

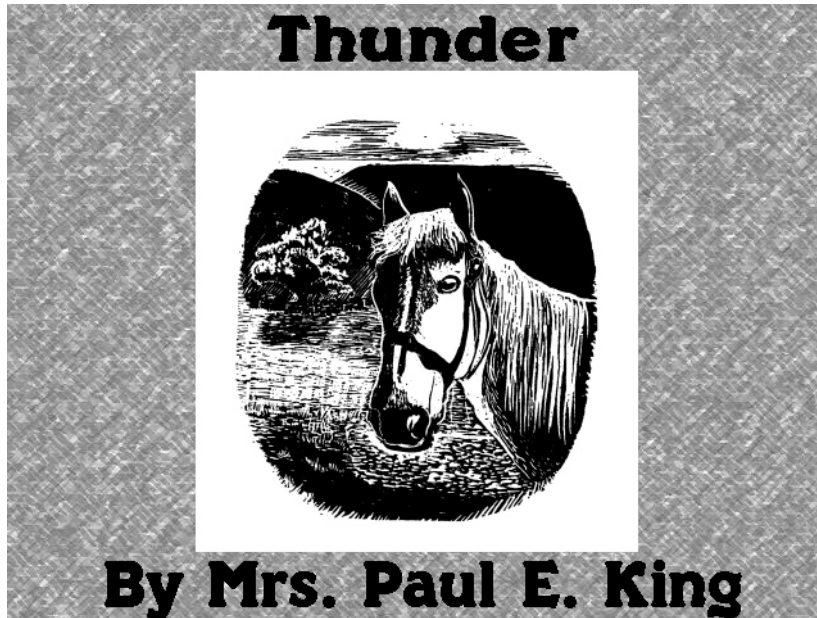
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**THUNDER**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

Cory awoke with a start and sat upright in bed, wondering why he felt so stiff and sore. Then, suddenly, he remembered. Yes, he remembered. How well he remembered! He smiled in spite of the stiffness and the soreness, feeling that the prize he had was well worth any or all pain he may yet acquire until said prize was fully broken and completely conquered.

Springing out of bed now like he had been shot from a projectile, Cory raced to the window and looked toward the corral, exclaiming softly, "Thunder! Thun. . . . No! Oh no!" he cried.

He stood in profound shock in front of the window. It couldn't be! He looked more closely. Then, rubbing the last fragments of sleep from his eyes, he looked again: The corral gate was open indeed. Thunder was gone!

Ignoring the stiffness and the soreness, he rushed into action. Dropping the warm pajamas to the floor, he dressed in record time and headed for the door, buttoning the heavy Woolrich jacket as he raced outside and ran toward the corral. The light snow that had fallen during the night revealed tracks; many tracks, and among the tracks were the footprints of a man.

Cory felt faint and weak. It couldn't be. It just couldn't! With his sharp, keen eyes he noted the size of the footprints.

"Sterling!" he cried, feeling all hot and choked up. "Oh Sterling, no. No!" The imprint of the boot tracks were unmistakable; they belonged to Sterling Durfee on the next ranch over the far hill. Sterling had bought the boots only a week ago and he had ridden over on his palomino to show them to Cory. The markings from the bottoms of the boots were without a doubt Sterling's.

Cory felt tears burn in his eyes. With great determination he forced the thought from his mind. Sterling was different since he became converted less than six months ago in Cory's folks' house. Yes, he was. His swearing ceased immediately and he stopped using snuff and chewing tobacco too, even though he took the razzing of his life from his male school companions who told him he was no longer a man because he quit doing what was the "in thing."

Sterling had smiled and told his old cronies -- the jet set of Butte Mountain High -- that he was just now learning how to be a man, since it took a real man -- a man with courage and determination -- to go counter to what was popular and known as the "in thing."

"I'm new, fellows," he had testified. "I found a new life -- in Christ. I want you to know that my soul found its haven and I am fully and completely satisfied. The Lord Jesus Christ changed me. He took away the desire of wanting to be popular with the 'in' crowd. I'm different, all right, and I'm

praying that soon you all will change too and find your peace and joy in Christ."

One by one Sterling's old friends left him; they dropped him like a hot potato, and it didn't seem to bother Sterling in the least.

Dropping his head now on the open gate of the corral, Cory prayed. "Please Lord, help me to keep faith in Sterling. I'm sure there's an explanation. And Lord, I don't know where Thunder is; but You know. Please help me to find him. Thank You, dear Lord. Thank You. I'm trusting in Your guidance. Amen."

Cory hurried away from the corral, down to the lean-to shed where he had tethered Calico, his pinto pony. Until Thunder was completely broken and "brought under," the corral nearest the house was off-limits to the other horses on the ranch. Someday, God willing, in the not too distant future, Cory mused silently, he would be able to look out of his bedroom window and see the magnificent black stallion cohabiting peacefully and docilely with the other horses and ponies on the ranch.

At thought of the future scene, Cory felt his heartbeat accelerate. The past three days of training and breaking and riding Thunder had encouraged him enormously and greatly and even though his body had cringed and rebelled with aches and pains over the abuse he had suffered because of the strenuous breaking process, the young man felt it was well worth each and every amount of energy and hard work expended. Soon, with continued help from the Lord plus his own sheer efforts and determination to get Thunder to love and appreciate him, Cory knew the work would be completed and the stallion would be running to him for a handout or a pat on the head and a bit of currying the way the other horses and ponies did.

The wind was raw in Cory's face as Calico took her master speedily across the open range. He fished the gloves and wool cap out of the jacket's pockets and finished dressing astride the dependable, gentle-mannered but exceedingly swift pony. Then, with his fingers feeling cozy-warm inside the insulated gloves, he leaned forward and stroked Calico's neck gently, saying, "Good girl. That's my pony, Calico. Take me to Thunder." And with that, he gave her free rein as he prayed and talked to the Lord about the lost Stallion.

Sterling's face came before him then, and the boot prints. "The Lord rebuke thee, Satan," he said aloud. "I refuse to believe your lies and your accusations regarding my friend. Every man is innocent until he's proven guilty. . . ."

Now where had he heard that, about being innocent until proven guilty? he wondered. But he knew he had heard someone make the statement. At any rate, he believed it, and he would not accuse Sterling of opening the gate and of stealing Thunder unless Sterling himself told him so, boot prints or no boot prints. Sterling's repentance and godly sorrow was real. He left no stone unturned; he went clear to the bottom, making restitution, asking forgiveness and paying back the money he had stolen from his father's "Emergency Box" -- monies his father had slipped into a box on top of his dresser when times were good to keep on hand for the lean times and in case of an emergency. Yes, Sterling had gone to the bottom and had had a genuine housecleaning, repentance-wise. He had indeed made "straight paths" for his feet so the Lord of glory could ride into his heart with saving grace and forgiving power.

Calico did a quick left turn and for a moment Cory was tempted to pull on the reins and get her turned back to go straight ahead like they had been going. Then he remembered his words to her -- "Take me to Thunder" -- and the prayer he had prayed and he eased himself gently down into the saddle and let her take the lead. More than once, in the heat of a blinding blizzard, he had turned the reins over to her and given her free rein and not once did she ever get lost: always, she had gotten them safely back to the ranch and to the corral, where warmth and food and shelter awaited each. Calico was trustworthy and smart. She seemed to understand his orders every bit as well as Shep the sheep dog did. And Shep was known to be an extremely intelligent and obedient dog.

They had ridden for a long while and not a sign of the black stallion could Cory see. The wind was picking up and an occasional sleet squall stung his cheeks mercilessly. On and on raced the pinto. Doubts marched with staccato cadences across his mind; almost, he felt like taking control of the reins and going in an opposite direction. Then his prayers loomed before him and he seemed to hear a gentle whisper quoting, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). Again he relaxed in the saddle.

They were climbing, he knew. A mixture of both snow and sleet was now falling in a more consistent and steady way. The wind slashed icy fists against his face, nearly knocking the breath out of him. Still the pony raced on; up on the plateau now, then turning slightly and racing downward. Cory's face burned fiercely with the stinging ice and wind pummeling it relentlessly and without mercy or let-up now. He prayed more fervently, asking the Lord for help.

Suddenly Calico slowed her speed considerably. Sure-footed though she was, Cory saw they were now in a rock bed. Below them was a canyon.

Cory wiped his face with the square work handkerchief from his pocket and looked downward. Far below, a bit to his right, he saw movement. Or were his eyes playing tricks on him? he wondered, noticing that in their downward move they were getting out of the snow and the sleet. For this, he was truly grateful: he was now able to see the lay of the land again and his cheeks would get a break from the elements.

He looked more carefully, and what he saw, or thought he was seeing, both gladdened and saddened his heart. Without a doubt, the horse trailing the lead horse was Thunder. And the lead horse carrying the man was Butterball, Sterling's beautiful palomino.

That could mean only one thing -- Sterling was riding Butterball!

Cory felt the breath almost knocked out of him with shock and disbelief. It couldn't be! No, he wouldn't believe it. He would not! Every man was innocent until proven guilty.

He closed his eyes and prayed for the Lord to help him to think only upon those things that were true and honest and just and pure and lovely and of good report, as the Apostle Paul told the Philippians to do. (Phil. 4:8).

Calico descended carefully but with a steady pace. Then she stopped and whinnied. Her whinny echoed back from the canyon walls. Suddenly, Cory heard the reply of the palomino. Then he heard Thunder. And then he saw Sterling. He had slid out of the saddle and was waving joyously to Cory, shouting. "I got him, Cory! I got him! Wait up, I'm coming up."

Tears ran freely down Cory's cheeks. "Thank You, precious Lord!" he cried. "Thank You. You're so kind and good to me."

Cory slipped out of the saddle and ran around to Calico's face. "You're a wonderful pony," he said, rubbing her face between his gloved hands. Then he wrapped his arms around her neck and leaned his cheeks into her wet hair, weeping for pure gladness and wishing he had a blanket to cover her with. She had excelled again. In spite of the sleet and snow, she was wet with sweat. "Good girl!" he exclaimed. "Good, faithful Calico!"

She turned slightly and leaned her head on his shoulder, signifying that the bond between them was mutual. Cory patted her affectionately. Then he remembered the apple in one of the coat pockets, a leftover from yesterday's cattle drive, and he reached it to her. Instantly, she took it from his hand and ate it. Cory laughed. "I guess we're both hungry," he said.

Cory watched as Sterling and the two horses came up the narrow pass of the canyon. Whinny followed whinny, first from Butterball, then answered by Calico. Or vice versa. Even Thunder got in on the greeting, especially as they neared Calico.

Sterling jumped from his saddle when he finally reached Cory and Calico, saying, "Oh Cory, if God ever helped anyone He helped me this morning. I was up early, as usual, wanting to get the chores out of the way so I could slip over to that church rally in the city. It closes today, you know; and this was to be a special day for the young people.

"The moon was still shining when I went out to the corral to start the feeding and to break the ice for watering the cattle, when what should I see but this horse up on the hill. I couldn't imagine where it had come from nor whose it could be. Then it started to run and I saw it was a black horse. But I was still puzzled, and I continued with my work. Then, like a flash of light, I thought of Thunder. And the more I thought about it so much more convinced was I that it was Thunder.

"Immediately after finishing the work, I got on Butterball and raced over to your place. I didn't need a second look to know that that stray was Thunder: Your corral gate was open wide and Thunder was gone.

"Butterball and I went into action. Trying to find which way and where that black beauty went was no easy job. I prayed. Oh, how I prayed! I asked the Lord to help Butterball and me to find him; and then, after finding him, to help me to lead him back to you. I asked God to gentle him down, Cory, and look at him: I've never seen Thunder like this before. He's as calm and docile as either Butterball or Calico."

Cory was crying for joy and happiness and thanksgiving. "God answered your prayer, Sterling," he said. "And I believe Thunder is finally broken." He walked over to the stallion and spoke softly to him. Then he reached up and stroked his shiny-black neck. Thunder stood perfectly still. Then he whinnied. Calico answered and Butterball followed suit.

"I don't know how to thank you, Sterling," Cory said. "But I'll think of some way to repay you, God willing."

"Repay me! Why, Cory, I'm in debt to you and your folks. You pointed me to the only One Who has the power to change people's hearts and lives. I'm so happy in the love of God that I feel I'll never be able to repay you. I'm just as tickled as I can be that I ran over to your place to make sure it was your stallion, and then that the Lord helped Butterball and me to find him. And now, I think we'd better be moving along. We have a long way to go to get back home and I'm as hungry as a bear."

"So am I, Sterling. But as thankful as thankful can be that the man standing before me is a man of sterling character -- saved and sanctified wholly, and honest and upright and righteous. I am honored to be your friend. And your brother in Christ, too."

"I don't know what that's all about," Sterling said with laughter, "but I can only lay claim to any of it because of Jesus' precious blood. And Cory, I'm nearly beside myself with joy over the way the Lord is helping me day after day. Oh, it's wonderful to be a Christian! Well, let's get moving. . . ."

All the way home, Cory's heart was a fountain of joy and thanksgiving, a fountain that bubbled up and overflowed time after time -- Satan was defeated; he was a liar, and the father of lies: Sterling hadn't opened the gate to the corral nor had he taken Thunder. And the Lord had helped him -- Cory -- to live according to Philippians 4:8. This was victorious living! Like Sterling, he, too, was gaining new heights day by day. And it was glorious!