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How The Raven Died 1902, From "Wolfville Nights"



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HOW THE RAVEN DIED

By Alfred Henry Lewis

From "Wolfville Nights,"

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"Which 'f you-all is out to hear of Injuns, son," observed the Old Cattleman, doubtfully, "the best I can do is shet my eyes an' push along regyardless, like a cayouse in a storm of snow. But I don't guarantee no facts; none whatever; I never does bend myse'f to severe study of savages, an' what notions I packs concernin' 'em is the casual frootes of what I accidental hears an' what I sees. It's only now an' then, as I observes former, that Injuns invades Wolfville; an' when they does, we-all scowls 'em outen camp-sort o' makes a sour front, so as to break 'em early of habits of visitin' us. We shore don't hone none to have 'em hankerin' 'round.

"Nacherally, I makes no doubt that if you goes clost to Injuns an' studies their little game you finds some of 'em good an' some bad, some gaudy an' some sedate, some cur'ous an' some indifferent, same as you finds among shore-enough folks. It's so with mules an' broncos; wherefore, then, may not these differences exist among Injuns? Come squar' to the turn, you-all finds white folks separated the same. Some gents follows off one wagon track an' some another; some even makes a new trail.

"Speakin' of what's opposite in folks, I one time an' ag'in sees two white chiefs of scouts who frequent comes pirootin' into Wolfville from the Fort. Each has mebbly a score of Injuns at his heels who pertains to him personal. One of these scout chiefs is all buckskins, fringes, beads an' feathers from y'ears to hocks, while t'other goes garbed in

a stiff hat with a little jim-crow rim—one of them kind you deenom'nates as a darby—an' a diag'nal overcoat; one chief looks like a dime novel on a spree an' t'other as much like the far East as he saveys how. An' yet, son, this voylent person in buckskins is a Second Lootenant—a mere boy, he is—from West P'int; while that outcast in the reedic'lous hat is foaled on the plains an' never does go that clost to the risin' sun as to glimpse the Old Missouri. The last form of maverick bursts frequent into Western bloom; it's their ambition, that a-way, to deloode you into deemin' 'em as fresh from the States as one of them tomatter airtights.

"Thar's old gent Jeffords; he's that sort. Old Jeffords lives for long with the Apaches; he's found among 'em when Gen'ral Crook—the old 'Gray Fox'—an' civilization and Gatlin' guns comes into Arizona arm in arm. I used to note old Jeffords hibernatin' about the Oriental over in Tucson, I shore reckons he's procrastinatin' about thar yet, if the Great Sperit ain't done called him in. As I says, old Jeffords is that long among the Apaches back in Cochise's time that the mem'ry of man don't run none to the contrary. An' yet no gent ever sees old Jeffords wearin' anything more savage than a long-tail black surtoot an' one of them stove-pipe hats. Is Jeffords dangerous? No, you-all couldn't call him a distinct peril; still, folks who goes devotin' themse'fs to stirrin' Jeffords up jest to see if he's alive gets disastrous action. He has long gray ha'r an' a tangled white beard half-way down his front; an' with that old plug hat an' black coat he's a sight to frighten children or sour milk! Still, Jeffords is all right. As long as towerists an' other inquisitive people don't go pesterin' Jeffords, he shore lets 'em alone. Otherwise, you might as well be up the same saplin' with a cinnamon b'ar; which you'd most likely hear something drop a lot.

"For myse'f, I likes old Jeffords, an' considers him a pleasin' conundrum. About tenth drink time he'd take a cha'r an' go camp by himse'f in a far corner, an' thar he'd warble hymns. Many a time as I files away my nosepaint in the Oriental have I been regaled with

"'Jesus, Lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high,'

as emanatin' from Jeffords where he's r'ared back conductin' some personal services. Folks never goes buttin' in interferin' with these concerts; which it's cheaper to let him sing.

"Speakin' of Injuns, as I su'gests, I never does see overmuch of 'em in Wolfville. An' my earlier experiences ain't thronged with 'em neither, though while I'm workin' cattle along the Red River I does carom on Injuns more or less. Thar's one old hostile I recalls speshul; he's a fool Injun called Black Feather-Choctaw, he is. This Black Feather's weakness is fire-water; he thinks more of it than some folks does of children.

"Black Feather used to cross over to where Dick Stocton maintains a store an' licker house on the Upper Hawgthief. Of course, no gent sells these Injuns licker. It's ag'in the law; an' onless you-all is onusual eager to make a trip to Fort Smith with a marshal ridin' herd on you doorin' said visit, impartin' of nosepaint to aborigines is a good thing not to do. But Black Feather, he'd come over to Dick Stocton's an' linger 'round the bar'ls of Valley Tan, an' take a chance on stealin' a snifter or two while Stocton's busy.

"At last Stocton gets tired an' allows he'll lay for Black Feather. This yere Stocton is a mighty reckless sport; he ain't carin' much whatever he does do; he hates Injuns an' shotguns, an' loves licker, seven-up, an' sin in any form; them's Stocton's prime characteristics. An' he gets mighty weary of the whiskey-thievin' Black Feather, an' lays for him.

"One evenin' this aggravatin' Black Feather crosses over an' takes to ha'ntin' about Dick Stocton's licker room, as is his wont. It looks like Black Feather has already been buyin' whiskey of one of them boot-

laig parties who takes every chance an' goes among the Injuns an' sells 'em nosepaint on the sly. 'Fore ever he shows up on the Upper Hawgthief that time, this Black Feather gets nosepaint some'ers an' puts a whole quart of it away in the shade; an' he shore exhibits symptoms. Which for one thing he feels about four stories tall!

"Stocton sets a trap for Black Feather. He fills up the tin cup into which he draws that Valley Tan with coal-oil—karoseen you-all calls it—an' leaves it, temptin' like, settin' on top a whiskey bar'l. Shore! it's the first thing Black Feather notes. He sees his chance an' grabs an' downs the karoseen; an' Stocton sort o' startin' for him, this Black Feather gulps her down plump swift. The next second he cuts loose the yell of that year, burns up about ten acres of land, and starts for Red River. No, I don't know whether the karoseen hurts him none or not; but he certainly goes squatterin' across the old Red River like a wounded wild-duck, an' he never does come back no more.

"But, son, as you sees, I don't know nothin' speshul or much touchin' Injuns, an' if I'm to dodge the disgrace of ramblin' along in this desultory way, I might better shift to a tale I hears Sioux Sam relate to Doc Peets one time in the Red Light. This Sam is a Sioux, an' a mighty decent buck, considerin' he's Injun; Sam is servin' the Great Father as a scout with the diag'nal-coat, darby-hat sharp I mentions. Peets gives this saddle-tinted longhorn a four-bit piece, an' he tells this yarn. It sounds plenty-childish, but you oughter ba'r in mind that savages' mental ain't no bigger nor older than ten-year-old young ones among the palefaces.

"'This is the old story my mother tells me,' says Sioux Sam, 'to show me the evils of curiosity. "The Great Sperit allows to every one the right to ask only so many questions," says my mother, "an' when they ask one more than is their right, they die."'

"'This is the story of the fate of *Kaw-kaw-chee*, the Raven, a Sioux chief who died long ago exactly as my mother told me. The Raven

died because he asked too many questions an' was too cur'ous. It began when Sublette, who was a trader, came up the *Mitchi-zoor-rah*, the Big-Muddy, an' was robbed by the Raven's people. Sublette was mad at this, an' said next time he would bring the Sioux a present so they would not rob him. So he brought a little cask of firewater an' left it on the bank of the Big-Muddy. Then Sublette went away, an' twenty of the Raven's young men found the little cask. An' they were greedy an' did not tell the camp; they drank the fire-water where it was found.

"The Raven missed his twenty young men an' when he went to spy for them, behold! they were dead, with their teeth locked tight an' their faces an' bodies writhen an' twisted as the whirlwind twists the cottonwoods. Then the Raven thought an' thought; an' he got very cur'ous to know why his young men died so writhen an' twisted. The fire-water had a whirlwind in it, an' the Raven was eager to hear. So he sent for Sublette.

"Then the Raven an' Sublette had a big talk. They agreed not to hurt each other; an' Sublette was to come an' go an' trade with the Sioux; an' they would never rob him.

"At this, Sublette gave the Raven some of the whirlwind that so killed an' twisted the twenty young men. It was a powder, white; an' it had no smell. Sublette said its taste was bitter; but the Raven must not taste it or it would lock up his teeth an' twist an' kill him. For to swallow the white powder loosed the whirlwind on the man's heart an' it bent him an' twisted him like the storms among the willows.

"But the Raven could give the powder to others. So the Raven gave it in some deer's meat to his two squaws; an' they were twisted till they died; an' when they would speak they couldn't, for their teeth were held tight together an' no words came out of their mouths—only a great foam. Then the Raven gave it to others that he did not love; they were twisted an' died. At last there was no more of the powder of the whirlwind; the Raven must wait till Sublette came up the Big-

Muddy again an' brought him more.

""There was a man, the Gray Elk, who was of the Raven's people. The Gray Elk was a *Choo-ayk-eed*, a great prophet. And the Gray Elk had a wife; she was wise an' beautiful, an' her name was Squaw-who-has-dreams. But the Gray Elk called her *Kee-nee-moo-sha*, the Sweetheart.

""While the Raven waited for Sublette to bring him more powder of the whirlwind, a star with a long tail came into the sky. This star with the tail made the Raven heap cur'ous. He asked Gray Elk to tell him about it, for he was a prophet. The Raven asked many questions; they fell from him like leaves from a tree in the month of the first ice. So the Gray Elk called *Chee-bee*, the Spirit; an' the Spirit told the Gray Elk. Then the Gray Elk told the Raven.

""It was not a tail, it was blood—star blood; an' the star had been bit an' was wounded, but would get well. The Sun was the father of the stars, an' the Moon was their mother. The Sun, *Gheezis*, tried ever to pursue an' capture an' eat his children, the stars. So the stars all ran an' hid when the Sun was about. But the stars loved their mother who was good an' never hurt them; an' when the Sun went to sleep at night an' *Coush-ee-wan*, the Darkness, shut his eyes, the Moon an' her children came together to see each other. But the star that bled had been caught by the Sun; it got out of his mouth, but was wounded. Now it was frightened, so it always kept its face to where the Sun was sleeping over in the west. The bleeding star, *Sch-coo-dah*, would get well an' its wound would heal.

""Then the Raven wanted to know how the Gray Elk knew all this. An' the Gray Elk had the Raven into the medicine lodge that night; an' the Raven heard the spirits come about an' heard their voices; but he could not understand. Also, the Raven saw a wolf all fire, with wings like the eagle which flew overhead. Also he heard the Thunder,

Boom-wa-wa, talking with the Gray Elk; but the Raven couldn't understand. The Gray Elk told the Raven to draw his knife an' stab with it in the air outside the medicine lodge. An' when he did, the Raven's blade an' hand came back covered with blood. Still, the Raven was cur'ous an' kept askin' to be told how the Gray Elk knew these things. An' the Gray Elk at last took the Raven to the Great Bachelor Sycamore that lived alone, an' asked the Raven if the Bachelor Sycamore was growing. An' the Raven said it was. Then Gray Elk asked him how he knew it was growing. An' the Raven said he didn't know. Then Gray Elk said he did not know how he knew about *Sch-coo-dah*, the star that was bit. This made the Raven angry, for he was very cur'ous; an' he thought the Gray Elk had two tongues.

"Then it came the month of the first young grass an' Sublette was back for furs. Also he brought many goods; an' he gave to the Raven more of the powder of the whirlwind in a little box. At once the Raven made a feast of ducks for the Gray Elk; an' he gave him of the whirlwind powder; an' at once his teeth came together an' the Gray Elk was twisted till he died.

"Now no one knew that the Raven had the powder of the whirlwind, so they could not tell why all these people were twisted and went to the Great Spirit. But the Squaw-who-has-dreams saw that it was the Raven who killed her husband, the Gray Elk, in a vision. Then the Squaw-who-has-dreams went into the mountains four days an' talked with *Moh-kwa*, the Bear who is the wisest of the beasts. The Bear said it was the Raven who killed the Gray Elk an' told the Squaw-who-has-dreams of the powder of the whirlwind.

"Then the Bear an' the Squaw-who-has-dreams made a fire an' smoked an' laid a plot. The Bear did not know where to find the powder of the whirlwind which the Raven kept always in a secret place. But the Bear told the Squaw-who-has-dreams that she should marry the Raven an' watch until she found where the powder of the

whirlwind was kept in its secret place; an' then she was to give some to the Raven, an' he, too, would be twisted an' die. There was a great danger, though; the Raven would, after the one day when they were wedded, want to kill the Squaw-who-has-dreams. So to protect her, the Bear told her she must begin to tell the Raven the moment she was married to him the Story-that-never-ends. Then, because the Raven was more cur'ous than even he was cruel, he would put off an' put off giving the powder of the whirlwind to the Squaw-who-has-dreams, hoping to hear the end of the Story-that-never-ends. Meanwhile the Squaw-who-has-dreams was to watch the Raven until she found the powder of the whirlwind in its secret place.

"Then the wise Bear gave the Squaw-who-has-dreams a bowlful of words as seed, so she might plant them an' raise a crop of talk to tell the Story-that-never-ends. An' the Squaw-who-has-dreams planted the seed-words, an' they grew an' grew, an' she gathered sixteen bundles of talk an' brought them to her wigwam. After that she put beads in her hair, an' dyed her lips red, an' rubbed red on her cheeks, an' put on a new blanket; an' when the Raven saw her, he asked her to marry him. So they were wedded; an' the Squaw-who-has-dreams went to the teepee of the Raven an' was his wife.

"But the Raven was old an' cunning like *Yah-mee-kee*, the Beaver, an' he said, "He is not wise who keeps a squaw too long!" An' with that he thought he would kill the Squaw-who-has-dreams the next day with the powder of the whirlwind. But the Squaw-who-has-dreams first told the Raven that she hated *When-dee-goo*, the Giant; an' that she should not love the Raven until he had killed *When-dee-goo*. She knew the Giant was too big an' strong for the Raven to kill with his lance, an' that he must get his powder of the whirlwind; she would watch him an' learn its secret place. The Raven said he would kill the Giant as the sun went down next day.

"Then the Squaw-who-has-dreams told the Raven the first of the

Story-that-never-ends an' used up one bundle of talk; an' when the story ended for that night, the Squaw-who-has-dreams was saying: "An' so, out of the lake that was red as the sun came a great fish that was green, with yellow wings, an' it walked also with feet, an' it came up to me an' said." But then she would tell no more that night nor could the Raven, who was crazy with cur'osity, prevail on her. "I must now sleep an' dream what the green fish with the yellow wings said," was the reply of the Squaw-who-has-dreams, an' she pretended to slumber. So the Raven, because he was cur'ous, put off her death.

"All night she watched, but the Raven did not go to the secret place where he had hidden the powder of the whirlwind. Nor the next day, when the sun went down, did the Raven kill the Giant. But the Squaw-who-has-dreams took up again the Story-that-never-ends an' told what the green fish with the yellow wings said; an' she used up the second bundle of talk. When she ceased for that time, the Squaw-who-has-dreams was saying: "An' as night fell, *Moh-kwa*, the Bear, called to me from his canyon, an' said for me to come an' he would show me where the treasure of fire-water was buried for you who are the Raven. So I went into the canyon, an' *Moh-kwa*, the Bear, took me by the hand an' led me to the treasure of fire-water which was greater an' richer than was ever seen by any Sioux."

"Then the Squaw-who-has-dreams would tell no more that night, while the Raven eat his fingers with cur'osity. But he made up a new plan not to twist the Squaw-who-has-dreams until she showed him the treasure of fire-water an' told him the end of the Story-that-never-ends. On her part, however, the Squaw-who-has-dreams, as she went to sleep, wept an' tore the beads from her hair an' said the Raven did not love her, for he had not killed the Giant, as he promised. She said she would tell no more of the Story-that-never-ends until the Giant was dead; nor would she show to a husband who did not love her the great treasure of fire-water which *Moh-kwa*, the Bear, had found. At this, the Raven, who was hot to have the treasure of fire-water an' whose ears

rang with curiosity to hear the end of the Story-that-never-ends, saw that he must kill the Giant. Therefore, when the Squaw-who-has-dreams had ceased to sob and revile him, an' was gone as he thought asleep, the Raven went to his secret place where he kept the powder of the whirlwind an' took a little and wrapped it in a leaf an' hid the leaf in the braids of his long hair. Then the Raven went to sleep.

"When the Raven was asleep the Squaw-who-has-dreams went also herself to the secret place an' got also a little of the powder of the whirlwind. An' the next morning she arose early an' gave the powder of the whirlwind to the Raven on the roast buffalo, the *Pez-hee-kee*, which was his food.

"When the raven had eaten, the Squaw-who-has-dreams went out of the teepee among the people an' called all the Sioux to come an' see the Raven die. So the Sioux came gladly, an' the Raven was twisted an' writhen with the powder of the whirlwind wrenching at his heart; an' his teeth were tight like a trap; an' no words, but only foam, came from his mouth; an' at last the Spirit, the *Chee-bee*, was twisted out of the Raven; an' the Squaw-who-has-dreams was revenged for the death of the Gray Elk whom she loved an' who always called her *Kee-nee-moo-sha*, the Sweetheart, because it made her laugh.

"When the Raven was dead, the Squaw-who-has-dreams went to the secret place an' threw the powder of the whirlwind into the Big-Muddy; an' after that she distributed her fourteen bundles of talk that were left among all the Sioux so that everybody could tell how glad he felt because the Raven was twisted and died. An' for a week there was nothing but happiness an' big talk among the Sioux; an' *Moh-kwa*, the Bear, came laughing out of his canyon with the wonder of listening to it; while the Squaw-who-has-dreams now, when her revenge was done, went with *When-dee-goo*, the Giant, to his teepee and became his squaw. So now everything was ended save the Story-that-never-ends.'

"When Sioux Sam gets this far," concluded the Old Cattleman, "he says, 'an' my mother's words at the end were: An' boys who ask too many questions will die, as did the Raven whose cur'osity was even greater than his cruelty."

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