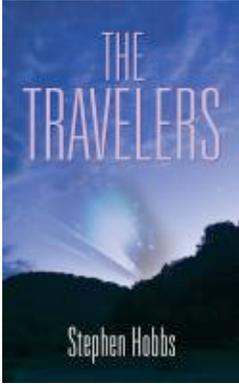


THE
TRAVELERS

Stephen Hobbs



There was Thomas and Susie and they fled for different reasons from a small western town, beginning a journey that would start with those two and grow to six souls lost in the old west. One left behind, one, not a soul, three that needed to go home to a distant star, and one who would return from that star with a story told to generations to come...

The Travelers

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First Edition

Chapter 18

The dawn was bright, cold and the souls in the camp were slow to rise. Paul was the first up and caused the fire to blaze as Henry peeked from under his blanket. He did not rise. William was up and seeing to the horses as Thomas massaged his crippled leg to life.

Susie was the last as the smell of breakfast brought her from under the cloth draped over the back of the wagon. William returned from seeing the horses and Henry next.

It was too cold to talk as the five ate in relative silence. The fire had melted the chunk of ice left in the pot and the smell of coffee was in the air. William suggested they get underway as soon as possible before they chilled with the cold. They agreed as they left the warmth of the fire to begin packing and stowing. William put Paul's bundle in the wagon and Paul knew now he was accepted.

They found the main road and Thomas turned the wagon south as William studied the map. "Paul," William, said, "Can you explain this plan a little better?" "Sorry William," Paul said. "You need to ask Henry, he gave me the original copy and what you have been using is a copy of the original. I have no idea of the mapped destination or the city that is marked with a star. Henry told me to make a copy of it for you to follow and that is all I know of the map."

William was stunned that he had been following a map south, written no doubt by someone of higher intelligence than he had. Even more perplexing was that this being was Henry, a young deformed boy of seven who on occasion slurred his speech. On the other hand, was Henry, as Thomas had said, "a genius in his own world?" That thought would

bring this question to William. What world was that and where in the universe would one find that world?

Paul asked William if he was troubled and William said, "Yes, by all these things and I wonder if the four of us are destined for Henry's earth. Drawn by something unseen and now here we are half-way across this map. A map that is so accurate it could have only been drawn by someone or thing in-flight. Could it be Henry had been one of the lights? Paul shook his head and said, "Maybe it is our destiny to see Henry to his home, the four of us." Paul hesitated and continued, "I forgot about Susie, is she in this higher thought or just someone caught up at this moment in time?" William had also wondered and answered Paul's question with, "I guess we will see what the future brings."

William was looking at Henry as he walked and sometimes ran ahead of the wagon as if being anxious to arrive at a destination unknown to the others around him. However, this was Henry. Could this boy, who is out of place on this earth because of his abnormalities, be something unusual in another world that exists somewhere in the stars above as Paul had quoted Henry? In Walsenburg, no one was disturbed or even noticed Henry's appearance and that bothered William. Could it be the lights had something to do with the populace ignoring the physical and seeing the child, as a seven-year-old boy full of wonder and life? William did not know and as he looked at Thomas, Thomas seemed resigned to whatever fate was to come. On the other hand, did Thomas know where they were going?

They easily followed the road dips and rises as each mile passed. The morning warmed as each of the travelers was deep in their own thoughts. The mountains to the west look taller and larger and Thomas could not shake this feeling of almost being home.

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Susie was on the seat beside him and she still was clueless, but more informed by listening. Looking over her shoulder at her valise, she wondered of the crystal. She had no memories, but those she created, not like William and Thomas whose memories seem to be of another time and place. She wished now she had stayed in Walsenburg. At least there, she would have some semblance of worth and maybe the future with a man as William seemed unconcerned with her presence. She looked at him and he smiled, so maybe not all is lost.

Paul knew of the mountains in the distance as told by others. He had not been there, but he had heard the stories, stories of enchantment and mystic winds, as told by Native Americans. A sacred sanctuary to those who often visited such places due to a lack of understanding, these mountains called "*San Juan*" Paul knew not where they were going, but he knew he must go.

Henry found himself alone on a hill and within view of the entourage below. He sat and hoped his deception would not harm the friendship of William, Paul, and Thomas. He wondered of Susie, as she was not part of a greater plan, as he had asked last night and told by the silent voice from the light. No, Susie was not a player and the moment would come when she would know. Henry looked towards the Mountains and wished his time here could continue. For the prosperity, a recorded journal of his time here, as well as his knowledge of these peoples, would be an asset. An asset if these people evolved more so than they are now. William was worried about Henry's whereabouts and Henry sensed the fear as he made himself known ahead of the wagon once again.

Along another stream, they stopped for lunch, and Henry wanted to fish once again. Paul accompanied Henry to the creek. Paul wanted to watch as Henry caught for their supper. Paul also knew it would give him an opportunity to ask some

questions of Henry. Whether he received, the answer would be a question in itself. Paul was unaware he was nothing more than a puppet on a mental wire with just enough artificial intelligence for him to blend with a populace and no more.

Thomas watched the others go toward the river realizing he and Henry were the only ones with a clue as to what was about to happen. William was quiet as he and Thomas prepared a small fire for warmth and heating of water. Susie was at a distance and should return within minutes.

Thomas asked quietly, "William do you think Paul is honest?" Thomas knew the answer was yes, and that Paul was without knowledge of what laid ahead. William replied yes, which gave some reassurance to Thomas. Susie returned and squatted beside William and then sat. Thomas looked up and smiled knowing this could be the last day the three would ever spend together.

From the direction of the stream, Henry laughed and the ones sitting around the fire knew fish was on the menu for supper.

Chapter 19

Henry's parents had received word that Henry would soon be coming. They were overjoyed at the thought of reuniting with a boy they had to leave as a toddler. This abandonment planned as part of a higher one. Henry knew and time was of the essence when his parents moved, not so much for him, but for them.

Of the four that were with him, three were not there by chance. Paul had seen to Henry, and his loyalty noted. Thomas just needed to come home. William was there because of his access to funds and Susie for now, was just there. Time will pass on this old earth for those who were traveling with Henry, and those who watched from afar.

Thomas was wrong in his assumption, as this journey will continue for several days. The day ended with miles behind them and the night was calm, relaxed and without any displays in the heavens. The terrain had changed as they climbed a passage between ranges of mountains. The way traveled worn by others, yet troublesome as they rose to the peak and started descending into an enormous valley. The discussion centered on the journey and Thomas refrained from telling what was yet to occur. William's concern about dwindling supplies brought forth the map for the next available Town. Everyone asked for something except Henry. Fed on a regular basis, he had not a care in this world, which was not ironic as this was not his. Thomas was the last to bed at the night.

The morning routine of days gone by was played out once again as preparations were made to continue south

toward the city where they could spend the rest of the winter in comfort. A city on the map indicated by a star that two of the five knew quite well.

It started snowing just before noon as the elevations still high but rapidly descending. Not just a few single flakes but as if the heavens opened. William asked Paul and no, he had not been this far south. The shelter was needed now and William rode ahead to find shelter to weather the storm. Already accumulating, the snow was heavy and wet making traveling any further distance dangerous.

William found a cabin with a partially broken roof but entire walls. It would be crowded and the lean-to should accommodate the horses. Paul and William were able to stretch the canvas across the ribs of the roof and the snow stopped on the inside, but outside it was still falling. Brought inside by Paul, Thomas, as he was unable to walk in the wet snow started a small fire in a mud-lined fireplace. Henry moved supplies as quickly as his legs would allow and stow them inside the makeshift shelter.

Warmed by the fire, the accommodations were comfortable, as the occasional drip of water from the white canvas above would find a soul below. Henry would come and go through a worn portal adjacent to the door. What he did outside, no one wanted to expose himself or herself to a rolled ball of snow to find out.

Opened tins of food dumped collectively into a pot hanging over the fire would suffice for a noon meal and dinner if the weather continued poorly. Henry returned to say the snow was still falling and bouncing, showered everyone with wetness. He apologized then laughed and then apologized again for laughing.

Susie was leaning against William for warmth and more so for a feeling of being secured. Paul and Thomas were wrestling with Henry as the cabin became home for the five.

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Supper was a bowl of warm whatever from the pot along with bread. Henry checked and the snow was less in volume but still accumulating. The canvas above sagged under the weight of the snow and was a constant struggle for William to push up with a pole to remove what he could of the snow. Just before dark, the snow stopped as sudden as it began.

Henry was disappointed, but he knew the group needed to continue with haste. No more than five days and the journey should conclude. He looked at everyone and he knew the friendships here would last through time and space. He scooted up against Thomas and Thomas looked down and asked, "How much longer Henry? Do you know when?" Henry knew it would be soon, but they had to be close to the city on the map and he told Thomas as much. Henry also wondered of Thomas. He was an older traveler and often if found in this world of his age, it is not the first time they have made the trip. Placed here as a child, Henry knew not of Thomas but this he knew, Thomas was from the city on the map.

Sunrise found the snow-covered cabin alive again with people. It had been years since anyone had occupied the log and mud structure. However, those, who lay under the sod on the little knoll behind the cabin, welcomed the guests in their own unique way.

The heat woke William and Paul as wood was burning in the small fireplace. Paul said, "Henry is quite a little fire keeper." William agreed. However, Henry, as he awoke, apologized for sleeping all night. Paul looked at William and both looked at Thomas, who was still snoring. Both shrugged their shoulders and Paul said, "William I do not think we are alone," as an apparition crossed the canvas covered door.

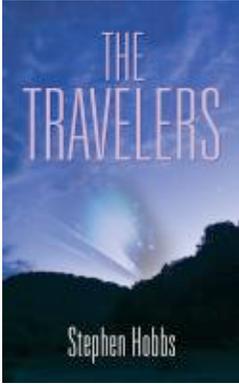
Henry went outside the cabin and returned immediately to let William know someone had made a path to the wagon. The snow no more than foot deep and now swept to one side

as Paul moved the canvas door and looked at the way cleared of snow. Henry was right someone had made a way to the wagon.

Breakfast was more of same from the last evening's meal. The meal was warm and filling and after eating, each gathered items and filled the wagon. Henry removed the cloth from the ribs of the roof and stowed the folded canvas.

Paul checked to make sure no items left behind as the others began another day going south. Just before the rise above the cabin, Paul caught up with those waiting and for some unknown reason, they all looked back at the small cabin. Standing at the door were two shadows and they were waving goodbye. However, it could have been a reflection but no, as Henry was returning the gesture as the shadows faded. The five hesitated for a moment as they looked at one another then back at the cabin as it collapsed one wall at a time.

William summed up everyone's thoughts by saying, "I am glad we did not oversleep!" No one looked back for a mile until Henry spoke of seeing the smoke from the cabin's demise. No one spoke of seeing the smoke, a figurative journal of those who once lived in the cottage. That was passed now and the future that lay ahead was more intriguing, as it is unknown to some of the travelers. Leaving the rocky terrain, they descended into a long open valley and turned more south on their journey.



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