

The Horse's Master

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The voice on the phone grew strident with fury. After waiting patiently for the outburst to die out, Harun began to reassure the man with his level baritone. He put the receiver down, knowing well that though he had succeeded in calming him this time, the builder would call again until Harun had found a final solution. The five thousand dollar bill for the new stable which he and his brothers had built in southern Fayoum to profit from waves of American tourists, was long overdue. It was soon to be the month of Ramadhan, a time of prayer and honor when Harun had no wish to think of money's tyrannies. Instead, he wanted to thank God for the treasures of his life: his best horse El'Awej and his children.

For a while, Harun had seen each new day come as a portent of good luck. Even now with the days turned into months, he still hoped that tourism would thrive again as when the brothers decided to expand their business. Terrorism had driven Egyptian tourism into the doldrums and investments confidently made in boom times had turned sour. Harun had taken to mumbling despondent imprecations to himself about the folly of fanatics and the cowardice of Yankees, both of which were leading him to bankruptcy. The Giza pyramids loomed high with a lonely look of ruins, abandoned to majestic solitude while men sat listless under canvas canopies with their camels and saddled horses scattered around them. Their fatalism rose in litanies of 'boukrah' and 'malesh' along with clouds of sand which resettled on all of them in a coat of perpetuity.

Amidst this economic aridity the Kuwaiti woman had appeared at his stable and offered him— just like that— fifty thousand dollars for El'Awej. But there was something about the woman that he hated: the way she had hopped out of the car in a self-consciously lady-like manner, and the sallow, unhealthy skin of her face made up with violent dabs of

color. The car itself exasperated him: a white Mercedes coupe with a leopard skin pattern on the seats. Surely, she had no fear of God. He knew he was the only stable owner in this part of Giza who had not sold the Kuwaiti woman a horse but he still felt no need for her money. Disdainfully, he had turned down the small fortune of the drawn-faced ghoul. She had money at a time when the people of Chari'al Ahram had none and for the past year she had been roaming their streets. Every house seemed to hide in a back court, in a ground floor hall or in the most remote corner of a stable, at least one fine Arabian horse, turquoise beads strung around his neck against the evil eye— as precious and concealed as a beautiful wife.

Even if as the eldest of the family, Harun was unquestioningly obeyed, he was often, in his own right, a master in good judgment and quiet command. He was also kind, prone to easy fun and frequently given to acts of liberality. His impulsive generosity lent him the aura of a far richer man than he actually was. Something about him, like the pyramids, belonged to a superb and noble past, and made the people of Chari'al Ahram take pride in him. Girls and women alike delighted in his square, strong and neatly mustached face. He wore the fellahin's robe called jellabah, and the keffiyeh, the desert man's red and white head cloth which most of the time stayed loosely wrapped around his neck. His color was brown, from the wool of the long jellabah to his skin, taut and tanned by almost forty years of life on the edge of the desert. His eyes were deeply set in his face like two pools of liquid copper. A querulous cough rising all too often from his tar-ridden lungs, would mar the clemency of his features. He chain-smoked Turkish cigarettes, which he held between his middle and fourth finger and his teeth were stained from the habit. Today he drew eagerly on his cigarette for the following day would be the beginning of Ramadhan's privations.

Carrying a chair in one hand, he stepped out of his office into the small stable courtyard and spoke to his youngest son who was feeding their ten horses. The boy immediately took a harness off its hook, opened one of the stalls, releasing a prancing, burnt chestnut stallion. Harun sat on the chair and looked his favorite horse over with critical eyes. The body was less chiseled: fat had begun to thicken its girth and its arched neck. The big eyes looked hopefully at the master and the nostrils dilated expectantly. Harun knew well how the powerful muscles needed exercise and longed to run the sand slopes of the nearby desert. He went over to pat the horse on the neck while the boy saddled him. El'Awej bent his dished head to his master's open palm, nuzzled at the familiar tobacco smell with his ears smartly cocked and whinnied. Harun's eyes softened. Two years ago he had bought him from a Tahawy tribesman and though El'Awej's neck wasn't marked with the 'asil' stamp of an Arab pure-bred, he had cost a lot of money, but with Harun's skillful training his value had continued to increase. The horse was as dear to him as any of his children. Harun used to ride him daily when guiding tourists around the Giza pyramids or to Saqqarah for a day's excursion. Then, his beauty had been flawless, bewitching, pervaded with fiery glamour like no other horse in Chari'al Ahram and everyone gazed admiringly as Harun rode the animal, harnessed in red pompons, to the desert. But still today, El'Awej was said to be the best horse for miles around, even though his only work-out was the ten minute trip between home and the general stable near the Mena House. All day, he stood tied near a water trough, while Harun himself sat around, counting another day without tourists.

Suddenly, Harun had lost hope and he pondered grimly the Fayoum builder's fury. As he stared out to the motionless waves of desert from his usual waiting spot, he felt himself drowning in its empty sea of sand.

Later, he was seen walking to and fro, his face un-

usually dismal. He stopped to pat El'Awej in long tender strokes. Sighing, he took his keffiyeh from around his neck, put it over his head and prayed in soft anguish. At last, he resigned himself to the only solution available to him and at moments this seemed like a holy sacrifice to God, but at others it seemed an abominable sin.

He rode El'Awej home and rushed to the telephone, afraid that he might weaken in his resolve. The Kuwaiti woman was quick to answer, as if she had been waiting for his call. Harun's determination disguised his worry that she would not accept his conditions. But to his sad relief, she made no difficulty and they agreed to meet the next morning. It has come to this, he thought in grief, I have given in to that hyena. He tried to console himself with the thought that he had wrested from her the promise of eighty-five thousand dollars—almost double the price she had previously offered!

And so the next morning, El'Awej was rubbed down, combed and polished until he shone like a gold ingot. Harun nursed his sorrow and contempt for himself by staying away from the horse until the time of the appointment. He sat mournfully at this desk, cursing himself for selling his dearest possession, worst of all to the disgusting Kuwaiti woman when suddenly a girl's voice rang out clear as a bell. It drew him out of his office to the stable yard. There he beheld a ravishing girl who was patting El'Awej and talking to him as if the animal had the capacity to reply. The horse seemed fond of her extravagant beauty. He nudged her gently, his gold mane mingling with her long black hair. With immense oblique eyes, she looked up at Harun and smiled enticingly. Though she was Arab, she was dressed in modern clothes, with tight jeans, a long-sleeved white shirt and fine leather boots. Harun shivered and felt himself lose balance. "My name is Leila," she said, putting out her hand to him. "You, I bet, are Harun Mohammed Abu Safian. And this one must be the famous El'Awej." She smiled with a self-

assurance that seemed natural to her loveliness. She turned back to the horse, combing her fingers through his mane. "Yes," Harun murmured so low that she insisted kindly, "Am I right?"

"Yes, this is my horse El'Awej" he said louder, relieved to hear himself say so. "Riding such a horse must bring one closer to heaven," she said with fervor. Harun acquiesced, for this was exactly what he had thought until meeting Leila. But now her beauty surpassed anything that he had ever contemplated before. She disclosed nothing of herself except this beauty and she fascinated him like an apparition from a different plane of existence. He wanted to create some permanent bond between them before she vanished. El'Awej had become a mere silhouette in her background.

With grave earnestness, she placed her manicured hand against her heart. "I am not a bad rider, you know. I wonder if you might let me to get on his back for a short while. It would be wonderful for me." Her tone had become modest and full of childish hope which left Harun speechless.

Without a word, he moved towards the tack room to get the bridle and saddle, but she stopped him. "No need for that." Her teeth flashed in amusement. She came nearer and pressed his arm, "Thank you." Harun struggled to keep his composure. Then swiftly, with the easy action of an old stable hand, she untied El'Awej's lunge from the ring in the wall and jumped on his back. The horse collected himself, and responding joyfully to the light pressure of her legs, he proceeded to dance, lifting himself high, his whole body never exceeding the contours of some invisible geometry. She bent forward, putting her arms lovingly around his neck and Harun's eyes misted over and in his racing heart, he felt that trouble and sorrow had dissipated.

"It's like riding music! How supple he is!" She cried. "You taught him this?"

"I have been the only one to ride him," replied Harun.

"You have the best of masters, El'Awej," she confided to the horse while peeking coyly at Harun. "I love you even more for it," she added to the animal's ear. Harun gazed at the pair, entranced. A warmth of self-confidence and infallible luck flowed through him. "Do you?" He asked gently. Before she could reply, he motioned graciously to the horse, "He's yours. I give him to you." His heart soared with exhilaration as he said it.

The girl slid off the horse's back and came up to Harun. She smelled of Lotus blossom, she was light and delicate as a breeze, yet strong and overwhelming like a hot gust of *khamassin*. He had no idea where she came from and somehow, he didn't care to know. Their encounter had the serene and inevitable charm of truth.

She inhaled deeply as she looked up with her oblong eyes into his. Then her laughter tinkled like music to his ears.

"You don't know me," she said, dutifully drawing his attention to the fact, though she didn't seem surprised by what he had said. "I know you well enough," replied the entranced Harun, brushing aside such futility. "El'Awej belongs to you. It's my pleasure to give him to you." She came up close and took his hand in hers. "How unusually generous you are!" She said. "You are welcome," replied Harun. He thought: Allah, you are the generous one on this first day of Ramadhan.

Suddenly, he remembered his appointment and sure enough, the Kuwaiti woman was standing at the gate. How swiftly Leila had made him forget about the woman. Reluctantly, he jolted his brain back to reality. What excuse would he give the awful creature? He couldn't go back on his gift to the girl; furthermore, he had no wish to. He grinned to himself. He would tell her the truth. What satisfaction to see her froth at the mouth! To hell with the money!

Pulling El'Awej by the lunge, the beautiful girl walked over to the other woman. Harun saw her hug the Kuwaiti with her free arm and they talked in hushed tones to each other for a while, the girl, breathless, while the older woman listened, lips open and expectant, not even looking over at Harun. The ravishing Leila paused solemnly in what she had said and twined her finger through the horse's mane. At last, turning to Harun, the Kuwaiti smiled. Only then did he notice that the theatrically painted eyes, batting with surprise, were oblique and that her lips, worn from predation, had been luscious at one time. He looked from one smile to the other and swayed in horror.

"That, Mr. Safian, is a much better deal you gave my daughter, than what you suggested yesterday on the telephone," said the Kuwaiti. Ripples of gentle laughter came from both women. "In fact," added the mother, "that's the best deal I've ever had!"

On that first day of Ramadhan, Harun waved them away with their booty and slowly moved back to his office.