

The Devil's Own

A Romance of the Blackhawk War

By RANDALL PARRISH Author of "Contraband," "Shea of the Irish Brigade," "When Wilderness Was King," etc.

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CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

"Kirby, stand up! Drop that rifle—take it, Eloise. Now raise your hands, Tim." "What's up?" "Is there anything serious going on outside?" "No; nuthin' much—just pow-wowin'. Yer want me?" "Search that scoundrel for weapons. Don't ask questions; do what I say."

Influence of Kirby, and he had, beyond question, informed them as to who we were, and the conditions under which we had fled from Yellow Banks. The only addition to our party since then was the rescued boy. They would have little fear of serious loss in an attack upon two men, and two women, unarmed, except possibly with a pistol or two, even though barricaded behind the log walls of a cabin. And, with one of their number within, any attempt at defense would be but a farce. This same gang had already sacked the cabin, taking with them, as they believed, every weapon it contained. In their haste they had overlooked the cellar below. They had no thought of its existence, nor that we awaited them in hand and with an ample supply of powder and lead. Whatever might be the final result, a surprise of no pleasant nature was awaiting their advance.

that the Sacs were fighting men. I knew it now. This was to be no play at war but a grim, relentless struggle. They came on masse, rushing recklessly forward across the open space, pressing upon each other in headlong desire to be first, yelling like fiends, guns brandished in air, or spitting fire, animated by but one purpose—the battering of a way into that cabin. I know not who led them—all I saw was a mass of half-naked bodies bounding toward me, long hair streaming, copper faces aglow, weapons glittering in the light. Yes, I saw more—the meaning of that fierce rush; the instrument of destruction they brought with them. It was there in the center of the maelstrom of leaping figures, protected by the grouped bodies, half hidden by gesticulating red arms—a huge log, borne irresistibly forward on the shoulders of twenty warriors, gripped by other hands, and hurled toward us as though swept on by a human sea. Again and again I fired blindly into the yelling mob; I heard the crack of Tim's rifle echoing mine, and the chug of lead from without striking the solid logs. Bullets ploughed crashing through the door panels and Elsie's shrill screams of fright rang out above the unearthly din. A slug tore through my loophole, drawing blood from my shoulder in its passage, and imbedded itself in the opposite wall. In front of me savages fell, staggering, screams of anger and agony mingling as the astonished assailants realized the fight before them. An instant we held them, startled, and demoralized. The warriors bearing the log stumbled over a dead body and went down, the great timber crushing out another life as it fell. Again we fired, this time straight into their faces—but there was no stopping them. A red blanket flashed back beyond the big tree; a guttural voice shouted, its hoarse note rising above the hellish uproar, and those demons were on their feet again, filled with new frenzy. It was a minute—no more. With a blow that shook the cabin, propelled by twenty strong arms, the great tree butt struck, splintering the oak wood as though it were so much pine, and driving a jagged hole clear through one panel. Kennedy was there, blazing away directly into the assailants' eyes, and I joined him.



A Huge Fellow Faced Me—a Winnebago, I Knew.

hinges. In through the opening the red mob hurried itself, reckless of death or wounds, mad with the thirst for victory; a jam of naked beasts, crazed by the smell of blood—a wave of slaughter, crested with brandished guns and gleam of tomahawks. There is nothing to remember—nothing but blows, curses, yells, the crunch of steel on flesh, the horror of cruel eyes glowing into yours, the clutching of fingers at your throat, the spit of fire singeing you, the strain of combat hand to hand—the knowledge that it is all over, except to die. I had no sense of fear; no thought but to kill and be killed. I felt within me strength—desperate, insane strength. The rifle butt splintered in my hands, but the bent and shapeless barrel rose and fell like a flail. I saw it crush against skulls; I jabbed it straight into red faces; I brought it down with all my force on clutching arms. For an instant Tim was beside me. He had lost his gun and was fighting with a knife. It was only a glimpse I had of him through red mist—the next instant he was gone. A huge fellow faced me, a Winnebago, I knew, from his shaven head. I struck him once, laying open his cheek to the bone; then he broke through and gripped me. The rest is what a dream; a delirium fever? I know not; it comes to me in flashes of mad memory. I was struck again and again, stabbed, and flung to the floor. Moccasined feet trod on me, and some fiend gripped my hair, bending my head back across a dead body, until I felt the neck crack. Above me were naked legs and arms, a pandemonium of dancing figures, a horrible chorus of maddened yells. I caught a glimpse of Asa Hall flung high into the air, shot dead in mid-flight, the whirling body dropping into the rack below. I saw the savage, whose fingers were twined in my hair, lift a gleaming tomahawk and circle it about his head; I stared into the hate of his eyes, and as it swept down—there was a glare of red and yellow flame between us, the thunder of an explosion; the roof above seemed to burst asunder and fall in—and darkness, death.

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 what might be 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 fiend crunching his face, and Asa Hall tossed into the air and shot at as he fell. Eloise! Eloise! 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, bringing 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."

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