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THE RETURN HOME

by

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Many a tale has been told about Davy Crockett and Old Betsy, his gun. His aim was so sure that when he roamed the woods, even the coons and the possums, it was said, climbed down from their hiding places in the trees and gave themselves up, for they knew they had no chance.

But there was a time when David had no gun. That was when he was a young boy and far from home.

"Six hundred miles and a little more," he thought as he turned and faced the west to watch an eagle in flight.

The bird's wings were like black shadows against the setting sun. Now if he could grab that eagle by the tail and sit astride its back, he would soon be in Tennessee, at the rate it was flying.

A feeling of homesickness came over the youth. It had been many months since he left his father's tavern on the lonesome road between Abingdon and Knoxville. And it didn't take so many months to make a difference in a growing boy - the difference between a child and a man. Would they know him, he wondered. Well, he'd find out, for he made up his mind then and there, that he was going back home. And when David Crockett made up his mind to do a thing, he did it.

"You've a long way to go, lad, to reach the Holston River in Tennessee," said the farmer he had bound himself to last harvest time.

"It's a long way, but I made it here, and I'll make it back," young David replied.

He still remembered that trail, narrow and muddy and steep, across mountains and valleys and over rivers and streams that had no bridge. The first four hundred miles he had come with a drover his father had bound him to, helping drive a big herd of cattle to Virginia. And the last two hundred miles he rode with a wagoner, bouncing and bumping among the barrels of flour.



"There are wild animals on the way that pounce on you as you sleep," the farmer's wife said uneasily.

But Davy Crockett could hold his own with any wild animals of the woods. He knew their ways, and it wasn't long till they began to know his ways, too.

"And bad men," the farmer said. "A strong boy like you, that hasn't reached man's age, can be stolen and bound out for <sup>the</sup> wages he brings."

Now this was something else again. It was in the year 1800, and many was the time when a young boy was stolen from the streets and bound out to some hard master, sometimes they were even put on the sailing ships and sent far over the sea. David thought of the wagoner who had brought him these last two hundred miles. There had been a crafty look in the man's eyes that he had not trusted. He had helped drive the horses by day and led them to the stream for water at night. And he had built the campfires to cook their supper, without letting the man know he did not trust him. But when they came to the Maryland border, he took his leave of that wagoner, and bound himself to the farmer of his own accord.

"Well, if you're determined to go, I'll pay you the money I owe you," the farmer said. "Let me see, how long have you worked for me?"

Seven months and three days," Davy Crockett replied.

He wrapped up the money in his bundle of clothes and he shook hands with the farmer and his wife, and started out. At the road, he hesitated. Baltimore was not far away. What was a little distance like fifty miles more or less when ~~there were~~ all of six hundred to go. He might as well see what a city was like before he returned to his home in the wilderness of Tennessee. His sisters would want



to know what fashions the ladies wore and his brothers would ask questions about the stores and taverns and sailing ships at the wharf.

"That's not the way to Tennessee," the farmer called after him.

"I know it," David Crockett replied. "I'm going to see the sights of town first."

"Be careful," the farmer's wife warned.

David had not walked far along the road until he heard ~~the~~ rumbling sound behind him. He turned to see a loaded wagon headed in his direction. And as it drew near, he saw that it was the same wagoner who had brought him this last two hundred miles, to the Maryland border.

"Helloa, boy, want to ride?" a deep voice boomed out.

David looked at the long straight road ahead, and he looked up at the empty place beside the wagoner. After all, a ride was better than a walk. He climbed up and held his bundle of clothes in his lap.

"Running away?" the wagoner asked with a sly grin.

"No, sir," David replied.

"Then you must have a tidy little sume there the farmer paid you."

There was the same crafty look in the man's eyes he had seen before. David said nothing. He would get away from this man when they reached Baltimore. He began making his plans about how it could be done, for the man's eyes were on him as if he were not going to let him out of sight this time. Just as they came closetto town, the horses bolted and ran away. David helped the man hold fast the reins, and the horses wheeled suddenly and started the other way. The



wagon turned and David fell out. He picked himself up and helped get the wagon straight, then he went on his way alone, still holding to his bundle of clothes with his money tied in it. The wagoner, covered with flour, stared after him.

David hid his bundle under a stone wall and he walked through the streets of the town to see the sights. It was a strange place for a boy raised in the Tennessee wilderness where bears and panthers and wildcats roamed close to a man's own door. Here there were tall brick houses built close together, with their stone steps, side by side, scrubbed glistening white. Gayly dressed men and women passed him, chatting to each other, with scarcely a glance in his direction. Down at the wharf, he saw ships with their sails flapping in the breeze.

"How would you like to sail to London, lad?" a man called from one of the ships.

Davy thought of that city across the ocean, then he thought of his father's tavern in the lonesome forest, and he turned away. He heard footsteps behind him. The faster he walked, the faster the steps sounded. A hand grasped his arm and he could feel himself being pushed along.

"Well, here you are again," the big voice of the wagoner said. "Thinking of going to London? That's a great place for a boy. A great place."

He towered over young David like a giant, and his strong arm pushed him away from the wharf and out of the city to the stone wall. Here he held the boy's arms behind him and he said in a low voice,

"But you're not going there. You are going with me. And if you cry out, I'll tell everybody you are a bound boy running away



from his master.

He reached down and picked up the bundle of clothes with the money tied in it, still holding fast with his other hand to David's arms behind his back.

David Crockett had no intention of crying out. If he could hold his own against the wild animals of the woods, he could hold his own against this man. But he must bide his time. No one would take his word against this tall, stout wagoner's that he was not a runaway bound boy. He could shout to the rooftops that he was on his way home to his father's tavern in Tennessee, but the people would only smile and say, "That's what all the runaway boys claim."

David followed in silence, and he stood beside the wagoner and looked on while the wagon was being loaded. He knew that his every movement was being watched.

"All right, boy, get in," the wagoner said at last.

Still stubbornly silent, he took his place on the wagon seat, and he held the reins himself, guiding the horses over the narrow trail. The wagoner had made him turn west. That was good. Each mile that they rode took him that much nearer home. On and on they went until dusk, then they stopped to camp for the night. The wagoner went with Davy to water the horses and he stood over him while he built the campfire and cooked the supper. But he could not stay awake all night to watch the boy. David lay as still as a crouched panther, listening to the sounds of the man's breathing to know when he was asleep.

At last the time came when he could make his escape. He had not roamed the woods hunting deer and bear and wild turkey without learning so softly on the earth that his feet made no sound. He would know if he were followed, for the man's steps were heavy and loud.



David Crockett walked slowly at first, creeping over the twigs and fallen leaves with no more noise than the wind would make. And when he was out of hearing, he hastened his steps. He walked until dawn, and then, when he turned a bend in the trail, he came suddenly upon a loaded wagon in front of him, with a tall, stout man in the seat. Could the wagoner have found a short cut and rushed on ahead of him? He stopped in his tracks, but a voice called out,

"Helloa, boy, want a ride?"

David looked up to see a stranger. Now he breathed more easily. This man had a kinder look in his eye.

"I'll ride till I've rested my feet, then I'll get out and walk, for I can go faster that way," the boy replied.

He rode all day and he camped that night with a group of wagoners beside a stream. He made himself useful by cutting wood and building fires and feeding the horses. But next morning he set out on foot alone.

It was a long, long walk. He reached the mountains of Virginia where the trail led up and down. Never had he seen so much game as he saw then. Wild turkeys flew above his head to perch in the branches of trees, coons looked down at him and deer and even bears showed themselves. If only he had his gun! The hungrier he was, the more the animals seemed to come out to mock him. But he must stop at farm houses in the clearing to work for his food. Sometimes he stayed a day and sometimes a month or more. Once he worked in a hatter's shop and he learned to make hats, but he still clung to the coonskin cap that he wore. Then he struck out once more on the trail that led to the west.

He knew when he was near his home for he could tell by the



trees growing there and the birds nesting in them. They were the kind that he knew so well. And the houses were farther and farther apart until he reached at last the deep forest where no other human being except an occasional wagoner or drover passed that way.

A rabbit ran in front of David's path, and he was reminded that he had had nothing to eat since early that morning when he ate the last piece of bread he had.

"There are other ways of getting meat than shooting it," Davy Crockett said.

He saw the hole where the rabbit had burrowed, and he made a snare with a twisted grapevine. When the rabbit was caught, he built a fire with a spark from his flint, and cooked it, then he sat down to his feast alone.

He heard sounds far away in the forest. There was shouting and laughter and singing, and he knew that some wagoners were camped not far away. He had come too far to take any more chances of being stolen and bound out, this close to home, so he stayed where he was, covering himself with leaves to keep warm while he slept. The men kept up their shouts and songs until far in the night, David thought about his home as he lay there. It was three years now, since he had left. He had changed a great deal. Now he was as tall as a man and he knew the ways of the world. Even his own mother would not know him, he was sure.

Only one day's journey more to make. Only one more river to cross. The water was high when he reached it the next day, for the mountain streams swell quickly and they go down as quickly. But David Crockett would not wait around for the water to go down. There was a canoe tied to a bush and he got in to paddle. The current was so swift that it would have taken him far downstream if he had not fought the waves and paddled up as hard as he could. At last he



reached the other side.

He could see the smoke from the tavern chimney, and his heart beat faster than when the wagoner tried to kidnap him. Two horsemen rode up to the door and went in to ask for a room, and he walked in with them. He saw his father come to welcome the guests, and his sisters were there, too. They glanced at him and then they glanced away. Quietly Davy sat by the hearth and waited. His youngest sister came near and looked at him again. Then she sat on the bench beside him, edging closer and closer. At last she touched him on the arm and he looked down at her and winked.

"I declar, it's just as I thought. This is Davy," she said with a laugh.

No~~x~~ all the family came up to greet him, crowding around and wanting to hear of his adventures. Davy talked for an hour but he could not begin to tell all that had happened. But ever after that, he took his faithful gun Betsy along wherever he went.