

Professor Corax' Memory Trade

By

Lawrence Barker

Wednesday, towards sunset

Twelve-year-old Cyrus Wentworth licked his sweat-salt lips as he climbed atop Old Noah, his family's one-eared, one-eyed mule. Today would be Cyrus' last ride to pick up his nine-year-old brother, Jimmy, from Miss Eponna's school. Come the morrow, the Wentworths would pull up stakes and move to Cincinnati so Jimmy could get better schooling.

Cyrus shook his head. Who needed more learning than Miss Eponna provided here in Dryton? Why, she had even started Jimmy on something called "algebra" that struck Cyrus as pure old magic. What's more, Jimmy could already read books that nobody besides him and Miss Eponna saw beans nor bacon in.

A strange wagon was parked outside of town. Its blood-red walls and the black wings carved into its sides just felt wrong. Dusty gray words sprawled across the wagon read "Professor Corax' Traveling Medicine Show" and "See the Mysterious Thingwing." A black-feathered, child-sized maybe-bird crouched inside a square-framed cage that hung from the wagon. The critter sneered behind wings that ended in shriveled hands. Cyrus shook his head. Something with a beak couldn't have an expression like that. Only it did.

"I am Professor Sableton Augustus Corax," a voice from behind him croaked. "The outlay for admission to observe the Thingwing, the mysterious bird-man of the Andean peaks, is one nickel."

Cyrus turned. A humped-over man with a curved-beak nose studied him with coal-lump eyes. The stranger's scarred face look like he shaved with barbed wire. A carved bone of some huge beast replaced most of Corax' right leg. The Professor wore an undertaker's coat and a tall hat that stuck to his bald head like a hungry tick.

Cyrus frowned. Who would buy medicine from someone so sick-looking? "Ain't got no nickel."

Corax wrinkled his brow as though listening to something Cyrus couldn't hear. "No, this one won't do, but one near him might," Corax muttered. "Well, young sir," he said, his voice resuming its medicine show tone, "we will excuse, on this singular occasion, the lapse in protocol."

Confusion crept over Cyrus' face.

Professor Corax sighed. "No nickel necessary."

Tramping boots approached. It was Deputy Andaman. Professor Corax started to speak.

"Ain't no need for howdies," Deputy Andaman said, the setting sun reflecting red on his badge. "Last medicine show came through, half a dozen folks got themselves poisoned. We don't want no repeat."

"My fine sir, I assure you that --" Corax began.

"Assure all you want." The Deputy's hand brushed his six-shooter; no threat, but the message was clear. "The town wants you gone ere sunup."

Corax sputtered another protest.

The Deputy stopped him with a gesture and cast an eye at Cyrus. "This ain't no place for younguns. Get gone while I lay down the law for . . ." He paused as though searching for words. "This here *professor*."

Reluctantly, Cyrus rode off. He had gone a hundred yards when a crackling echoed from behind him. He turned. The Deputy looked stunned, like he had taken a drunken cowboy's gut-punch. Corax, beaming, held open the cage. The maybe-bird, a tiny new-churned-butter colored light in its beak, flew away. Corax didn't seem concerned about losing his bird. Who could understand grown-ups? Cyrus rode on.

When Cyrus reached the school, he dismounted and peered through the open door. Miss Eponna stood at her desk, hands on a leather-bound book. Jimmy sat before her.

"Young Master Wentworth," Miss Eponna told Jimmy, her horsey features barely moving as she talked. "I've known from the first that you must someday leave Dryton." She cast a sad smile. "Your intelligence marks you for a destiny greater than this town."

Jimmy's face flashed red. "I ain't nothing special."

"Oh, but you are." Miss Eponna handed Jimmy the book. "Someday, you will understand everything this book can teach."

Cyrus cleared his throat.

Miss Eponna looked up. "Come to get your brother?" She gently pushed Jimmy toward Cyrus. "Make sure he takes care of this book."

Cyrus nodded. An animal smell hung around the book, earthy but not unpleasant. Something between a rounded crow and a thin-bodied horse decorated the cover. The critter didn't look worth so much concern. But Jimmy didn't look exceptional, and he could beat both Cyrus and Pa at checkers without trying.

Cyrus helped Jimmy onto Old Noah and started the mule towards home. Cyrus blinked. Had the maybe-bird, holding something that glowed blue, flown over, back toward Corax' camp? Why would it return to a cage?

Cyrus saw Deputy Andaman. He would know what was going on with the medicine show.

"Evening," Cyrus called.

Deputy Andaman tipped his hat. "Cyrus, Jimmy."

"About that medicine show--" Cyrus said.

The Deputy shook his head. "Ain't been no snake oil men here since last May. If'n one came, I'd run the varmint off."

Cyrus' eyed widened. "But Professor Corax . . ." Cyrus stopped. Deputy Andaman's expression said that he didn't know what Cyrus was talking about. "Just forget it."

"Younguns," the Deputy mumbled, shaking his head.

"Did you understand what just happened?" Jimmy asked.

"No, but we will," Cyrus replied. He turned Old Noah toward Corax' camp.

The wagon hadn't moved an inch, and the maybe-bird was re-caged. But something felt different, and it wasn't a good different. Cyrus' tingling scalp reminded

him of how old folks described waiting for warpathing Comanches to come. The wagon door opened. Corax emerged. His face was unscarred, new-leather smooth. He pointed at Cyrus and Jimmy, mouthing words that might have been, "this one will do."

An ice-house chill filled Cyrus. He turned Old Noah around and dashed away.

Wednesday, approaching midnight

Cyrus, drenched in sweat, sat bolt upright from his pallet. Only pale moonlight slivers lit the attic where he and Jimmy slept. Distant coyotes wailed. Jimmy, Miss Eponna's book in his hands, breathed with clockwork regularity. What had Cyrus heard? Something moved inside the chimney. A snake? A roosting owl? A scabble-clawed ringtail? It descended and then wriggled through the fireplace down below with a wet-dough sound. Cyrus slipped down the ladder from the attic.

As Ma and Pa slept, the maybe-bird stood over them with a pale white-yellow light in its worm-fingered hands. Only the light was as much bigger than what Cyrus had seen before. The maybe-bird's beak descended and rose, as if to peck Ma. A crackle, like what Cyrus had heard at Corax' camp, echoed from the walls. Ma stirred, but did not wake. On the beak's end glistened a point of light that then floated into the bigger ball that the maybe-bird carried.

Cyrus' hands clenched. The maybe-bird had taken something from Ma! He lunged and drove the maybe-bird to the floor. A metal-on-a-cold-morning sensation ran through him as something passed from the yellow light into him. He gripped the maybe-bird's neck. Ma could snap a chicken's throat that way, so maybe he could do something with this fowl. The maybe-bird writhed free. It snapped at him. A rattlesnake hiss shot from its black beak. It bounded for the fireplace and shot up the chimney.

Cyrus paused. Wake Ma and Pa? Pa groaned, as though he dreamed about Lookout Mountain. Those dreams made Pa touchy, and he would be double mad to get roused for nothing. But the maybe-bird wasn't nothing. Still ... Cyrus climbed the ladder. Jimmy would know what to do, come morning. Jimmy was good like that.

Thursday sunup

"Come down here to finish packing the wagon." Pa's voice, as commanding as it must have been in the war, rose through the cracks in the floor. Cyrus opened his eyes. Jimmy was already dressed, still cradling his ugly critter book. Cyrus rubbed his eyes. Had last night been a dream? He scrambled into his clothes and he and Jimmy descended the ladder.

Both Ma and Pa stared at Jimmy with strange expressions. "Who's your young friend?" Pa asked, hands shaking so that he could scarce hold his morning coffee.

Cyrus' eyebrows rose in confusion. "Friend?"

Pa gestured at Jimmy. "The stranger you brought in."

"It ain't like we mind sharing what we have with strangers," Ma hastened to add.

Jimmy blanched. "Don't you know me, Ma?"

"This is Jimmy," Cyrus said. "Jimmy, my younger brother."

At that, Ma's hands trembled like Pa's. A tear ran down her cheek.

"That ain't funny," Pa snapped at Jimmy. "I don't know what kind of foolishness

you're pulling, but I won't see no more."

"Foolishness?" Jimmy's voice trembled.

Pa turned to Cyrus. "Son," he said, voice barely audible. "You know how thinking about how the Comanche served your younger brother upsets your Ma. Bringing in some stranger and calling him that name is just plain mean." He cleared his throat. "Especially when we're about to head east and leave your brother's grave."

The words hit Cyrus hard. "But .. but ... if there ain't no Jimmy to educate, why are we going?"

Pa frowned and held out his trembling hand. "Because Cincinnati doctors can do something about this." He fixed his eyes on Cyrus. "You need to finish loading the wagon so we can get traveling."

Cyrus swallowed hard. "I need to walk Jim ... er, Timmy ... here back home. Can I have a minute for that?"

Pa nodded.

Cyrus took Jimmy outside. "Hide in the woods behind the fire hall," he told Jimmy. "I'll bring you food later."

"But what then?" For all his book-study, Jimmy seemed even younger than his nine years.

"I don't know," Cyrus confessed. "We'll think of something."

Cyrus waited a bit and then went back. Pa and Cyrus began loading the wagon, filling it with all it could carry. As it neared capacity, Cyrus clutched his middle and fell, moaning. When a drink of cool water didn't help, Ma and Pa loaded Cyrus on Old Noah and took him to Doc Wellnot.

"I'll be well after a night's sleep," Cyrus told the Doc. "I know I will."

Doc sighed. "I'll be honest, Jake." Jake was Pa's given name. "I can't find nothing wrong with the boy. But rest cures many ills. If I were you, I'd wait a day before heading east."

Pa scratched his chin and nodded. "One day."

And so Cyrus found himself back at the Wentworth farm. After sundown, he told himself, he would act.

Thursday night

Cyrus moved quieter than a Comanche. He filled a little rough-woven sack with corn pone and jerky. Then he took Pa's old single-shot pistol and headed for the woods behind the fire house. He found Jimmy under a mesquite, trying to sleep but not managing. "Anybody see you coming here?" Cyrus asked.

Jimmy nodded. "Lots of folks, but no one seemed to know me." He shivered. "Like they forgot that I ever lived."

Did no one remember Jimmy? Cyrus waited until Jimmy finished eating. "Let's go see Miss Eponna. She'll know what to do if anyone does."

In minutes, they reached Miss Eponna's. Cyrus hid the pistol behind a saltbush so Miss Eponna wouldn't think he had come to rob her or nothing. Cyrus knocked. Candles within glowed to life. Miss Eponna, wrapped in a loose gown, opened the door a hand's width.

"Why Cyrus," she asked, puzzlement on her face. "What are you doing here?"

She glanced at Jimmy. "And who is this young man?"

Cyrus' heart sank. He tried to stay calm so Miss Eponna wouldn't think he had gone foolish. Only his words ran together with flood-swollen stream force. "He's-my-brother-Jimmy-and-the-best-pupil-you-ever-had-and-you-said-he-had-a-destiny-greater-than-this-town."

Miss Eponna frowned as though she remembered something, but not enough. "But Jimmy died," she muttered. "Or did he?" Her gaze fixed on the rising moon; or maybe something in the moon's general direction. "Tell me."

Cyrus grabbed the book that Jimmy carried. "You gave him this. Said he would someday understand everything in it."

Miss Eponna opened the door a bit wider. She took the book and flipped through the pages. "I did?"

"Surely."

Miss Eponna pursed her lips. She opened the door all the way. "Perhaps what is torn asunder can be repaired." She shook her head. "Or maybe it can't. Come in, Cyrus and ... Jimmy."

Jimmy beamed at even this slender recognition. He dashed inside.

"Cyrus?"

Cyrus shook his head. "No, ma'am," he said. "You patch your way, and I'll mend in mine."

Cyrus recovered Pa's pistol and strode off toward Professor Corax' camp.

He approached in silence, crouching behind a rock beyond Corax' firelight. Cyrus wasn't certain how, but Corax was to blame for Jimmy's woes. Cyrus hadn't decided what to do when he found Corax, but the Professor couldn't be too far--leaving an unattended fire would be folly. And Corax had two overturned half-barrels beside the fire to make seats.

The Professor emerged from his wagon. A healthy limb had replaced Corax' peg leg. Corax turned toward Cyrus. The fire reflected from Corax' eyes as it might from a coyote's. "Come on in," Corax shouted, motioning Cyrus into his camp. "I had begun to doubt you would show."

Cyrus rose, feeling foolish. Pa's pistol dangling at his side, he stumbled forward. "How did you know I was there?"

Corax flashed a broken smile. "I know many things." He walked over to a barrel and sat down. "Have a seat."

Numbly, Cyrus complied. "How ... ?" Thoughts churned so that he couldn't finish the question. His bones felt as though he had ridden a buckboard over a stony trail from sunup to sundown. He could only describe the feeling as pain that slid into numbness that slid into plodding weariness. Had Corax done something to him?

The Professor's fingers ran over his jaw and leg. "How did I heal? What is Thingwing? Why did folks forget your little brother? And, most importantly, why didn't *you*?"

Cyrus could only nod.

Corax leaned back on his barrel. "Well, I suppose I owe some explanation." His eyes fixed on Cyrus, as though he looked through skin and muscle down to the bones. "It was a few days before the last Christmas of the war, near Hollow Tree Gap in Tennessee. We let down our guard because we thought the Rebs were done for. We

were wrong." He licked his lips as though speaking left them dry. "We walked right into the Secessionists' grapeshot hornet-nest. My comrades left me for dead." He shook his head. "Not that I blame them. Mars had battered me so that I thought myself dead. I lay on that field a day and night, in frost and wind and without sustenance or fluid. I prayed to Jesus without result. Then I tried Jehovah, and nothing happened. I became so desperate I called on Satan, and still nothing happened. As I prepared to expire, the Red Man appeared."

"You mean Satan answered?" Cyrus gulped.

Corax laughed. "No, an Indian. Maybe he had been a Rebel soldier; the Secessionist army took redskin volunteers. Anyway, this Indian appeared from the darkness telling me that, if I must pray, call on something that would answer."

"Like what?" Despite the fire, a cold shiver ran down Cyrus' spine.

Corax shook his head. "I don't really know, only that the Indian called it the 'crow-angel'." Corax reached into his coat and pulled out a copper medal on a leather thong that he wore around his neck.

Cyrus studied the medal as best the flickering firelight allowed. On the medal's face, a bird-like figure sprawled across a seven-pointed star.

"The Indian," Corax continued, "gave me this. He said that the crow-angel would heal me, in payment for my promise of eternal service."

"And you promised?"

"I did. Never regretted it, since the bill has never come due. It wasn't as though my healing came free, though." Corax stirred the fire with a poker. Pinon and mesquite sparks rose and settled. "Thingwing simply appeared, from where I know not. Thingwing harvests the yellow light of folks' memories, sometimes leaving others in their place and sometimes not. Either way, he takes memories to God-knows-where and then comes back with the blue-white light that restores me."

"You harvested the whole town? I didn't forget because some of what your bird took flowed back into me when I grabbed it?"

Corax nodded. He coughed and spat. "I've wandered the land since 1864, making the trade that keeps me whole." A sad smile crossed Corax' face. "At least for a time. Then it fades, and I must start over again."

"But that's monstrous," Cyrus sputtered.

"Monstrousness is the world's way. Ask those who died in Chickamauga's burning forests, the darkies who suffered the southern lash, the settlers in the Salt Creek Massacre." Corax shrugged. "The more important the memory, the longer I remain whole. That's why I chose your brother. Whatever fate has in store for him is sufficiently grand to keep me fleshed a year or more." He rose to his feet. "I truly regret the pain that remembering after others have forgotten has caused you. That's why I waited for you. I decided that you, being as brave and motivated as you obviously are, deserve a choice that I gave no one else. If you choose, Thingwing can take your memories."

"How will that help Jimmy?"

Corax shook his head "It won't. But if you don't recall your brother, you won't care." He came so close that Corax' vitriol breath warmed Cyrus' face. "Should I call Thingwing?"

At those words, Cyrus fought off his weariness. He leapt to his feet, whipped Pa's

pistol against Corax' middle, and squeezed the trigger. The pistol belched fire and smoke.

Corax stood pine-tree still and open-mouthed, staring at the gaping gut wound. He looked up at Cyrus. "Now that I must heal myself," he said. "I have no choice but to claim the memories."

The maybe-bird descended. Its wizened hands gripped Cyrus' head. Cyrus staggered as something vital flowed from him. "I won't forget," he whispered. "I won't." A crackling filled Cyrus' ears. Then there was darkness.

Friday morning

The wagon rattled with Old Noah's every step. Cyrus, riding beside Pa, licked the trail dust from his dry lips. His head throbbed, as though his vague feeling of having forgotten something tried to gnaw free of his skull. Cyrus sighed. Whatever the Wentworths had forgotten would likely stay behind.

He glanced over his shoulder. Skinny Eponna came riding a gray-dappled horse, an unfamiliar boy clutching a heavy leather book behind her. In a heartbeat, she came up even with the wagon. "Mr. Wentworth! Stop!"

Pa shook the reins and Old Noah halted. "What is it, woman?" Pa's hands shook worse than usual.

The strange boy behind Miss Eponna opened his mouth. It looked like he tried to say, "Pa," but Miss Eponna stopped him.

"Before you leave, there's something you must see," Miss Eponna told Pa. "It's not far."

Pa shook his head. "Ain't no time."

"It will only take minutes," Miss Eponna insisted.

Pa snorted and shook the reins, as though to set the wagon moving. Ma stopped him. "A bit more won't matter," Ma said.

Pa grunted and turned the wagon in Miss Eponna's direction.

They came upon a strange sight. A battered red wagon with the words "Professor Corax' Traveling Medicine Show" written on black carved wings rattled out of town. Cyrus' brow wrinkled. How could he have missed hearing about a medicine show? He didn't remember one, and surely he wouldn't have forgotten. A bird-like man--Professor Corax, Cyrus guessed--drove the wagon, with a strange caged maybe-bird beside him.

The wagon pulled beside Corax. Cyrus stared at the Professor. Why did he keep thinking that Corax should be lying dead instead of driving a wagon from town?

"Corax, you stop there," Miss Eponna demanded. She jumped down from her horse. "I know your game, and I don't intend to let you get away with it," she said, driving every word home with a pointing finger.

"My good woman," Corax responded, separating each word as though he addressed a crowd come to hear him sell medicine. "I fail to comprehend your accusations." He tapped his chest. "I am merely an humble sojourner, seeking to promote happiness and wellbeing."

"Feathers!" Miss Eponna snorted. "You promote your own self, and you don't care whose future you blight to do it." She advanced a step, gesturing at the boy on the horse's back. "His destiny is too important for you to take."

Corax' eyes widened. "I can't understand how you remembered," he said. His words sounded more like a normal person's, as if his medicine show voice had slipped from his grasp. "There is nothing you can do, though." He patted the maybe-bird's cage. "There's nothing anyone can do." He shook his reins and the wagon rattled forward.

"Don't be so certain," Miss Eponna replied. She stepped into the path of Corax' wagon. Her empty hands grabbed at the air, as though taking an invisible horse's reins.

Corax' wagon stopped. The professor's eyes narrowed. "There is more to you than I imagined."

"Much more," Miss Eponna replied. "The raven is but one form. The horse is another." Her face became hard. She withdrew from her blouse a small copper medal on a leather strap.

Cyrus could almost, but not quite, remember having seen a similar medal elsewhere.

"And what happens if a horse steps on a raven?" Miss Eponna demanded. She raised her hands and took one step toward the professor. As she did, a dust devil surrounded her.

For a heartbeat, the Professor looked angry. Then he raised his hands and another dust devil surrounded him. The dust devils expanded until they met in a raging spinning battle.

Cyrus slapped his hand over his nose and mouth, protecting himself from the gritty dust. Did the dust around the Professor really take on a bird's form and that around Miss Eponna take a horse's? Did the animals really bite and kick in a life-and-death struggle? And, if so, did the horse really trample the bird as badly as Cyrus thought?

After a moment, the dust devils settled. The professor, bedraggled and battered, sprawled across the wagon seat.

Strange half-memories, like a dream after waking, entered Cyrus' mind: dropping someone off with Miss Eponna; something about stealing memories; and the Professor getting shot.

Miss Eponna, untouched by the swirling dust, took a step back. "Give it back now. Don't deny that you can, because I know differently."

"Then you also know what would happen if I did," the Professor yelped. He looked like a whipped cur.

"Do it," Miss Eponna demanded. "Unless you want your service to come due this very moment."

The Professor turned pale. "Unless I take someone's memories to trade, I'll scarce be fit for buzzards," he bleated. "Please."

Cyrus blinked. Take memories? Could the thoughts that shimmered through his head be real? "Take the war memories," Cyrus shouted, gesturing at Pa. "The ones that hurt him so."

Miss Eponna nodded.

The Professor's shaking hands released the maybe-bird. It flew toward Pa. A crackling sound filled the air. Something yellow streamed from Pa to the maybe-bird's claws. Fainter streams came from Cyrus and Ma. Then there was nothing.

Thirty minutes later

The wagon rattled with Old Noah's every step. Cyrus, riding beside Pa, licked the trail dust from his dry lips. Jimmy sat beside him on the wagon, studying Miss Eponna's odd old book. Pa held the reins, hands rock-steady. Somehow, the feeling that Pa used to be a nervous man nagged Cyrus. That didn't make any sense, though. Pa, as level-headed a man as you could want, had never had any problems that Cyrus could recall.

The wagon bounced on its way, leaving Dryton behind. Miss Eponna waved as it passed. She called out to Jimmy, telling him that she knew a great future awaited. He never looked up from his book.

Fifteen minutes from town, the wagon passed a traveling medicine show headed out of Dryton. The driver, a bony man with a beak-like nose, neither waved nor shouted. Cyrus figured the medicine show man probably just wasn't too friendly. It was no concern of his. The Wentworths--Ma, Pa, Cyrus, and Jimmy--were headed for a new life in Cincinnati.