

The Free Press Short Story

WILD BLACK PRINCE

By DENNIS H. STOVALL

ROSCOE HANLEY jammed on the brakes and brought his speeding car to a screeching halt. By swerving to the edge of the country road, he barely missed colliding with the black horse and its rider who had unexpectedly swung around the blind corner.

"Mace Whipple again, riding that crazy black brute! He should have more sense than to bring his fractious mount on the highway!"

This was not the first time Roscoe had narrowly escaped a collision with Mace and Black Prince. As on previous encounters, the madly frightened animal, instead of galloping by, leaped straight for the fence, jumped it cleanly and bounded across the field.

The youth in the saddle, as if enjoying the fun, swung his hat and yelled: "Some horse, boy! Some horse!"

"Horse?" Roscoe sneered derisively. "Do you call that jumping kangaroo a horse?"

Mace soon had his scared mount under control and rode back to the fence. Not until this moment did he know two persons were in the car. Nancy, Roscoe's sister, was the other passenger. When the machine made its abrupt stop she was pitched forward, under the cow. Roscoe helped her up. "I hope you weren't hurt, Nancy," he said in an apologetic tone. "Sorry I had to stop so quick."

"No, I'm not hurt!" Nancy answered, straightening her tight-fitting little hat over her blond curls and smoothing the wrinkles out of her crumpled coat. Her blue eyes flashed angrily as she directed them first to her brother, then on the grinning rider.

"It was Mace's fault!" Roscoe told her. "He should get rid of that wild brute!" Mace bent forward in the saddle. His gloved hand gently patted the steaming neck of the nervous horse. He was looking at Nancy. "I'm sorry—for causing you trouble." He faltered. "I didn't expect to meet anybody on the road—this early."

"You should keep that jumping kangaroo off the road at all times!" Roscoe interrupted. "He'll kill somebody yet—and probably break your own neck." The grin vanished from Whipple's face. Mace had done his best to apologize, and this additional out from Roscoe in Nancy's presence, was one lash too many. His eyes gleamed coldly. His jaw tightened. "I have as much right to ride my horse on the road, as you have to drive your flashy chug-wagon!" he reminded.

"Well—I know a few things about horses! That black one is dangerous! I'd advise you to sell him—or give him away—anything to dispose of him."

"You both are acting—own talking—like a pair of silly boys!" Nancy interrupted, her cheeks flaming indignantly. This brought an end to the heated argument. Roscoe slumped down in the seat. Mace raised up and blinked like a scolded youngster, but Nancy had more to say: "What's come between you two, anyhow? Why all this wrangling every time you meet? If you ask me, I'll tell you that you both are to blame. Black Prince was coming round the corner too fast in one direction, and Roscoe was hitting the much speed the other way! Why can't you be friends again? I'm sick and tired of—"

"You've said enough, Curly Locks!" Roscoe stopped her. He gave the rider a warning glance. "Hold that kangaroo! I'm getting away from here!"

Nancy clamped her hat on tighter. The car bounded off with a roar. The black horse, struck with another fit of terror, reared and spun around, then went leaping and plunging over the field. Mace ventured a backward glance and caught a fleeting glimpse of the girl's troubled face as the car beamed round the turn.

He rode on, his brain in a whirl. Roscoe's hot words angered him, but they were more easily dismissed than Nancy's sharp rebuke. This was the first time he had come into the widening gap which for the last few months opened between Mace and her brother. Mace found himself bewildered and puzzled. He did not want to hurt Nancy. Perhaps it might be better for him to dispose of Black Prince.

He shook his head. He loved this wild, sick-coated brute that manifested such fear of motor cars. Mace had bought him from a pair of itinerant horse buyers who camped for a day near the Whipple ranch. The traders were on their way north with a drove of lean-flanked range horses, most of which they had collected in the bunch-grass country. Among the lot was this young, coal-black gelding. He stood out from the others like a glistering gem.

Warily, Mace made an offer of five dollars, all the money he had with him; for the animal. He expected them to hicker, as is the way of horse traders. To his surprise, the offer was accepted on the spot. "He's your horse, Bud!" they told him promptly. "Put a rope on him and take him home!"

Mace soon learned why the traders let the black horse go so readily. On the way to the ranch, leading the gelding, he met Roscoe Hanley in his bright new roadster. In a wink, the black horse

glanced in the direction of the highway. "He's waving for me—to come over! Thanks I'll be killed if I stay here!"

She rode away without another word. Mace led the horse back to the barn, and to the safety of the box stall. Darkness soon lowered a murky blanket over the ranch. He lighted a lantern to finish the evening work. By the time he was ready to go to the house, a storm which had threatened through most of the day, swooped down with a roar of wind and a cold lashing of rain.

Mace was finishing a belated supper when the telephone rang. He got up from the dining table to answer. A woman's voice came in excited, broken cadences over the wire, barely audible above the moaning and howling of the gale. "It's Mrs. Hanley," he told his mother, who stood by, listening.

"Nancy is hurt! She slipped on the back porch—awfully ago—and broke her arm! She's suffering terribly—and I don't know what to do. Must have a doctor—at once. Mr. Hanley is away from home—rode to the other side of the range to-day looking for stray cattle. Roscoe hasn't returned with his car. I'm afraid he's met trouble."

"Can't you telephone for a doctor?" Mace asked, thinking the woman, in her excitement, had forgotten.

"I tried to telephone—but couldn't get a message through to the doctor," came the distracted reply. "His line must be broken by the storm." She repeated, with increased distress. "Nancy is suffering terribly! Her arm should be set at once—"

"I'll go for a doctor!" Mace replied. "Do you hear—I'll go for a doctor—right now!" He slammed the receiver on the hook and turned round, looking into his mother's white face. "Nancy fell and broke her arm!" he said tensely. "Mr. Hanley and Roscoe are both away from home. They must have a doctor at once. I'm riding to town for Doc Mercer!" He tramped across the kitchen and jerked his steaming coat from the wall where he had hung it only a few minutes before. He pulled on his hat and gloves as he strode to the door. His mother clutched his sleeve.

"Are you going to ride Prince?" she asked him fearfully.

"Sure, I'll ride Prince! He's the only horse on the ranch that can take me through—fast enough. Don't worry!"

"Do be careful Mace!" He touched her pale cheek with the back of his hand. "Don't worry! He's grinnin'. There will be no cars on the road to-night!"

To shorten the distance, Mace took a seldom-used wagon road which skirted the two ranches, and wound up over a bald ridge for a distance of five miles toward the county seat. The road was gravelled, narrow for most of its length and quite steep.

"Easy, Prince! Easy, boy!" he cautioned, as he tightened the reins. "You must hold your wind for the long spurt on the main highway!"

The horse settled to a rhythmic gallop that swung him by long, measured strides up the slope. The rain poured in solid sheets, making it impossible for Mace to see any distance at all. He could hear water gurgling and running everywhere. Over the ridge, the wind howled and shrieked. He did not strike the full force of it until his mount swung through the narrow gap at the crest, plunging on with quickened pace, straight into the gale.

Mace, leaning over the saddle horn, felt the hot vapor from the broncho's panting breath. "Easy, Prince! Easy, boy!" he cautioned again. "We have several miles yet to go—"

He straightened suddenly, and tightened his hold on the water-soaked reins. At the same instant the horse flung up his head, snorted and lurched to a stop. Out of the blurred, rain-blown gloom, directly ahead, a pair of gleaming lights

looked form. "A motor car! On this road and on such a night!"

He had taken the cut-off to avoid the things! It came on, in intermediate gear, whining like some complaining monster, up the narrow, gullied trail.

Mace slipped his toes deeper into the stirrups, and yanked off his right glove to better grip the slippery reins. He pulled the shaking horse against the embankment on the inside of the highway. The lights of the approaching machine became more dazzling. Mace hoped the driver would pass without sounding his horn.

"Cara—a-hoo-oo! Cara—a-a-hoo-oo!" The familiar, raucous note burst upon the stormy night like an evil call.

In wild, uncontrollable frenzy, Black Prince leaped into the road, straight into the path of the oncoming car. Mace yelled and swung his arm. Another howl came from the motor horn, then the excited shouts of the driver. Must have been the shaking horse against the embankment on the inside of the highway. The lights of the approaching machine became more dazzling. Mace hoped the driver would pass without sounding his horn.

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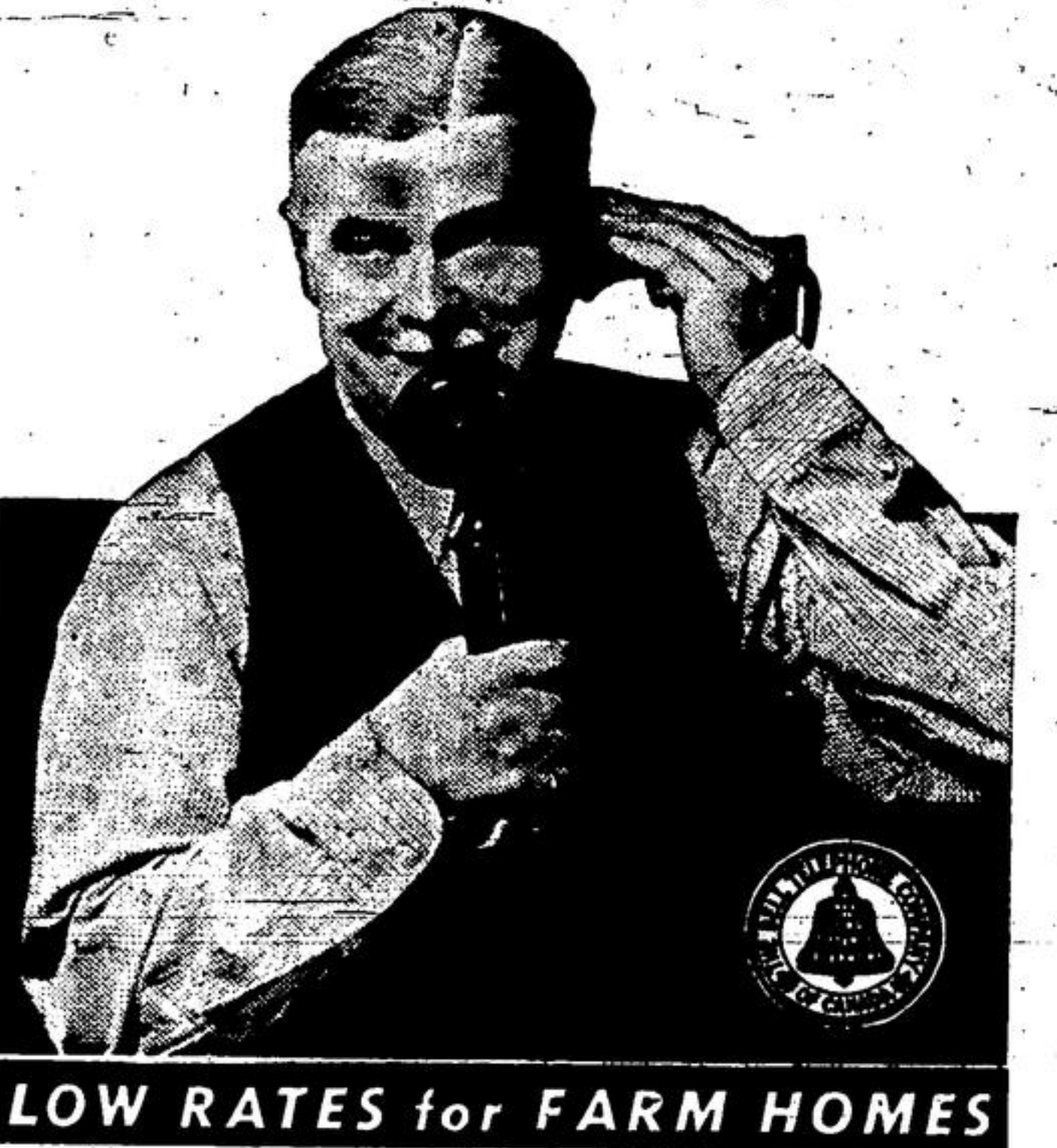
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"It's all right—I see them coming along the road now!"

When you've got a telephone you can reassure people quickly. In the country, farm homes are far away from each other—it takes a lot of time to send somebody "next door"—but it takes no time at all when you've got a telephone. Then you are in touch with your neighbors, with the stores in the village—and if your grown up children are working in nearby towns—you can hear their voices too. Every farm home should have a telephone—because it costs so little.



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Mackenzie King case-up shows Prime Minister Mackenzie King and Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, as they walked together into the Senate of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa during the coronation visit of the King and Queen to the capital on their current tour of the Dominion.