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The Son, the Father and the Donkey

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THE SON, THE FATHER AND THE DONKEY

THOUGH SHADWAN'S BODY was sleeping, his mind was wide awake.

His body was weighed down with the burdens of the long day that had begun before the sun cast its first lock of glowing hair upon the dark, dewy fields, upon the trees and the streams and the southern irrigation canal. His body was weighed down, the arm muscles swollen and the veins in his thighs throbbled with the pumping movement of his blood. So Shadwan squatted down on the bed of palm leaves after supper, when the salt and onions and maize bread had done their work. Benumbed, Shadwan had stretched himself out—yet his mind remained awake.

The walls of mud and straw could not keep out the howling wind, nor could the pack of daughters, descended from his loins and heaped under a cotton coverlet on the dusty mat, keep out the howling. And yet the howling was not actually loud and, in reality, did not even resemble howling.

His old father knew what was possible and what wasn't. He was also a past master at knowing what things should be kept deep down in a well and not brought out into the open. In any case, pain was nothing new to him. Sixty years was more than enough to train a man in containing and repressing pain when there was no point in upsetting others with it. On the other hand, there was no harm in an occasional groan or moan.

Yet the groans were like needles, the moans like skewers, all with sharp points that ripped through Shadwan's state of torpor and climbed up along his nerves till they reached his ears and pierced them. So it was that his mind remained awake.

Said Shadwan to himself: "The old man would like to have a doctor, but he's too shy to say so."

These were the words of Shadwan the son, for the branch quivers when the trunk suffers some shock. But Shadwan the man crippled by life began to think: "What's the use of medicine at the age of sixty?"

For some days the old man had been taking his habitual pain off to the general clinic where he would stand in the queue till his turn came. Never having enough time to explain his pain to the doctor who was

always in a rush, he was given instead, by the people of the clinic, a mixture that was a cure for all ills.

The old man returned from the clinic accompanied by his pains. While he stopped complaining about his pain, Shadwan was sure it was still there, for the old man was a man who endured things in silence. What Shadwan had surmised proved to be right, for yesterday the pain peeped out, broke through the cordon that stifled it and spread throughout the house. So the old man went to the general clinic a second time and returned with the medicine that cured all ills.

Shadwan was split in two as he pricked his ears to hear the sound of his father's pain.

Shadwan the son said: "The old man must have a private doctor," and the Shadwan who was crippled by life answered: "For the Prophet's sake, shut up—where are we to get the fee for a private doctor?"

Shadwan wanted to shake off his exasperation, so he tried to move his covered limbs. But one of his legs had become numb and would not respond, so he began massaging it to bring it back to life.

On the bench over the stove, the old man gave in to his pain, thinking that everyone was asleep, and the needles and skewers floated about in the darkness, dashing themselves against the walls of mud and straw, colliding with the children and thrusting their way into the bed of palm leaves to pierce the ears of Shadwan the son.

Said Shadwan the son: "The old man must have a private doctor."

Said the man who was crippled by life: "Where will we get the money for a private doctor?"

Said the son: "It's not as if we don't have anything. I've got a couple of pounds, which we need, of course, but then he's father, too."

Said he who was crippled by life: "Is a private doctor going to get up at this time of night?"

Replied the son: "By the time we arrive, he'll have awakened."

Shadwan the son and Shadwan the crippled both got up and walked in one combined body over the pack of progeny to the back storehouse. In the darkness they both groped about for the tied-up donkey. They woke it up; it got to its feet in a state of rage and began braying. Together, as one Shadwan, they led it out of the storehouse, swearing at it. Carrying his old father out, well-wrapped up, he set him carefully on the donkey, while he who had been crippled by life looked on, as though scoffing at the old man. Even so, he prodded the donkey with his stick and it moved sluggishly. Turning their backs on the village,

they began walking along the dewy track, crossing the fields and disturbing the silence. All the while the old man continued to discharge his needles and skewers, though Shadwan had thought that the journey would plunge the old man into a sea of hopes which would numb his pain. The way was long and the night cold. At dawn Giza came into view. By the time the donkey, with a man on it and a man behind, had arrived it was broad daylight and the combined Shadwan had also begun to voice his pain.

The doctor, after Shadwan had paid him the two pounds outside, took the old man inside and examined him.

Said the doctor: "This old man requires an operation"—and he started to upbraid Shadwan for delaying it so long.

Said Shadwan: "We didn't know."

Replied the doctor: "You know now. What do you think?" Said Shadwan: "Do it at once."

The doctor gave a dignified laugh and announced that the fee for the operation would be twenty pounds. Shadwan the son stood aghast, his heart thumping. Shadwan the crippled by life said to himself: "For the Prophet's sake, just gather up your father and take him back."

Said the doctor: "I understand how things are—I'll make it fifteen. Make up your mind because the old man hasn't got that much time."

He who was crippled by life cried out: "By Allah, man, we don't have a thing."

Replied the doctor: "That's not my fault. The responsibility is yours."

Said Shadwan: "I'll sell the donkey."

Said he who was crippled by life: "Are you crazy? We don't have another one."

Shadwan the son cried out: "My father and the donkey are on the scales. What do you think?"

Said he who was crippled by life: "The old man's of no more use."

Said Shadwan the son: "He's still my father and the donkey's his donkey."

The doctor seized the opportunity to order that the operating room be made ready.

Said Shadwan the son: "I'll be right back with the money."

Shadwan rode the donkey to the market where he sold it and returned breathlessly with the money in his hand. He went in and gave the money to the doctor, who smiled gravely, pocketed the money that had

been a donkey, and said proudly: "The operation was successful—but the old man died."

Shadwan, carrying the body on his shoulders, left Giza and went back, along the same way he had come. He who was crippled by life disassociated himself and began scolding him. Said he who was crippled by life: "I knew the old man well—he wasn't a man to depart this world and leave us to benefit from his donkey."

translated by Denys Johnson-Davies with Anna Lillios

BENEVOLENCE

THE WOMAN NOTICED that her daughter had slowed down and her movements were sluggish, as if she had to drag her body along. Her body was not big enough to be heavy. Her neck was slender and her breasts were like two peaches.

The woman paused at her daughter's breasts and was surprised that the two peaches were extraordinarily ripe for her fourteen years of age. As the woman stood studying her daughter her anxiety grew. The girl walked with her legs apart, even though her thighs were not fat enough to make her walk that way. On her face, usually pale from undernourishment, two small apples were sparkling with near-bursting skin which set free the blood underneath. The girl's eyes were bright and wide, as if she were feverish, while her body appeared full and well fed.

The mother's eyes travelled to her daughter's stomach and she became alarmed. The stomach did not appear extraordinary and it ambiguously told nothing, but the girl seemed to pay great attention to it as she moved about, as if something within irritated her.

The mother stretched out her hand, took the girl's small hand and drew her behind her into an inner room where she inspected her body. Only then were her doubts confirmed and a stone fell on her heart.

Weeping, the girl explained that she had not willingly taken part in what had happened. She had been under the old tree on the hill while the sheep were grazing a stone's throw away. Just before sunset a man suddenly appeared and raped her. The act took awhile, but she did not care very much.

The woman was not listening. Her face darkened and became gloomy, for she was absorbed in thinking about her husband, who had died without leaving a son behind. For this reason she cried bitterly and