The Devil's Own

A Romance of the Blackhawk War

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CHAPTER XV—Continued.

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"Indians, you say! Here?" her eyes widening in horror. "When do you suppose this happened? how long ago?"

"Middle twelve, maybe, certainly; probably some after dawn."

I caught the rein of her horse, and Elsie, who was now wide awake, and trembling with fear, pressed forward, close to my side, moaning and casting her frightened glances backward. Kennedy was already started in advance of us on foot, leading his animal, and seeking to discover the quickest passage to shelter. On a narrow terrace the deputy halted us.

"I reckon maybe this pass is as good as any place for her stop," he said rather doubtfully. "It'll be mighty dark in an hour, an' then we kin go on; only my hoss is about dug up. What ye say, Cap?"

"We are probably as safe here as anywhere in the neighborhood. Is that all you have to report, Tim?"

He lifted his hat and scratched gravely his thin hair.

"Only that them Injuns went south. I done run more their trail after yer left—it was plain as the nose on yer face. That makes big a show o' 'em, an' sum a humpback; they was a settin' straight across yonder, an' I reckon they fetched a prisoner along, somebody wearin' boots anyhow, for I saw the tracks in the sand." He hesitated, as though something was on his mind, glancing toward the girls, and lowering his voice. "I ain't so very sure Lloyd an' reckon I'll scout round a bit. Them red devils might've overlooked a rifle or two back thar in the timber, an' I'd sure like ter git my fingers on one."

I nodded indifferently, too completely exhausted myself to care what he did, and then dull-eyed watched him disappear through the creek. No one spoke, even Elsie failing to question me, as I approached where she and Alice had flung themselves on the short grass, although her heavy eyes followed my movements, and she made an effort to smile.

"Use this easily see by your face how sleepy you are," I said, commiseratingly, kneeling down at her. "I am going to be asleep for an hour or two, and you had both better do the same. This is going to keep guard."

She smiled wearily at me, her head sinking back. I did not move or speak again; indeed I had lost consciousness almost before I touched the ground.

I could not have slept long, for there was a glow of light still visible in the western sky, when a strong grip on my arm aroused me, causing me instantly to sit up. Tim stood there, a battered, old, long rifle in his hand, and beside him a boy of eighteen, without a hat, bareheaded, with an ugly red wound showing on one cheek.

"Mighty worry for ter make yer, Cap," the deputy grumbled. "This here pooped thing is one o' them injuns; an' it worries me, he's got a d— power lame for ter tell."

I glanced backward across my shoulder towards the others. Both girls were sleeping soundly, while beyond them, down the slope, the three horses were quietly cropping away at the herbage. I managed to rise.

"Leave them back in the spring where we will not wake them up," I suggested. "Now we can talk."

His eyes sought the face of the lad questioningly. He was a loose-jointed, awkward youth, trembling still from a fright he could not conceal.

"You belonged to that squad killed our number?"

"Yes, sub; I reckon I'm the only one what ain't dead," he stammered, as tongue-tied I could scarcely make out his words. "I was plum after walkin', an' when them Injuns begin for ter yell, I never done neither but just run, an' hid in the bush."

"I understand. What is your name?"

"Asa Hall."

"Well, Asa, I suppose those were militiamen you belonged to the company?"

He nodded, his eyes dull, his face moving, as though it was an effort to talk. Quite evidently whatever little manhood he had ever possessed, now seemed to vanish. Keenly broke in impatiently:

"It looks that way, boys, as hard for me tell anything, Cap," he explained gravely. "I reckon he's skeered half ter death in the first place, an' then thar's somethin' wrong with his eyes, how. Howsumever, it's what he need an' heard, Cap, that sounds mighty power ter me. He sez thar was more'n fifty bucks in thet party, an' that ol' Black Hawk was thar himself, a settin' on—he done saw him."

I turned, surprised at this statement, to stare into the boy's face. He half groaned back at me, vacantly.

"Black Hawk! He could scarcely be down here; what did he look like?"

"Big as six feet high, I reckon, with a big hooked nose, an' the blackest pair o' black eyes ever yer saw. I reckon he didn't have no eyebrows, an' he wore a bunch o' eagle feathers, an' a red blanket. Gosh, mister, but the devil couldn't look no worse'n he did."

"Was that alike, Cap?" turned to Tim, anxiously.

"He's got a bad description," I admitted, yet not convinced. "I can't believe he would be here with a raiding party. If he was, there must be some important object in view. Is that all?"

"No, sub"; the boy seemed that was a white man along with 'em, a feller with a short moustache, an' dressed in more clothes. She wasn't no prisoner either, for had a gun, an' talked ter Black Hawk, most like he were a chief himself. After the killin' was all over, he was the one what got 'em ter go off thar in the south, the whole kit an' kaboodle."

"I don't doubt that. There have always been white renegades among the Sacs and plenty of half-breeds. If Black Hawk, and this other fellow are leading this band, they are after big game somewhere, and we had better keep out of their way. I have sub-sided up considerably and travelling all night."

"So do I," and Tim flung a half-filled bag from his shoulder to the ground. "But I reckon we can trace. Taint much, only a few scraps I found out thar; but it's way better thet nothin'. Here yer, Hall, give me a hand, an' then we'll go ter eat, an' round up them hosses."

If the party of raiding Indians, whose trail Kenny had discovered, had departed in a southerly direction, as their chief would plainly seem to indicate, then our safest course would seemingly be directed eastward up the valley. This would give us the protection of the bluffs, and take us more and more out of the territory they would be likely to cover. Within twenty minutes we were in saddle, descending the steep bluffs through the darkness, Tim walking ahead with the lad, his horse trailing behind, and the long rifle across his shoulder.

I do not recall feeling any special fear. In the first place I was convinced that we must already be at the extreme limit of Black Hawk's raids, and that, traveling as we were eastward, most before morning be well beyond any possible danger of falling into the hands of his warriors. The other pursuers I had practically dismissed from thought. Shortly after midnight my horse strained a tendon, and could no longer upheld my weight on foot, and the poor beast hobbling painfully behind me. I pressed on behind Elsie, back of us alone, too strictly enjoined with the scouts for any attempt at speech.

The rising sun topped the summit of the bluff, the red rays seeming to bridge with opens of possession the little valley up which we toiled. I had lost my interest, and was walking dogmatically on, with eyes bent upon the ground, when the girl beside me cried out suddenly, a new excitement in her voice.

"Oh, there is a cabin. See! Over yonder! just beyond that big oak, where the bluff curves."

She might have was spent, her eyes attempted hand pointing eagerly.

The sign of which the little building had been constructed, still in their active back, hatched so perfectly with the dark bulkhead beyond, that for the moment none of us caught the cabin outline. The possession the knowing sight, and his voice was first to speak.

"Now, sure, that's a cabin, all right," he said grimly. "Now, mind, we gave hold; there's enough with arrow, for one to come. I don't see no sentinels, for sooner."

"That is the nearest fort probably," I replied, also signed to the time to decipher the spot. "Do not risky to stay out here alone. We'll look it over; there might be food left behind, even if the people have gone."

We must have been half an hour in reaching the clearing. The cabin stood well up above the stream, within the shade of the great oak, and we were confronted, long before we reached it, in our former judgment that it was uninhabited. No sign of life was visible about the place; it had the appearance of desertion, no smoke ever curling from out the chimney. A faint trail, evidently little used, led down toward the creek, and we followed this as it wound around the base of the big tree. There it was that the crack showed suddenly upon us—there in our right but a dead stale, hammered for work, but with thread cut; while directly in front of the cabin door was a dog, an ugly, massive brute, his hair erect, prone on his back, with stiffened legs pointing to the sky. I shouted my mate, and wonder forward.

"What's wrong with you," I called back, "There have been savages here; let me see first what has happened inside."

The dog had been shot, stricken by two bullets, and I was obliged to drag his huge body to one side before I could press my way in through the door. The open doorway and window afforded ample light, and a single glance was sufficient to reveal most of the story. The cabin had been ransacked as by the blow of an ax, and pewter dishes were everywhere. The bed in one corner had been stripped of its coverlets, many of them slashed by a knife, and the screw tick had been ripped open in a dozen places. Chalk from the fireplace lay wide-spread, some of them having eaten deeply into the hard wood before they ceased smouldering.

I saw all this yet my eye rested upon something else. A coat lay beneath double arrows as overturned bench, in a posture which hid its face from view. His body was there alone, although a child's shoe lay on the floor, and a woman's dress dangled from a hook against the wall. I crept forward, my heart pounding madly, until I could gain sight of his face. He was a big fellow, not more than thirty, with sandy hair and beard, and a pugnacious jaw. His coarse hickory shirt showed torn ribbons, a bullet wounded in the center of the forehead, and one arm broken by a vicious blow. His relaxed hands yet grasped the butt of an ax, just as he had died—fighting.

Tim's voice spoke from the doorway.

"Injuns, I reckon!"

"Yes, they have been—we; the man is dead. But there now: have been others, a woman and child also—see that shoe on the floor, and the dress hanging over there. The poor devil fought hard!"

Kennedy stepped inside, staring about him.

"Do you think it best to stop here?"

"Why, sure! Taint likely them devils will be back again. They were after big game, or the Lord knows we can't go as we are. Them girls be mighty nigh ready for sleep, an' two of the horses have gone out. I'm for setting down for a few hours anyhow—way till it gets nothing dark."

Undoubtedly this was the sensible view. We would be in far less danger remaining there under cover than in any attempt to continue our journey by daylight. Together we carried the body out, and dragged it to a thicket behind the cabin, awaiting burial; and then dragged the dead dog also out of sight. The disorder within was easily remedied, and after this had been attended to, the girls were permitted to enter. Elsie sank back on the bench, her head supported against the wall, the lashes of her half-closed eyes showing dark against the whiteness of her cheeks. She looked so painfully tired, the very heart choked in my throat.

The rest of us found a small stock of provisions, and Elsie, with Tim to aid her, built a fire and prepared breakfast. A half-filled bottle of whisky discovered in the cupboard helped to revive all of us slightly, and gave our sentinels courage to seek outside for a spring. Tim, company, stoutly maintained himself, and twelve, seated a chamber in the floor, further laboriously removed, which disclosed the existence of a small cellar below. Chance in hand he explored this, returning with two jugs, together with a quantity of powder and ball, and informing that there remained a half keg of the explosive hidden below.

"Blow a big enough for blow up anything, I reckon," he concluded, exhibiting a sample. "Whether I ever saw; reckon he'd be that in no good, for it's powder alright."

He removed the debris out of our way, I was gathering up the screw tick and all bedding, and piled them all together back on the bed. Glancing to one of the bunkers, caught and held it in his, was a peculiar emblem, and I stood for a moment with it in my hand, curiously examining the odd design. Elsie observed her eyes, and started to her feet.

"What is that you have?" she asked. "A sort of snake amulet—a rather strange design; I have found it here, entangled in this blanket."

"Why," she exclaimed in surprise, "I have seen one exactly like it before—don't know it in the fire."

CHAPTER XVI.

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We Accept a Refugee.

I looked again at the thing with a fresh curiosity, yet with no direct bought of any connection. The undisguised terror manifest in her face, however, caused me to realize the sudden suspicion which this discovery had aroused.

"That means nothing," I interrupted, taking the pin back into my own possession. "It is probably the emblem of some secret order, and there may be thousands of them scattered about; anyhow this one never belonged to Joe Kirby. He could never have been here. My guess is the fellow is back at Lee or Sauk's before now. Forget it, Elsie, while we eat. That a few hours sleep will restore your nerves; you are all worn out."

We had scarcely completed the meal, seated around what remained of the shattered table. The boy Asa sat at the very end of the table, facing the open door, eating as though he had not tasted food for a week. From the time of sitting down he had scarcely raised his eyes from off the pewter plate before him; but at last this was emptied, and he lifted his head, to stare out through the open door. Into his face came a look of dumb, inarticulate fright, as his lips gave utterance to one cry of warning.

"Look! Look!"

With swift turn of the head I saw what he meant—a man on horseback, riding at a savage gait up the trail, directly for the cabin, bent so low in the saddle his features could not be discerned, hid from his clothing, unquestionably white. I was without the door, Tim beside me, rifle in hand, when the fellow swept around the base of the oak, still swaying behind him, as though in fright of pursuers, and digging his struggling horse with the end of a rein. He appeared fairly crazed with fear, and were in his blind terror of the close proximity of the cabin.

"Hold on!" I yelled, springing forward, my arms thrown up, directly in the animal's course. "Stop you fool!"

I know not whether the frantic horse checked itself, or if the rider drew rein, for the beast stopped, half rearing, and I gazed with amazement into the revealed face of the man—he was Joe Kirby. Before I could speak, or more, he hurled into words.

"Tom! Knox! My God, man, whoever you are, don't refuse me shelter!"

"Shelter! From what?" my hand closing on a pistol butt.

"Indians! Be merciful, for God's sake. They are there in the valley, they are after me. I just escaped them—they were going to burn me at the stake!"

I glanced aside at Tim; his rifle was flung forward. Then, looked quickly back at the man, who had already dropped from his horse, and seemed scarcely able to stand. Was this true, had he ridden here unknowing whom he would meet, with no other thought but to save his life? Heaven knows he looked the part—his swarthy face dirtied, with a stain of blood on one cheek, his shirt ripped into rags, bareheaded, and with a look of terror in his eyes not to be mistaken. Villain and savage as I knew him to be, I still felt a strange wave of pity sweep me—pity and tenderness, mingled with hatred and distrust.

"Kirby," I said, and strode in between him and Tim's leveled weapon. "There is no friendship between us—now, or at any time. I believe you to be a miserable, snarling dog; but I would save even a cur from Indian torture. Did you know we were here?"

"No, so help me God. I saw the cabin, and hoped to find help."

"The savages are following you?"

"Yes—yes; see! Look down there—there are half a hundred of the devils, and—and Black Hawk."

"By the holy smoke, Cap, he's right—there they are!" sung out Kennedy, pointing excitedly. "The cuss ain't a lying. What'll we do?"

I saw them also by this time, my mind in a whirl of indecision. What should we do? What ought we to do? We should have to fight to the death—there was no doubt of that. An attempt to get away was manifestly impossible. But what about this renegade, this infernal scoundrel, this hellhound who had been trailing us to kill and destroy? Should we turn him back now to his deserved fate, or should we offer him the same chance for life we had? He might fight, he might add one rifle to our defense; he might help us to hold our certain besiegers, come. And then—then—after that—we could settle our score. Tim's voice broke the silence.

"I reckon we ain't got much time," he said grimly. "It's one thing, yer the other. I'm for givin' the d— beggar a chance. I don't turn no white man over ter Injuns—not me. Kirby's got a gun, an' I reckon we're goin' ter let need yer all afore this blood frenzy is over with."

"And I agree with you, Mr. Kennedy," said Elsie, clearly, speaking from the door. "Lieutenant Knox, no one here has more to forgive than I. We must give the man refuge—it would be inhuman not to."

"Do it!" I said, grimly, to Kirby, looking him squarely in the eyes. "And then put the man, if you care to live."

I lingered there upon the outside for a moment, but for a moment only. The advancing crowd of savages were already coming up the slope, gradually spreading out into the form of a fan. The majority were mounted, although several struggled forward on foot. Near their center appeared the common gleam of a red blanket, waved back and forth as though in signal, but the distance was too great for my eyes to distinguish the one manipulating it. We were trapped, with our backs to the wall.

There were but few preparations to be made, and I gave small attention to Kirby until these had been hastily completed. The door and window were barred, the powder and slugs brought up from below, the rifles loaded and primed, the few loopholes between the logs opened, and a pail of water placed within easy reach. This was all that could be done.

Kennedy made use of the fellow, ordering him about almost brutally, and Kirby obeyed the commands without an answering protest. To all appearances he was as eager as we in the preparations for defense. But he could not command him; to even address the fellow would have been torture, for even then I was without faith, without confidence. The very sneaking, cowardly way in which he acted did not appeal to me as natural. I could not deny his story—those approaching Indians alone were proof that he fled from a real danger; and yet—and yet to my mind he could not represent anything but treachery. I possessed but one desire—to kick the cringing cur.

I stood at a loophole watching the approaching savages. They had halted just below the big tree, and four or five half hidden by the huge trunk, were in consultation, well beyond rifle shot. Assured by their attitude that the attack would not be made immediately, I ventured to turn my face slightly, and take that survey of the room behind. Tim had stationed himself at the other side of the door, his eyes glued to a narrow opening, both hands gripped on his gun. Elsie and the colored girl, the one dry-eyed and alert, the other prone on the floor crying, were where I had told them to go, into the darkest corner. The boy I did not see nor even remember, but Kirby stood on the bench, which enabled him to peer out through the loophole in the window shutter. What I noticed, however, was that instead of keeping watch without, his eyes were furtively wandering about the room, and when they suddenly encountered mine, were as instantly averted.

"Where was it you met those Indians, Kirby?" I questioned sternly.

"Down the valley."

"Last night?"

"This morning; they surprised us in camp."

"In camp! there were others with you, then. Who were they? the party you had trailing us?"

"Yes," a decidedly sullen tone creeping into his voice. "Five of them; one was a Winnebago."

"And Hale was along, I presume. What became of the others?"

He shook his head, but with no show of feeling.

"That's more than I know. Things were hot enough for me without bothering about the rest. I never saw any of them again, except Hale. He was killed in the fight. About an hour after that I shot the buck who was guarding me, and got away on his horse."

"What Indians were they?"

"Sacs mostly; some Foxes, and maybe a Winnebago or two."

"Was Black Hawk with them?"

"I don't know—I never saw Black Hawk."

I felt firmly convinced that he was deliberately lying, and yet there was nothing in his story which might not be true. No doubt it was prejudice, personal hatred, and distrust which led me to come to this conclusion. Well, true or not, I meant to see that he fought now.

"All right, but I advise you to keep your eyes outside." I said sternly. "Don't be staring about the cabin any more."

"I was looking for something to eat."

"Is that so? Well, you better stand it for awhile without eating. What is it, Elsie?"

"Please let me hand him some food!"

I hesitated, conscious that I disliked even the thought of her serving the fellow in any way, yet unable to resist the eager plea in her eyes.

"Very well, if you wish to; only keep down out of range; those Indians may try for the loopholes. It is more than you deserve, Kirby."

He made no response, and I watched him closely as he endeavored to eat what she proffered him, and felt convinced that it was hard work. The man had lied about being hungry; he was not in need of food, and my deep-rooted suspicion of him only fanned to anger.

A hand gripped at my sleeve timidly, and I turned quickly to encounter the eyes of Asa Hall. Never did I read such depth of fear in the expression of any face—it was the wild, unreasoning terror of an animal.

"What is it, my boy?"

"It's him, sub," he whispered, his lips trembling so I could scarce catch the words. "Thet feller thar. He's—he's the one I saw last night with Black Hawk."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sub; I know him. I saw him plain as I do now."

I do not know why, but every bit of evidence against the man came instantly thronging back to my mind—the chance remark of Throckmorton on the Warrior about his suspicion of Indian blood; the high cheek bones and thin lips; the boy's earlier description; the manner in which our trail had been so relentlessly followed; the strange emblem found pinned to the blanket. I seemed to grasp the entire truth—the wily, cowardly scheme of treachery he was endeavoring to perpetrate. My blood boiled in my veins, and yet I felt cold as ice, as I swung about and faced the fellow, my rifle flung forward.

(TO BE CONTINUED)