

A Portion of
“Getting Acquainted with Cricket”

from “Cricket, a Mountain Pony” by Enos A. Mills

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“Cricket will surprise you every day,” said the prospector who sold her to me, “but she’ll never disappoint you.”

I waved good-bye, but scarcely heard his words of warning, so eager was I to be off on a five weeks’ camping trip in the rugged mountain ranges of Southwestern Colorado. I had come many miles out of my way to secure Cricket for this trip and now hoped to make up the time lost. She, too, was apparently anxious to be off, and in fact started before I was scarcely in the saddle. This, I learned, was characteristic of her.

It was early October and I knew I might encounter snow storms and uncertain weather. But I had long planned to return and explore the deep cañons and steep peaks of the San Juan Mountains that I had glimpsed on previous occasions. Usually I made my trips afoot, to allow freedom for trailing wild life. But with a horse accustomed to snow and that was also able to go off the trail into difficult places, I hoped to cover more territory. I would not have undertaken the trip with any ordinary horse, but I had ridden Cricket a few times and knew that she was unusually resourceful and responsive. More than this, she had a love of adventure equal to my own. I congratulated myself on having procured her for this trip, and reveled in the thought

of her companionship.

No one could ride Cricket without being impressed with the fact that she had an uncommon amount of horse sense, and also that she had character. She showed it in every move she made. She was about four years old at this time, a beautiful bay of good proportions, with none of the lankiness of some western horses. Her mental and physical endowments were of the finest, for she had the unspoiled ancestry of wild horses, which in turn were descendants of the Arabian stock brought over by the conquering Spaniards to Mexico. These horses, commonly called mustangs or bronchos, developed in the exacting conditions of unfenced wilderness and were exceedingly capable of taking care of themselves under any and all conditions. Cricket had the best of such ancestry, and in addition had had excellent training from her owner who appreciated horses.

The prospector had often rented her out to miners, and she was known as one of the best “return” horses in the country. A miner living in town would often rent a horse to take him up the mountain to work, but would not care to keep it to ride down. Consequently the custom arose of releasing such a horse, after tying up the reins, to return to its stable alone.

We had taken one of these trails up the mountainside, much used by miners, and made rapid progress. Just at sundown we came to a little mining camp and, without any suggestion on my part, Cricket suddenly stopped. She waited for me to dismount.

“No, Cricket,” I said, “I am not stopping here, you and I are going to travel on in the moonlight,” gave her an affectionate pat in the assurance that she would understand me.

I often talked to her in this way and she usually responded. This time she did not move an ear or make any evidence of hearing me. There was no reason why she would stop here unless released, and I was sure she was not tired.

“We have a long trip ahead of us, Cricket, and I want to make time to-night,” I explained, and urged her forward.

She went on a few steps, then turned and looked at me with dissension, even disgust. I dismounted, led her past the scattered buildings of the little camp, and told her she was not going to return home to-night. She followed me reluctantly, looking back down the trail at every turn.

I decided she was only playing with me. Cinching up the saddle to be sure this was comfortable, I mounted, and before I was scarcely in the saddle she started off briskly. Apparently all was well. The moon rose luminously and seemed to enter into our adventure. We crossed a high plateau where Cricket had been before, and I was giving her little thought. At the fork of a dim trail she stopped. Either trail would take us to our destination and I gave her her head. She took the fork to the left and trotted on as though she knew where she was going.

Absorbed in the moon, the black shadows of the cliffs, and the mellow moonlight on the rocks, I wandered through “yesterday’s

seven thousand years” and my thoughts were far from the trail. Towards midnight Cricket suddenly stopped and began eating. I prodded her but she did not respond.

“Why, Cricket,” I said, “what does this mean? We aren’t going to stop here!” She would not move.

I dismounted and discovered we were not on a trail. I made three attempts in different directions to lead her back to the trail, but she pretended to be lost. If she was not, I was. For having given Cricket her head I had trusted her to do the trail finding. I knew she was capable of this—but apparently she had lost interest, or thought I had. The moon had set and I had no landmarks. Time would be lost in going back in the darkness to retrace our steps, so I unsaddled her. Cricket gave a groan of satisfaction and returned to the spot she had selected when she stopped to graze and to rest for the night.

When morning came I discovered we were within a stone’s throw of the point where the trails forked. Cricket, not liking night travel, had deliberately outwitted me. Or perhaps I had become too deeply absorbed in my own thoughts, and Cricket felt she had been left out of the picture.

After this experience I made it a point to comment to Cricket on things of interest that we passed, and to consult her when I stopped to take pictures of striking scenes. She was responsive and alert. We made rapid progress over broken mountain ranges and passes filled with beauty and wildness.

Several days' journeying brought us to a wild section where scrub oak had been multiplied and gnarled by repeated fires, forming an impassable thicket acres in extent. I wanted to leave the trail and shortcut to a promontory where I could view the lay of the land ahead of us.

There were several places in the oak jungle where I could have managed to squeeze through, but there seemed no possible opening for Cricket. But she appeared as interested as I in finding a way through this, trying first one place and then another, and finally selected one that looked to me the most impossible of all. Before I could dismount, she literally insisted on going ahead.

As we were nosily proceeding to tear down this stunted oak forest, we were outdone by a crashing near-by. It sounded like nothing less than a herd of stampeding elephants. Cricket plunged wildly ahead, ignoring danger or the threshing I was receiving from every oak we passed. The commotion ahead of us continued, but even from my position I could not see the cause of it. Cricket determined that she would. Rearing on hind legs, which left me in a precarious situation and clinging with knees and arms to keep from falling off, she stood poised a second only, then with a lunge and a high leap cleared a low-growing clump, and made a quick turn that landed us in a small clearing.

What a sight met us! A black bear, towering full height, stood waiting, as surprised as we were at meeting. I wish I might have

gotten his picture. The bear made up his mind like a flash. Without even a “woof” he went crashing through the thicket again at a rapid lope that took him speedily out of sight.

Cricket stood trembling, afraid to leave the clearing. I attempted to calm her fears, but my assurance that we had escaped mishap may not have been very convincing. The bear might still be in ambush waiting for us. Cricket had the common horse aversion to bears, and studiously avoided them. She concurred willingly in my decision to retreat, but snorted at any stir of leaves and even stopped to listen at the sound of a scurrying rabbit.

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