



The Devil's Own
A Romance of the Black Hawk War
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"When Wilderness was King," etc.
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CHAPTER XVII.
The Trail to Ottawa.

When my eyes again opened it was to darkness and silence as profound as that of my former unconsciousness. For the moment I felt no certainty even that I was actually alive, yet slowly, little by little, reality conquered, and I became keenly conscious of physical pain, while memory also began to blindly reassert itself.

I could see nothing, hear nothing. All about was impenetrable blackness and the silence of the grave. I found myself unable to move my body and when I desperately attempted to do so, even the slightest motion brought pain. I became conscious also of a weight crushing down upon me, and stifling my breath. One of my arms was free; I could move it about within narrow limits, although it ached as from a serious burn. By use of it I endeavored through the black darkness to learn the nature of that heavy object lying across my chest, feeling at it cautiously. My fingers touched cold, dead flesh, from contact with which they shrank in horror, only to encounter a strand of coarse hair. The first terror of this discovery was overwhelming, yet I persevered, satisfying myself that it was the half-naked body of an Indian—a very giant of a fellow—which lay stretched across me, an immovable weight. Something else, perhaps another dead man, held my feet as though in a vise, and when I ventured to extend my one free arm gropingly to one side, the fingers encountered a moccasined foot. Scarcely daring to breathe, I lay staring upward and far above, looking out through a jagged, overhanging mass of timbers, although scarcely discernible, my eyes caught the silver glimmer of a star.

I was alive—alive! Whatever had occurred in that fateful second to deflect that murderous tomahawk, its keen edge had failed to reach me. And what had occurred? Then it was that the probable truth came to me—that flash and roar; that last impression imprinted on my brain before utter darkness descended upon me, must have meant an explosion, an upheaval shattering the cabin, bringing the roof down upon the struggling mob within, the heavy timbers crushing out their lives. And the cause! But one was possible—the half-keg of blasting powder Kennedy had placed in the corner as a last resort. Had Tim reached it in a final, mad effort to destroy, or had some accidental flame wrought the terrible destruction? Perhaps no one could ever answer that—but was I there alone, the sole survivor? Had those others of our little party died amid their Indian enemies, and were they lying now somewhere in this darkness, crushed and mangled in the midst of the debris?

Kennedy, Elsie Clark, the half-witted boy Asa Hall—their faces seemed to stare at me out of the blackness. They must be dead! Why, I had seen Kennedy fall, the heedless feet crunching his face, and Asa Hall tossed into the air and shot at as he fell. Elsie! Elsie! I covered my eyes with the free hand, conscious that I was crying like a child—Eloise. My God, Eloise! I wonder if I fainted; I knew so little after that; so little, except that I suffered helplessly. If I did not faint, then I must have been upon the verge of insanity, for there was a time—God knows how long—when all was blank.

Some slight, scarcely distinguishable noise aroused me. Yes, it was actually a sound, as though someone moved in the room—moved stealthily, as though upon hands and knees, seeking a passage in the darkness. I imagined I could distinguish breathing. Who, what could it be? A man; a prowling wild animal which had scented blood? But for my dry, parched lips I would have cried out—yet even with the vain endeavor, doubt silenced me. Who could be there—who? Some sneaking, cowardly thief; some despoiler of the dead? Some Indian returned through the night to take his toll of scalps, hoping to thus proclaim himself a mighty warrior? More likely enemy than friend. It was better that I lie and suffer than appeal to such a fiend for mercy.

The slight sound shifted to the right of where I lay, no longer reminding me of the slow progress of a moving body, but rather as though someone were attempting blindly to scrape together ashes in the fireplace. I pressed my one free hand beneath my neck, and thus, by an effort, lifted myself so as to see more clearly beyond the shoulder of the dead Indian. The first tiny, flickering spark of fire had caught the dry wood, and was swiftly bursting into flame. In another moment this had illumined that stooping figure, and rested in a blaze of light upon the lowered face, blazing out the features as though they were framed against the black wall beyond—a woman's face, the face of Eloise!

I gave vent to one startled, inarticulate cry, and she sprang to her feet, the mantling flames girdling her as though she were a statue. In that first frightened glance she failed to see

me; her whole posture told of fear, of indecision.

"Who was it spoke? Who called? Is someone alive here?"

The trembling words sounded strange, unnatural. I could barely whisper, yet I did my best.

"It is Steven, Eloise—come to me."

"Steven! Steven Knox—alive! Oh, my God; you have answered my prayer!"

She found me, heedless of all the horror in between, as though guided by some instinct, and dropped on her knees beside me. I felt a tear fall on my cheek, and then the warm, eager pressure of her lips to mine. I could not speak; I could only hold her close with my one hand.

"You are suffering," she cried. "What can I do? Is it this Indian's body?"

"Yes," I breathed, the effort of speaking an agony. "He lies directly across my chest, a dead weight."

It taxed her strength to the utmost, but, oh, the immediate relief! With the drawing of a full breath I felt a return of manhood, a revival of life. Another body pinned my limbs to the floor, but this was more easily disposed of. Then I managed to lift myself, but with the first attempt her arm was about my shoulders.

"No; not alone—let me help you. Do you really think you can stand? Why, you are hurt, dear; this is a knife wound in your side. It looks ugly, but is not deep and bleeds no longer. Are there other injuries?"

"My head rings, and this left arm appears paralyzed, from blows, no doubt; there are spots on my body which feel like burns. No, I am not in bad shape. Now let me stand alone; that's better. Good God, what a scene!"

The fire, by this time blazing brightly, gave us a full view of the entire dismantled interior. The cabin was a complete wreck, the roof practically all gone and the upper logs of the side walls either fallen within or dangling in threat. Clearly enough it had been the sudden plunge of heavy timbers and the dislodgment of those upper logs, which accounted for this havoc of death. There were dead there pierced by bullets and brained by rifle stocks, but the many had met their fate under the avalanche of logs, and amid the burning glare of exploding powder.

Only between arched timbers and sections of fallen roof could we move at all, and beneath the network of this entanglement the majority of the bodies lay, crushed and mangled. I saw Kirby, free from his bonds, but dead beneath a heavy beam. His face was toward us and the flicker of flame revealed a dark spot on his forehead—his life had never been crushed out by that plunging timber which pinned him there; it had been ended by a bullet. My eyes sought hers, in swift memory of my last order, and she must have read my thought.

"No," she said, "not that, Steven. It was the boy who shot him. Oh, please, can we not go? There is light already in the sky overhead—see. Take me away from here—anywhere, outside."

"In a moment; all these surely are dead, beyond our aid, and yet we must not depart foodless. We know not how far it still may be to Ottawa. Wait, while I search for the things we need."

"Not alone; I must be where I can touch you. Try to understand. Oh, you do not know those hours I have spent in agony—I have died a thousand deaths since that sun went down."

"You were conscious—all night long?"

"Conscious? Yes, and unhurt, yet prisoned helpless beneath those two logs yonder, saved only by that overturned bench. Elsie, poor thing, never knew how death came, it was so swift, but I lay there, within a foot of her body unscratched. I could think only of you, Steven, but with never a dream that you lived. There were groans at first and cries. Some Indians crept in through the door and dragged out a few who lived. But with the coming of darkness all sound ceased and such silence was even more dreadful than the calls for help. Oh, I cannot tell



you," and she clung to me, her voice breaking. "I—I dared not move for hours, and then, when I did try, found I could not; that I was held fast. Only for a knife in the hands of a dead savage, which I managed to secure, I could never have freed myself. And oh, the unspeakable horror of creeping in the darkness among those bodies. I knew where the fireplace must be; that there might be live coals there still. I had to have light; I had to know if you were dead."

"Don't think about it any more, dear heart," I urged. "Yes, we can go now—nothing else holds us here."

We crept out through the door, underneath a mass of debris, into the gray of the dawn. Beyond a little grove we found some horses browsing in the deep grass; they were those that had brought us from Yellow Banks, and whinnied a greeting as we drew near. Two of them were fit to ride and the others followed, limping along behind.

A half mile up the valley we came to a beaten trail, running straight across from bluff to bluff, and disappearing into the prairie beyond, heading directly toward the sunrise. We stopped and looked back for the first time. There on the side of the slope, under the shade of the big tree, stood the cabin. Only for the wreck of the roof it spoke no message of the tragedy within. The sun's rays gilded it, and the smoke from its chimney seemed a beckoning welcome. I reached out and took her hand, and our eyes met in understanding. What I whispered need not be told, and when we again rode forward, it was upon the trail to Ottawa.

[THE END]
(To Be Continued.)

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