

THE FALL

Come the later part of July, Horace Kilyer left his comfortable bed in the Riverside Hotel of East St. Louis and headed west. It was a half-fanciful and a half-business move. Horace had a hankering to see the land of gold and silver, and the company he represented thought the west would yield lucrative new markets.

The first few hundred miles passed without incident, despite the constant threat of danger. When he reached Dodge City, he caught on with a wagon train taking the same route. Horace and the wagon train parted ways just outside Denver. He'd been riding for about a day when he came to a narrow pass through the Baker Mountain range. Easing his horse around several tricky curves, he thought he heard a faint rumble. Half frozen with curiosity, he looked up to see a rockslide headed his way. Digging his heels into his horse's sides, he tried to outrun the mass. In one of those rare moments of time that few survive to relate, Horace lost the race with the barrage that knocked him and his horse down into a secluded ravine.

At some point in time, Horace woke up with a terrible headache. He thought he had his eyes open, but everything looked so dark, without any form or shadow. He couldn't understand why he felt so hot. The warmth on his face and arms could only be from the midday sun. But if the sun shone brightly, he couldn't see it, and that could only mean ... he must be blind. A man of steely composition, Horace rarely gave in to panic. He knew he had to come up with a plan. He reckoned he must be down in the ravine beneath the trail. He hollered for help for a while, but the only response he got was a dozen echoes of his own voice.

Horace felt weak, but he knew he couldn't give up. Then he thought about his horse. A couple of quick whistles brought a muted snort off to his right. Horace continued whistling and listening. Trying to follow his horse's response as best he could, he eventually felt the warm welcome of his friend with his right hand. As he stood there leaning against the muscular side of the big bay, he wondered if his horse had suffered any injuries. He grabbed the reins and took a few steps to see if the horse would follow. He heard no protest, and the animal offered no resistance to the reins. Horace

knew his chance for rescue had just increased dramatically.

Whispering into the horse's ear, he said, "Boy, I'm depending on you to get me outta this place. I trust that somehow you'll find a way."

The saddle still felt snug, so he climbed up onto his horse's broad back. As the animal began to move, Horace felt his head start to spin, but he held on tight to the saddle horn. After a while he felt his left leg scraping a rocky wall. Slowly, they made their way up a narrow steep path. Then Horace suddenly felt a fresh breeze against his face. When the horse stopped, he knew they had made it out of the ravine. His spirit gained renewed strength with the sound of someone talking.

A strong voice asked, "Are ya alright, pardner?"

"I'm hanging in there, friend," answered Horace. "A rock slide knocked us down into that ravine. I hit my head and, unfortunately, now I can't see anything. If it wasn't for this big ol' horse of mine, though, I would have never gotten outta there alive."

“Rest easy, pardner,” said the voice. “I own a ranch beyond that next ridge. My boys and me, we’ll get ya to a doc.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” replied Horace. “Take a look at my horse and make sure he isn’t too bruised up, will ya? I owe him my life.”

“Sure, pardner,” answered the rancher. “Ya say this horse got you outta that ravine?”

“Yeah, he sure did,” answered Horace. “Somehow, he found a path up the rocks.”

The rancher peered over the edge of the trail down into the ravine. He saw a steep rocky path no wider than two feet at any point. Then he asked, “And ya couldn’t see a thing?”

“No,” answered Horace.

The rancher looked at the path a second time, and then he looked at the horse. Gently rubbing behind the animal’s ears, he turned back to Horace and said, “Well, mister, I tell ya, you’ve got quite ... quite a horse here.”

“Yeah, I’m real thankful, but why do I sense a hesitation in your voice? Is there something wrong with him?”

“Well, it’s just that ... I reckon I best just spell it out,” answered the rancher. “It’s just that I been around horses for nigh onto forty years now and I, well, I ain’t never seen a horse that’d walk a path like that by himself. It’s too steep and too narrow. The way it drops off like that, a horse would panic at the sight of it. If anybody were to tell me a story like that, I’d say he’s a little loco. It’s impossible.”

“Well, he did. I’m livin proof of it. Besides, don’t you believe in miracles?”

“Yes, pardner, I do,” answered the rancher, as he continued stroking the horse’s head. “And I think ... that’s just what ya got here, a genuine miracle. Cause ya see, friend, this here horse, well this horse, he’s blind, too.”

Horace’s mind rushed with strange visions, as he exclaimed, “Blind! How is it possible he got us outta there?”

“Pardner, I’ve had a few blind horses in my time. If a horse loses his sight suddenly, it will frequently get scared and panic at the darkness. Now a calm, easy-going one sometimes remains calm and adapts. A high-strung steed doesn’t always do

as well. I'd say ya gotcha a good calm one here, but I think in this case he also had someone guiding him from up above ... now, let's get ya to the doc."

After about an hour of tedious travel over rocky paths, Horace could hear the sounds of a bustling country town. He then heard the rancher say, "Pardner, the doc's place is just down the street. One of my boys rode ahead, so's the doc knows we're comin."

As grizzled hands helped him down off the horse, Horace said, "I know you've done a lot for me, but could ya do one more thing?"

"Sure, pardner. Just name it."

"Could ya see to it that they take care of my horse?"

"He'll be down at the livery on the other side of town. Joshua Banks, the owner, is a friend of mine. He'll take real good care of him."

"Thanks ... I'm sorry. I don't even know your name. I'm Horace."

"Jake ... Jake Crockett."

The doctor learned his medicine back at one of those northeast schools, but he wasn't any less

inclined, on occasion, to fall back on some cures he learned from a spell he spent with the Cherokee Indians. He mixed up a strange combination of herbs, spittle, and clay, which he applied to Horace's eyes. He had his assistant take Horace over to the hotel with instructions not to wash the mixture off for two days. On the third day, the doc said he'd be over to check on his progress. Horace perked up when he heard the doc's voice on that third day. When the doc removed the bandages over his eyes, Horace blinked a few times and then took in the glorious ruddy face of the man standing over him. After profusely thanking the man of medicine, Horace suddenly had an idea hit him.

“Doc, that mixture that ya made up, would it work on ... on a horse?”

“I would say it depends on what caused the blindness.”

“My horse went blind in the same fall as me. He's down at the livery. Could ya come down and try it?”

“I reckon I've got the time today. Besides, I always enjoy a challenge.”

Horace and the doctor walked over to the livery, where they found Joshua Banks busy mending some harness.

“Excuse me,” said Horace. “A few days ago, a friend of yours, Jake Crockett, brought in a blind horse. He’s mine and I wonder if I could see him.”

“Sure, friend. He’s in the back paddock. Hey, Doc, how ya doin?”

“Middlin, Joshua. Middlin.”

“Well, I’ll be dogged,” said Joshua Banks. “He was here a minute ago.”

“Look,” said the doc, pointing to the right of their position.

Running at breakneck speed, the horse jumped over three fences and then stopped at the top of a ridge overlooking a small cemetery. Raising up on his hind legs, the big bay, with the morning sun behind him, cast a large shadow onto a small wooden cross marking the grave of an unknown traveler. A full-of-life neigh affirmed no need for a miracle salve.

“Yes,” said Horace, softly. “I understand, old boy. Someone else has fallen.”

