



The Loves of a Sultan
by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*There are all kinds of love in this world
but never the same love twice. — F. Scott Fitzgerald*

Many moons ago, Ahmad, the Sultan of a small Arab domain, gave his son, Prince Hassan, an expensive present for his coming-of-age birthday: a just-weaned colt from the Najd plateau, bred by a chieftain of the renowned horse-breeding Banu Tamim tribe. Sahab (“Cloud”), the gift horse, was spotlessly white, had a finely chiseled head; large, dark and expressive eyes; a broad forehead; a long, well-arched neck; a short, strong back and a deep chest. His tail was carried high, presenting an elegant appearance. The young horse seemed intelligent and calm, giving rise to the expectation that it would fare well in battle.

Hassan was taken immediately with his present. The moment Sahab was delivered to the royal stables, the prince assumed the role of principal caretaker of the animal. He taught the horse to be led, stand while tied and walk over various types of terrain. He personally fed Sahab and carried out all the horse’s daily grooming: removing dust and dried sweat with a bundle of grass, brushing the coat to stimulate circulation; wiping dust from Sahab’s eyes; examining the nostrils for potential clogging with sand, and the ears for irritation or insects; checking the body for cuts, sores, insect bites, or swellings; finger-combing Sahab’s tail to avoid breaking the hair; inspecting each hoof for cracks or excessive wear, and clearing pebbles and packed dirt from them.

Caring daily for Sahab was a thorough and intimate procedure that brought Hassan and his horse in close contact. Spending time being cleaned, rubbed, and inspected accustomed the horse to the touch of his human owner and developed mutual trust and affection between them.

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Hassan backed Sahab when the steed was three years old. By that time, the training had progressed to the point where the horse was accustomed to yielding to its owner’s physical pressures, had learned to follow his commands and was familiar with being exposed to camels, dogs, livestock and the hubbub of human crowds.



Sahab's starting began when an attendant placed a bridle over the horse's head and a light blanket on its back. Sahab shuddered nervously at first, but then quieted down and allowed a saddle to be placed atop the blanket and a girth to be placed and tightened. Hassan then walked around leading Sahab by the bridle.

The horse hopped a bit but soon was moving naturally and learning to move forward, turn, and stop from light cues. Then the crucial point was reached: Hassan leaned over the horse's back several times, placed one foot in the stirrup, mounted quietly, and rode slowly for just a few minutes, until Sahab calmly accepted being ridden.

Over time, the horse learned to walk straight, turn, halt, back up, and obey other commands. After mastering the walk, Sahab progressed to trotting, cantering, and being led over varied terrain. Hassan always spoke softly to the horse and used terms of high praise to reward its docility; the breaking-in process built mutual trust and acceptance between them.

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At about the time Hassan first backed his beloved horse, his father, Sultan Ahmad, started negotiations with the weezer of a powerful caliph to arrange for the wedding between Hassan and Jamila, the weezer's eldest daughter. Ahmad's purpose in seeking the proposed marriage was to enlist (through the weezer) the caliph's support in an ongoing conflict between Ahmad and the rulers of a neighboring kingdom. The negotiations were completed, and the wedding took place despite Hassan and Jamila never having met.

The prince soon learned that his wife required a training process akin to that undergone by Sahab. The main difference was that Jamila was willful and not disposed to just obey orders. Hassan tried reasoning with her and sought to use persuasion rather than coercion to achieve his desires. This proved only partially successful, because Jamila was smart and was not readily convinced; however, through the training of his horse, Hassan had learned to be patient and to avoid direct confrontations with his new wife.

Thus, when Jamila claimed boredom as the reason to eschew sitting with her husband during official functions, Hassan instituted sessions to read and analyze the holy books, which his wife joined as a happy participant; those sessions included at the end business discussions to which she became accustomed. Likewise, he encouraged her to undertake the establishment and management of *awaqaf* (permanent charitable endowments) that supported orphanages, soup kitchens, and other public welfare activities. Little by little, Jamila became not only Hassan's bedmate but his partner in government, and their interaction led to a deepening of the bond between them.

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Sultan Ahmad was slain in battle fighting his neighbors, and Hassan inherited the ruling of his kingdom and the responsibility for leading its forces in the ongoing war. By that time, Sahab had been fully trained and had become a trusted war horse that took its master into



battles, raids, and marches. It remained calm amid the shouting and loud noises of combat and more than once saved Hassan's life by removing him to safety from a perilous encounter.

The war was finally won, and Hassan settled to rule a domain that had become enlarged by the land of his vanquished enemies. His victory had been achieved, in part, thanks to the counsel of Jamila and the steadfast help of Sahab.

As he grew in power, Hassan showed his affection towards his two supporters in different but important ways. He loved Jamila deeply, who gifted him with three children; together, they presided over a land that was prosperous and at peace and looked forward to many years of blissful marriage.

Hassan rose early every day to groom Sahab and, as weather and the affairs of state allowed, went out for a ride that sometimes consumed a good part of the morning. Afterwards, the Sultan would sneak to the stables a couple of times in the afternoon and evening to check on his horse and bring it some dates or small amounts of camel's milk. The rest of the time, Sahab remained under the care of one of Hassan's most trusted acolytes.

The Sultan's affection for his horse elicited questioning whispers around the court. While it was not uncommon for Arabs to become attached to their horses, the closeness between Hassan and Sahab was viewed by some as unnatural and even made them question the Sultan's sanity.

One of the ladies of the court raised the issue delicately with Jamila, who laughed the matter off: "If my husband were visiting a mare frequently, I might harbor some disquiet. But that is not the case and, in any event, my husband is affectionate and dutiful to me and his children and properly attends to the needs of his domain, so whatever he does in his spare time is of no concern to me and should not bother anyone else."

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Years later, Jamila was stricken by a plague that coursed through the entire Arabian Peninsula. It started out with a fever that would not yield to cold compresses and baths in frigid water. The fever was accompanied by headaches and fatigue and all sorts of body aches. The third day, diarrhea and vomiting added to the symptoms.

It soon became clear to everyone that the royal consort's days on this earth were numbered. After a disheartening visit to the sick chamber, Hassan summoned his children and his top advisers and addressed them: "Queen Jamila shall be dead very soon. I cannot abide to witness her passing and shall spend some time alone in the desert. Please do not look for me unless you come to give me news of her miraculous recovery. I leave my weezer in charge of the funeral arrangements. I shall visit her tomb on my return, but for now I wish to preserve in my mind my last memories of my still-living wife."

Hassan then gathered provisions for several days, went to the stables, saddled Sahab, and galloped away to disappear in the emptiness of the high desert.



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He was gone for four weeks and returned one night exhibiting the physical marks of his bereavement. He was drawn and deathly pale and had lost a significant amount of weight. His royal clothes had become sand-encrusted rags, and he walked slowly, with a limp that suggested an injury to one of his legs. He seemed to have aged several years during his brief absence.

He arrived at his palace on foot, carrying only a pair of saddlebags that he deposited on the carpet before his throne. He hesitated there for a moment as if deciding what to do next and then shuffled on to his chamber, where he plummeted onto his bed. He fell into a slumber that lasted a full day, failing to respond to the urgent inquiries of his underlings.

When he awoke, Hassan asked for water and drank a full carafe. Thus refreshed, he demanded food and was brought some bread and fruit, a light repast to settle his empty stomach. He then addressed his children and attendants to respond to their anxious queries:

"I rode into the mountains, traveling randomly without any goal in mind other than running away from my wife's deathbed. I drove poor Sahab mercilessly, with no concern for his fatigue or physical needs, and stopped to rest only when I was too weary to go any farther. Five days into the trip, I ran out of food and found myself in a desolate ravine, surrounded by sharp peaks that rose to the skies. Getting out of there was difficult. Upon reaching the heights, I discovered I had no idea where I was or which way was home. We rode aimlessly for days, living on figs, wild onions and herbs, and drinking muddy water from whatever puddles were left over from the rainy season. Finally, I recognized the sharp rocky cliffs of the Tuwaiq Mountains and was able to steer us in the right direction to return home.

"Alas, it was too late. Poor Sahab, who never complained, collapsed and died of exhaustion in the middle of the desert, three days away from here. Even in death, it made an ultimate gift for me: I cut the vein on its neck and drank the last of its blood. It tasted of iron and made my stomach turn, but it sustained me long enough to make the rest of the trip here."

"Alas, I did not have enough strength to bury Sahab, so I had to leave its corpse on the open ground to be devoured by the carrion birds. I continued to make my way back on foot, at the end drinking whatever little piss I had left in me. It was a miracle I was not set upon by bandits and survived to make it home."

"Was your escape worthwhile?" asked his oldest son, now a teenager, in recrimination.

Hassan sighed. "I learned several important things during my trip. First, that there was no point in trying to run away from my grief over the loss of Jamila, for it will always catch up with me; the memory of her loss will remain gnawing at my soul all my living days. Beyond that, I realized that I had been gifted with two great loves in my life, the affections of my dear wife and my loyal horse. I was twice blessed and should be grateful to the heavens for the multiple boons I was granted."



The son reproached him again: “How can you compare the love of my saintly mother with the allegiance of a horse, a creature that is not even a human?”

Hassan recoiled and started to formulate a rebuke, but then he stopped himself, and the words that finally left his mouth were mild. “All true loves are equally valid and important, no matter the identity of the lovers or the circumstances under which their affections are displayed. The kinds of love may vary, but in the end, love is always love.”

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