

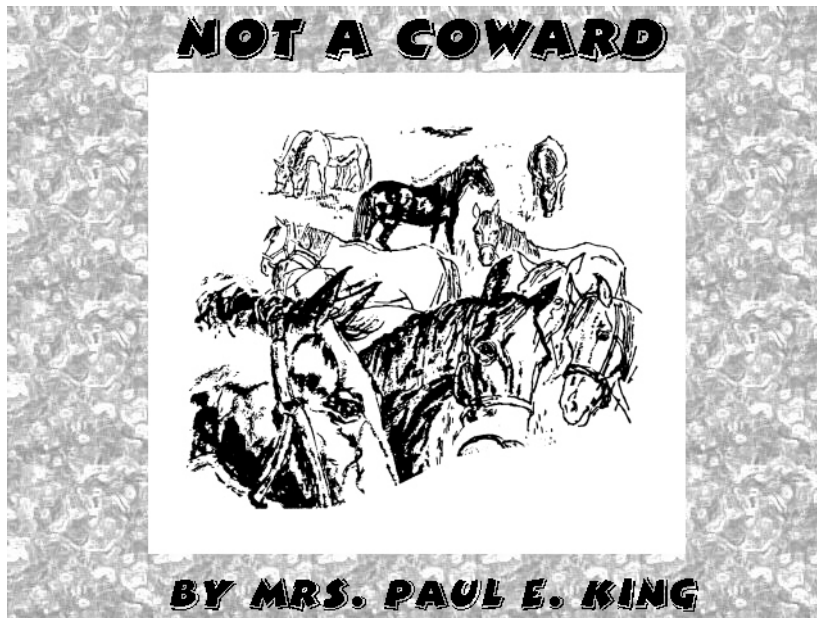
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NOT A COWARD
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Wayne sat deathly still on a monster of a rock that jutted out of the canyon's side. His eyes searched the canyon floor with keen perception and practice but not a sign could he see of the herd of wild horses that inhabited the area. He felt keen disappointment for a brief moment, then he got to his feet cautiously and slowly and made his way back to the mesa where his faithful cow pony grazed contentedly on the succulent meadow grass. He

was ready to mount the faithful steed when a loud whinny sound floated in on the breeze and reached his ears.

His face was drawn and white, shielded and protected from the sun by his broad-brimmed hat; his levi-clad limbs were taut. The stallion! He'd know that call anywhere. He'd made friends with the magnificent beast. And all by having a world of patience and some lumps of sugar and a few apples which he'd hidden inside his jacket pocket until he needed them as "comehithers" for bait.

Quietly he mounted Pinto the pony. Normally he rode with the typically easy nonchalance of a pure westerner in the saddle. Now, however, his lithe body was ramrod stiff. Every move was an effort of will. His spine tingled with eager anticipation and longing.

"Please, dear Lord," he prayed softly, "help me to put a rope on him today."

Wayne touched Pinto gently with his knees and urged her forward, praying as he rode. Spotting the herd of beautiful horses grazing in a ravine, he drew rein and sat watching. His whole being tingled and thrilled over the spectacle. An eagle soared graciously above him and all around him was the fragrance of sweet smelling grasses and wild flowers. He loved this country; loved it as much as the herd of wild horses, he was sure, and the thought of taking the handsome stallion and confining him to a corral and a stall brought tears to his eyes. Still, his father had told him that if he wanted a horse of his own he'd have to get it -- by himself -- from the herd of wild ones roaming the land.

He watched the stallion for a long time, torn between an intense desire to lasso him and break him and make him his own, and pity for the horse. He looked like he belonged to the canyons and the mesas. Still, he would make him an excellent and ideal horse for rounding up cattle with his father and brothers and the hired hands.

So deep in thought and concentration was he that he didn't notice the stallion leave the herd and make his way cautiously toward him. The soft whinny brought him out of his reverie. He felt like his chest would burst, so excited was he when he saw the jet black horse coming toward him. He

dismounted slowly and dropped Pinto's reins. She stood obediently. "Thunder," Wayne whispered.

The stallion's head flew up and in an instant he was facing Wayne.

"Thunder," Wayne repeated, standing still, his hand holding an apple and some sugar lumps. Then he edged forward, his movements cautious and his steps measured and slow. The great stallion eyed him critically, trying to decide if he was still his friend. Then suddenly Wayne saw the horse relax. His ears came forward and the wild, desperate look left his eyes.

The stallion edged forward to meet the young man, extending his nose to reach for the delicacies. Excitement tingled every nerve in Wayne's body as the horse's lips snaked in the apple and the sugar lumps. Ever so slowly, Wayne's fingers reached up and stroked the great, black beauty's forehead. Then, just as slowly, he reached into his pocket and brought out the other apple, a carrot and several more sugar lumps. This time the stallion edged even closer.

"I love you, Thunder," Wayne said softly, looking up into the dark, unfathomable looking eyes. "I want you for my very own so much that it hurts. And right now I could easily slip a rope about your neck and snub you down to that tree over there and begin to gentle you. But I . . . I can't bring myself to do it." A muffled sob escaped his lips. "I guess love goes beyond human desire. Real love, that is. I . . . I mean, I love you so much that, even though I want you, I can't bring myself to roping you and breaking you in and.., and taking you away from the life you love. Do you understand what I'm trying to say, Thunder?"

In reply, the stallion edged even closer and nudged Wayne's arm gently.

"Oh, you are so beautiful. I love you, Thunder. We'll see each other every day, if this is possible, God willing, and I'll bring you a treat, too. But you were made for freedom, and my love for you will give this to you." Reaching up, he stroked the jet black, satin-soft nose. Tears rolled down his ruddy cheeks. Again the stallion nudged his arm as if in understanding.

"Go, Thunder," Wayne said tearfully. "But come back to see me, God willing."

For a long while the stallion looked at the tall, lithe young figure before him. It was as though he enjoyed the camaraderie and the friendship of this gentle mannered and loving people person. Then, slowly, he turned and started toward the herd, stopping once and looking back before whinnying softly and loping proudly away.

Wayne sat down on a rock nearby and wept. Lifting his eyes heavenward, he said, "Thank You, kind Father, for gentling him until he trusts me and is my friend. He's so beautiful. You answered my prayer; I could have roped him -- easily. . . ."

"You fool!" The voice cut into Wayne's prayer like acid.

"You're a fool if I ever saw one."

"You think so, Hal?" the boy asked, getting to his feet and walking over to one of his father's cowboys.

"What else could I think?" the cowboy asked. "You had him, boy! Eating out of your hand, literally. Why'd you let him go? You're excellent with the lasso and the lariat. You had him! But you let him go! Why? I never saw anything so foolish in all my life. Why'd you do it?"

"Love, Hal. Love!"

"Love? Bah!"

"Love must let go sometimes. And sometimes real love must get tough, and be firm and not give an inch. It all depends upon the circumstances. I love Thunder so much that I want him to retain and keep his freedom. He belongs with the herd. Look at him! He's king and commander-in-chief of those beautiful horses. They need him. He needs them. They belong together."

"But . . . but how'd you tame him? Man, he has hoofs! Dangerous hoofs! Hoofs that almost killed one man and maimed another. And you.., you had him eating out of your hand! I wouldn't believe this if I hadn't seen it. It's a miracle, Boy! Why, there's not a man around here who'll go after the black beast!"

"God still works miracles, Hal, whether you believe it or don't believe it, and. . . ."

"Well, one thing's sure," Hal interrupted, "and that is that you're not the coward I told you you were. Guess I need to be apologizing and confessing to you that I thought everybody who was a Christian was a coward. I figured real men didn't need any religious crutch to lean on. But you've got me re-thinking my thinking, Boy. Seems to me you're more brave than anyone on the Bar-Ranch. And, Boy, I'm wonderin' if . . . if your God didn't do something special to . . . to . . . work that wild, deadly beast over."

"I'm sure God had His hand upon Thunder, Hal -just like He has His hand upon you."

"Now, Boy, you know I've never been one for listening to a sermon. But I saw a miracle a while ago if ever there was one. Maybe I . . . I'm changing, the way I feel. Reckon so?"

"I'm praying that you will, Hal. I've been praying this prayer ever since you came to work for Dad. You're not getting any younger, you know, and one of these days you're going to have to give an account to God for the deeds you've done."

"I know. I know. And I've been thinking about it since the first time you told me when I arrived here. Makes me feel uncomfortable and . . . and miserable at times."

"Why don't you come to Jesus, Hal? Give Him your heart and let Him save you from all your sins. Your heart's even more beastly and dangerous than that beautiful stallion is, you know. Jeremiah said it's 'desperately wicked' and is 'deceitful above all things.' How about it Hal; are you ready to repent and be converted? I'd love to pray with you, and Jesus is waiting to forgive you of your sins."

"I'm thinking, Boy. Yes, I'm thinking. You keep on praying for me, you hear?" And the cowboy urged his palomino on and rode away.

Wayne watched until Hal disappeared in the ravine; then he mounted Pinto and urged her gently down into the canyon's floor for a leisurely early

morning ride, his heart seeming to be floating on a cloud over his experience with Thunder and the cowboy's confession. He would soon be converted. Yes, Hal was not far from being converted, Wayne knew. He felt like shouting.