

THE BLACK HORSE

By Jim Kjeblgaard

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THE JULY sun was hot, and the mountain was high. Jed Hale brushed the perspiration from his forehead as he mounted over the top. The coil of rope about his middle started to chafe. Jed unwrapped it and threw it on the ground while he sat down to rest.

He chewed thoughtfully on a straw and gazed down on the range of low hills that stretched as far as he could see. The big, saucerlike hoofmarks of the horse led down, but there was no particular hurry. The horse was not traveling fast. A man on foot, if he had two good legs, could see him as many times a day as he chose. But the horse could not be caught. Jed had known that when he started.

After an hour Jed rose to his feet, and at the limping hobble that was his fastest pace, started down the hill on the trail of the horse. If he could bring him back—something that fifteen men, each mounted on a good saddle horse, had not been able to do—he would get five hundred dollars. Raglan would pay that much for the black horse.

Jed had seen the black horse scatter Raglan's men. After two days of constant chasing they had finally run him into the stout log corral that they had built. The corral had been strong enough to hold any ordinary animal, but the black horse had crashed through it as though it had been matchwood when they tried to put a rope on him. The man on the wiry saddle pony, who had roped the horse as he ran, had barely escaped with his life. The pony had been dragged along for fifty yards and would have been killed if the saddle girth had not broken. The black horse had rid himself of the rope somehow. It had not been on him when Jed caught up with him.

Jed's crippled leg gave him trouble going downhill. He was glad when he passed the summits of the low hills and descended into the valley where it was level. From a stream in the valley, Jed drank and ate his fill of the ripe raspberries that hung over the

stream. He had had no money to buy supplies to bring along. But he needn't starve. More than once he had lived off the country.

A mile down the valley he came upon the black horse. It stood with its head in the shade of a tree, swishing the flies away with its tail. Noiselessly, Jed sank behind a patch of brush, and for four hours lost himself in staring.

It was the biggest and most magnificent horse Jed had ever seen. He knew horses. Product of a wastrel mother and father, victim of paralysis in his childhood, he had spent all his life doing chores for Raglan and other stockmen in the hills. He had never earned more than ten dollars a month, but he had dreams and ambitions. If he could get only ten acres of land for himself, he would somehow or other procure a mare and make a living raising horses. That, for Jed, would be all he wanted of happiness.

The hill men had said that nobody could capture this horse; nothing could tame it. Every man in the hills had tried. The black horse wasn't fast. Three riders besides Raglan's men had had their ropes on him, two had had their ropes broken, and the third had cut his rather than risk having his saddle horse dragged to death. Jed looked at the manila rope that he had again looped about his waist and shook his head. It was the best and strongest rope to be had, but it would not hold the black horse. Still Raglan offered five hundred dollars.

Dusk fell. The black horse moved lazily out of the shade of the tree and began cropping at the rich grass that grew along the creek. For another half hour Jed watched him. When Jed was near the horse, he was not Jed Hale, crippled chore boy and roustabout. In some mysterious way he borrowed from the horse's boundless vitality. When the horse grazed too close to him and there was danger of his being discovered, Jed slipped out of his hiding place and moved half a mile up the valley. There, under the side of a mossy log, he made his bed for the night.

With sunup he rolled from under the log. He had slept well enough and he was not tired, but even the summer nights were chilly in the hills. As briskly as he could, he set off down off valley to where he had last seen the horse.

The black horse was browsing peacefully in the center of a patch of wild grass that grew along the creek. For all the world he might have been one of Raglan's Percherons grazing in his home pasture. But the black horse was bigger than any Percheron that Raglan owned. There was another difference too, a subtle one, not to be noticed by the

casual eye. When grazing, the black horse raised his head at least once every minute to look about him. It was the mark of the wild thing that must be aware of danger; no tame horse did that.

For a quarter of an hour Jed studied him from the shelter of some aspen trees. Then, as slowly as he could, he walked into the little field where the horse grazed. As soon as he left the shelter of the trees the horse stopped grazing and looked at him steadily. Jed's pulse pounded; the vein in his temple throbbed. Men with years more experience than he had said the horse was bad—a natural killer.

Recklessly Jed walked on. He came to within fifty feet of the horse. It made a nervous little start and trotted a few steps. Jed paused to make soothing noises with his mouth. The rope he had been carrying he threw to the ground. Two yards farther on the horse stopped and swung his head to look at the crippled man. Jed advanced another twenty feet.

The black horse swung about. There was no fear in him, but neither was there any viciousness. His ears tipped forward, not back, and his eyes betrayed only a lively curiosity.

In low tones that scarcely carried across the few feet that separated them, Jed talked to the horse. Still talking, he walked forward. The black horse tossed his head in puzzled wonderment and made nervous little motions with his feet. Fifteen feet separated them, then ten feet. The horse shone like a mountain of muscle and strength. With a sudden, blasting snort he wheeled and thundered down the valley. Jed sank to the ground; perspiration covered his face. He had done what no other man in the hills had ever done, been unarmed in striking distance of the horse. But the horse was not a killer. If he were, Jed knew that he would not be alive now.

Jed took a fish line and hook from his pocket and picked some worms from the bottom of an overturned stone. He cut a willow pole with his sheath knife and caught three trout from the stream. He built a fire and broiled the fish over the flames. He was on a fool's mission. He should be back among the stockmen earning the money that would provide him with food during the winter to come. Deliberately he ate the trout. Getting to his feet, he put out the fire and struck off in the direction taken by the horse.

For another six days he followed the black horse about the low hills. Jed rested when the horse rested and went on when the horse moved again. For the six days the

horse stayed within a mile radius of the small meadow where Jed had tried to approach him.

Then on the seventh day, moved by some unaccountable impulse within his massive head, the horse struck across the low hills and did not stop at any of his customary grazing grounds. Patiently, Jed gathered up his coil of rope and followed.

The horse had been foaled in Raglan's back pasture and somehow he had been overlooked when Raglan took his stock in for the winter. They were, Jed guessed, traveling in a great circle and within a month or six weeks they would come back to Raglan's pasture again. It was only at rare intervals that the horse appeared at the pasture. His visits were always unwelcome. Numberless times he had lured mares into the hills with him, and only with difficulty had they been recaptured.

All day he traveled without stopping. It marked the first day that Jed did not see the horse. He was a little fearful when he made his bed that night under a ledge of rocks a dozen miles from where they had started. For two hours he lay peering into the dark, unable to sleep. He did not own the horse and could not catch him, and by spending his time following him he was only making it certain that he would have to live all the next winter on boiled corn meal when he was lucky enough to get it.

Nevertheless, he had to chase the black horse. If he could not come up to him again and somehow contrive a way to capture him, then nothing else mattered either. Finally Jed slept.

He was up the next morning with the first streak of dawn and he did not bother with a cooked meal. Some low-hanging juneberries served him for breakfast. He ate a few and picked a great handful to eat as he walked. Only when he was again on the trail of the horse did he feel at ease.

At twilight he found the horse again. He was quietly grazing in the bottom of a low and rocky ravine. Jed lay on top of the ravine and watched him. He had never been in this country before and he did not like it. The valleys were not gently sloping as in the low hills he had just left. It was a place of rocks, of steep ravines, and oddly enough, of swamps. The creeks were low and muddy; it was a good country to stay out of.

With night Jed moved a quarter mile back from the lip of the ravine and built a fire. He supped on berries, but rabbit sign was plentiful. With his knife he cut a yard from

the end of his rope and unbraided it. Within a hundred yards of his fire he set a dozen snares, and curled on the ground beside the fire to sleep.

He awoke in the middle of the night. The air was cool. A high wind soared across the rocky ledge upon which he slept. Thunder rolled in the sky. The night was made fearfully light by flashes of lightning. Jed picked up a fat pine knot that dripped sticky pitch and stirred the embers of his fire. He lighted the knot at the embers and with it blazing in his hands he made the rounds of his snares. There were rabbits in two of them. Gathering them up along with the unsprung snares, Jed made his way along the rocky ledge by the light of the pine torch.

Halfway around it he came to the place he sought. Close to the wall of the cliff a huge flat rock lay across two small boulders. The natural cave thus formed was full of leaves blown in by the wind. Laying the pair of rabbits on top of the rock, Jed crawled in among the leaves and in a few seconds he was fast asleep.

The second time he awoke in a wet world. Torrential rain had fallen while he slept. The sluggish stream that he could see from his retreat flowed out of its banks. Every leaf on every tree dripped water. A light rain still fell. Jed shrugged and turned to the back of the cave. He built a fire in the dry leaves and fed it with wood that he split with his knife so it would burn. When both the rabbits were cooked and eaten, he wound the rope about him and set out once more to look for the black horse.

The horse was not in the same ravine where Jed had seen him last night. Jed glanced at the steep wall of the ravine and at the swamp at its mouth. The horse could neither climb one nor cross the other. Jed walked along the edge of the ravine; descending into it when he did not have to would be hard work and unnecessary. At the head of the ravine, where it ran onto the summit of the hill, he found the horse's tracks. He followed them.

For five miles the horse had walked across the level top of the hill. Finally, between a cleft in its rocky side, he went down into another of the steep little ravines. There was a trail five feet wide where he had half walked, half slid down.

The rain had stopped, but a wind still blew. Jed stood at the top of the path where the horse had gone down and watched it critically. The walls of the ravine were forty feet high and steep. At the bottom it was scarcely twenty feet across.

Jed worked his way along the rim of the ravine toward its mouth. He would descend into it ahead of the horse and chase him up the ravine to safe travel on top.

Where the ravine led into the main valley was another of the dismal swamps, a big one this time, fully a mile across, and it ran as far up and down the main valley as Jed was able to see. The black horse stood at the edge of the swamp, pawing the soft ground anxiously with a front hoof. Jed watched as he galloped a few yards up the grassless floor of the ravine, then turned to test the swamp again.

For the first time since he had been following him, Jed saw that the black horse was worried. He peered anxiously about. Somewhere in the ravine was an enemy that he could not see. There were rattlesnakes and copperheads to be found in great numbers in just such places, but the black horse was snake-wise; he could avoid these. Occasionally, a wandering cougar was known to cross the hills and to take a colt or calf from the stock men's herds. That must be it. A big cougar might possibly be able to fasten itself on the horse's back and to kill it with fangs and raking claws.

Ten feet below him a little ledge jugged out from the side of the ravine. Jed doubled his rope around a tree and slid down. For several seconds after he gained the ledge, he lay gasping for breath.

At a blasting neigh of terror from the horse he crawled to the side of the ledge and looked over. Below him the black horse stood with his head thrown erect, his nostrils flaring and his eyes reflecting the terror they felt. Jed yanked the rope down to him and looped it over a rock. The horse was in danger, he had to get to him. A cougar would run from a man, even such a man as himself.

For fifteen painful feet he struggled down the face of the ravine. His crippled leg sent spasms of pain shooting over his entire body. Grimly he held on. Five feet more he descended. Then his crippled leg proved unequal to the task his mind had given it. He lost his hold on the rope and landed in a heap at the bottom of the ravine.

He sat up to look about. Ten feet in front of him the black horse stood rigid, staring up the ravine.

Jed shook his head to clear it and took his knife from its sheath. There was no time now for anything save finding and coping with whatever nameless terror beset the horse. He rose to his feet by sheer will power putting strength into his legs. When he walked up the ravine, he passed so close to the black horse that he might have reached

out and touched him if he had wanted to. The horse merely sidestepped a few paces and followed him with questioning eyes.

The cougar would now either attack or slink away. Walking slowly, searching every ledge with his eyes and missing nothing, Jed advanced. He could not see anything. But there was a sinister thing here that could be neither seen nor heard, only sensed. The air was growing more gushy; pebbles rattled into the ravine. Jed glanced anxiously back over his shoulder. If somehow he had missed the enemy and it had got behind him to attack the horse—. But the black horse still stood; from all appearances he had not moved a muscle.

Suddenly the silence broke. The black horse screamed, a long and chilling blast of fear. There came the pound of his hooves as he fled back down the ravine. Jed heard him splashing into the swamp. Simultaneously there came a deep-throated rumble from up the ravine, as a huge boulder loosed its hold on the canyon's lip to thunder down the side. It gathered others as it rolled. There was a staccato rattling as shale mingled with the avalanche.

Jed sheathed his knife. Within a minute everything was over. A pall of shale dust hung in the air, but that was wafted away by its own weight. The avalanche, then, was the enemy. Animal instinct had told the horse that the slide was coming. The ravine was blocked to a third of its depth by a wall of shale and rock. A man could get over the block, a horse never could. With a shrug, Jed turned back to the swamp and to the horse.

The horse was a raving-mad thing. Ten feet from the rocky floor of the ravine he struggled in the grip of swamp mud that was already up to his belly. His breath came in agonized gasps as he strove with all his mighty strength to free himself of the slimy hand of the swamp. Slowly, inexorably, he sank. As Jed watched, he flung himself four inches out of the mud, and fell back again to sink deeper than before.

Jed walked into the swamp. It sucked at his bare feet, and sighed because it could not grip them. If he stayed out of holes and stepped on grass tussocks wherever he could, he would not sink.

The horse was fast in the grip of the mud when Jed reached its side. It could not move but still tossed its head wildly. A sublime elation gripped Jed when he first laid a hand on the horse's back. He had, he felt, at last known a full moment in his life.

“Easy, old boy,” he crooned. “Take it easy.”

The horse swung its head about and knocked him sprawling in the mud. Coolly Jed picked himself up to walk back to the mired animal. Kneeling by the horse’s shoulder, he ran his hand slowly up its neck.

“Don’t be worried, horse,” he pleaded. “Don’t fight so, old fellow. I’ll get you out.”

Wildly the black horse struggled. Slowly, carefully, making no move that might alarm, Jed scratched his neck and talked to him. Finally, the black horse stopped his insane thrashing and held his head still. Calmly Jed walked to the front of him. Instantly the black horse closed his jaws on Jed’s arm. Jed gritted his teeth as the horse squeezed, but his free hand played soothingly around the animal’s ears.

The horse unclenched his jaws. He pressed his muzzle against Jed’s mud-caked body and smelled him over. Jed grinned happily. The black horse and he were acquainted. Now he could go to work.

The frenzied flight of the black horse had carried him a dozen feet from the floor of the ravine and left him facing into the swamp. Still keeping up his murmuring undertone, Jed studied the situation. He had no lifts or hoists and no way of getting any. It was useless for him to try to pit his own strength against the sucking mud. Likewise there was no way whatever to make the horse obey his commands, and first he would have to get him facing toward the ravine.

With his knife Jed set to work by the horse’s side. When the carpet of grass on top of the mud had been cut away he could dig faster with his hands, but as soon as he scooped out a handful of mud another handful seeped in to take its place. Jed took off his shirt and returned to the ravine, where he filled the shirt with loose shale from the rock slide. As soon as he scooped away a handful of mud he packed the remaining wall with shale. That held. The horse moved against the wall as soon as Jed made enough room for him to move, and Jed was much encouraged. Then darkness stopped the work. After eight hours of steady labor he had turned the horse around at least six inches.

In the last faint light of day Jed returned to the ravine and got the coil of rope. The night would be a bad time. He did not think the horse could sink any deeper, but if he became panicky again he might easily render useless all the work done. With his

knife Jed hacked off a dozen slender saplings, and carried them back along with the coil of rope. The black horse turned his head to watch when Jed started back to where he was; almost it seemed that he was glad of company. Jed threw the saplings down beside the horse; they were to be his bed. The rope he passed about the horse's neck and made a hackamore that lined over his jaw. With his head resting on the horse's back, he lay down on the saplings. The end of the rope was in his hand. If the horse should start to sink he would hold his head up as long as he could.

All night long Jed talked to the mired horse, calling him endearing names, soothing him with quiet voice whenever he became restless. A full two hours he spent caressing the horse's head with his shale-torn hands. An hour before dawn he went again to the bottom of the ravine. Daylight was just breaking when he scrambled over the rock slide. He picked a great armful of the wild grass that grew in patches on the other side of the slide and carried it to the horse. Half of it he threw down in front of him, but when the animal had eaten that he took the rest from Jed's hand.

Doggedly Jed set to work with his knife and hands. It was devastatingly slow work. Take out as much mud as he could, and pack the sides with shale. Before the sun set the black horse was again facing the ravine. Furiously he plunged to reach firm ground. Jed quieted him. The time to make the test had not yet come.

Jed slept again beside the horse. When morning came he once more scaled the slide to get him grass, then he resumed his digging. He worked from a different angle this time. It was scarcely ten feet to stony footing. A yard in front of the horse he set to work clearing the mud away. When he got down to the level of the horse's feet he filled the hole with rocks and shale, and packed the sides with shale alone. As the day wore on he gradually worked up to the horse's breast. Two hours before sunset all was ready.

In front of the black horse was a ramp of shale and rocks, a foot high, a yard long, and four feet wide. Jed took the rope, one end of which still formed the hackamore, and ran it into the ravine. He returned to the horse. With his knife and hands he scraped the mud away from one of his mired front legs. As soon as the pressure eased, the horse brought his freed leg to rest on the ramp and he raised his entire body two inches from the mud. Jed ran back to the ravine. Taking the rope in both hands he pulled gently but steadily. The horse fought the rope a minute before he yielded to it. With a prodigious effort he placed his other forefoot on the ramp, and arching his back, he sent all the

elastic strength of his muscles into his mired rear quarters. Jed heaved madly on the rope. The horse cleared the ramp with both front legs; for the first time his belly was clear of the mud. Jed gritted his teeth and pulled, the horse's hind hoofs slid on the ramp. He leaped and threw himself a yard through the mud. His front feet found a wisp of hard footing; he pawed wildly. A second later the black horse scrambled to the stony floor of the ravine.

Jed fell back, and for a few seconds yielded to the fatigue that was upon him. He had slept little and eaten nothing for three days. Dimly he was aware of an immense black beast standing over him, pushing him with its muzzle and nibbling him with its lips.

The horse's mane fell about him. Jed grasped it and pulled himself erect. He could not rest yet. The black horse followed close behind him. He nickered anxiously when Jed climbed over the slide, and pranced playfully when he came back, his arms laden with wild grass.

Half the grass Jed left on top of the slide, the rest he carried into the ravine with him. He took away the hackamore as the horse ate, and fashioned a breast strap in the end of the rope. With utter freedom he dodged under the horse's neck and arranged the crude harness. Then he climbed to the top of the slide for the rest of the grass.

Jed shook his head worriedly as he surveyed the slide; a good team might not move some of the boulders in it. But perhaps the black horse . . . He banished fear from his mind as he hitched the free end of the rope about one of the boulders and with the grass in his arms went to the horse's head.

He patted the horse as it pulled at the hay in his arms. Slowly he backed away. The horse followed, and the rope stretched taut. The black horse stopped and swung his head as he edged nervously sideways. Jed gasped. If the horse fought the harness now he could never get it on him again and he could never get him out of the ravine. Jed stepped close to the horse.

"This way, horse," he murmured. "Look this way. Come this way."

He stepped back again, the grass held out invitingly. The black horse trembled and took a step forward. Pebbles flew from beneath his hooves as he gave all his enormous strength to the task in hand. The tight rope almost hummed. The boulder moved an inch, six inches.

Then, in a steady creeping that did not stop at all, it came away from the slide.

A week later a great black horse appeared in the upper pasture where Tom Raglan was counting his colts. The horse stopped while the tiny, emaciated figure of a man slid from his back. Incredulously Raglan approached them. The horse stood fearlessly behind the wasted man.

“You got him, Jed,” Raglan said.

Raglan was no waster of words, but words were not needed. He was unable to tear his eyes away from the horse’s massive legs, his splendid head, his flawless body, all the qualities that had here combined to form the perfect living thing.

“I got him, Tom,” Jed Hale said, “and I brought him back like I said I would.”

Raglan coughed hesitantly. Above all else he was a horseman. There was no need for Jed to tell him of the chase, or how the horse had been captured. Jed’s sunken eyes, his skeleton body, his tattered clothes, the fingers from which the nails had been torn, told that story for all who could read. There was a world of difference between himself, the successful stockman, and Jed, the crippled stable hand. But they were brothers by a common bond—the love of a good horse. Raglan coughed again. Jed had indeed brought the horse back, but by all the rules known, the black horse could belong to only one man, the man who had brought him back.

“Jed,” Raglan said slowly, “I never went back on my word yet, and I’ll stick by the bargain I made. But that horse is no good to me.” Jed stood without speaking.

“He’d kill anybody except you, that tried to monkey ’round him,” Raglan continued. “I can’t risk that. But I’ll go a long way to get his blood in my stock. Now there’s a house and barn in my north pasture. I’ll give both of ’em to you along with fifty acres of ground, if you’ll take that horse up there and let me turn my best mares in with him. I can pay you thirty dollars a month, and you can keep every seventh colt. Do you think you’d just as soon do that as to have the five hundred?”

Jed Hale gasped, and put a hand against the black horse’s withers to steady himself. The black horse laid his muzzle against Jed’s shoulder. Jed encircled it with an arm. The black horse, the horse that could do anything, was his now. It was a little too much to stand all at once. Suddenly Jed remembered that he was now a hard-boiled stock owner.

“Why, yes,” he said finally. “If that’s the way you’d rather have it, Tom. Yes, I guess I’d just as soon.”

