



# DOWN THE BIG RIVER

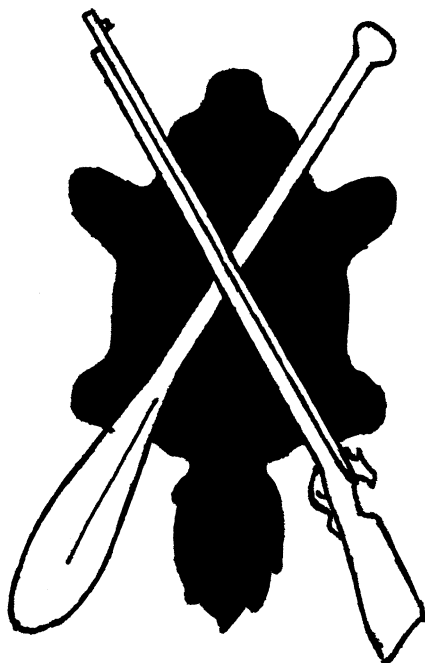


Stephen W. Meader



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# DOWN THE BIG RIVER



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## Chapter I

A ROUGH-HAIRED little brown dog came trotting up the wilderness trail. He scouted in and out of the thickets and sniffed at the roots of the giant trees, then scampered on, out of sight. After him in a moment followed a white mare, her shoes clinking lightly on outcroppings in the trail as she climbed with sure, quick steps. A boy rode her, slouching in the saddle, his long, buckskin-clad legs hanging half a foot below the girth. He had on a buckskin top and coonskin cap, and in the crook of his arm lay a long-barrelled squirrel rifle. His face, for all its youth, was stern and tired.

At the top of the ascent the boy reined in his mare and halted, looking long and intently ahead at a little clearing in the trees on the next ridge. When he had finished he turned his mount and started back down the rough mountain trail.

“Get on with you, Pocono,” he said. “Those lazy drivers will be stopping for the night if we don’t tell them there’s an inn ahead.”

The sure-footed animal went scrambling down the slope, avoiding the stumps and roots that dotted the slashing, and came at length to the little stream that ran down the bottom of the ravine. She stopped with both forefeet in the water and flung her nose down to drink. The boy, starting to pull her up with an impatient tug on the rein, sat suddenly erect and swung half about in the saddle. The mare threw her head up and her haunches quivered. The sound they both had heard came from somewhere up the valley to the north. Even as they listened it was repeated—the faint, far-off hunting-call of a gray wolf.



The lad gathered the reins with a sharp gesture, and drove his moccasined heels into the flanks of his mare so that she started up the farther hillside with a jump. Out of the bushes alongside burst the little dog, growling low, and at a quiet command from his owner, followed close at the mare's heels.

It was already after sunset and only a faint glow of evening light shone through the bare branches of the great hardwood trees. The boy knew something of the wolf packs that ran in the Allegheny hills, and he was quite aware that they sometimes made things uncomfortable for winter travelers who camped in the open. Before the mare had covered half the distance to the top of the hill, however, her rider caught the sound of approaching wagon wheels and the occasional shout of teamsters, and he pulled his eager little mount to a stop by the trailside.

Over the crest came the wagons, canvas-topped and huge of wheel, swaying downward with a grind of brakes. There were two of these crude wilderness conveyances and each was drawn by six gaunt, big-boned horses. The patched harness and the mud-caked wheels bore witness to long hard weeks on the trail.

Beside the second wagon, on a roan horse, rode a man of middle age, dressed in stout gray homespun. His bearded face had an anxious look as he pulled up abreast of the boy on the white mare.

"Any sign of shelter, Tom?" he asked.

"A small inn, not more than a mile ahead, Uncle Ezra," the lad replied. "It's just as that freighter told us—not much to look at, but 'twill serve to keep those varmints out."

He turned, listening, as the distant wolf howl came once more above the rattle of the wheels.

The little cavalcade crossed the stream and climbed the opposite hill, the heavy-loaded wagons zigzagging upward with many rests. It was wholly dark when they gained the summit,



and Tom Lockwood and his uncle went ahead carrying torches of fat pine that threw an uncertain yellow glow on the huge black boles of the trees.

Occasionally the eerie cry of the gray hunters would echo behind them in the hills, making the horses plunge nervously into their collars. At length the road seemed to become less rough, and all of a sudden it widened into a small clearing. In the middle of this dim space was a long, low shack of logs. A mongrel hound came out to bark at the weary horses and was instantly challenged by the dauntless Cub. A candle appeared at a window. Then, at the bearded man's hail, the door opened and a sullen-faced, shock-headed German emerged.

Ezra Lockwood greeted him civilly.

"Have you room for us and our horses for the night?" he asked.

The man scowled. "Yah," he grunted, "but you pay me first."

"Very well," said the traveler, quietly, "if so be that's your custom. First or last, it's nought to me." And he pulled out a rotund wallet.

When the man had his money he led the way toward the hostelry. Tom's uncle helped Mrs. Lockwood, a spirited little lady with flashing black eyes, to descend from one of the wagons, and they entered the tavern, while Tom assisted the drivers with their unharnessing. At last the animals were all in the crude shed that served for a stable, and the covers of the wagons made fast for the night.

Tom, still carrying his rifle, strode up to the inn door, and as he crossed the threshold he knew that there was something about the house he did not like. Certainly it was not the roughness of the place that he objected to. They had slept in some uncouth taverns on their way through the Pennsylvania wilderness. But a sort of vague uneasiness caused the tall young pioneer to look sharply about him as he sat down at the slab table. The room was bare enough. Log walls chinked

with earth made three sides of it. Most of the fourth was taken up with a homemade brick oven and a fireplace in which a dirty kettle hung above the blaze. Some stools and blocks of wood stood about the table and these completed the furnishings of the place, though through the door of an adjoining room some tumbled bedding was visible.

Tom took all this in at a glance, and noted the surly bustle of the innkeeper and his wife as they placed a meal on the puncheon table. Then his eye came to rest on a ragged figure, squatting at one side of the fire. Above the mangy bearskin that wrapped its body, a pair of black eyes gleamed. Tom had seen many native people before, but never as dirty a specimen as this one.

He turned away to join his uncle and aunt at their supper. The food was of the coarsest, but their outdoor appetites enabled them to make away with it, and at length, the dishes being removed, their host sat down near them. His little eyes held a shrewd glint.

“You comin’ from Philadelphy?” he remarked after a while.

Ezra Lockwood nodded. “Yes,” he said, “we left the Schuylkill four weeks ago. Wanted to cross the mountains early so as to be ready to start from Pittsburgh with the first freshet.”

There was silence for a while. Then the German man spoke again.

“Goin’ for Ohio?” he asked, this time.

“Missouri,” replied the bearded traveler.

“You got it friends outd dere?” the innkeeper persisted.

“Yes,” Ezra Lockwood explained. “A family named Coleman, old neighbors of ours, went over last year. From them we heard good report of the lands beyond the Mississippi and we are to join them out there in time to plant a few crops this season. The corn in that Missouri country, they say, grows as tall as a barn and bears six good ears to the stalk. I am myself a



gunsmith by trade, and good rifles, I hear, are in much demand in those parts.”

The German nodded his bristly head. “Yah, yah, so,” he grunted, and Tom, watching him like a hawk, could have sworn he saw the German exchange a glance with the squatting native.

The gunsmith and his wife rose now and asked to be shown their sleeping place, for they had been on the trail since early morning. As there were but two bedrooms in the shack, Tom and the teamsters rolled themselves in their blankets on the floor of the kitchen. Candles were extinguished. The huge, maple log threw a faint, flickering light over the clay-daubed walls. Save for the occasional snapping of an ember on the hearth, the silence of the forest settled over the little inn in the clearing.

# DOWN THE BIG RIVER

In 1805, seventeen-year-old Tom Lockwood, his aunt and uncle journey westward from their Pennsylvania farm to join friends living in Missouri. Their peaceful trip down the big Ohio river, aboard a keelboat, turns deadly when the group falls into the hands of river pirates.

With the help of friends made along the way, young Tom and his faithful dog, Cub, set about rescuing his family using all the grit, determination, and ingenuity they can muster.

This exciting Meader adventure, written nearly a hundred years ago, is as appealing today as when it was first written.

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