

Last Ride for An Old Cowboy

By Jim Taylor

The mare climbed the grade easily, blowing steam from her nostrils in a steady stream and he felt her strength and endurance through his legs. "Nothing like a good strong mountain horse under you" he thought to himself, his eyelids blinking at the glow beyond the mountaintops in the distance. He showed his appreciation of the horse with an affectionate pat on the withers as she topped the grade and began a short decent into the small valley ahead. The mare snorted and tossed her head and he could feel her desire to run. She always was a fast one and ready to go at a moments notice. She had bottom also, did she ever! He could ride her all day in these mountains and at the end of the day she still had it in her to run. She seemed excited by the strong bright glow dawning over the ridges ahead, as if she wanted to see what the light was. He felt the same excitement himself ... drawn toward the light ... and said quietly, "Easy girl. We have a ways to go and some big hills to climb yet. Save your strength." Yet he knew she was always eager to please and would do her best no matter the obstacle they faced.

He thought back to the day when he had gotten her, just a young willful filly. It was so many years ago that he could hardly remember exactly when it was.

But he remembered that from the first she wanted to run and that it had taken him many a month to teach her there was a time to run and a time to walk. She had learned well but still, every day he saddled up she let him know she was ready to run. She turned out to be the best ...and the last also. He never had another horse after her. His mind drifted back to the many hours they spent together riding the mountains. So long ago it was almost like another time altogether. And then his thoughts were pulled back to the present by that ever-brightening glow beyond the ridge above him. What was it? There was no smoke so it wasn't a fire. It seemed strange, fascinating, yet not frightening or out of place.

As he studied it the light grew ever brighter and his desire to see the source of it grew stronger. The mare had now crossed the bottom and was starting up the other side, working her way steadily through the juniper and scrub oak. Her pace had quickened as if she too desired to see what exactly it was over that ridge. He let her have her head and she picked her way through the brush and trees easily. He

thought back ... how many years ago was it since he had broken her to ride? They both had been considerably younger then, yet she seemed as strong as ever and moved easily up the small hills and down through the bottoms. A momentary thought flitted through his mind that something was different and then it was gone as he looked up the ridgeline at that beautiful, mysterious glow coming over it.

He shook himself mentally and the memory came of that time, just after he had broken her to rein, that he had ridden up to a tent meeting. He had heard singing and had tied the mare to a tree nearby and had gone up to the tent to listen. There he had heard the old Gospel story of God's love, sent to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. It was like he was hearing it for the first time even though his momma had taken him to Church every Sunday as a young boy. The preacher explained how God had done everything that was needed for us to be saved, that it was now up to us to choose. If we chose not to accept the work that Jesus had done there was nothing more God could do for us, and at the invitation he walked down the length of the tent and knelt in front by the pulpit. It was a turning point in his life, he remembered. Odd that those memories should all seem so clear.

And then his thoughts were pulled back to the present... when had he first noticed that light? He shook his head ... "Getting forgetful in my old age" he thought. "I should be able to remember when I first saw it!" There was a little momentary confusion as he tried to remember if it was before he saddled up or after he left the corral and headed into the mountains? Funny. He did not even remember saddling the horse! Of course things like that had been happening to him off and on enough in the last few years that he had finally accepted it, no matter how much he did not want to. He was no longer young, though it did bother him some if anyone else referred to him as an old man. But it was strange that he could not remember exactly why he had saddled up and decided to take this ride. He was pretty sure that he had not seen the light before he rode out. He seemed to remember that he had started out in the dark and he was sure he would have noticed the light then. No, he had started riding for some other reason, but what it was escaped him. There was something important that he should remember, something about just before the ride.....

For a brief second his thoughts were pulled away from remembering by the ever-increasing light coming over the ridge and then he forced himself to think. What was it that was so important? What was he trying to remember? Something triggered a thought and he said to himself, "The parking lot at the grocery store in town!" He

remembered now that something important had happened there. The drawing of the light over the mountain invaded his thoughts and pulled them away from remembering but he forced himself to think back. What was it that had happened? The horse under him seemed anxious to get up the ridge and he let her have her head as he tried to collect his thoughts. The one thing that bothered him about getting old was his inability at keeping his thoughts straight. What was it in the parking lot that was so important? The light from the other side of the ridge lit up the countryside he was riding through. It not only was illuminating, it seemed to have some kind of power to draw his thoughts, his being, and it was a struggle to remember what had happened before he had saddled up. He forced himself to try to think.

Then it flooded back into his memory. Coming out of the store that evening he had heard a scuffle and muffled screams. As he came around the back of the store, he remembered now, he saw three young punks tearing at a young woman near a van, ripping her clothes and trying to drag her into the van! Yes! It was all coming back to him now. He remembered yelling at them and how they had turned on him like a pack of predators. There were shots, he remembered. Something punched him hard in the chest. There was momentary panic... it seemed hard to breathe. He heard running footsteps and looked up to see the young lady over him, crying. He was worried whether she was OK but couldn't seem to get the words out. Smiling through her tears the best he could, he tried to let her know he was fine. "I'm OK. I'm OK." He tried to tell her, but the words just would not come out right.

The light over the ridge jerked him back to reality. The mare was near the top now, breathing steadily and moving fine. The steep climb had not winded her. She always was a strong one. Then, momentarily, he was confused. The mare had been dead for near ten years! He had sold his saddle and gear when he had gotten too old and too stiff to ride and had turned her out to pasture. A few years after that he came out one morning to find that she had lay down and gone to sleep one final time during the night! What was going on here? Where was he? And that light!!! It seemed alive!.....

Suddenly as the horse topped the ridge all the confusion was forgotten and the concern melted away to nothing in the majestic view and the glorious light beyond that engulfed them both.