

Clever Hans

- Take in a sick person? exclaimed Alix, a pitchfork full of manure in her hand. Are you completely out of your mind, or are you trying to kill the man?

- Please try to understand, said the nun who had interrupted her work, a cloth tied over her nose as a mask. Because of the smallpox epidemics, our charity hospitals are overflowing. We know you're immune because you survived the Red Death...

- Unlike my husband... she clarified, washing her hands in a jug of water.

- And our Father is watching over him from above, the nun prayed, clutching a rosary hidden beneath her bloodstained apron. You can carry on his commitment to the most destitute. Berthelot, the patient we're bringing you, doesn't have long to live. We've tried poultices, bloodletting, ointments, purgatives, but his body was too weak. Continuing to struggle will only condemn him. We wish to respect his last wishes, namely to spend his final moments alongside his horse Hans.

- I see. And I imagine this act of pure charity won't earn me a single penny.

- We cannot afford it. But helpers will come daily for his ablutions and meals. Will you agree to serve and contribute to God's work?

With a sigh, Alix slung her dirty dishcloth over her shoulder. The Carmelite cast a meaningful glance at her, implying that the Almighty's mercy on Judgment Day depended entirely on her selflessness at that very moment. After all, insisting on spending her final days with her favorite horse demonstrated a certain nobility in the smallpox-scarred woman.

- Fine, Alix relented. Bring him in.

Berthelot was a curious old man. Smallpox had buried the traces of his former beauty beneath pustules and macules. His horse Hans was a beautiful Russian Arabian thoroughbred stallion, with a silky black coat, a mark on his head, and white socks down to his heels. Berthelot insisted on never letting him out of his sight, even when the assistants led him to the saddle. On such occasions, the assistants were met with blows, spittle, and scratches. Alix sympathized with them. How hard it was to be patient with this sort of patient!

On the other hand, Berthelot seemed to deeply hate Hans. To the lingering smells of damp hay and greased leather and the constant clatter of hooves and chains were now added the ceaseless mutterings of the pockmarked man, who couldn't help calling his palfrey a nag, a nag, a nag, a nag, or an old nag. It was when Berthelot called Hans a smooth-talking spawn of Satan that Alix's curiosity was truly piqued. It was obvious they had been through a lot together. Their nature was the daily subject of the stablemaster's widow's speculations. The most promising theories involved a riding accident caused by the bad rider, apples nibbled from the wrong orchard, and a mare impregnated in the wrong paddock. Nevertheless, none of them satisfactorily explained his attachment to the steed. None of her previous attempts had managed to loosen his tongue until she came up with a plan.

Putting on her farrier's apron—one had to be versatile in the stable of a tavern run by just the three of them—she set about scrubbing Hans's shoes, tossing bits of horn and mud she scraped from his hooves to the dog circling nearby, happy with the feast, while Berthelot continued to grumble his endless curses.

- Tell me, she ventured as a first attempt, what exactly do you hold against Hans?

- You, for not shutting up!

Undeterred, Alix set down the horse's front hoof and moved her stool to the hind legs.

- Here's my deal: if you answer my question, I'll feed Hans the oats last during every feeding. Seeing his companions get fed before him will drive him crazy, I guarantee it!

Silently, Berthelot turned toward Alix. He opened his eyes, which he usually kept closed to conserve his meager strength.

- Can you mix his oats with manure?

The groom held back a burst of laughter. He certainly had an imagination, that scrawny old man.

- I can't — I have a reputation to uphold. But I can give him my lower-grade oats.

- Deal. If you want proof that the devil himself is hiding inside Hans's body, bring me a pen and paper.

- Hilda! Alix shouted.

The footman who served as her maid appeared in an instant and returned as quickly as possible laden with her errands.

- Next?

- Draw $3 + 4$ on a sheet of paper and place it in front of the horse.

Hilda complied promptly.

- Hans! exclaimed Berthelot. Calculate!

The stallion, who until now had shown—or at least feigned—a certain indifference to his humans' antics, leaned in to examine the cards. After running his nostrils over the symbols, he lifted his muzzle and, his eyes fixed on Berthelot, stamped his hoof on the ground a total of seven times.

- Hans can do addition? Alix asked in disbelief.

- And more. He can count, calculate, read, spell, recognize colors, musical notes...

- Mom, make the horse count again! Hilda blurted out.

- You can have fun with him. But remember to give him rewards. He gets impatient quickly, advised the bitter old man, turning away from the spectacle.

- Berthelot, you won't believe this! exclaimed Alix, rushing into Hans's stall with her muddy boots. A family of scholars has agreed to take Hans into their stable to discover the source of his intelligence! They've promised to make him a world-renowned celebrity who'll amaze young and old alike.

- No, I refuse to let him go, Berthelot protested in a hoarse whisper tinged with the nausea that had kept him awake.

- Don't worry, they won't take him in as long as you... you...

- ...I haven't breathed my last yet, is that it? Whether it's in a week or ten years, if you respect me, don't let him become a circus freak.

Distraught, Alix leaned against the hay rack and stared at this decrepit relic, whom the fever failed to make comprehensible.

- Berthelot, I'm willing to accept that things happened between you and your horse that are none of my business. But if you insist on keeping me in the dark, I'll have a hard time taking care of Hans once... you've passed on to the other world.

Once again, the old curmudgeon withdrew into silence, his head turned toward the wall, his knees bent to relieve his lower back pain. Weary, the horsewoman was about to leave when a whisper interrupted her movement.

- I had a little boy back then. No bigger than Hilda. His name was Maixant. Cheerful, full of life, always enthusiastic. It was watching him play with Hans that made me realize just how smart that damn nag was. I remember that time as a truly wonderful era. Together, we built him all sorts of games to test his abilities. Every day we came up with new tricks. Every day, in front of our house, we put on a little show that delighted the neighbors and earned us a few coins to live on. But as Hans's fame grew, spectators from farther and farther away came to see us. One day, while I was out gathering wood, bandits sent by a greedy scholar who wanted to claim Hans for himself came and ransacked the house. They killed my wife and Maixant and burned down my home. The reason for their frustration: Hans fled as soon as he saw them coming. It wasn't until late at night, as I wept for my dead, overcome with grief, that this nag returned calmly, as if nothing had happened. When I saw that demonic beast, that horse that caused my family's death, I saw red. I grabbed a knife, but I couldn't bring myself to stab it. I saw, and still see, Maixant's eyes in Hans's. It is impossible for me to kill this filthy beast; it is as if I were killing my own son. So no, I refuse to let Hans be responsible for another massacre in the service of actors obsessed with power...

His monologue was cut short by a violent coughing fit that sent spatters of blood onto the straw in the barn. Berthelot was racked with convulsions, unable to control himself.

- Help! Alix shouted to the clerk who was loitering in the stable. Quick!

The stable had returned to calm as night fell. Berthelot lay prostrate, wrapped in his quilt, in a state of extreme weakness. Lit by the light of a lantern, Alix was quizzing Hans. With every correct answer, she slipped a piece of carrot into his mouth. Outside the stall, all was silence.

- Alix... Berthelot murmured.

Startled, she rushed to his bedside, nearly knocking over the candelabra. True to form, he shook his head contemptuously to signal his disapproval of her fuss.

- Alix, I need the truth. You've worked in this stable since you were a child; you know horses as well as any man could. In your opinion, is Hans truly intelligent, or has he made a pact with the Devil?

The widow clasped her gnarled, scab-covered hand and paused to reflect. She decided to be honest.

- I'm not sure, but I have a theory. Hans is neither one nor the other. He doesn't figure anything out on his own. He just watches the person asking him the question and taps his hoof until their face lights up. Hans doesn't calculate or read. He isn't intelligent. He watches.

Berthelot's shoulders relaxed.

- I'm glad you told me the truth. Thank you, Alix.

- It's just a guess... Berthelot, I want you to forgive Hans.

- Forgive that scoundrel? Never in my...

A fit of coughing cut him off mid-rant.

- Hans had nothing to do with the tragedy you endured. He just fled when he sensed danger coming. The bandits would have slaughtered your family anyway. It's time to admit it.

Berthelot stared at her, then looked at Hans. He looked at the horse that had brought him so many moments of happiness in their family cocoon. He looked at an animal whose only crime was to live and seek the approval of his masters. Not much different from himself. He relented.

- I forgive you, Hans...

With a serenity finally restored, Berthelot fell asleep for the last time.

- I was wrong to tell you that Hans wasn't smart, Alix declared into the wind.

Accompanied by the horse, she stood in silent prayer at Berthelot's grave, dug next to those of his wife and Maixant. Gusts of wind whipped her hair in every direction and fluttered the fabric of her livery leotard, the finest outfit she owned.

- The instruction we gave Hans was to find the right answer to every question, and he never failed. He just didn't use our traditional channels of intelligence. He watched his masters for a long time, learned every facial expression, memorized shrugs, frowns, and sniffs. He answered every challenge we posed to him perfectly thanks to this in-depth study of human behavior. Hans is an exceptional animal, and it was you, Berthelot and Maixant, who recognized his potential. Be proud of the companion who journeyed alongside you.

Alix lifted her head toward the horizon, a small tear in the corner of her eye. She never would have thought that this little man's visit could move her so deeply.

- I wish you a safe journey, Berthelot.

She took hold of Hans's reins.

- Come on, my handsome stallion. Let's go do some math.