

A Portion of
“Midget, the Return Horse”
from “Wild Life on the Rockies” by Enos A. Mills
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In many of the Western mining-towns, the liverymen keep “return horses”,—horses that will return to the barn when set at liberty, whether near the barn or twenty miles away. These horses are the pick of their kind. They have brains enough to take training readily, and also to make plans of their own and get on despite the unexpected hindrances that sometimes occur. When a return horse is ridden to a neighboring town, he must know enough to find his way back, and he must also be so well trained that he will not converse too long with the horse he meets going in the opposite direction.

The return horse is a result of the necessities of mountain sections, especially the needs of miners. Most Western mining-towns are located upon a flat or in a gulch. The mines are rarely near the town, but are on the mountain-slopes above it. Out of town go a dozen roads or trails that extend to the mines, from one to five miles away, and much higher than the town. A miner does not mind walking down to the town, but he wants to ride back; or the prospector comes in and wants to take back a few supplies. The miner hires a return horse, rides it to the mine, and then turns the horse loose. It at once starts to return to the barn. If a horse meets a freight wagon coming up, it must hunt for a turnout if the road is narrow, and give the wagon the right of way. If the horse meets some one walking up, it must avoid being caught.

The San Juan mining section of southwestern Colorado had hundreds of these horses. Most of the mines are from one thousand to three thousand feet above the main supply-points, Ouray, Telluride, and Silverton. Ouray and Telluride are not far apart by trail, but they are separated by a rugged range that rises more than three thousand feet above them. Men often go by trail from one

of these towns to the other, and in so doing usually ride a return horse to the top of the range, then walk down the other side.

“Be sure to turn Jim loose before you reach the summit; he won’t come back if you ride him even a short distance on the other side,” called a Telluride liveryman to me as I rode out of his barn. It seems that the most faithful return horse may not come back if ridden far down the slope away from home, but may stray down it rather than climb again to the summit to return home. The rider is warned also to “fasten up the reins and see that the cinches are tight” when he turns the horse loose. If the cinches are loose, the saddle may turn when the horse rolls; or if the reins are down, the horse may graze for hours. Either loose reins or loose cinches may cripple a horse by entangling his feet, or by catching on a snag in the woods. Once loose, the horse generally starts off home on a trot. But he is not always faithful. When a number of these horses are together, they will occasionally play too long on the way. A great liking for grass sometimes tempts them into a ditch, where they may eat grass even though the reins are up.

The lot of a return horse is generally a hard one. A usurper occasionally catches a horse and rides him far away. Then, too often, his owner blames him for the delay, and for a time gives him only half-feed to “teach him not to fool along.” Generally the return horse must also be a good snow horse, able to flounder and willing to make his way through deep drifts. He may be thirsty on a warm day, but he must go all the way home before having a drink. Often, in winter, he is turned loose at night on some bleak height to go back over a lonely trail, a task which he does not like. Horses, like most animals and like man, are not at ease when alone. A fallen tree across the trail or deepened snow sometimes makes the horse’s return journey a hard one. On rare occasions, cinch or bridle gets caught on a snag or around his legs, and cripples him or entangles him so that he falls a victim to the unpying mountain lion or some other carnivorous animal.

I have never met a return horse without stopping to watch it as far as it

could be seen. They always go along with such unconscious confidence and quiet alertness that they are a delight to behold. Many good days I have had in their company, and on more than one occasion their alertness, skill and strength have saved me either from injury or from the clutches of that great white terror the snow-slide.

The February morning that I rode "Midget" out of Alma began what proved to be by far the most delightful association that I have ever had with a return horse, and one of the happiest experiences with nature and a dumb animal that has ever come into my life.

I was in government experiment work as "State Snow Observer" and wanted to make some observations on the summit peaks of the "Twelve-Mile" and other ranges. Midget was to carry me far up the side of these mountains to the summit of Hoosier Pass. A heavy snow had fallen a few days before I started out. The wind had drifted most of this out of the open and piled it deeply in the woods and gulches. Midget galloped merrily away over the wind-swept ground. We came to a gulch, I know not how deep, that was filled with snow, and here I began to appreciate Midget. Across this gulch it was necessary for us to go. The snow was so deep and so soft that I dismounted and put on my snowshoes and started to lead Midget across. She followed willingly. After a few steps, a flounder and a snort caused me to look back and all I could see of Midget was her two little ears wriggling in the snow. When we reached the other side, Midget came out breathing heavily, and at once shook her head to dislodge the snow from her forehead and her ears. She was impatient to go on and before I could take off my snowshoes and strap them on my back, she was pawing the ground impatiently, first with one little fore foot and then with the other. I leaped into the saddle and away we went again. We had a very pleasant morning of it.

About eleven o'clock I dismounted to take a picture of the snowy slope of Mt. Silverheels. Evidently Midget had never before seen a kodak. She watched with extraordinary interest the standing of the little three-legged affair upon the

ground and the mounting of the small black box upon it. She pointed her ears at it; tilted her head to one side and moved her nose up and down. I moved away from her several feet to take the picture. She eyed the kodak with such intentness that I invited her to come over and have a look at it. She came at once, turning her head and neck to one side to prevent the bridle-reins, which I had thrown upon the ground, from entangling her feet. Once by me, she looked the kodak and tripod over with interest, smelled of them, but was careful not to strike the tripod with her feet or to overturn it and the kodak with her nose. She seemed so interested that I told her all about what I was doing,—what I was taking a picture of, why I was taking it, and how long an exposure I was going to give it; and finally I said to her: “To-morrow, Midget, when you are back in your stall in the barn at Alma, eating oats, I shall be on the other side of Mt. Silverheels, taking pictures there. Do you understand?” She pawed the ground with her right fore foot with such a satisfied look upon her face that I was sure she thought she understood all about it.

From time to time I took other pictures, and after the first experience Midget did not wait to be invited to come over and watch me, but always followed me to every new spot where I set the tripod and kodak down, and on each occasion I talked freely with her, and she seemed to understand and to be much interested.

Shortly after noon, when I was taking a picture, Midget managed to get her nose into my mammoth out-side coat-pocket. There she found something to her liking. It was my habit to eat lightly when rambling about the mountains, often eating only once a day, and occasionally going two or three days without food. I had a few friends who were concerned about me, and who were afraid I might some time starve to death. So, partly as a joke and partly in earnest, they would mail me a package of something to eat, whenever they knew at what post-office I was likely to turn up. At Alma, the morning I hired Midget, the prize package which I drew from the post-office contained salted peanuts. I did not care for

them, but put them into my pocket. It was past noon and Midget was hungry. I was chattering away to her about picture-taking when, feeling her rubbing me with her nose, I put my hand around to find that she was eating salted peanuts from my big coat-pocket. Midget enjoyed them so much that I allowed her to put her nose into my pocket and help herself, and from time to time, too, I gave her a handful of them until they were all gone.

Late in the afternoon, Midget and I arrived at the top of Hoosier Pass. I told her to look tired and I would take her picture. She dropped her head and neck a little, and there on the wind-swept pass, with the wind-swept peaks in the background, I photographed her. Then I told her it was time to go home, that it was sure to be after dark before she could get back. So I tightened the cinches, fastened up the bridle-rein over the horn of the saddle, and told her to go. She looked around at me, but did not move. Evidently she preferred to stay with me. So I spoke to her sternly and said, "Midget, you will have to go home!" Without even looking round, she kicked up her heels and trotted speedily down the mountain and disappeared.

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