front as he pleased and held tightly to the bit of the one bearing Elsie. The island proved a small one, not exceeding a hundred yards wide, rather sparsely covered with forest trees, the space between these thick with undergrowth. What first attracted my gaze after penetrating the tree fringe was the glimpse of a small shack, built of poles, and thatched with coarse grass, which stood nearly in the center of the island. It was a rudely constructed, primitive affair, and to all appearances deserted.

"Hold the horses here, Tim; let me see what we have ahead first."

I approached the place from the rear, peering in through the narrow openings between the upright poles. The light was so poor I was not able to perceive much, but did succeed in fully convincing myself that the dismal shack was unoccupied. The door stood unlatched and I pushed it open. A single glance served to reveal everything the place contained. Without doubt it had been the late abode of Indians, who, in all probability, had fled hastily to join Black Hawk in his foray up Rock river. What interested me most was a small bit of jerked deer meat which still hung against an upright and the rude stone fireplace in the center of the hut, with an opening above to carry away the smoke.

I had found during the night a fair supply of hard bread in my saddle-bag, and now, with this additional gift of Providence, felt assured, at least, of one sufficient meal.

"It is all right, Tim, there is no one here. An old Indian camp with nothing but a hunk of jerked deer meat left behind. Elsie, gather up some of that old wood yonder and build a fire. Kennedy and I will look after Miss Beaucaire."

It was bright day by this time, the red of the rising sun in the sky, and I could trace the radius of swamp land stretching about us on every hand, a grim, desolate scene even in the beauty of that clear dawn. We had been fortunate enough to approach the spot along the only available pathway which led to this little oasis, and a more secure hiding place it would be difficult to find. I felt almost at ease for the present and satisfied to rest here for several hours.

Tim assisted me in unstrapping Elsie, and lifting her from the saddle, and, as she made no effort to help herself, the two of us carried her to a warm, sunny spot beside the wall of the hut. Her cramped limbs refused to support her body, and her eyes, then open, yet retained that vacant look so noticeable from the first. The only change was in the puzzled way with which she stared into our faces, as though memory might be struggling back, and she was vaguely endeavoring to understand.

(To Be Continued.)

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