The Devil's Own

A Romance of the Black Hawk War

By Randall Parrish

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CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

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It was about the middle of the following afternoon when the Adventurer poked her blunt nose around a point of land, and came into full view of the squalid hamlet of Yellow Banks. A half-hour later we lay snuggled up against the shore, holding position amid several other boats made fast to stout trees, busily unloading, and their broad gangplanks stretching from forward deck to bank. The roustabouts began unloading cargo at once, a steady stream of men, black and white, burdened with whatever load they could snatch up, moving on an endless run across the stiff plank, and up the low bank to the drier summit. It chanced to be my good fortune to escape this labor, having been detailed by Mapes to drag boxes, bales and barrels forward to where the hurrying bearers could grasp them more readily. This brought me close to the forward stairs, down which the departing passengers trooped, threading their insecure way among the trotting laborers, in an effort to get ashore.

Reynolds' troops, all militia and the greater part of them mounted, were an extremely sorry-looking lot—sturdy enough physically of the pioneer type, but bearing littl[e] soldierly appearance, and utterly ignorant of discipline. The men had chosen officers from out their own ranks by popular election, and these exercised their authority very largely through physical prowess.

We had an excellent illustration of this soon after tying up at the landing. A tall, lank, ungainly officer, with a face so distinctly homely as to instantly attract my attention, led his company of men up the river bank, and ordered them to transport the pile of commissary stores from where they had been promiscuously thrown to a drier spot farther back. The officer was a captain, to judge from certain stripes of red cloth sewed on the shoulders of his brown jean blouse, but his men were far from prompt in obeying his command, evidently having no taste for the job. One among them, apparently their ringleader in incipient mutiny, an upstanding bully with the jaw of a prize fighter, took it upon himself openly to defy the officer, exclaiming profanely that he'd be d—d if he ever enlisted to do nigger work. The others laughed, and joined in the revolt, until the captain unceremoniously flung off his blouse, thus divesting himself of every vestige of rank, and proceeded to enforce his authority. It was a battle royal, the soldiers crowding eagerly about, and yelling encouragement impartially first to one combatant, and then another.

"Kick him in the ribs, Sam!"

"Now, Abe, you've got him—crack the d—n cuss' neck."

"By golly that's the way we do it in ol' Salem."

"He's got yer now, Jenkins, he's got yer now—good boy, Abe."

Exactly what occurred I could not see, but when the circle of wildly excited men finally broke apart, the big rebel was lying flat on his back in the yellow mud, and the irate officer was indicating every inclination to press him down out of sight.

"Hav yer hed 'nough, Sam Jenkins?" he questioned breathlessly. "Then, blame ye, say so."

"All right, Abe—yer've bested me this time."

"Will yer tote them passels?"

The discomfited Jenkins, one of whose eyes was closed, and full of clay, attempted a sickly grin.

"H—! yes," he admitted, "I'd sure admire ter dew it."

The conqueror released his grip, and stood up, revealing his full height, and reaching out for the discarded blouse, quietly slipped it on. One of the Adventurer's passengers, an officer in uniform, going ashore, another tall, spare man, had halted on the gangplank to watch the contest. Now he stepped forward to greet the victor, with smiling eyes and outstretched hand.

"Not so badly done, captain," he said cordially. "I am Lieut. Jefferson Davis of General Atcheson's staff, and may have a good word to say regarding your efficiency some time."

The other wiped his clay-bespattered fingers on his dingy jean pants, and gripped the offered hand.

"Thank ye, sir," he answered good humoredly. "I'm Abe Lincoln of Salem, Illinoy, an' I ain't got but just one job right now—that's ter make them boys tote this stuff, an' I reckon they're goin' ter do it."

With the exchange of another word or two they parted, and not until thirty years later did I realize what that chance meeting meant, there in the clay mud of Yellow Banks, at the edge of the Indian wilderness, when Abraham Lincoln of Illinois and Jefferson Davis of Mississippi stood in comradeship with clasped hands.

We had unloaded perhaps a quarter of our supplies, when an officer suddenly appeared over the crest of the bank and hailed the captain. There was a tone of authority in his voice which caused us to knock off work and listen.

"Is Captain Corcoran there? I bring orders from headquarters. You are to discontinue unloading, captain, retain the remainder of the provisions on board and prepare at once to take on men."

"Take on men? We are not to return south, then?"

"No; you're going in the other direction—up the Rock. You better get busy."

He wheeled his horse and disappeared, leaving the angry captain venting his displeasure on the vacant air. Kirby, evidently from some position across the deck, broke in with a sharp question.

"What is that, Corcoran? Did the fellow say you were not going back to St. Louis?"

"That's just what he said. We've got to nose our way up Rock river, with a lot of those measly soldiers aboard. Here you, Mapes, stop that unloading, and get steam up—we've got to put in a night of it."

"But," insisted Kirby in disgust, "I'm not going up there; aren't there any boats going down?"

"How the h— should I know? Go ashore and find out—you haven't anything else to do."

The men below knocked off work willingly enough and, taking advantage of the confusion on board, I endeavored to creep up the stairs and gain a view of the upper deck. But both Mapes and the second mate made this attempt impossible, forcing me into the ranks of the others and compelling me to restow the cargo. So far as I could perceive, no attempt to depart was made by anyone, excepting a big fellow with a red mustache, who swore profanely as he struggled through the mud, dragging a huge valise.

The situation puzzled and confused me. What choice would Kirby and the deputy make? If once up Rock river the Adventurer might very likely not return for weeks, and it did not seem to me possible that the impatient gambler would consent to such a delay. Every advance northward brought with it a new danger of exposure. These were Illinois troops to be transported—not regulars, but militia, gathered from a hundred hamlets—and many among them would be open enemies of slavery. Let such men as these, rough with the pioneer sense of justice, once suspect the situation of those two women, especially if the rumor got abroad among them that Eloise was white, and the slave-hunter would have a hard row to hoe. And I made up my mind such a rumor should be sown broadcast; aye, more, that if the necessity arose, I would throw off my own disguise and front him openly with the charge. I could do no more.

It was only an accident which gave me a clue to the real program. Mapes sent me back into the vacant space just forward of the paddle-wheel, seeking a lost canthook, and, as I turned about to return, the missing tool in my hand, I paused a moment to glance curiously out through a slit in the boat's planking, attracted by the sound of a loud voice uttering a command. I was facing the shore and a body of men, ununiformed, slouching along with small regard to order, but each bearing a rifle across his shoulder, were just tipping the ridge and plowing their way down through the slippery clay in the direction of the forward gangway. Although I saw, not for an instant did my gaze linger on their disordered ranks. The sight which held me motionless was rather that of a long, broad plank, protected on either side by a rope rail, stretching from the slope of the second deck across the narrow gulf of water, until it rested its other end firmly against the bank.

The meaning of this was sufficiently apparent. For some reason of his own, Kirby had evidently chosen this means of attaining the shore, and through personal friendship, Corcoran had consented to aid his purpose. The reason, plainly enough, was that by use of this stern gangway the landing party would be enabled to attain the bank without the necessity of pushing their way through the crowd of idle loungers forward. And the passage had just been accomplished, for, as my eyes focussed the scene, they recognized the spare figure of the deputy disappearing over the crest—a vague glimpse, but sufficient. At the same instant hands above began to draw in the plank.

There was but one thing for me to do, one action to take—follow them. Dropping the canthook, I turned aft and crept forth through a small opening onto the wooden frame which supported the motionless paddlewheel, choosing for the scene of operations the river side, where the boat effectively concealed my movements from any prying eyes ashore. I lowered myself the full length of my arms, dangling there an instant by clinging to the framework, then loosened my grip and dropped silently into the rushing waters beneath.

CHAPTER XII.

My Friend, the Deputy Sheriff.

Well below the surface, yet impelled swiftly downward by the sturdy rush of the current, sweeping about the steamer's stern, I struck out with all the strength of my arms, anxious to attain in that first effort the greatest possible distance. I came panting up to breathe, my face lifted barely above the surface, dashing the water from my eyes, and casting one swift glance backward toward the landing. Great volumes of black smoke swept forth from the funnels and my ears could distinguish the ceaseless hiss of steam. Again I permitted my body to sink into the depths, swimming onward with easier stroke, satisfied I had not been seen.

I swam slowly ashore, creeping up the low bank into the seclusion of a shallow, sandy gully, scooped out by the late rains. Immediately about me all was silent, the steadily deepening gloom rendering my surroundings vaguely indistinct.

Thus far I possessed no plan—except to seek her. I would venture forward, rather blindly trusting that good fortune might direct my steps aright. I would have to discover first of all, where Kirby had taken Eloise—into whose hands he had deposited the girl for safekeeping. This task ought not to be difficult. The settlement was small, and the camp itself not a large one; no such party could hope to enter its confines without attracting attention, and causing comment. Once I had thus succeeded in locating her, the rest ought to prove comparatively easy—a mere matter of action. For I had determined to play the spy no longer; to cease being a mere shadow. I proposed finding Eloise, and telling her the whole truth; following that, and assured of her support, I would defy Kirby, denounce him if necessary to the military authorities, identifying myself by means of my army commission, and insist on the immediate release of the girl. The man had broken no law—unless the wanton killing of Shrunk could be proven against him—and I might not be able to compel his arrest. Whatever he suspected now relative to his prisoner, he had originally supposed her to be his slave, his property, and hence possessed a right now under the law to restrain her liberty. But even if I was debarred from bringing the man to punishment, I could break his power, and overturn his plans. Beyond that it would be a personal matter between us; and the thought gave me joy.

I attained my feet, confident and at ease, and advanced up the gully, moving cautiously, so as not to run blindly upon some sentry post in the darkness. There would be nervous soldiers on duty, liable to fire at any sound, or suspicious movement, and it was a part of my plan to penetrate the lines unseen, and without inviting arrest. I was standing uncertain, when the dim figure of a man, unquestionably drunk, came weaving his uncertain way along a footpath which ran within a yard of my position. The sudden blazing up of a fire revealed the unmistakable features of the deputy.

"Hullo," I said, happily, stepping directly before him. "When did you come ashore?"

"Hello, yerself," he managed to ejaculate thickly. "Who are yer? frien' o' mine?"

"Why, don't yer remember me, ol' man? We wus talkin' tergether comin' up. I was goin' fer ter enlist."

"H—! yes; glad ter see yer. Sum hot whisky et this camp—tried eny?"

"No," I answered, grasping at the opportunity to arouse his generosity. "I ain't got no coin to buy. I'm flat broke; maybe yer cud stake me fer a bite ter eat?"

"Eat!" he flung one arm lovingly about my shoulders, and burst into laughter. "Yer bet yer life, we're a goin' ter eat, an' drink too. I don't go back on none o' ther boys. Yer never heerd nuthin' like thet 'bout Tim Kennedy, I reckon. Eat, sure—yer know Jack Rale?"

"Never heerd the name."

"What, never heerd o' Jack Rale! Ol' river man, half hoss, half alligator; uster tend bar in Saint Louee. He's up yere now, a sellin' forty-rod ter sojers. Cum up 'long with him frum Beardstown. Frien' o' mine. Yer just cum 'long with me—thas all."

I permitted him to lead me, his voice never ceasing as we followed the dim trail. I made out little of what he said, nor did I question him. The trail ended before a two-room log cabin, so deeply hidden in the woods as to be revealed merely by a glimmer of light shining out from within through chinks in the walls. Tim fumbled for the latch and finally opened the door, lurching across the threshold, dragging me along after him. There were two men at a sloppy table, a disreputable looking white woman stirring the contents of a pot hung over the open fire, and a fellow behind the bar, attired in a dingy white apron. It was all sordid enough, and dirty—a typical frontier grogshop; but the thing of most interest to me was the proprietor. The fellow was the same red-mustached individual whom I had watched disembark from the steamer that same afternoon, slipping in the yellow mud as he surmounted the bank, dragging his valise along after him. So it was this fellow passenger who had given these fugitives refuge; it was his presence in these parts which had decided Kirby to make the venture ashore. He glanced up at our entrance, the glare of light overhead revealing a deep, ugly scar across his chin and a pair of deep-set, scowling eyes.

"Back in time fer supper, hey, Kennedy," he growled, none too cordially. "Who's yer frien'?"

"A feller whut's goin' ter enlist. He's all right, Jack," the deputy hiccoughed thickly. "Le's liquor, an' then we'll eat. I'm payin' the bill—so what's it ter yer?"

"Nuthin' 'tall; eny frien' o' yers gits ther best I have."

He set out a squat bottle on the bar, and thinking it best to humor the both of them I poured out a stiff drink, fully aware that Rale was observing my features closely.

"Seen yer afore sumwhar, ain't I?"

"I reckon," I replied indifferently, watching Tim fill his glass. "I worked my way up on the boat; saw yer on board."

"Sure; that's it; 'tain't in my line fer ter forgit a face. Yer ain't enlisted yit?"

"No; I reckon I'll wait till mawnin', an' clean up a bit furst. How 'bout sum soap an' water 'fore I eat?—an' yer cudn't loan me a razor, cud ye?"

"Wal' I got plenty o' water, an' maybe cud scare up sum soap. Tim yere he's got a razor, an' if he's a frien' o' yers, I reckon he mought lend it ter yer."

The deputy gulped down his drink, and smacked his lips, clinging with one hand to the bar, regarding me lovingly.

"Sure; he's a friend o' mine. Shave him myself soon's I git sober. What's thet? Yer can't wait? Oh, all righ' then, take it yerself. Mighty fin' razor, ol' man."

Rale found me a tin basin, water, a bit of rag for a towel, and a small, cracked mirror, in which my reflection was scarcely recognizable. He was a man of few words, contenting himself with uttering merely a dry comment on Kennedy, who had dropped back into a convenient chair and buried his face on the table.

"Tim's a good fellow, an' I never saw him so blame drunk afore," he said, regretfully. "He an' Kirby hed a row, an' I reckon thet's whut started him drinkin'."

"A row; a quarrel, you mean?" forgetting myself in surprise. "Who's Kirby?"

"Joe Kirby; yer sure must know him if yer a river man. Slim sorter feller, with a smooth face; slickest gambler ever wus, I reckon."

"Why, of course," getting control of myself once more. "We picked him up, 'long with Tim, down river. Hed two women with 'em, didn't they? run-away niggers?"

Rale winked facetiously, evidently rather proud of the exploit as it had been related to him.

"Wal', ther way I understan', they wa'n't both of 'em niggers; however, that was the story told on board. This yere Joe Kirby is pretty slick, let me tell you. One of 'em's a white gurl, who just pretended she wus a nigger. I reckon thet even Kirby didn't catch on ter her game at furst; an' when he did he wus too blame smart ter ever let her know. She don't think he knows yet, but she's liable fer ter find out mighty soon."

"But he cannot hold a white woman," I protested stoutly.

"Can't, hey! Wal', I reckon there are ways o' even doin' thet, an' if thar be, Kirby'll find it. I reckon she won't find no chance ter raise a holler fore he's got her tied good an' strong."

"Do you mean," I asked, horrified, "that he will compel her to marry him?"

"Sum smart little guesser, ain't yer? I reckon she's in a right smart way ter do it, et thet."

"And was this the cause of the quarrel between Kirby and Kennedy?"

"Wal', I reckon it wus; leastwise Tim wudn't be mixed up in the affair none. They hed it prutty blame hot, an' I reckon thar'd bin a dead deputy if hedn't bin fer me. Tim thought I wus a prutty gud frien' an' cum over yere ter liquor, an' eat. Ther joke ov it is, he never know'd thet Joe hed told me all 'bout the fix he wuz in, afore we cum ashore. H—, it wus all fixed up whut wus ter be done—only we didn't expect the steamer wus goin' up north. Thar's sum boys wantin' a drink; see yer 'gin."

I finished shaving, making no attempt to hurry, busily thinking over this new situation. In the first place why had Rale told me all this? I felt convinced the man had some purpose in his conversation, and that he had not finished all he intended to say when the entrance of customers compelled his return to the bar. His parting words implied that. Perhaps the revolt of the deputy made it necessary for the conspirators to select another helper to properly carry out their nefarious scheme, and Rale had decided that I might answer. I hoped this might prove the explanation and determined to seek the earliest opportunity to impress upon that individual the fact that I was desperately in need of money, and decidedly indifferent as to how it was obtained.

The two soldiers, whose entrance had interrupted our talk, remained at the bar drinking until after I had completed my toilet, and were still there listening to a story Rale was telling when the slatternly white woman announced that supper was ready to serve. Tim slept soundly, while the other men remained engrossed in their game of cards. Rale glanced about at these as though to reassure himself that they were intent on their play then, removing his apron, he crossed the room and drew up a chair opposite me.

"All right, Sal," he grunted shortly. "Bring on whut yer got."

He remained silent, staring moodily at the fire, until after the woman had spread out the dishes on the table before him. Then his eyes fell upon the fare.

"Nice looking mess that," he growled, surveying the repast with undisguised disgust. "No wonder we don't do no business with thet kind ov a cook. No, yer needn't stay—go an' make up them beds in the other room. I'll watch things yere."

I judged the fellow had come over intending to resume our interrupted conversation, but hardly knew what he had best venture. I decided to give him a lead.

"I ain't got no money, myself," I began to explain, apologetically, "but Tim thar sed he'd pay my bill."

"Sure, thet's all right; I ain't a worryin' none. Maybe I might put yer in an easy way o' gettin' hold o' a little coin—thet is if ye ain't too blame perticular."

"Me!" I laughed. "Well, I reckon I don't aim fer ter be thet. I've bin ten years knockin' 'bout between New Orleans an' Saint Louee, steambeatin' mostly. Thet sort o' thing don't make no saint out'r eny kin'd man, I reckon. What sort'r job is it?"

He eyed me cautiously, as though not altogether devoid of suspicion.

"Yer don't somehow look just the same sort o' chap, with them ther' whiskers shaved off," he acknowledged soberly. "Yer a sight better lookin' then I thought yer wus, an' a sight younger. Wha wus it yer cum frum?"

"Frum Saint Louee, on the boat, if thet's what yer drivin' at."

"'Tain't what I'm drivin' at. What else did yer cum frum afore then? Yer ain't got no bum's face."

"Oh, I see; well, I can't help that, kin I? I wus raised down in Mississip', an' run away when I wus fourteen. I've been a driftin' 'long ever since. I reckon my face ain't goin' ter hurt none so long as the pay is right."

"No, I reckon maybe it won't. I've seed sum baby faces in my time thet sure hed the devil behind 'em. What's yer name?"

"Moffett—Dan Moffett."

He fell silent, and I was unpleasantly aware of his continued scrutiny, my heart beating fiercely, as I endeavored to force down more of the food as an excuse to remain at the table. What would he decide? Finally he spoke once more, but gruffly enough, leaning forward, and lowering his voice to a hoarse whisper.

"Wal' now see yere, Moffett. I'm goin' fer ter be d—— plain with yer. I reckon yer whut yer say ye are, fer thar ain't no reason, fer as I kin see, why we should lie 'bout it. Yer flat broke, an' need coin, an' I'm takin' ye at yer own word—thet ye don't care overly much how yet git it. Thet true?"

"Just 'bout—so it ain't no hangin' job."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A Dead One.

The late Amelia E. Barr, who wrote sixty successful novels, was a keen and original critic.

She was discussing one of her own death scenes with a New York publisher last spring, and expressed profound dissatisfaction with the chapter. "That death," she said warmly, "has no life in it."

Horses Inhale Smoke.

Horses imported into Argentina are taught to avoid a poisonous weed that the native animals shun naturally by forcing them to inhale smoke from burning pieces of the weed.