

The Wilderness Trail

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Table of Contents

The Wilderness Trail

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER X

CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER XII

CHAPTER XIII

CHAPTER XIV

CHAPTER XV

CHAPTER XVI

CHAPTER XVII

THE WILDERNESS TRAIL

CHAPTER I

The year 1810 was more commonly known, at least in the Kentucky wilderness, as the thirty-fourth year of the Independence of the United States. Backwoods folk are simple folk, proud of what they and their fathers have done.

Although split with vexatious questions of Federal or Democrat, rent asunder by argument over the Great Conspiracy of Aaron Burr, and menaced always by the gathered allied hordes of Tecumthe across the Indiana border, the settlers in and around Louisville forgot all these things in the one supreme fact that this was the thirty-fourth year of the United States.

Law had come into the country, to the bitterness of many. Land-titles and sorry scoundrels had in combination ousted many a less famous man than Colonel Daniel Boone from his holdings. Whisky and lawless border-life, to say nothing of the more lawless river-ways, had ruined more than one good man both in morals and reputation. Some said the western country had gone to the dogs; others said that the dogs had all come to the western country. Both sayings were true, in a sense.

So, then, in this thirty-fourth year of the United States, an old man stood on the Beargrass Creek Road, just out of Louisville, and swore volubly. A horseman had spattered him with mud. To his right was a fringe of trees, to his left the mudhole, and just beyond him was a bend in the road.

The old man was only five feet ten, but was thewed like a giant. As he wiped the mud from his cheek and glared at the returning

horseman, he displayed a strong, keen-eyed face which sat well above powerful shoulders and barrel-like chest.

"Consarn the lawyers!" he cried angrily. "If I had my way, I'd hang every cussed lawyer in Kaintuck! Hanging's too good for 'em. Consarn 'em, I'd——"

The horseman had reined in at the bend and was now back beside the old man. He was a large athletic man, dressed in fine blue broadcloth, with pudding cravat and ear-high coat collar. He leaned over in his saddle with a smile.

"Sir, your pardon! The offence was unintentional. I take it that you have a grudge against lawyers, eh?"

"Huh!" The other grunted angrily, yet with none of the sputtering fury of old age. His words seemed calculated, in fact. "Huh! Hain't lawyers robbed me right and left an' driv me out o' Kaintuck? You're like all of 'em, consarn ye, slick and smooth! I ain't lived seventy-six year 'thout bein' able to read a man's face. Ye black-hearted Wyandot, why didn't ye turn out o' the way— huh?"

At these final words the horseman went white to the lips. He was handsome, dark of hair and eye, with thin lips, virile features, and powerful hands. Despite the careful attire and courtly air, however, there was an indescribably cruel curve to his thin lips and nostrils, an arrogance in his bearing, which seemed rather out of place in democratic Kentucky.

"Sir, I asked your pardon," he said in a deep voice, twitching his riding-whip against his boot. "In deference to your age I pass over your words——"

"Cuss yer impudence!" broke out the old man hotly, a flame leaping out in his blue eyes. "You're one o' them Louisville vultures, huh? I kin tell. Pass over my words, do ye? Well, ye git down out'n that saddle an' I'll give ye somethin' better to pass over. Hump down, consarn ye—I'll pay out one debt more on yer carcass afore I go back to Missouri!"

The old man did not look his seventy-six years. The wrathful earnestness of his bearing bespoke his entire willingness to chastise the lawyer, while there was a dangerous vitality in his high-browed face. The other gazed down steadily, contempt sitting in his proud dark eyes.

"I have no quarrel with you, sir," he returned slowly. "Yet if you would seek redress through the courts, you may seek me at Louisville, where I am well known. My name, sir, is Charles Duval, and I regret that my apology did not——"

His stately courtesy and slight trace of contempt served only to infuriate the old man the more. With one swift forward stride, he gripped the bridle of the horse.

"Git down out'n that saddle," he broke in. "I aim to git a feel o' yer hide right here an' now, consarn ye! I don't want no courts."

"Hands off, you fool!" whipped out Duval, deadly pale. He made as if to raise his riding-crop, put paused and twisted in the saddle at sound of a cheery voice from the bend of the road just behind him. It was a vibrant joyous voice, and the lilt of song rose clearly on the afternoon air.

Oh, I fit with Gen'ral Washington an' I'd like to fight some more,
An' I'm going to join with Gen'ral Clark when next we go to war!

I'll tote my Kaintuck rifle, and I'll raise the Kaintuck boys,
And we'll sculp the bloody Britishers——

The singer jogged around the bend of trees and came to an abrupt halt as he sighted the two. His horse was good, his deerhide dress bad, his rifle brass-mounted, and his head bare. Glinting brown hair, a brown, clean-shaven face of youth and strong lines, and clear brown eyes formed a symphony of woods-colouring.

"Well, well!" His eyes twinkled slightly as he surveyed the scene before him. "Is this a highway robbery, friends? Strength assailed by old age—what an allegory we find here! And why not make youth the mediator, may I ask?"

His appearance seemed to quiet the rage of the old man, who released the horse's bridle and stepped back calmly. The newcomer met the steady look of Duval, but the twinkle passed from the brown eyes.

"Well?" he snapped suddenly. "Are you dumb, sir? I believe you intended to strike this old man with your whip?"

"Sir, you are at liberty to formulate your own beliefs," returned Duval coldly. "Kindly get out of my path at once."

"Ah, this is more like it!" exclaimed the stranger quickly. "And if I refuse?"

A tide of passion flooded over Duval's swarthy face. He pushed his horse toward the new-comer, lifting his whip. There was a slight, almost negligent motion, and he found himself staring into the mouth of the long rifle which had reposed on the brown man's saddle-bow.

"Well, try it," smiled the stranger, but with a glint in his brown eyes as they rested on Duval's furious face. "I fancy my powder is still a bit too good for wasting, unless you force me. If you wish to pass, sir—take the mud."

For a moment Duval was choked by his rage. While plainly no coward, he was checked both at sight of the ready trigger-finger and the cold purpose in the brown eyes. The old man, watching keenly, stooped and picked up his fallen cap of coonskin.

"Devil take you," cried Duval hoarsely, the intensity of his passion clenching all his face into wild fury. "Sir, I—I——"

Whatever he might have said was stopped by a thud of hoofs. Once more the bend in the quiet Beargrass Creek Road was invaded at a critical moment, and this time by a girl who rode from the direction whence Duval had come. And as before, the arrival broke off threatening hostilities.

She was a beautiful girl enough, with her fresh firm face and clear grey eyes, and the red-gold hair falling over her shoulders. Her steed was bony and her gown was homespun, but Duval swung his horse around with a graceful bow and swept his hat to his stirrup as she drew rein.

"May I ride back to town with you, Madam Trigg?" he asked quietly, giving no hint of the storm which a moment before had convulsed him. "It seems there are strangers and odd characters about, and it may well——"

He was interrupted by a cry of surprise. The girl slipped from her saddle as the old man stepped forward, and with a swift hug and a laugh of rippling delight she flung her arms about his neck.

"You!" she cried. "Why, where on earth did you come from?"

"Come from town," said the old man jerkily. He stared into her excited eyes with a flush of pleasure on his rugged old face, and seemed lost to all around. "Come in with some beaver, Kitty. Paid the ol' debts, every last man, thank God! Clean's a whistle now. Goin' out to Dick Taylor's, comin' to see you-all, then goin' back home. Be in town to-morrow sure."

His abrupt awkward speech drew another hug and a kiss from the girl, who then turned to her horse and scrambled to the saddle.

"Be sure you come, then!" she cried merrily, and looked at Duval: "I thank you for the courtesy, sir, and avail myself of it right gladly——"

She broke off at sight of the brown-eyed stranger, who had not moved. Duval touched his spurs and brought his horse beside hers.

"Out of the way," he commanded sharply. "This lady wishes to pass."

The leather-clad stranger smiled a little.

"And so she shall, friend Duval," he drawled easily. "I told you once that you might take the mud."

"Confound you, sir—would you dare shoot me?" broke in Duval furiously. "I dare you to do it, sir!"

"Well, that's a dare easily settled!" laughed the other, but his eyes remained very steady. Pressing his steed with his knee, he moved aside and left the inner edge of the road clear. "The lady is not hindered. As for you, if you doubt either my ability or my will, why not test the matter?"

Duval noted the crooked trigger-finger, muttered an impatient word, then turned and splashed through the muddy water. The girl went on, still gazing at the stranger. As he drew upon the dry road and waited, Duval turned.

"Take care of yourself!" he cried, his face livid.

"That is my business in life, thanks," returned the stranger, lightly, and so he found himself alone with the old man. Carefully uncocking his rifle, he swung down from the saddle and gripped hands with the other.

"Well, you seem to be in no great need of help," he chuckled, surveying the huge chest of the grey-haired man. "What's the matter, anyway? Did you have a fuss with his excellency?"

"Kind of that way," grinned the old man, to whom speech now seemed to come slowly. "Muddied me, the cussed law-shark! All alike, consarn 'em."

"Well, now he's gone, can you tell me where Colonel Dick Taylor lives?"

"Goin' there," grunted the other, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. His keen blue eyes searched the younger face shrewdly. "Young man, ye handled him right. You're a fine fellow. How are ye named?"

"Norton, John Norton," smiled the younger man. "I'm a captain in the Seventh Infantry, or was, and came up from New Orleans after resigning. So you're going to the Taylors, eh? Know young Zach? Do you live around here?"

"Uh-huh, I know him. Used to live here." The old man's face darkened as he glanced around. "Them cussed lawyers skun me out o' my land, consarn 'em! Live in Missouri now. Lots o' game there. Come back here to pay my debts—no man can't say I ain't honest. Them moccasins ain't Cherokee-made, are they?"

"What's your name?" asked Norton with frank interest. He clucked to his horse, and the steed followed them as they trudged along the road. The other only glanced down at the moccasins.

"Name's Boone," he grunted. "Them moccasins, now—they sartin look kind o' like——"

"Boone?" Norton stopped abruptly, a puzzled wonder in his eyes. "You're not Colonel Boone, by any chance? Colonel Daniel Boone?"

"That's me. About them mocc——"

"Well, by thunder!" Norton gasped, then laughed aloud as he seized Boone's hand in a hearty clasp and looked deep into the keen blue eyes. "Why, Colonel, I spent two days looking you up in Missouri, over on the Femme Osage! Your wife said you had gone east, either to Virginia or Tennessee. I was mighty anxious to see you—in fact, that's why I threw up my army commission."

"Huh! To see me?" Boone looked at him, then jerked his head. "Well, come along to Dick's. Find the wife well, did ye? Now tell me 'bout where ye got them moccasins——"

John Norton was lost in amazement at the manner in which he had chanced on the one man in the country he most desired to meet. Daniel Boone was not greatly honoured in that day. He had been out of the public view for twenty years and was not of the self-

assertive type; his fame seemed to be dying out with the older generation of frontiersmen. Driven into the South-west, he still made long, lonely forays through the South and East, hunting and trapping and seeking the solitude he loved.

At Femme Osage, Norton had missed him by a month. Then the young ex-officer had come on by flatboat to Fort Massac, and from there overland to Louisville. He said no more of his journey than this, but Boone looked at the delicate yet decisive profile, the brown eyes which could twinkle like a star or leap out hard and cold like a sword—and nodded to himself.

"Ye knew Zach down to N'Orleans, mebbe? He's in the Seventh, ain't he?"

"Yes," nodded Norton. "We were great friends, till he came North with fever. How is he? All right?"

Boone chuckled. "The cuss has got married, Norton."

"What? He has?" Norton whistled, then broke into a laugh. "Someone here?"

"No—him and me brung her over from Maryland. Got here a month ago. We located beaver on the way, so I went back an' got enough pelt to pay up some ol' debts here in Louisville—consarn them lawyers!"

Norton was not altogether surprised at Zach Taylor's marriage. He had gained his captaincy at the time Zach joined the regiment in New Orleans as lieutenant. Barely had the two men become friends when young Taylor went home on sick-leave. This had been two years before, and the reason for his prolonged absence was now evident. Norton's business concerned Colonel Richard

Taylor, Zach's father, no less than it did Boone, so he had come on to Louisville after missing the old frontiersman at Femme Osage. Now, by a fortunate chance, he had come upon Boone as well—a good presage, he reflected. He was like to have need of all the friends he could muster.

The two tramped along between the cottonwoods, and in a few moments sighted the clustering log and frame buildings of the Taylor farm, six miles above the city itself. Colonel Taylor, or "Colonel Dick" as he was known along the frontier, had been Collector of the Port of Louisville until Louisiana ceased to be foreign territory, in 1804, but for the past six years had abstained from politics altogether and devoted himself to his farm. With the exception of George Rogers Clark, who lived across the river from Louisville, he was the town's most prominent citizen, however; an old friend of President Madison, his influence at Washington bore no little weight.

As the two men approached the farm, negroes came running out, Boone was recognized with a delighted shout, and from the different buildings appeared the family itself. Colonel Taylor and his wife were joined by Zach and his bride, and while Norton's horse was led away he met with an exuberant welcome from the hard-featured kindly-eyed lieutenant, his own elder by two years.

"Dad, this is Captain Norton," cried Taylor, introducing his friend in mad delight. "He's the man I've told you about so much—the officer who cleared out those river pirates by Nagatoches! Margaret—Mother! Upon my word, Jack, what the devil brought you here?"

This final outburst of helpless amazement evoked a general laugh, and Norton found himself placed at his ease by the quiet hospitality of old Colonel Dick. Boone was the guest of honour, however, and the old frontiersman was at once accorded an easy chair by the fireplace when the party gathered inside to hear the news.

Of this Boone brought little enough, beyond the fact he had cleared off his old debts and was ready to start for Missouri with a dollar in his pocket and a clear mind.

"You just missed Kitty Grigg," said Colonel Dick. "She was out here to visit Margaret, while I was trying to keep that skunk Duval from ridin' home with her——"

"Ye didn't do it," chuckled Boone. "We met 'em—consarn them lawyers!"

He proceeded to give a brief account of the meeting, which drew a roar of applause from Zach and his father. Norton, however, was bent on more serious matters than visiting, and waved aside the eager questions which rained upon him.

"No, there's no news—General Harrison is keeping things pretty quiet along the border, and the last I heard there was no immediate talk of a British war. I believe Zach's going to get a captaincy before long, though. I've resigned, and the older officers won't transfer into the Seventh; they think the regiment won't last long——"

"You've resigned?" broke in Zach blankly. "Why—good Lord, Jack! You ain't goin' to take up farming? Got married?"

"Neither one," laughed Norton easily. "I have letters to you, Colonel Taylor, to Governor Harrison, and to Colonel Boone here—and I want help. There's been a good deal of piracy of late, as you may know, and my business here is to get that mysterious fellow, Blacknose——"

His words were drowned in a sudden crash, as Boone knocked over one of the huge andirons with his foot. Zachary Taylor darted to the door and slammed it with a bang; Mrs. Taylor went white, and Colonel Dick started abruptly.

"My dear Norton," he said quickly, frowning, "your business here had best wait until the morning, when we will go to town with Colonel Boone and talk it over then. Margaret, will you see that the guest-cab in is made ready? How did you make out with your beaver, Daniel?"

And Norton fell into an amazed silence, while old Boone told of his hunting trip, Why had the mere name of a river-pirate brought fear to such men as these, and pallor to the faces of the two women?

"By thunder!" he exclaimed inwardly, listening to the old frontiersman's jerky sentences. "I wonder if I've struck a bigger thing than they dreamed of at New Orleans?"

CHAPTER II

Upon attaining his majority three years before, John Norton had gained a commission through the influence of his uncle, a merchant at New Orleans. Yellow fever had left him alone in the world six months afterward, and he had looked forward to a career in the army. By a curious combination of circumstances, however, he had now resigned that career to enter on a more hazardous and difficult task.

What he remembered of his life had been centred about New Orleans, but beyond a casual acquaintance with his uncle's business he had not lingered about the city save for a few weeks at a time. A few years of wandering in the Southern woods with friendly Indians, traders, and frontiersmen had given him a thorough mastery of woodcraft; with this his brief military career had not interfered, for he had conducted several treaty-making or mapping expeditions through eastern Louisiana, once as far as Florida.

Now, however, a new service had offered itself to him. The Ohio Valley trade came largely to St. Louis and New Orleans, by means of arks and flatboats. It was easy to float down with the current, and men took down their wares, sold them, and came back overland, for the return river journey was difficult. A few years before, banditti had been numerous until the Kentucky riflemen had broken up the Harpe and Mason gang of pirates. Since that time there had arisen a new king of the lawless, whose doings had all but paralyzed the river trade.

"Let me give you my own story first, gentlemen," said Norton quietly, as he rode between Colonel Dick and Boone, with Zach just ahead. "Since you seem to jump at the very name of Blacknose, things must indeed be in a poor state up here."

The others merely nodded. All four were riding slowly toward Louisville; the sun was but recently up, and in the brisk morning air all thought of danger or trouble seemed very vague and distant. Yet Boone's keen gaze never left the roadside.

"As you will, sir," responded Colonel Dick courteously. "My son has told us of you, and we would be only too glad to hear of your family. I knew a gallant gentleman of your name—a Major Charles Norton, of my own Virginian regiment under General Washington."

"He was my father." And Norton's face darkened.

"What, sir—your father!" Colonel Taylor drew rein suddenly.

"Yes. He brought his family west, expecting to settle at Cincinnati—he was a member of that society, of course, and was attracted by the name. He had barely reached there when he found a message from my Uncle John, who had gone to St. Louis. My father decided to join him, and undertook the trip with a brother officer named Moore.

"This was in the fall of 1790, when I was four years old. During the winter my father and Captain Moore built a large ark, and early in the spring embarked both families, with their property and slaves. The ark passed Louisville, and after that—it vanished."

"Good heavens, sir—what do you mean?" demanded Colonel Taylor, staring. Norton smiled.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

