

# WILDFIRE, THE RED STALLION

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and Other Great Horse Stories



*Compiled and edited by  
Joe L. Wheeler*



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# DEDICATION

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I was nine years old, living with my missionary parents in Panama, when my dream of someday owning a horse came true. Though the white horse my folks gave me was nothing much to look at and was thin and bony, just having a horse of my own was perpetual music to me. So it is today, looking back through the years to my childhood, it seems right that I dedicate this book of horse stories to the only horse I ever owned, a horse that filled my life with her name,

MUSICA

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# INTRODUCTION

## *The Changing World of the Horse*

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*Joseph Leininger Wheeler*

Horses stand about halfway between dogs' slavish devotion to man and cats' noblesse oblige. They respond best to kindness backed by strength, anchored by consistency. When their trust is betrayed, such a wound rarely ever fully heals. Horses, like elephants, have long memories.

Somewhere between three thousand and five thousand years ago, a great change occurred. *Equus caballus* first appeared on the steppes of Central Asia. Scholars today label this common ancestor as Przewalski's horse (or *E. caballus Przewalski*); it was sandy in color. Eventually, its descendants spread eastward into Mongolia, China, Europe, Asia Minor, Egypt, and the other nations bordering the Mediterranean. In 1519, the Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortez introduced the horse to Mexico, from where it soon spread all over the New World.

As to what the horse has meant to the human race, *Britannica* editors perhaps have articulated it best:

The relationship of the horse to man has been unique. The horse was man's partner and friend, carrying him above his fellow man on foot and giving him power and speed. It ploughed his field and brought in his harvest, hauled goods and conveyed passengers, followed game and, later, tracked cattle, and carried combatants into battle and adventurers to unknown lands. It has provided recreation in the form of jousts, tournaments, carrousels, and in the sport of riding. The widespread influence of the horse is expressed in the English language in such terms as chivalry, cavaliers, and cavalry which generally connote honor, respect, good manners, and straightforwardness (*Macropaedia*, fifteenth edition, vol. 8, 1088).

Down through recorded history, the horse has been a symbol of nobility and royalty. Both the Scythian kings and the Egyptian Pharaohs revered their favorite horses so much that when these rulers died, their horses were

entombed with their masters. In Greek mythology, the man/horse synthesis, called a centaur, signified the oneness of man and horse. Furthermore, the gods were often depicted on well-trained horses. It was unthinkable for a king, general, statesman, or hero to be other than a superb horseman. The same was true for the Romans.

It's fascinating to note how often famous people associated themselves with their horses: Alexander the Great with Bucephalus, the infamous Caligula with Incitatus (the emperor planned to make him a senator!), Rich-

ard II with Roan Barbary, the Duke of Wellington with Copenhagen, Cortez with El Morzillo, and Robert E. Lee with Traveller, to name just a few.

Ramon Adams, dean of Old West historians, had a great deal to say about the horse in the settling of the



American West. According to the cowboy's unbreakable code, no matter how hungry or weary he might be, the comfort and nourishment of his horse always took precedence over his own. When climbing mountains on horseback, he'd spare his horse by picking the easiest route; when riding on a hard-surfaced road, he'd ride on the softest part of it. If he met a rider on a grade, he always gave the other the inside. A cowboy's string of horses was never broken. If it was, it usually meant he was about to be fired. No horse buster abused horses. When a rider was thrown, if not crippled, he was expected to crawl back on the horse. A good hand never overworked his horse.

A cowman saddled and unsaddled his own horse. Only in a serious emergency would he ever loan his horse to another. To mount another's personal horse, without permission, was considered an insult of the first magnitude. One did not feed another's horse without its owner's knowledge.

If visiting where he was unknown, he must remain on his horse until invited to dismount by his host. On a stranger's land, a rider should stick to the trail. If he met a driven herd, he should remain in his saddle.

The reason horse stealing was grounds for lynching was that one's horse often represented the difference between life or death for the cowboy on the open ranges.

(*The Cowman and His Code of Ethics*, Austin, Texas: The Encino Press, 1969).

## **The great change**

For well over three thousand years, the horse represented the fastest land speed known to man. Indeed, it was as essential to an age's lifestyle as steam, engines, electricity, and computers are in our modern world. All this lasted until well beyond the advent of the horseless carriage. No more significant and wrenching change has our world ever known than the switch from a horse-driven world to a machine-driven one. Speed gradually made the horse obsolete.

As time has passed, however, even in the industrialized world, the horse has made a comeback of sorts. Today, however, except in societies such as the Amish, the horse's role has tended toward entertainment, relaxation, or sport rather than utility.

In times past, the horse may almost be said to have been a male preserve. During the last century, however, that has ceased to be true. Though the male love of horses has continued, the feminine species has drawn even with the male in terms of horse devotion. So much so that rare is the girl who fails to fall in love with horses (whether real, fictional, or both) during that crucial age of a woman's life (between nine and fourteen) during which books and horses form the bridge between childhood and romance with boys and men.

## **About this collection**

In this collection, some of the greatest nature writers of our age have weighed in with memorable tributes to the horse—writers such as Walter Farley, Zane Grey, Will James, Maurice Maeterlinck, Penny Porter, and Ernest Thompson Seton.

Each of the stories is, in a way, an iridescent piece of stained glass contributing to a multidimensional mosaic of horse and the human love affair with the species.

Chances are that never, between two covers, has there appeared a collection quite like this one—stories that reveal as much about the people who love horses as they reveal about the horses themselves. Two stories deserve special notice: Grace Livingston Hill (known primarily as a Christian romance writer) reveals in “The Ransomers” an entirely different dimension, a depth and breadth, that may surprise readers who mistakenly assume they had pigeon-holed her. Quite possibly, it may well be the greatest short story she ever wrote. Though Eleanor Bailey’s “Horse Sense” is ostensibly about a horse, undergirding the narrative is another story—a story about a rural doctor who is faced late in life with his greatest temptation. Of all the stories written on the subject of what it means to be a success in this thing called life, this story may very well be one of the greatest of them all.

Generally speaking, most of the stories collected in this book are set in a time period before the “great change” took place. For comparison purposes, a few feature our contemporary world. In these stories we may vicariously revel in the swan song of wild horses—how tragic that most Americans will never again glory in the sight of horses running free in the wild! But, in story, we may.

Even more significant, however, is the opportunity to become acquainted with the essence of the horse as revealed in these stories: its personalities, its courage, its endurance, its loyalty, its fidelity, its dependability, its idiosyncrasies, its intelligence . . .

And above all—its *heart*.

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*“The Changing World of the Horse,” by Joseph Leininger Wheeler. Copyright © 2006. Printed by permission of the author.*



# WILDFIRE, THE RED STALLION

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Zane Grey

*Fiction and fact often blur with Zane Grey, especially where horses are concerned. Often, on expeditions into the wild country of the Southwest, he'd hear true stories about specific horses that would capture his imagination; later he'd weave such horses into his stories and novels, and later yet he would purchase real-life horses that would carry the same names.*

*Though no single account is acknowledged as the greatest of all his horse stories, this one comes close. It has everything in it—an abducted heroine who has been roped to the back of one of Grey's most famed horses, the White King; her fiancé, Lin Sloane, astride another legendary horse, Lucy Bostil's Wildfire—both protagonists are being pursued by outlaws as well as a wind-driven forest fire. Death appears all but certain as the fire is coming upon them faster than a horse can run. The combination of all these ingredients adds up to one of the greatest horse stories ever written. The setting: the uplands of Utah, near the Grand Canyon.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Wildfire reached the pines. There, down the open aisles between the black trees, ran the fleet gray racer. Wildfire saw him and snorted. The King was a hundred yards to the fore.

"Wildfire! It's come—the race, the race!" called Sloane. But he could not hear his own call. There was a roar overhead, heavy, almost deafening.

The wind! The wind! Yet that roar did not deaden a strange, shrieking crack somewhere behind. Wildfire leaped in fright. Sloane turned. Fire had run up a pine tree, which exploded as if the trunk were powder!

“A race with fire! . . . Lucy! Lucy!”

In that poignant cry Sloane uttered his realization of the strange fate that had waited for the inevitable race between Wildfire and the King; he uttered his despairing love for Lucy and his acceptance of death for her and himself. No horse could outrun wind-driven fire in a dry pine forest. Sloane had no hope of that. How perfectly fate, time, place, horses, himself, and his sweetheart had met! . . .



Tense questions pierced the dark chaos of Sloane's mind. What could he do? Run the King down? Make him kill Lucy? Save her from horrible death by fire?

The red horse had not gained a yard on the gray. Sloane, a keen judge of distance, saw this, and for the first time he doubted Wildfire's power to run down the King. Not with such a lead! It was hopeless . . . so hopeless.

He turned to look back. He saw no fire, no smoke—only the dark trunks and the massed green foliage in violent agitation against the blue sky. That revived a faint hope. If he could get a few miles ahead before the fire began to leap across the pine crests, then it might be possible to run out of the forest if it were not wide.

Then a stronger hope grew. It seemed that foot by foot Wildfire was gaining on the King. Sloane studied the level forest floor sliding toward him. He lost his hope, then regained it again, and then he spurred the horse. Wildfire hated that. But apparently he did not quicken his strides. And Sloane could not tell if he lengthened them. He was not running near his limit, but after the nature of such a horse, left to choose his gait, running slowly, but rising toward his swiftest and fiercest effort.

Sloane's rider's blood never thrilled to that race, for his blood had curdled. The sickness within rose to his mind. And that flashed up whenever he dared to look forward at Lucy's white form. Sloane could not bear this sight; it almost made him reel, yet he was driven to look. He saw that the King carried no saddle, so with Lucy on him he was light. He ought to run all day with only that weight. Wildfire carried a heavy saddle, a pack, a water bag, and a rifle. Sloane untied the pack and let it drop. He almost threw aside the water bag, but something withheld his hand, and also he kept his rifle. What were a few more pounds to this desert stallion in his last run? Sloane knew it was Wildfire's greatest and last race.

Suddenly Sloane's ears rang with a terrible oncoming roar. For an instant the unknown sound stiffened him, robbed him of strength. Only the horn of the saddle, hooking into him, held him on. Then the years of his desert life answered to a call more than human.

He had to race against fire. He must beat the flame to the girl he loved. There were miles of dry forest, like powder. Fire backed by a heavy gale could rage through dry pine faster than any horse could run. He might fail to save Lucy. Fate had given him a bitter ride. But he swore a grim oath that he would beat the flame. The intense, abnormal rider's passion in him, like John Bostil's, dammed up, but never fully controlled, burst within him, and suddenly he awoke to a wild and terrible violence of heart and soul. He had accepted death; he had no fear. All that he wanted to do, the last thing he wanted to do, was to ride down the King and kill Lucy mercifully. How he

would have gloried to burn there in the forest—and for a million years in the dark beyond—to save the girl!

He goaded the horse. Then he looked back.

Through the aisles of the forest he saw a strange, streaky, murky something moving, alive, shifting up and down, never an instant the same. It must have been the wind—the heat before the fire. He seemed to see through it, but there was nothing beyond, only opaque, dim, mustering clouds. Hot puffs shot forward into his face. His eyes smarted and stung; his ears hurt and were growing deaf. The tumult was the roar of avalanches, of maelstroms, of rushing seas, of the wreck of the uplands and the ruin of the earth. It grew to be so great a roar that he no longer heard. There was only silence.

And he turned to face ahead. The stallion stretched low on a dead run; the tips of the pines were bending before the wind; and wildfire, the terrible thing for which his horse was named, was leaping through the forest. But there was no sound.

Ahead of Sloane, down the aisles, low under the trees spreading over the running King, floated swiftly some medium, like a transparent veil. It was neither smoke nor air. It carried faint pinpoints of light, sparks, that resembled atoms of dust floating in sunlight. It was a wave of heat driven before the storm of fire. Sloane did not feel pain, but he seemed to be drying up, parching. And Lucy must be suffering now. He goaded the stallion, raking his flanks. Wildfire answered with a scream and greater speed. Except for Lucy and the White King and Wildfire, everything seemed so strange and unreal—the swift rush between the pines, now growing ghostly in the dimming light, the sense of a pursuing, overpowering force, and yet absolute silence.

Sloane fought the desire to look back. But he could not resist it. Some horrible fascination compelled him. All behind had changed. A hot wind, like a blast from a furnace, blew light, stinging particles into his face. The fire was racing in the treetops, while below all was yet clear. A lashing, leaping flame engulfed the canopy of pines. It was white, seething, inconceivably swift, with a thousand flashing tongues. It traveled ahead of smoke. It was so thin he could see the branches through it, and the fiery clouds behind. It swept onward, a sublime and an appalling spectacle. Sloane could not think of what it looked like. It was fire, liberated, freed from the bowels of the earth, tremendous, devouring.

This, then, was the meaning of fire. This, then, was the horrible fate to befall Lucy.

But no! He thought he must be insane not to be overcome in spirit. Yet he was not. He would beat the flame to Lucy. He felt the loss of something, some kind of a sensation which he ought to have had. Still he rode that race to kill his sweetheart better than any race he had ever before ridden. He kept his seat; he dodged the snags; he pulled the maddened horse the shortest way; he kept the King running straight.

No horse had ever run so magnificent a race! Wildfire was outracing the wind and fire, and he was overhauling the most noted racer of the uplands against a tremendous handicap. But now he was no longer racing to kill the King; he was running in terror. For miles he had held that long, swift, wonderful stride without a break. He was running to his death, whether or not he distanced the fire. Nothing could stop him now but a bursting heart.

Sloane untied his lasso and coiled the noose. Almost within reach of the King! One throw—one sudden swerve—and the King would go down. Lucy would know only a stunning shock. Sloane's heart broke. Could he kill her—crush that dear golden head? He could not, yet he must! He saw a long, curved, red welt on Lucy's white shoulders. What was that? Had a branch lashed her? Sloane could not see her face. She could not have been dead or in a faint, for she was riding the King, bound as she was!

Closer and closer drew Wildfire. He seemed to go faster and faster as that wind of flame gained upon them. The air was too thick to breathe. It had an irresistible weight. It pushed horses and riders onward in their flight—straws on the crest of a cyclone.

Again Sloane looked back, and again the spectacle was different. There was a white and golden fury of flame above, beautiful and blinding; and below, farther back, an inferno of glowing fire, black-streaked, with trembling, exploding puffs and streams of yellow smoke. The aisles between the burning pines were smoky, murky caverns, moving and weird. Sloane saw fire shoot from the treetops down the trunks, and he saw fire shoot up the trunks, like trains of powder. They exploded like huge rockets. And along the forest floor leaped the little flames. His eyes burned and blurred till all merged into a wide, pursuing storm too awful for the gaze of man.

Wildfire was running down the King. The great gray had not lessened his speed, but he was breaking. Sloane felt a ghastly triumph when he began

to whirl the noose of the lasso around his head. Already he was within range. But he held back his throw which meant the end of all. And as he hesitated Wildfire suddenly whistled one shrieking blast.

Sloane looked. Ahead there was light through the forest! Sloane saw a white, open space of grass. A park? No! The end of the forest! Wildfire, like a demon, hurtled onward with his smoothness of action gone, beginning to break, within a length of the King.

A cry escaped Sloane—a cry as silent as if there had been no deafening roar, as wild as the race, and as terrible as the ruthless fire. It was the cry of life instead of death. Both the White King and Wildfire would beat the flame.

Then, with the open just ahead Sloane felt a wave of hot wind rolling over him. He saw the lashing tongues of flame above him in the pines. The storm had caught him. It forged ahead. He was riding under a canopy of fire. Burning pine cones, like torches, dropped all around him. He had a terrible blank sense of weight, of suffocation, of the air turning to fire.

Then Wildfire, with his nose at White King's flank, flashed out of the pines into the open. Sloane saw a grassy wide reach inclining gently toward a dark break in the ground with crags rising sheer above it, and to the right a great open space.

Sloane felt that clear air as the breath of deliverance. His reeling sense righted. There the King ran, blindly going to his death. Wildfire was breaking fast. His momentum carried him. He was almost done.

Sloane roped the King, and holding hard, waited for the end. They ran on, breaking, breaking. Sloane thought he would have to throw the King, for they were perilously near the deep cleft in the rim. But the King went to his knees.

Sloane leaped off just as Wildfire fell. How the blade flashed that released Lucy! She was wet from the horse's sweat and foam. She slid off into Sloane's arms, and he called her name. Could she hear above that roar back there in the forest? The pieces of rope hung to her wrists, and Sloane saw dark bruises, raw and bloody. She fell against him. Was she dead? His heart contracted. How white the face! No. He saw her breast heave against his, and he cried aloud, incoherently in his joy. She was alive! She was not badly hurt. She stirred. She plucked at him with nerveless hands. She pressed close to him. He heard her smothered voice, yet so full, so wonderful! . . .

## *Wildfire, the Red Stallion*

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After rejoicing that they were both still alive, belatedly their thoughts turned to their faithful horses. Lucy had long been inseparable from her horse, Wildfire.

How strange that Sloane should run toward the King while Lucy ran to Wildfire!

The King was a beaten, broken horse, but he would live to run another race.

Lucy was kneeling beside Wildfire, sobbing and crying, “Wildfire! Wildfire!”

All of Wildfire was white except where he was red, and that red was not now his glossy, flaming skin. A terrible muscular convulsion, as of internal collapse, grew slower and slower. Yet choked, blinded, dying, killed on his feet, Wildfire heard Lucy’s voice.

“Oh, Lin! Oh, Lin!” moaned Lucy.

While they knelt there the violent convulsions changed to slow heaves.

“He ran the King down—carryin’ weight—with a long lead to overcome!” Sloane muttered, and he put a shaking hand on the horse’s wet neck.

A change, both of body and spirit, seemed to pass over the great stallion.

“Wildfire! Wildfire!”

Again the rider called to his horse, with a low and piercing cry. But Wildfire did not hear.

\* \* \* \* \*

*“Wildfire,” by Zane Grey. Reprinted by permission of Loren Grey. Zane Grey (1872–1939) was born in Zanesville, Ohio. He was the highest-selling and highest-paid author in the world during the first half of the twentieth century. He is considered to be the Father of the Western Novel and the last chronicler of the frontier to write while the frontier still existed. He was also one of the leading nature writers of his time.*