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THE RAVEN

by

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THE RAVEN

Two horsemen rode to the door of Russell's Inn in Maryville and alighted. The host came forward to greet them, but when he saw their faces he knew they had not come to stay. They were the two oldest Houston boys from Baker's Creek, only ten miles away.

"We are looking for our brother Sam. Do you know his whereabouts?" asked John, the older one.

"Disappeared the other morning before sunup and we haven't seen hair nor hide of him since," his brother James put in.

"Why no," the innkeeper replied. "He's not been this way in well over a week."

The Houston boys mounted their horses and rode on, to the blacksmith shop, the saddle shop, the hatter's shop, and out to the tan-yard at the edge of town, asking the same question. And the answer was always, "No, we've not seen the boy around here."

James glanced toward his own general store and sighed. He ought to be there now instead of traipsing all over the country in search of this wandering younger brother.

"I saw him when he left," he repeated for the tenth time since the boy's disappearance. "I woke up just as he was creeping down the loft, as quiet as a panther, and I said to myself, 'What's come over the boy? He's beginning to get serious about his work at last, going off to the store so early in the morning.'"

"I'd have known better than that if I'd seen him," John replied. "He wouldn't take any interest in the farm with me, and he's proved no better in the store with you." "It's not likely that he'd have a sudden craving for work now."

The brothers rode out beyond the town, stopping at the lonesome little farmhouses along the way.

"Have you seen a boy around here, fifteen years old but tall for his age?" John asked.

"He has brown curly hair and blue eyes and he uses long words when he talks, the kind he's read in books," James added.

"No, he's not been here," the reply was always the same.

"Reckon he's met with foul play?" one farmer asked.

"Not Sam," the two brothers spoke at the same time.

Their mother, a widow who had come recently with her ten children to settle in this frontier wilderness, had often said to her sons,

"I want you boys to remember this, the door of my house is ^{open} ~~been~~ to brave men only. It is eternally shut against cowards."

"Whatever his faults, Sam was not one that door would ever be shut against, and he'd stand up against any danger and not be afraid. That much his brothers knew. And they knew, too, that the ring their mother wore on her finger, with the word "Honor" engraved on the ^{more} inside, was ~~was~~ likely to go to Sam than to any of the others, and it would be his motto through life.

"He has no mean vices," his mother had said when he first disappeared. "It's only that the boy is born for a life of excitement and adventure, and he can't get that plowing a field or measuring cloth in a store."

She was not worried, but the brothers would not give up the search. They came to the banks of the Tennessee river and paused to let their horses wade in to drink. An empty canoe, tied to a clump of canebrakes, was rocking with the waves.

"This is as far as I go," James announced. "I've work at the store waiting for me, and I can't waste any more time away from it."

"I need to get back to my farm," John said. "But I don't like to give up just now. Suppose we try one more place, and search on yonder island, before we go back."

They tied their horses so they would not stray, and rowed in the canoe to an tree-covered island in the middle of the river. A stern-faced Indian watched as they approached, but he gave no sign of having seen them before, when they appeared at his wigwam.

"I am Chief Oo-loo-te-ka," he said. "What brings you to my wigwam?"

"We are searching for our younger brother who ran away from home," John replied.

Little brown children stopped in their play and stared, then they broke into a run, chattering in their strange tongue. James' eyes followed them and he saw them gather around a blanket-covered youth lying under a willow tree, as if they were trying to hide him. Some child's game, no doubt, he thought. But something caught his eye. The youth lying down was reading a book. Indians did not read books, he knew.

"Who is that?" he asked the old chief.

"That is Co-lon-neh, my son." was the reply.

"Co-lon-neh?"

"Yes. The name means "Raven" in your own language, a revered name among my people, and a revered youth who answers to the name."

Both brothers now looked in the direction of the youth.

"You might call him your son, the Raven, but he has brown curly hair and blue eyes, and I call him my brother Sam," John said, walking toward the boy.

"You've had your fun now, Sam," he ^{went on} said. "It's time to go back to your home and your work."

"We've wasted enough time as it is," James added. "The canoe's waiting there to take you back."

"I'm not ready to go back. I like it better here, measuring deer tracks, than being cooped up in a store measuring tape."

No amount of persuading could make the boy relent and go home just then with his brothers.

"I like it best here," he ~~said~~ ^{wasted}.

Chief Oo-loo-te-ka stood beside his adopted son and looked on while the two older brothers departed. The boy was as dear to him as an own son could have been. But he said, "You are not going back now, Co-lon-neh, but the time will come when you will leave us."

Sam Houston could think of no better life than the one he was living, the adopted son of an Indian chief, fishing and hunting and playing the Cherokee ballgame or dancing in the Green Corn Dance. But he knew the old chief spoke the truth. There were dreams that he had and plans ^{that} he had made. He would go far in this world. He would become great and famous, among the men of the country.

"But I'll always come back, my father," he said.

And Sam Houston kept his word. *He always came back to his adopted people, the Indians.*