











"Tell me - please," she begged "Is the man dead?" Page 165

THE DEVIL'S OWN

[Frontispiece: "Tell me - please," she begged. "Is the man dead?"]



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# The Devil's Own

## CHAPTER I

### AT OLD FORT ARMSTRONG

It was the early springtime, and my history tells me the year was 1832, although now that seems so far away I almost hesitate to write the date. It appears surprising that through the haze of all those intervening years—intensely active years with me—I should now be able to recall so clearly the scene of that far-off morning of my youth, and depict in memory each minor detail. Yet, as you read on, and realize yourself the stirring events resulting from that idle moment, you may be able to comprehend the deep impression left upon my mind, which no cycle of time could ever erase.

I was barely twenty then, a strong, almost headstrong boy, and the far wilderness was still very new to me, although for two years past I had held army commission and been assigned to duty in frontier forts. Yet never previously had I been stationed at quite so isolated an outpost of civilization as was this combination of rock and log defense erected at the southern extremity of Rock Island, fairly marooned amid the sweep of the great river, with Indian-haunted land stretching for leagues on every side. A mere handful of troops was quartered there, technically two companies of infantry, yet numbering barely enough for one; and this in spite of rumors daily drifting to us that the Sacs and Foxes, with their main village just below, were already becoming restless and warlike, inflamed by the slow approach of white settlers into the valley of the Rock. Indeed, so short was the garrison of officers, that the harassed commander had ventured to retain me for field service, in spite of the fact that I was detailed to staff duty, had borne dispatches up the Mississippi from General Gaines, and expected to return again by the first boat.

The morning was one of deep-blue sky and bright sunshine, the soft spring air vocal with the song of birds. As soon as early drill ended I had left the fort-enclosure, and sought a lonely perch on the great rock above the mouth of the cave. It was a spot I loved. Below, extended a magnificent vista of the river, fully a mile wide from

shore to shore, spreading out in a sheet of glittering silver, unbroken in its vast sweep toward the sea except for a few small, willow-studded islands a mile or two away, with here and there the black dot of an Indian canoe gliding across the surface. I had been told of a fight amid those islands in 1814, a desperate savage battle off the mouth of the Rock, and the memory of this was in my mind as my eyes searched those distant shores, silent now in their drapery of fresh green foliage, yet appearing strangely desolate and forlorn, as they merged into the gray tint of distance. Well I realized that they only served to screen savage activity beyond, a covert amid which lurked danger and death; for over there, in the near shadow of the Rock Valley, was where Black Hawk, dissatisfied, revengeful, dwelt with his British band, gathering swiftly about him the younger, fighting warriors of every tribe his influence could reach. He had been at the fort but two days before, a tall, straight, taciturn Indian; no chief by birth, yet a born leader of men, defiant in speech, and insolent of demeanor in spite of the presence also at the council of his people's true representative, the silent, cautious Keokuk.

Even with my small knowledge of such things it was plain enough to be seen there existed deadly hatred between these two, and that Keokuk's desire for peace with the whites alone postponed an outbreak. I knew then but little of the cause. The Indian tongue was strange to me, and the interpreter failed to make clear the underlying motive, yet I managed to gather that, in spite of treaty, Black Hawk refused to leave his oldtime hunting grounds to the east of the river, and openly threatened war. The commandant trusted Keokuk, with faith that his peaceful counsels would prevail; but when Black Hawk angrily left the chamber and my eyes followed him to his waiting canoe, my mind was convinced that this was not destined to be the end—that only force of arms would ever tame his savage spirit.

This all came back to me in memory as I sat there, searching out that distant shore line, and picturing in imagination the restless Indian camp concealed from view beyond those tree-crowned bluffs. Already tales reached us of encroaching settlers advancing along the valley, and of savage, retaliating raids which could only terminate in armed encounters. Already crops had been destroyed, and isolated cabins fired, the work as yet of prowling, irresponsible

bands, yet always traced in their origin to Black Hawk's village. That Keokuk could continue to control his people no longer seemed probable to me, for the Hawk was evidently the stronger character of the two, possessed the larger following, and made no attempt to conceal the depth of his hatred for all things American.

Now to my view all appeared peaceful enough—the silent, deserted shores, the desolate sweep of the broad river, the green-crowned bluffs, the quiet log fort behind me, its stockaded gates wide open, with not even a sentry visible, a flag flapping idly at the summit of a high pole, and down below where I sat a little river steamboat tied to the wharf, a dingy stern-wheeler, with the word "Warrior" painted across the pilot house. My eyes and thoughts turned that way wonderingly. The boat had tied up the previous evening, having just descended from Prairie du Chien, and, it was rumored at that time, intended to depart down river for St. Louis at daybreak. Yet even now I could perceive no sign of departure. There was but the thinnest suggestion of smoke from the single stack, no loading, or unloading, and the few members of the crew visible were idling on the wharf, or grouped upon the forward deck, a nondescript bunch of river boatmen, with an occasional black face among them, their voices reaching me, every sentence punctuated by oaths. Above, either seated on deck stools, or moving restlessly about, peering over the low rail at the shore, were a few passengers, all men roughly dressed—miners from Fevre River likely, with here and there perchance an adventurer from farther above—impatient of delay. I was attracted to but two of any interest. These were standing alone together near the stern, a heavily-built man with white hair and beard, and a younger, rather slender fellow, with clipped, black moustache. Both were unusually well dressed, the latter exceedingly natty and fashionable in attire, rather overly so I thought, while the former wore a long coat, and high white stock. Involuntarily I had placed them in my mind as river gamblers, but was still observing their movements with some curiosity, when Captain Thockmorton crossed the gangplank and began ascending the steep bluff. The path to be followed led directly past where I was sitting, and, recognizing me, he stopped to exchange greetings.

"What! have you finished your day's work already, Lieutenant?" he exclaimed pleasantly. "Mine has only just begun."

"So I observe. It was garrison talk last night that the *Warrior* was to depart at daylight."

"That was the plan. However, the *Wanderer* went north during the night," he explained, "and brought mail from below, so we are being held for the return letters. I am going up to the office now."

My eyes returned to the scene below.

"You have some passengers aboard."

"A few; picked up several at the lead mines, besides those aboard from Prairie du Chien. No soldiers this trip, though. They haven't men enough at Fort Crawford to patrol the walls."

"So I'm told; and only the merest handful here. Frankly, Captain, I do not know what they can be thinking about down below, with this Indian uprising threatened. The situation is more serious than they imagine. In my judgment Black Hawk means to fight."

"I fully agree with you," he replied soberly. "But Governor Clark is the only one who senses the situation. However, I learned last night from the commander of the *Wanderer* that troops were being gathered at Jefferson Barracks. I'll probably get a load of them coming back. What is your regiment, Knox?"

"The Fifth Infantry."

"The Fifth! Then you do not belong here?"

"No; I came up with dispatches, but have not been permitted to return. What troops are at Jefferson — did you learn?"

"Mostly from the First, with two companies of the Sixth, Watson told me; only about four hundred altogether. How many warriors has Black Hawk?"

"No one knows. They say his emissaries are circulating among the Wyandottes and Potawatamies, and that he has received encouragement from the Prophet which makes him bold."

"The Prophet! Oh, you mean Wabokieshiek? I know that old devil, a Winnebago; and if Black Hawk is in his hands he will not listen

very long even to White Beaver. General Atkinson passed through here lately; what does he think?"

I shook my head doubtfully.

"No one can tell, Captain; at least none of the officers here seem in his confidence. I have never met him, but I learn this: he trusts the promises of Keokuk, and continues to hold parley. Under his orders a council was held here three days since, which ended in a quarrel between the two chiefs. However, there is a rumor that dispatches have already been sent to Governors Clark and Reynolds suggesting a call for volunteers, yet I cannot vouch for the truth of the tale."

"White Beaver generally keeps his own counsel, yet he knows Indians, and might trust me with his decision, for we are old friends. If you can furnish me with a light, I'll start this pipe of mine going."

I watched the weather-beaten face of the old riverman, as he puffed away in evident satisfaction. I had chanced to meet him only twice before, yet he was a well-known character between St. Louis and Prairie du Chien; rough enough to be sure, from the very nature of his calling, but generous and straightforward.

"Evidently all of your passengers are not miners, Captain," I ventured, for want of something better to say. "Those two standing there at the stern, for instance."

He turned and looked, shading his eyes, the smoking pipe in one hand.

"No," he said, "that big man is Judge Beaucaire, from Missouri. He has a plantation just above St. Louis, an old French grant. He went up with me about a month ago -- my first trip this season -- to look after some investment on the Fevre, which I judge hasn't turned out very well, and has been waiting to go back with me. Of course you know the younger one."

"Never saw him before."

"Then you have never traveled much on the lower river. That's Joe Kirby."

"Joe Kirby?"

"Certainly; you must have heard of him. First time I ever knew of his drifting so far north, as there are not many pickings up here. Have rather suspected he might be laying for Beaucaire, but the two haven't touched a card coming down."

"He is a gambler, then?"

"A thoroughbred; works between St. Louis and New Orleans. I can't just figure out yet what he is doing up here. I asked him flat out, but he only laughed, and he isn't the sort of man you get very friendly with, some say he has Indian blood in him, so I dropped it. He and the Judge seem pretty thick, and they may be playing in their rooms."

"Have you ever told the planter who the other man is?"

"What, me, told him? Well, hardly; I've got troubles enough of my own. Beaucaire is of age, I reckon, and they tell me he is some poker player himself. The chances are he knows Kirby better than I do; besides I've run this river too long to interfere with my passengers. See you again before we leave; am going up now to have a talk with the Major."

My eyes followed as he disappeared within the open gates, a squatly, strongly-built figure, the blue smoke from his pipe circling in a cloud above his head. Then I turned idly to gaze once again down the river, and observe the groups loitering below. I felt but slight interest in the conversation just exchanged, nor did the memory of it abide for long in my mind. I had not been close enough to observe Beaucaire, or glimpse his character, while the presence of a gambler on the boat was no such novelty in those days as to chain my attention. Indeed, these individuals were everywhere, a recognized institution, and, as Thockmorton had intimated, the planter himself was fully conversant with the game, and quite able to protect himself. Assuredly it was none of my affair, and yet a certain curiosity caused me to observe the movements of the two so long as they remained on deck. However, it was but a short while before both retired to the cabin, and then my gaze returned once more to the sullen sweep of water, while my thoughts drifted far away.

A soldier was within a few feet of me, and had spoken, before I was even aware of his approach.

"Lieutenant Knox."

I looked about quickly, recognizing the major's orderly.

"Yes, Sanders, what is it?"

"Major Bliss requests, sir, that you report at his office at once."

"Very well. Is he with Captain Thockmorton?"

"Not at present, sir; the captain has gone to the post-sutler's."

Wondering what might be desired of me, yet with no conception of the reality, I followed after the orderly through the stockade gate, and across the small parade ground toward the more pretentious structure occupied by the officers of the garrison.

## CHAPTER II

### ON FURLOUGH

A number of soldiers off duty were loitering in front of the barracks, while a small group of officers occupied chairs on the log porch of their quarters, enjoying the warmth of the sun. I greeted these as I passed, conscious that their eyes followed me curiously as I approached the closed door of the commandant's office. The sentry without brought his rifle to a salute, but permitted my passage without challenge. A voice within answered my knock, and I entered, closing the door behind me. The room was familiar—plain, almost shabbily furnished, the walls decorated only by the skins of wild beasts, and holding merely a few rudely constructed chairs and a long pine table. Major Bliss glanced up at my entrance, with deep-set eyes hidden beneath bushy-gray eyebrows, his smooth-shaven face appearing almost youthful in contrast to a wealth of gray hair. A veteran of the old war, and a strict disciplinarian, inclined to be austere, his smile of welcome gave me instantly a distinct feeling of relief.

"How long have you been here at Armstrong, Lieutenant?" he questioned, toying with an official-looking paper in his hands.

"Only about three weeks, sir. I came north on the *Enterprise*, with dispatches from General Gaines."

"I remember; you belong to the Fifth, and, without orders, I promptly dragooned you into garrison service." His eyes laughed. "Only sorry I cannot hold you any longer."

"I do not understand, sir."

"Yet I presume you have learned that the *Wanderer* stopped here for an hour last night on its way north to Prairie du Chien?"

"Captain Thockmorton just informed me."

"But you received no mail?"

"No, sir; or, rather, I have not been at the office to inquire. Was there mail for me?"

"That I do not know; only I have received a communication relating to you. It seems you have an application pending for a furlough."

"Yes, sir."

"It is my pleasure to inform you that it has been granted—sixty days, with permission to proceed east. There has been considerable delay evidently in locating you."

A sudden vision arose before me of my mother's face and of the old home among the hills as I took the paper from his extended hands and glanced at the printed and written lines.

"The date is a month ago."

"That need not trouble you, Knox. The furlough begins with this delivery. However, as I shall require your services as far as St. Louis, I shall date its acceptance from the time of your arrival there."

"Which is very kind, sir."

"Not at all. You have proven of considerable assistance here, and I shall part from you with regret. I have letters for Governor Clark of Missouri, and Governor Reynolds of Illinois; also one to General Atkinson at Jefferson Barracks, detailing my views on the present

Indian situation. These are confidential, and I hesitate to entrust them to the regular mail service. I had intended sending them down river in charge of a non-commissioned officer, but shall now utilize your services instead—that is, if you are willing to assume their care?"

"Very gladly, of course."

"I thought as much. Each of these is to be delivered in person. Captain Thockmorton informs me that he will be prepared to depart within an hour. You can be ready in that time?"

I smiled.

"In much less. I have little with me but a field kit, sir. It will not require long to pack that."

"Then return here at the first whistle, and the letters will be ready for you. That will be all now."

I turned toward the door, but paused irresolutely. The major was already bent over his task, and writing rapidly.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but as I am still to remain on duty, I presume I must travel in uniform?"

He glanced up, his eyes quizzical, the pen still grasped in his fingers.

"I could never quite understand the eagerness of young officers to get into civilian clothing," he confessed reflectively. "Why, I haven't even had a suit for ten years. However, I can see no necessity for your proclaiming your identity on the trip down. Indeed, it may prove the safer course, and technically I presume you may be considered as on furlough. Travel as you please, Lieutenant, but I suggest it will be well to wear the uniform of your rank when you deliver the letters. Is that all?"

"I think of nothing more."

Fifteen minutes sufficed to gather together all my belongings, and change from blue into gray, and, as I emerged from quarters, the officers of the garrison flocked about me with words of congratulation and innumerable questions. Universal envy of my good fortune

was evident, but this assumed no unpleasant form, although much was said to express their belief in my early return.

"Anyway, you are bound to wish you were back," exclaimed Hartley, the senior captain, earnestly. "For we are going to be in the thick of it here in less than a month, unless all signs fail. I was at that last council, and I tell you that Sac devil means to fight."

"You may be certain I shall be back if he does," I answered. "But the Major seems to believe that peace is still possible."

"No one really knows what he believes," insisted Hartley soberly. "Those letters you carry south may contain the truth, but if I was in command here we would never take the chances we do now. Look at those stockade gates standing wide open, and only one sentry posted. Ye gods! who would ever suppose we were just a handful of men in hostile Indian territory." His voice increased in earnestness, his eyes sweeping the group of faces. "I've been on this frontier for fourteen years, and visited in Black Hawk's camp a dozen times. He's a British Indian, and hates everything American. Ask Forsyth."

"The Indian agent?"

"Yes, he knows. He's already written Governor Reynolds, and I saw the letter. His word is that Keokuk is powerless to hold back an explosion; he and the Hawk are open enemies, and with the first advance of settlers along the Rock River Valley this whole border is going to be bathed in blood. And look what we've got to fight it with."

"Thockmorton told me," I explained, "that Atkinson is preparing to send in more troops; he expects to bring a load north with him on his next trip."

"From Jefferson?"

"Yes; they are concentrating there."

"How many regulars are there?"

"About four hundred from the First and Sixth regiments."

He laughed scornfully.

"I thought so. That means that Atkinson may send two or three hundred men, half of them recruits, to be scattered between Madi-