

Pony

He sat in the saddle. The sun beat down. He was sweating even under his hat. He took it off and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. He almost wiped it against his uniform sleeve, but the thought of long hours trying to keep it clean in this dust and dirt bowl...

The dizziness came back. What in the heck was in that beer? Second Lieutenant Nelson swayed in the saddle. He stuck his hat back on his head.

Sal-gal, his quarter horse, sensing something, whinnied at him. He patted her neck.

“You’re right, Sal. We need to get back to base. Won’t do to be out past curfew.”

Nelson pulled her reins and she walked a few steps in the hard scabble sand.

The dizziness came back, only worse. Nelson was sweating even more now and there was a pounding in his ears. His head was killing him, and he was bending over now, low over the saddle. Sal-gal stopped.

Clutching the saddle horn, Nelson felt the darkness overwhelm him. Still holding the reins in one hand, he slowly fell from the saddle. One boot was caught in the stirrup. He managed to pull his foot out of the boot before he completely passed out.

Sal-gal stood patiently next to her master. There was a little scrub grass close to the railway tracks and she moved over and started munching.

#

The bright desert sun was starting to descend in the sky. Two men dressed in striped cotton gowns with wrapped turbans on their heads, were using the railway ties as a walkway. They were busy chatting in Arabic and taking a walk before the evening meal.

Twilight was settling but one of the men spotted the horse standing motionless by the side of the tracks. The two started running toward the quarter horse shouting expletives.

“What son of a donkey would leave nice horse like that out here alone?”

They ran toward Sal-gal who stood calmly and finally saw the young soldier lying in the sand. They ran to him. He was unconscious and very hot. One of the men retrieved the long leather boot from the ground where it had fallen. Together, the two of them lifted the young man up and pushed him over, facedown across his horse’s saddle.

They turned around, a goggle with speculation and led Sal-gal and her master back to their village.

As they came into the village, heads began to pop out with a myriad of questions. Who is he, where is he from? The two men, Omar, and Mohammad waved the questions off and led the pony to Omar’s small home. Numerous hands came to help them lift and pull the young man off the saddle and into Omar’s dwelling. His wife turned from dinner and exclaimed; a hand over her mouth.

“He is sick, mother,” Omar said to her in Arabic.

Pointing with a long wooden spoon, she directed the men to the main bedroom, where they laid Nelson on a low bed.

Salim put down the spoon and leaned over the young man.

“Undo the jacket,” she commanded to her husband.

They carefully unbuttoned the brown light-wool jacket with its high collar and and metal buttons. Omar undid the wide brown leather belt and laid it aside. He had to pull the leather strap from around the man’s chest to get it off him.

“He’s burning up,” Salim told her husband. She yelled at the girls to bring her rags and cold water. They did and Salim wrung the water out of the first rag. Carefully, she began to wipe the dirt and dust off the young man’s face. Dinner, for the moment, was forgotten.

Mohammad still stood outside holding Sal-gal with one hand. Omar came and spoke to him briefly.

“Can we put her in your barn? The man is very sick.”

With some reluctance, Mohammad agreed and started to lead the pony away.

“Can I help, father?” An eager, Ali, Omar’s oldest son pulled at his father’s sleeve.

Omar smiled down in the dim light at his son, the one who always loved animals.

“Yes, of course, my son. Go.” Omar turned and went back inside his dwelling.

Ali scampered after Mohammad and the pony.

In the small barn, Mohammad undid the buckle from under Sal’s belly and he and Ali pulled the saddle off the pony’s back. Mohammad placed the saddle with care on the ground.

“She needs water,” he told the boy.

Ali gathered up the reins and led Sal to the water trough where she began to drink heavily.

“Hum,” Mohammad, “this is a very fine horse. We have hay. Maybe some oats for her too.”

Ali was still holding the reins while Sal drank. He was mesmerized.

“She is the most beautiful I have ever seen,” he told the man dreamily.

“Yes, yes. Very fine. We need to get those reins off her.”

Sal had a good drink. Mohammad approached her cautiously, and gradually lifted the leather head piece off from her ears and then pulled the metal bit from her mouth. He hung them from a peg.

“She needs to eat. And she is dirty and needs to be brushed down. You want to do that?” he asked the boy already knowing the answer.

Ali jumped up and down.

“Alright then. I will send my son and he will show you where everything is. And whatever you do, do not leave the door open for her to get out. Can you do that?”

Ali looked stricken. “No, no. I will guard her with my life.”

Mohammad almost laughed. “Well, hopefully it doesn’t come to that. I will be back in a few minutes. Keep the door shut.”

Mohammad had put a light rope around Sal’s neck with a hand lead. Ali got her over to the hay pile and she began to munch contently.

In a few minutes, Mohammad and his oldest son were back. They pulled out the grooming comb and brush and a small pail with cold water and two rags.

Mohammad left them with more admonishments about shutting the door behind themselves. The boys got to work with the rags and water.

Ali took the rag and gently wiped Sal’s face to get off the dust. She blinked at him with her big eyes and long lashes and kept eating. He started to talk to her in Arabic and stroke her mane.

The other boy started working the flanks.

“She is as dirty as a donkey,” he exclaimed.

“Don’t say that, she’s no donkey.”

“Okay, okay, Ali. No more remarks about your new girlfriend, okay?”

Ali didn't even hear him. He was busy with the grooming brush and was working Sal's entire side getting out the dirt. When the water was dirty, he picked up the pail and headed for the door.

“I'll be right back.”

The other boy nodded at him. Ali made sure the door was completely closed. He threw the dirty water to the side and ran for the well.

The moon was rising in the sky and was bright, casting a clear light on the village square. Ali did something he usually would not be caught dead doing, he gathered the well bucket and pulled up water for his little pail. This was woman's work, but at the moment, he didn't care. He filled up his pail and walking as fast as he could go, without spilling, he got back to the barn. Setting the bucket down, he opened the door, put the bucket in and pulled the door shut behind himself.

Salem, the other boy was still there.

“You know, I'm getting a little tired of this. I hardly had any dinner. I think I'll go. You?”

Ali shook his head, ignoring the growls from his own stomach.

“Alright then. She's all yours. See you tomorrow.” Salem left.

Ali waited until he was gone then went and double checked that the door was shut. He finished with Sal's flanks and got out the broad toothed comb and began on her mane.

There were bits of weed and brush tangled in her hair. He carefully picked them out speaking to her in a low voice. He had worked for an hour when his father came in.

“Oh, doesn't she look good!” Father exclaimed. “Much better. Yes, she's very beautiful.”

Ali's eyes gleamed up at his father.

Omar patted his son on the shoulder. "Good work. But, my son, mother says you need to come home now. Tomorrow is another day. And, no dinner, yes?"

Ali's shoulders sagged and he laid the comb back on its shelf.

"Tomorrow, Flower." He had named her himself. Flower or Flower of the Desert he was to call her.

#

The next day, Ali bolted his breakfast, splashed water on his face and got through morning prayers with one eye on the door. The moment they were done, he ran out the door, two green apples bulging in his pockets.

He ran for the barn and carefully unwound the rope tie and ran to his horse. Sal-gal was slowly munching again. Ali could see that Mohammad had already been in the barn and left a small wooden stool there with oats on the top. Sal was eating the oats.

Ali grabbed the comb again and started on her tail. It was a worse mess than her mane, if that was possible. Sal ignored him and only kicked lightly once when he pulled an obnoxious burr out.

Ali murmured to her and she flicked her tail and turned to look at him once. Then, she went back to her oats like he wasn't there.

Ali just could not bear to leave his pony and during the day, various people from the village, curious about the new arrival, showed up to see. Salem became the unofficial tour guide and told the story over and over again about how the pony had been found in the desert, close to the railway tracks.

They all wanted to know about the rider of the pony. There were many long looks and shakings of the heads.

Ali's mother and sister's tended the soldier night and day and he was very, very sick.

#

By the third day, Ali kept after his father that Flower needed fresh air and exercise. It was a buoyant Ali and Salem who, after Mohammad fitted the bit back in Sal's mouth, were allowed to lead her around the village. People came out to look at her and admire. She was such a beauty.

After she had been cleaned thoroughly with water, Mohammad had gotten out some of his special oils. He allowed the boys to brush the oils into her coat and hooves. Now, clean and with a lightly oiled sheen, Sal-gal gleamed in all her chestnut glory. The mane was clean as well as her tail.

Ali's sisters got into the act and got some wild flowers to put in the horse's mane. He thought it was silly, but they insisted.

"It's a girl," they said to him. "Girls wear flowers." He grimaced but allowed it.

Each morning, mother had allowed him two hard apples for Flower and then, to his amazement, a couple of carrots were added.

Ali raced to the barn and fed Flower by hand stroking her forelock and murmuring to her.

#

On the fourth day, mother came out of the bedroom and spoke to his father.

"The fever has broken. I think he will be alright now. He is young and healthy."

Omar nodded to her and went out to find Mohammad. The two men met and walked to the edge of the village.

"He is a soldier."

"Yes, from the military camp."

“French?”

“No, English, I think. He was muttering in English.”

The two men nodded.

“We have to take him back.” They both nodded.

“And the horse.”

There was a pause.

“I am sorry, Omar, the boy...”

“The boy will live. There will be other horses.”

“Well, yes.” Mohammad thought for a moment of his own run-down nag. “Of course, other horses...”

“You will tell him?”

“Yes, we can go together?”

“Yes, I think they would like that.”

Sadly, Omar returned home. He would have to talk to his son.

#

That evening, Omar left the barn. Ali was inside crying. His father would leave the boy for a while. There was nothing else to be done.

He got home. Salim looked at him. “He’ll be okay,” he told her. “He just needs some time.”

Salim took a bowl of soup from the kitchen and walked it back to the bedroom. The soldier could almost sit up by himself now. She would feed him a little soup.

Later that evening, Omar and Salim walked quietly to the barn. Omar opened the door and they peeked in. Ali was asleep, curled up in the straw next to his horse. Sal-gal stood with her head down, she was close to the boy and they saw her reach over and nuzzle him once. As quietly as they came, they closed the door and left.

#

The next day, early, Omar, Mohammad, Ali, and Salem got ready for their trip. It was decided that they would all travel together to the military compound. The expensive leather saddle had been cleaned and oiled and scrubbed until it shone. The silver belt and points gleamed in the early morning sun.

Mohammad, who was considered the best rider in the village, had the honor of riding Sal-gal/Flower. Ali would ride behind him. Omar and Salem would follow, each on the smaller village donkeys. Ali's mother and sisters had prepared food for the trip. Leather flasks of water were filled up. Dates and raisins were in little pouches and falafel and goat cheese were in another pouch.

One would think they would be gone three days. In truth, the compound was only about twenty miles away and there were sure they would be there before late afternoon.

Sal-gal responded to her new rider like the champ she was and obeyed commands that Mohammad fearfully gave her. The two got used to each other after a few miles. Soon, it wasn't just Ali who regretted this trip, Mohammad was having second thoughts about giving this excellent pony back to the British.

Midday, the group rested, and Ali led Flower to the watering hole and stroked her neck. He murmured to her and picked tiny bits out of her mane. She nuzzled him and he held onto her head. Silent tears

began to run down his cheeks. Omar came over and put an arm on his son's shoulders. One little tear fell down his cheek too.

#

By late afternoon, the odd group were entering the gates of the military base and the Arabic interpreter was sent for. The soldiers at the gate were instantly suspicious of village people bringing in what was obviously a pony belonging to one of their junior officers.

Much rapid-fire conversation commenced and one of the guards silently took the reins of Sal-gal from Omar. Ali still stayed glued to the horses' side.

"We need to take this to the commander, toute suite," the one guardsmen said to the other.

The entire group, Sal-gal, donkeys, et. al, proceeded through the camp to a small white washed building at the far side of the gate.

The interpreter went with one of the soldiers and the others stood outside. When the men started to climb the steps, the soldier put his hand out to stop them.

"Wait here," he told them.

The two men and the two boys waited. There was the sound of conversation inside. In a few moments, a big man, dressed a lot like the soldier in mother's bedroom came out.

He had dark hair and a thin mustache. He was imposing and looked very no-nonsense. A younger man, in the same dress, was with him.

"What's all this?" His eyebrows went up.

More rapid-fire conversation.

"I believe they are Bedouin's sir. From a local village. They found a soldier."

"Lt. Nelson, you think?"

His aide de camp nodded.

"He's been missing for days."

"Looks like he fell ill, sir." The aide told the commander in a low voice. "They found him unconscious."

"They did, did they?"

The men understood nothing the commander said to them. The interpreter began babbling to them.

At this point, the villagers all nodded their collective heads up and down rapidly.

"Ah," the Commander commented and walked down the steps and over to Sal-gal.

He walked around the pony, looking at her face, picking up her feet, looking at those. He circled the pony entirely and patted her on the neck.

"And you took care of his horse, too?"

More interpreting, much more nodding of the heads.

"Well," the commander looked back at his assistant, "she looks to be in pretty good shape. Better, actually," he laughed. "Better I think than when Nelson was taking care of her. Ha!" He smoothed his mustache.

"And you still have him? Nelson, I mean?"

More translating and more nodding heads.

"Well then," the commander looked at his aide, "I guess we'll have to go get him." The aide nodded.

“But,” the Commander looked at the sky, “getting late. And, it seems to me these gentlemen have rendered a service to the British Army, not in a case of conflict but in rescuing both a junior officer and his,” he stopped to give Sal-gal a little pat, “his very valuable Army property. Tom, let’s invite these men in for some food and drink and start this trip tomorrow morning.”

The aide de camp talked to the interpreter who gave the message to the villagers who looked uncertainly around. With some deal of coaxing, the men ascended the steps and were led to the mess hall in the same building.

Tom, the aide-de-camp came over to his boss and whispered, “The boy wants to go with the horse.”

“What?”

“The boy,” Tom pointed, “wants to go with the horse.”

“Ah, I see.” The commander looked over at the skinny kid standing next to Sal-gal’s reins. He could easily read the forlorn look. “Okay, Tom, tell the stable master I said it was okay. Take the kid a plate of something.”

Tom nodded to Ali and waved for the boy to follow him. Tom handed the reins to the kid who clutched them in his fist. The two walked to the stables.

#

Later, dinner was served, and the villagers took off their shoes and left them at the door. There were snickers and asides from the men who came into eat. They all received the parental glare from their chief.

In a few moments, the aide de camp clinked his glass with a spoon. The commander stood up.

“Ah, yes. I would like to say, men, that my guests,” he cast a gimlet eye on the assembled troops, “my guests, here are from the local village a few miles from here. It appears a few days ago, from what I understand, Lt. Nelson, out on patrol was struck by some kind of fever, fell from his horse, and was rescued by these men.” He waved in their direction. “He has been taken to their village and nursed back to health. For these things, we need to thank them.” The commander began to applaud, and his troops quickly joined in.

The villagers practically blushed and bowed many times. The interpreter was busy telling them what was said. The men even ate some of the food offered to them.

After dinner, the commander summoned Tom over.

“Where’s that kid?”

Tom jerked his head. “He’s still in the stable, sir.”

“Ah,” the commander nodded. “Entertain our guests if you would Tom and get them a place to sleep for the night.”

Tom nodded and turned to the interpreter again.

The commander got up and walked outside. It was another starry night in the desert, the full moon had passed, and a half moon hung in the sky. A light breeze stirred the desert sand and he could smell jasmine faintly in the air. He lit a cigar.

Quietly for such a big man, he approached the stables and went in.

The stable master was in his cramped little office finishing up some paperwork.

“The boy?” the commander asked.

The master shook his head and pointed to the back of the stable.

The commander walked back and came to the last stall and stopped. There, Sal-gal was standing, her saddle and reins were off, and she was contentedly munching hay. The skinny kid he had seen before had an old wire bush in one hand and was stroking down her side. He was talking to the pony in a low voice and occasionally she would whinny back.

The commander had his cigar in one hand and puffed on it thoughtfully. He stood there a few minutes and the kid never seemed to notice him.

Hum, he thought to himself and turned and left.

He went back to the main building and back to the camp mess. The villagers were being served tiny cups of coffee by the interpreter. Apparently, from his own private stock. They all seemed to be relaxed now and enjoying themselves.

The older man sat down a little distance away and waved to his aide. The younger man separated himself and came up.

“Yes, sir?”

“Ah, Tom. Hum...tell the interpreter to tell the men,” he gestured loosely at the group, “that we might need the services of a water boy in the stable.”

Tom ogled at his boss a moment. “A water boy, sir. We’ve never had...”

“Tell him, Tom.” The older man puffed on his cigar.

Tom turned, went, and sat down next to the interpreter and started speaking. There commenced a great deal of conversation and waving of hands. This went on for some minutes. Tom got up and went back to his boss.

“They say it depends completely on the mother. She cannot lose her oldest son.”

“Right, tell them there is very little money involved, mostly room and board but the boy will be able to work with the horses every day. Maybe learn to ride.” The commander puffed some more.

Tom went back and conveyed the message. More conversation and waving of hands. The villagers did not look directly at the commander but confided their comments to the interpreter and Tom.

Tom came back. “They will have to go home to discuss it.”

“Understood,” the commander said. He got up and bowed. “Salaam.”

The villagers bowed to him in return, “Salaam,” they said.

#

The next day, two jeeps and several British soldiers followed the directions given to them by the interpreter and Omar, the father of Ali. In a few hours, they were able to locate the village and Junior Officer Nelson who was now well enough to walk.

Numerous thank yous were exchanged on both sides. The mother and sisters all kissed Nelson on the cheek and pressed gifts of dates, nuts, and raisins into his hands. He turned red from the attention and stiffly got into the back of the jeep.

More bowing occurred. Tom, aide de camp, separated himself from the others and dragged the interpreter into the house of Omar and Salim. They conveyed the offer from the Commander again. Salim looked stunned and just stared at her husband.

Tom nodded, bowed, and said. “Your decision, ma’am, of course.” With that he turned and left the tiny plaster house followed by the interpreter.

Getting back in the jeep he turned to Nelson. “Well, soldier, you have had quite the ride, sir.”

A wan Nelson, holding his side, nodded briefly. In a cloud of dust, the two jeeps drove off.

#

One month later, the commander walked into the stable.

“Mr. Gleason let me present your new stable boy. This is Ali.”

Ali stepped forward timidly and bowed.

“Do he speak any English, sir?”

“Not a word, not a drop.”

“Well, sir...”

“We talked about this, Gleason. He’s a sharp lad, he’ll pick it up quick and any real problems, ask the interpreter.”

“Ah, sir...”

“Good for public relations, Gleason. You’re doing your part. Plus,” the commander turned to leave, “he is a whiz with horses.”

“Ah, well. Okay, kid...” Gleason looked at the skinny kid in front of him, “we are going to show you’re the shovel. That’s s-h-o-v-e-l. Understand?”

Ali bounced on his toes and nodded his head furiously up and down.

Gleason showed him the shovel and the bucket. Ali got to work immediately.

When Gleason shuffled back to his office. Ali, stopped, peeked around the stalls and tip toed down the the last stall. There were two green apples in his pockets.

“Flower,” he said.

There was a whinny.

The End