

Breaking a Broncho.

By Philip Verell Hilditch.
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ON THE grassy slope of a great irrigation ditch that wound along the side above a Nevada valley a young boy was lying on his back, talking to a saucy bluejay perched on a near-sagebrush. The bluejay was scolding, no doubt of it. He jabbered away a very shrill, discordant voice, bobbed his tail and agitated his top-knot most ridiculously. The boy was not Bob Cornway.

Sitting up presently, he gazed at the road, level flat—the floor of the valley that stretched far to the great blue mountains, miles away on the other side. Half a mile distant was a huge sea cleared of sagebrush—by the flowing water, for too much water is death to the brush. On it the grass grew luxuriantly, and a herd of half-wild horses was grazing there in comfort and security. In the band was a broncho of unusual beauty. He was of chestnut color and plump and sleek. His legs were slender, his neck full and arching. His head, which he constantly tossed with a scornful, haughty motion, was small and delicately shaped. His long mane and tail floated in the breeze in graceful lines. As if riding the part of a sentinel for the herd, this young broncho ate nervously, stamped a great deal and frequently waved his nose to sniff what his eyes might fall to see.

"What a beauty he is," Bob soliloquized aloud. "Oh, don't I wish that nut were mine! Look at him now! Isn't he great! Oh, but I'd like to get a straddle of you, my boy!"

"Would you, though?" said a pleasant voice behind him.

Bob leaped to his feet to find "Old man Treadwell," as the wealthy ranch had been dubbed, on the other side of the ditch, mounted on a large bay horse, upon which he had ridden noiselessly within hearing distance of the boy's speech.

"Yes, I would, sir!"

"He's the most ornary piece of hoss that ever walked, that's what he is," rejoined the rancher, speaking with emphasis. "He shorely is."

"Is he, really? Why, how—"

"He's mine."

"Oh!"

"Yep, and worth nothin' at all. I've had him busted by the best broncho riders in the valley, but it don't do no good. He lets 'em ride 'cause he can't pitch 'em off or kill 'em; but the minute anybody else tackles him he's bad as ever—if not worse!"

Bob's color had been rising while this description had been growing. He now looked a very statue of defiance.

"I'd like to try that horse," he replied, slowly.

"Well—here the rancher paused and he waited breathlessly—"if you'll let that hoss you can have him, for of me. Only I warn ye, he's no good as a terror to boot."

Instantly the hand stamped, chestnut and all. Bob was prepared, however, and, bracing himself, squatted back on his heels just at the moment the captured animal reached the length of it; and this with such effect that the fleeing creature was brought up with an exceedingly abrupt turn. As if realizing the situation, the horse, instead of tugging vainly at the rope that would choke him more and more if he struggled against it, trotted near enough to slack the pressure, and stood posing as docility on a grass pedestal. Bob was amazed.

"That's exactly what Old Man Treadwell said you'd do," he exclaimed.

Never was the animal so capable of perpetrating surprises as this same sleek-looking pony. Acting as if the wondering horses were total strangers and Bob his long-sought friend, he ignored the scurrying band and followed the boy with a meekness that simulated affection. He kept the rope hanging slack between himself and his captor, just as an old home-loving cow might have done, and pricked his ears as if with kindly interest in the proceedings. He stood like a sawbuck while Bob cautiously adjusted a blanket and then the heavy Mexican saddle on his back; not once did he wince while the broad cinch was tightened under and around his splendid lungs; only sadness seemed to lurk in his eyes as he opened his mouth to receive the bridle bit. But Bob was not in the least put off by his guard by this gentle behavior. Indeed, as an extra measure of safety, he fastened a stout "bucking strap" under the tree of the saddle and tied the stirrups loosely together underneath, so that they should not fly toward his head in the earthquake upheaval which he anticipated.

All being in readiness, Bob tucked his trousers into his boots, fastened on a spur, pulled his hat down hard, lashed his handkerchief firmly about his neck and strapped his belt up a couple of holes. Leading the lamb-like pony to a wide, sloping space from which a fair and square start could be made, he secured his rope to the pommel of the saddle, and, grasping the bucking strap with all his strength, vaulted to the saddle so lightly and quickly that even that experienced animal gave a little grunt of surprise.

For a moment the pony stood as if in meditation. Then, shaking his head and heaving a great sigh indicating how much to be regretted the whole thing was, he trotted for several yards, getting his muscles well into action. And then, with a suddenness truly amazing, he "lit into" a spasm of bucking fearful to see and more fearful to endure. He shot into the air like a spring from out a broken clock; he shook himself in mid-flight like a rag in the wind; he landed with his feet bunched so closely that all came down within a space a foot square, stiff-legged. The jolt was enough to scatter the teeth from an Indian skull. But up he went again, his back arching like a bow, his head down between his legs, his tail flying.

And Bob! Hanging desperately to the bridle rein with one throbbing hand, gripped the bucking strap with all his might, he held on top—while he gritted his teeth to keep them from snapping together and biting his tongue off with the terrible jerking and lugging to which he was subjected.

Changing his tactics with lightning-like rapidity, the broncho now ceased his bucking. Throwing his foam-flecked mouth aloft, he ran at top speed, dashing away through the brush into a trail leading toward the mountains. Bob lay back in the clasp of the saddle, swaying with the altered motion and quite unable, for a moment, to secure a proper equilibrium.

Realizing, however, that the opening fight had been settled in his favor, the boy rapidly recovered his senses, and began to take advantage of the change. Jabbing his spur into the pony's flank, he gathered in the reins and attempted to assume command of the heaving land-craft that rocked so smoothly beneath him and close the air with the swiftness of sound. In this he was not entirely successful, as the broncho had

evidently made up his mind to go to the depths of Pickhandle gulch. And go there he did. Bob's utmost efforts to restrain him proving futile.

At length, when they were far down in the gloomy gulch, the horse reduced his speed; nor could all of Bob's spurting compel any more of that headlong pace. The animal seemed to be saving his energy for a final outburst, and to be choosing the spot with diabolical cunning.

Finally, he reached a hillock, where a space was clear, but hedged all about by ledges of slate, the wicked edges of which stuck up like pickets on a fence. There he unexpectedly bounded into the air, with a shrill neigh, and threw himself into the wildest contortions. Again and again with the violence of a catapult he jerked himself upward and jolted down as harshly as a brick that falls and strikes a pavement—twisting in the air, and thrashing furiously, right and left, forward and back.

Down came the pony like a sack of wrought iron, jarring the very hillock where he struck; he went up again, but not so high. His neigh, sharp and quick, indicated pain; and lifting a foot all helpless and wounded, he abruptly ceased his horrible antics, and stood submissive and subdued. It was like the miraculous quelling of a storm. His whole body quivered with pain.

Surprised to find himself alive, Bob hazily wiped the blood from his face and slipped feebly down to the earth. How wholesome it felt!

No effort to escape or even to move did the horse attempt; but he turned a face, altered and strange, with a dumb expression of profound respect toward his master. Something else was also in his eyes—supplication.

Bob glanced him over. The foot, half lifted, met his gaze. Not a moment did he hesitate—not a thought of the in-

famous treatment to which he had been subjected by the merciless pony lingered in his mind. Picking up the foot he found, deeply imbedded in the frog thereof, a sharp, white stone.

It was only a moment's work to whip out his knife and dig away the wounding fragment—the bit of rock that had saved his life, in all probability. And such a piteous moan of relief as that broncho gave when the fresh, healing blood flowed out of the gash!

Bob placed the foot gently down, and laying his hand on the animal's neck spoke to him tenderly. It was evident the pony had never been treated with kindness before; assuredly respect, shame, humiliation and love were in his countenance now, as he placed his nose on the lad's shoulder and rubbed his sweat-soaked cheeks against the bloody one of his master.

For a moment so they stood. Bob looked at the stone that had done so much for them both—for now they were friends. It was white quartz, streaked with peculiar lines that were weaved in and out of it strangely.

Turning it over the boy made an exclamation of surprise. He rubbed and cleaned it, and looked again. A gleaming speck, surrounded by smaller specks of equal brightness, appeared on its surface.

"Gold!" he cried, excitedly.

And gold it was!

Then down on his knees fell young Cornway, pawing away at the soil, while the horse looked on and seemed to love him.

He presently came to that for which he searched—the ledge of quartz, buried beneath a shallow layer of earth, from which the piece had been broken. Over this he bent in an ecstasy of joy, for gold was glinting all through it, promising all manner of wonderful things for the future.

At last he excitedly covered the spot with the sandy soil, placed in his pocket the little piece of ore, and stood on his feet.

"Oh, you beauty, you beauty!" he cried to the broncho. He threw his arms about the pony's neck and hugged him warmly. "An imp you are, and my own imp you shall be as long as you live. And this, too, this gold mine, shall be called the 'Bucking Broncho,' by all that's fair!"

And the pony neighed a soft, affectionate assent.

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