The Devil's Own

A Romance of the Black Hawk War

By [illegible]

ILLUSTRATIONS BY [illegible]

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CHAPTER I.—Continued.

"It is my guess," I said. "That fellow's only thought was to get away before the crime was discovered. Reckon you'd be afraid to remain here alone for a little while?"

She glanced about into the gloom of the surrounding woods, her hesitancy answering me.

"It is not a pleasant prospect I admit, but there is no possible danger. Kirby has gone beyond all question. But I wish to warn if I can the direction he has taken. All this must have happened only a short time ago—while we were at the ranch. The scoundrel can scarcely be entirely out of sight yet on foot, and if we could only find a place to offer us a wide view."

"But could I not go with you?"

"Hardly with me, for I intend to swim the creek and try to reach the point at the mouth of the Illinois, from where I can see up and down the Mississippi. I am going to send Sam back through the woods there and have him cross that ridge. From the top he ought to have a good view up the valley of the Illinois. I suppose you might go with him."

"Ah, sure wid yer wud, mister," broke in the negro plaintively. "Ah ain't personally feared fer ter go 'cross, but Ah'm as of man as Ah reckons as how a young gal was likely fer ter see more'n Ah wud. Peers like Ah'd look low wy glasses."

A faint smile lighted up her face—a mere glimmer of a smile.

"Yes, Sam. I'll go," she said, glancing up into my eyes and holding out her hand. "You wish me to, do you not?"

"I think it will be fully as well. You will retain the pistol?"

She nodded her response and without delaying my departure longer I lowered myself into the water and swam toward the opposite shore, creeping forth amid a tangle of roots and immediately disappearing in the undergrowth. I found a rough passage for the first few rods being obliged to almost tear a way through the dense growth, and unable to see a yard in advance. But this ended suddenly at the edge of the sand flat, with the converging waters of the two rivers the mile just beyond. My view from here was narrowed, however, by high ridges on both sides, and with a desire not to expose myself to any chance eye I followed the line of forest until able to climb the slope, and thus attain the crest of the bluff.

From this vantage point the view was extensive, both up and down the big river, as well as across to the opposite bank. Along that entire surface but three objects met my gaze—a small island, green with trees, seemingly anchored just beyond the mouth of the Illinois; a lumbering barge almost opposite me, clearly outlined against the distant shore, and barely moving with the current; and far away below a thin smudge of smoke, arising from behind a headland, as though coming upward from the stack of some steamer. I felt no doubt but what this was the stolen keelboat, speeding toward St. Louis.

This struck me as the most reasonable course to pursue—to work our way quietly up the Illinois by night, keeping close in shore to avoid any passing steamer, until we arrived close to Beardstown. Undoubtedly there were blacks in the town, both slaves and free negroes, with whom Sam could easily establish an acquaintance. By this means we would soon be able to identify that particular preacher into whose care I hoped to confide Rene. Of course the girl might refuse to enter into the game, might decline to assume the role assigned her, however unknown I intended it to be—indeed, I felt convinced she would meet the suggestion with indignation. But why worry about that now? Let this be kept as a last resort. There was no necessity for me to even mention this part of my plan until after the approach to Beardstown; then the necessity of our going forward with it might be so apparent she could not refuse to carry on her part. With this belief settled in my own mind I felt ready to refute the others.

I went back then almost to the neighborhood of my boats, and they had returned to the bank of the creek some time in advance of me. As I appeared at the edge of the wood Sam hailed, offering to row the boat across.

"All right," I replied, outdoor we were alone. "It will save me another wetting. You saw nothing?"

"No, sah; leastways not much. We put we up de Illinois mah'n ten mile. All reckons, but dat wasn't no boat so-where; reckon as of anyw'ere dat up to de back."

"I thought so. The keelboat has gone down the Mississippi."

"Yer done saw her, sah?"

"I saw her smoke; she was hidden by a big bend just below. Didn't all there starting at me—some across."

Rene greeted me with a smile as I scrambled up on the slippery log and asked a number of questions. I answered them as best I could and then explained, as far as I deemed it desirable, the general nature of the plans I had made. The Illinois route offered the only hope, and we decided to venture it, although Rene pleaded earnestly that she and the negro be permitted to go on alone. To this suggestion, however, I would not consent, and the girl finally yielded her reluctant persuasion for me to accompany them until she could be safely left in the care of white friends.

I knew her real thought was elsewhere—with those two in Kirby's hands already well on their way to St. Louis. Try as she would she was unable to banish from her mind the recognition that she was largely to blame for their misfortune, or submerge the dread that it was towards her to save escape, while leaving them in such peril. I lingered, talking with her for some time after Sam had fallen asleep, yet the only result was the bringing of tears to her eyes and a reluctantly given pledge that she would do whatever I believed to be best and right. She appeared so tired and worn that I left her at last in the little glade where we had found refuge, hoping she might fall asleep. I doubt if she did, although I dozed irregularly, my back against a tree, and it was already growing dusk when she came forth again from her retreat and joined us in a hastily prepared meal.

Sam and I stowed away in the boat whatever provender remained, and I assisted her to a seat at the stern, wrapping a blanket carefully about her body, for the night air in those dank shadows already began to chill. I took possession of the oars myself, believing the negro would serve best as a lookout in the bow, and thus settled we headed the boat out through the tangle of trees toward the invisible river.

Suddenly we shot out through the screen of concealing boughs into the broader stream beyond. The light here in the open was better, although dim enough still, and revealing little of our surroundings. Sam knelt, peering eagerly forward into the blackness, an occasional growl of his voice the only evidence of his presence. I [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]