

Rescue on the Big Sandy

by Herbert Witten



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Chapter 1

JONSE DEERFIELD wiped the sweat out of his eyes with a tanned, work-worn hand and wiggled his shoulders under the heavy pack.

“I’m hot as a roasted tater,” he said.

Sam grinned. “Well, to tell you the truth, Jonse, this ain’t ice a-poppin’ out’n my face.” He brushed a bony arm across his flushed brow.

Jonse stepped into the meager shade of a dogwood bush, and Sam quickly followed. They glanced up and down the straggling line of settlers. There were two wagons, with four oxen straining at each one. Heavily burdened pack horses plodded wearily along behind the wagons. It had been a long, hard journey getting through the gap and on down the river with the wagons. It had taken days to cut a swath up the other side of Pine Mountain and to get the wagons up the steeps and rock ledges and through the gap, and then to let them down the other side; and the going hadn’t been much easier after dropping down to the Big Sandy Valley. Jonse knew it wouldn’t be easy making the remainder of the journey on down to the mouth of Paint Creek either. But it was a consolation to know it wasn’t so much farther and there weren’t any big mountains to cross.

Jonse glanced at Sam. He was older than Jonse, tall and gangling, with a thin freckled face and an unruly shock of brown hair. Jonse liked Sam Jason. They had been close companions on this journey.

“I ain’t complainin’,” Sam said. “A home and lots of good rich land in this purty valley will make all the punishin’ worthwhile.”

“Me neither,” Jonse replied. “But I’m mighty anxious to get there, though.”

“There’s goin’ to be a heap of work to do between now and cold weather,” Sam said.

“I reckon you’re right there,” Jonse agreed. Jonse saw Silas top a rise up ahead and disappear among some beech trees.

“I’m cravin’ a cold drink of water,” Jonse said, and cast an appraising glance at the mid-afternoon sun. “It’s a long time till we make camp for the night.”

“I’m plumb tuckered out too,” Sam said. “It’s been a hard day. Look at them pore oxen, they’re totally a-draggin’.”

At that moment the Hallecks went by. Mace Halleck was jerking his lead pack animal viciously and swearing. Mrs. Halleck, perched on the tired animal with a baby in her arms, was quarreling and whining as usual. Four children trailed along behind. The two small ones were limping and snuffling, and the two older ones, Labe and his sister Calla, were scolding and pushing them forward.

“Hesh your infernal yappin’,” Calla cried, and slapped the noisier one.

Labe slowed and leered at Jonse and Sam. “What’s the matter — petered out?” he jeered. “The weather’s too hot for you, I reckon, and the goin’ too hard?”

“Don’t let it fret you, Labe,” Jonse fired back. “We’ll be there ’gainst you get there.”

Sam grinned broadly. Nothing seemed to rile him. “We’re jest waitin’ for you to catch up, Labe. Want me to take you by the seat of your ragged breeches and give you a little boost?” He threw back his head and laughed.

“I’ll skin your mangy head with a rock,” Labe threatened.

Calla stuck her tongue out. “Think you’re smart, don’t you, Sam Jason? ’Cause you’re bigger’n Labe, you think you can bullrag him.” As a matter of fact, Labe was only shorter than Sam, not smaller. He was thickset and strong as a bull.

“Shet up your foolishment,” Mrs. Halleck bawled, and Calla sullenly jerked the younger children into motion again and followed her mother. Labe put his hands in his pockets and sauntered after.

Jonse and Sam waited to let the whole family get well ahead.

As they stepped out of the shade and followed the string of travelers, they saw Mace Halleck stumble and fall, then crawl unsteadily to his feet and reel on.

“Drunk,” Jonse said in a low voice.

“He’s been hittin’ the jug purt’ nigh ever’ day,” Sam said.

“He’s hittin’ it harder today,” Jonse said.

“I reckon he had his hosses loaded down with jugs of whiskey instead of victuals and the things they’ll need a sight more.”

“I don’t see why Silas and your pa let ’em come along,” Jonse said angrily. “They ain’t been nothin’ but trouble.”

“You’re right,” his friend agreed. “But I reckon they figure ever’body deserves a chance in this new country. Anyways, they didn’t know what kind of folks they was.”

That was right, Jonse realized. He sure couldn’t abide them, though. He and Labe had been at outs ever since they started. He did his best to shun Labe, but it was hard to do. And Calla was always on hand with her mean tongue going at both ends.

“Pa and Silas figured they needed all the folks they could get to come along in this Injun country,” Sam added.

“Oh, I ain’t blamin’ your pa or Silas,” Jonse said. “There’s all kinds of folks shiftin’ over the country; there’s no siftin’ ’em out.”

They heard Silas call a halt up ahead, and they hastened to catch up. The wagons had been drawn up to the edge of the beech grove. There was a deep, clear spring bubbling up among the roots of one of the trees. It was a beautiful spot. Everyone drank deeply from the spring, then found a place to sit and rest a spell. There were soft leaves and moss on the ground.

Jonse wriggled out of the heavy pack and found a soft bed of moss at the foot of a gray beech. Sam followed and flopped down beside him.

The Hallecks were raising a fuss at the spring. Mace was cursing and cuffing one of the children. Silas eyed him steadily, intently, a frown on his face. When Mace had drunk his fill, he headed for the shade a short distance away, flopped down in the leaves, and was soon snoring.

Bess, Silas’ wife and Jonse’s foster mother, came over to where the boys were sitting.

“How are you doing, lads?” she asked cheerfully.

“Oh, I think I’ll hold out,” Sam said. He laughed. “I don’t know whether Jonse will or not. I’m afraid this hot sun will melt him down like a snowball in a oven.”

“You just worry about yourself, Sam Jason,” Jonse said. “I’ll run the last two miles with you on my back.”

Bess laughed, and pushed their long legs aside with the toe of her foot. “Give a body room to sit down,” she chided. “I like company.”

She sat down on the moss beside them, tucking her long linsey-woolsey skirt under her legs. She leaned her head against the smooth bark of the beech and sighed wearily.

Jonse gave her a sidelong look. She was as pretty as a spring morning, with her smooth skin, well tanned now, and her long chestnut-brown hair and warm dark eyes. Going down on the Big Sandy to live with two kind people like Bess and Silas surely was a change of luck for Jonse Deerfield. He'd had it mighty rough since his folks were killed by the Indians a little over three years ago.

Silas walked over to where they were sitting and stared down at them. He shook his head and laughed.

"Piled up like three empty meal sacks," he said.

Bess looked up and smiled at him. "You don't look as fresh as a dewdrop yourself, Silas Atwood."

"I don't feel that way, either," he admitted wearily. He squatted on his haunches in front of her.

"You're worried," Bess said, with a question in her voice.

He picked up a twig and stuck it between his teeth, removed his slouch hat and laid it beside him. In answer to her question, he turned his head and stared silently at Mace Halleck.

"He's dog-drunk," Bess said.

Silas nodded, thoughtfully. "'Pears like it."

"Will he cause any more trouble than he has already?" Bess asked, a troubled look on her face.

He laid a big rough hand over her small one.

"People like that are always trouble, no matter where they're at. There's no place for 'em at all in country like this, where ever'body's bound to pull together."

"And Indian danger makes it even worse," Bess said.

He nodded soberly.

"He caused a heap of trouble this morning," she said.

"It didn't help any."

That was why it had been such an uncommon rough day, Jonse knew. About midmorning they had come to a creek with high, soggy banks. Silas and Hiram Jason decided to scout up and down its banks to see if they could find a better place to undertake a crossing.

When they had been gone only a few minutes, Mace Halleck began to grumble and rail about being held up just because they were afraid to face a little old creek.

He grabbed a whip and drove one team of the oxen into the stream before anyone had a chance to stop him. They had bogged