

FOUR-EYES AND THE DEVIL

by Gary L. Blackwood

Appears here with the kind permission of the author

LET ME TELL YOU about the time I saw Mr. Theodore Roosevelt tame a horse.

Maybe you don't know, but before he got to be president and all, me and him were partners on a cattle ranch in the Dakotas. Nobody thought he'd last long. He wasn't much to look at—a bit on the scrawny side, with a pair of spectacles that caused people to call him Four-Eyes behind his back.

He wasn't much of a horseman, either. But one thing he did have in common with most horses—he was pure stubborn.

He come around one day when we were breaking the saddle band. After running loose all winter, the horses were half wild. Our buster, Hank Bennett, was riding this one big bay and having a rough time of it.

“By Godfrey,” Roosevelt said, skinning his teeth in that wide grin of his, “that horse looks as if he's never been ridden.”

I shrugged. “He could maybe stand to have the rough edges rubbed off, but most of the time he's right polite.”

Just then Hank come flying towards us and hit the earth with a thud. Roosevelt winced. “Polite, is it?”

“I reckon Hank forgot to say ‘May I?’ before he got on.”

“What is that horse's name?”

“Devil,” I said.

“Who do you think will break first, Hank or the horse?”

“No telling. Some horses can't ever be broke, and maybe shouldn't be.”

Roosevelt looked puzzled. “Of what use is an animal that's not tamed?”

“None, I guess. But not everything needs to be of some use. Tame a thing too much and you take the spirit out of it.”

“Perhaps you're going about it the wrong way,” Roosevelt suggested. Hank, who'd just come unglued from the saddle again, heard him and scowled, but Roosevelt didn't notice. “Man is a civilized animal,” he said. “We are meant to deal with matters in a calm and reasonable fashion, not by force alone.”

Hank come up, holding one hand to his tailbone. “I’d purely like to see you tell the Devil that.”

Roosevelt squinted towards the horse, who was wound up on the snubbing post and about to choke himself. Roosevelt showed his teeth again and said, quiet-like, “Very well.” He didn’t wait for anybody to talk him out of it, either. “Bring him outside here, will you?”

“You gonna ride him, Four-Eyes—uh, Mr. Roosevelt?” asked one of the hands.

“Let us just say I mean to try.”

They wrangled the horse out of the corral and held him while Roosevelt took his bandanna and covered the animal’s eyes. The horse was blowing hard, and Roosevelt, figuring the way to the Devil’s heart was through his stomach, slowly picked up the water pail and held it out.

The Devil shied, but you could tell he smelled the water and wanted some. It took him awhile to make up his mind to it. Finally he inched forward and plunged his nose in the pail.

Roosevelt drew the pail closer and lifted a hand real slow to lay it on the horse’s neck. The Devil’s hide rippled, but he was too busy drinking to make much of it.

When the water was gone, they stood there; the Devil’s nostrils and Roosevelt’s hand were the only things moving. Then Roosevelt sidled around real gradual until he got a foot in the stirrup. Grabbing the horn, he eased his weight into the saddle. Still the horse didn’t move. Roosevelt leaned forward and untied the bandanna.

The second that horse’s eyes were uncovered, he went off like a cocked pistol. He ran through every trick in the book and some that hadn’t been wrote down besides. He reared, he kicked, he leaped like a sunfish and come down facing a whole other direction. He did everything but roll over and play dead.

It was beyond me how Roosevelt hung on, but he did, though his spectacles bit the dust. It wasn’t what you’d call a fancy ride. You could have surveyed twelve acres of bottom land between him and the saddle. It was stirring, though, and us spectators whooped and bellered.

I never knew if Mr. Roosevelt did it on purpose, but he headed Devil towards the river. “He’s gonna drown himself,” Hank said, starting after him.

“Or maybe the horse,” I said.

They didn’t reach the water, but hit a stretch of quicksand alongside it. That took the starch out of the Devil. With no place solid to put his feet, he couldn’t buck.

Roosevelt didn't mind the danger, he just let the Devil flounder awhile, and then guided him over to where the horse could drag himself out.

They come up the bank covered in slime, but not so bad you couldn't see the glitter of Roosevelt's teeth. "Well," he said, "I suppose there are times when a bit of force is justified."

After that, the Devil was a different horse. Sometimes folks would ask why we give him such an inappropriate name. The only thing was, he never amounted to much as a cow horse. He'd do what he was told, right enough, but he didn't have much gumption. I mean, he always *had* to be told.

It's like I said, some things are better off left wild.