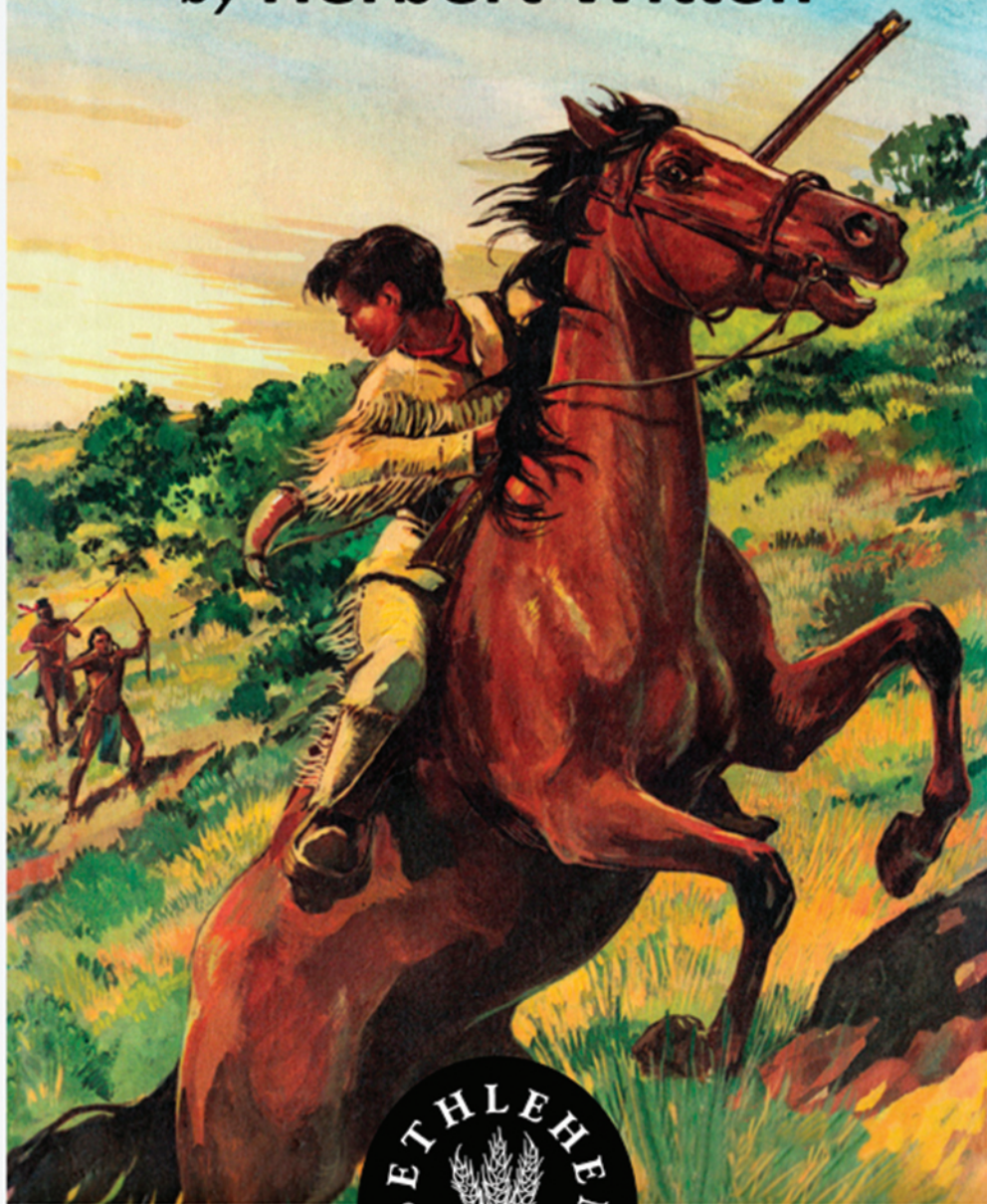


Desperate Journey

by Herbert Witten



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To my Mother and to the memory of my Father

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Chapter 1

JONSE DEERFIELD struggled up the steep, rugged trail. The icy March wind knifed through his soggy hunting jacket and whipped the rain in his face. The water squished in his moccasins as he slithered in the mud and on the slippery rocks. He tugged wearily at the lead line of a fur-laden pack horse.

“Come on, Sal,” he said, through chattering teeth.

“There’s a dry cliff shelter just ahead,” his companion called over his shoulder. “We’ll hold up there for a spell.”

Jonse didn’t make any attempt to reply, for he was so cold and tired that he didn’t reckon he could make Fin hear anyway. But the idea of stopping suited him plumb fine.

“Come on, Sal,” he urged again, and yanked the lead rope impatiently.

He glanced back down the trail they had just ascended. The trees and cliffs looked small in the distance. Surely they must be nearing the divide in the mountains that would let them on across to the headwaters of the Big Sandy in Virginny. There was no passage along the river, and they had left it hours ago to toil up and over some of the roughest country Jonse had ever seen.

It had been a wonderful winter he and Finley McClintock had spent down on Salt Lick Creek, a side stream of the Big Sandy. They had found a big dry cave near a salt lick and had wintered there, hunting and trapping near the lick in the deep wilds where game was plentiful. Jonse looked proudly at the three pack horses heavy laden with deerskins and cured furs of beaver, otter, and bear.

The present was less pleasant to think about. Gritty sleet rattled on the bare limbs of the trees and bushes along the trail and pelted Jonse in the face.

“Tarnal!” he yelled through numb lips.

Fin turned from the trail and went up among some laurel and huge rocks. He stopped under a broad overhang of rock. Jonse led his horse up beside him.

“This ought to hold us from the weather for a while,” Fin said.

Jonse glanced around. “It’s a sight better’n taking the weather,” he said. “I’m plumb froze.”

“And all tuckered out.” Fin grinned.

“I ain’t hankering to foot-race with no Indian right now,” Jonse admitted.

“Tether your animal,” Fin directed. “We’ll get a fire going right quick and tend to our stomachs.” Jonse looped the leather lead to a scrawny bush near the cliff and looked around for dry wood. Fin got a fire going while Jonse was hunting wood and carrying it in.

When he had a sizable amount stacked under the shelter, Jonse hunkered close to the fire. “That cold rain wets plumb to the core,” he said.

“Reckon we’ll stop here for a short spell,” Fin said. “I figure this bad spell will hold on for a few days.”

“I thought spring had come for certain, it was so purty for a week or so. A few elms had budded down along the river.”

Fin nodded. “Reckon we can’t complain, though,” he said. “We’ve come a far piece in the last few days.”

“That we have. I’ve wore my feet to the quick.”

Fin soon had a kettle of stew bubbling on the fire. “Het up a bowl of water,” he directed, “and we’ll make a batch of tea. It’ll warm our innards.”

When the water was boiling, Jonse crumbled in some dry spicewood, then mixed in a little black tea. He was so hungry he didn’t think he could wait. Fin had a johnnycake on the small griddle, and it was browning.

“Our victuals are running low,” Fin said. “But we’ll not fuss about it, though. We’ll eat fancy now, and take a chance on killing game later to furnish us till we gets on to Fort Chiswell.”

“I don’t look for this bad spell to hold on too long,” Jonse observed.

It seemed a long time till the stew was done. Fin dipped out a big trencher full and handed it to Jonse. "Fill up, lad."

Jonse didn't wait to be told the second time. Soon he was shoveling the stew into his mouth as fast as he could. He felt better already. When he had emptied the trencher, he filled it again. He took it over to the wall of the cliff and sat flat on the leaf-covered ground and used the rock as a backrest. Water dripped from the ledge above and plunk-plunked a broken line on the ground. The heat from the roaring fire made steam rise up like thin fog around his face.

He remembered the fires they had had during the long winter nights back on Salt Lick Creek. They had cut young saplings and closed up the front of the cave with them, with bark and small withes woven between them. They had made bunk frames and filled them with dry moss and leaves, and covered that with bearskins. The fire glowed all night in the circle of rocks that Fin had carefully placed in the center of the cave.

They had made a warm shelter under a cliff face for the horses and had wintered them on pea vines and cane gathered from a nearby canebrake. Fin had fetched along what shelled corn he could, and on the coldest days he gave the horses a small bait of corn. It wasn't much, but it helped hold them against the hard cold.

But now the winter was over, and their nights around the cheerful fire were at an end. A lump came up in Jonse's throat. Fin didn't talk a great deal, but he was always jovial and had never said a cross word to Jonse since Jonse had known him. They had both enjoyed the long winter hunt down in the vast solitude of Kentucke.

Jonse thought of Roscoe Thurston. He had almost forgotten the moody, ill-tempered man who was his self-appointed guardian. He sat there staring silently into space, his spoon and trencher held motionless in his hands.

"What ails you, lad?" Fin asked.

"Nothing," Jonse said quickly. "'Twasn't nothing atall." He refused to meet Fin's steady eyes.

"You can tell me, lad."

"Don't pester me," Jonse said. "I was thinking."

"About Thurston?"

"Maybe."

"The scoundrel!"