

# Riding With Death

a short story by

William Brasse

© William Brasse

That my destination was heaven could not be doubted. I had committed no offense that would condemn me, so I put my foot into the stirrup with confidence. I found it odd that Death would require me to ride a horse, and my own horse at that, to my ultimate destination. What if I hadn't owned a horse? Worse, what if I was unable to ride? It puzzled me, but what did I know about the dark world?

I swung into the saddle and started after the large, black-cloaked figure. He was already fifty yards ahead of me, but I caught him easily enough. I'm a good rider and still young enough to absorb the shocks that come with a canter or even a gallop. That I was being taken from life at the age of forty and in a state of perfect health seemed unfair, but again, I knew I was ignorant of the mysterious machinery of life and death. It's not as if my passing had been proposed to the local county commission who would open the matter to debate and public discussion before putting it up to a vote. Death ruled by fiat.

"Faster," said the figure beside me, and I spurred Bella, my dappled mare. I hoped Bella would be spared my fate. My wife and children would need her on the farm. Surely at some point I would send Bella back and proceed afoot or be lifted onto the back of the black stallion that Death rode. The horse panted steamy, sulfurous clouds and hot saliva dripped from its tongue like streams of molten pewter. Death rode in a Spanish saddle. I had seen some like it on my trips to the West, but few here in the Pennsylvania mountains. If I had been asked, I would have pictured Death in more familiar habit, garbed in clothes at least somewhat like our own and riding on a saddle that bore the stamp of a local saddler. Yet again I was confused, and I wondered if it would all be explained when I reached the end of my journey. I might meet the unfortunate Californio who had lost not only his life, but his saddle to this Grim Reaper.

"Faster," said the hoarse voice again, and I put my head close to Bella's neck and hied her to more speed. We were in a long valley now, one I didn't recognize. The hillsides bore a heavy growth of timber, but the bottom was meadowland. The grass held traces of dew that glimmered like jewels in the light that did not come from the sun. I began to feel hot.