

## A Gift from the Heart

“Bring me a gift that shows me your heart.”

That was what she had said– the woman Patrick had loved since the moment he first saw her. Augusta, that was her name, and she was every bit as fine as it implied– tall and fair, with luxurious golden hair and clear, sparkling blue eyes. He was only a self-made farmer, pleasant and good-humored, if rather plain and roughened by work.

“Whatever did she mean?” Wondered Patrick out loud. “How am I to buy her a gift that shows her what I– how much I adore her? I could never afford such a gift.” He leaned dejectedly on the fence at the back of his modest, sturdy little house. After a minute of solemn contemplation he shook himself, and called cheerfully, “Nadirah!” As always, it came out with a quiver of delight on his part. That lovely, exotic name always stirred him and he loved to hear it.

A pert, brazen, throaty nicker sounded loudly almost straight into his ear. Patrick jumped, and whirled round to find himself nose to nose with a soft little black muzzle that wriggled adorably as the horse that owned it chomped a mouthful of grass. A pair of dark, inordinately bright eyes blinked at him with inquisitiveness, intelligence, and impishness. With a laugh Patrick planted a quick kiss on the perfectly exquisite little dished face– a face which left no doubt as to the horse’s ancestry.

“Nadirah, what are you doing in the hayfield? How did you get out, you fat little Arabian?” He tried half-heartedly to sound severe, fooling neither himself nor the Arabian mare. They both knew that he adored her. The mare had been a gift to him, and was a well-kept secret and the most precious thing he owned. As rare and valuable as Arabians were in those days, Nadirah would be sure prey for horse thieves if anyone knew about her. Though her sleek chestnut body currently gave evidence to the fact that she loved spring grass, her long, clean legs and graceful, sculpted neck managed to convey an impression of elegance. Oh! she was a lovely, fascinating creature... much like the woman he loved.

“You are rather alike, Nadirah, you know? You and Augusta– smart, pretty, independent, saucy, opinionated, temperamental–” Patrick broke off and laughed. “I don’t know why I like either of you. Oh, but I love her– don’t be offended, dear, I love you to– but I love her so much. And yet if I cannot bring her a gift that ‘shows her my heart’ – what do you think that means?– she’ll go off any marry that Thomas something-or-other.”

Nadirah snorted and bit off another plump patch of clover, then began frisking his pockets for treats.

“But, except for her, the only other thing that holds my heart in this world is– oh my–” Again Patrick trailed off as an idea suddenly came to him. “Is you, Nadirah. What am I to do? You are my gift– mine! But it would show her my heart, if anything would. I would win all or lose all, for you two are the only things I care about. But surely, once in a lifetime, a man ought to take that chance.”

Fifteen minutes later he was galloping Nadirah up a tree-lined lane toward an imposing old house. A flash of gold caught his eye as they flew by a stone bench set in

the trees. "Augusta!" He exclaimed, pulling the little Arab mare up short and trotting her back to where his lady sat. "I was coming to see you."

"In a very great hurry," noted the young woman with a bright smile.

"Why, what is this you are on? It's adorable!"

Patrick grinned proudly and was just opening his mouth to reply when he caught sight of several other horses coming up the lane, also in a very great hurry. "Is that?—"

"Oh dear," said Augusta, with momentary consternation. Then she laughed a little nervously, "It looks like Sir Thomas. He was rather upset when

I told him this morning that I was seriously entertaining another suitor. He said he might just come and carry me off if I wouldn't see his way. I did not think he could mean it."

Delightful creature that she was, August stood up and flung her head back gaily. "I have always wondered what it should be like to be abducted."

"Well, look here, Augusta, would you rather not?— be abducted, I mean,"

Patrick ventured.

"I don't see how there's any avoiding it now."

"Come with me," he reached his hand down to her eagerly. "Nadirah will carry us! And carry us well— come, please."

"How exciting," Augusta said, her eyes sparkling as she laughed again.

She took the proffered hand and was soon swung up behind Patrick. "Do you think it will work? Sir Thomas has very large, fast horses. This one seems— er—"

"Smallish?" Patrick finished for her. He whooped and dug his heels into the Arabian's sides. "Yah! Go, Nadirah!" The little mare flipped her tail over her back and shook her head with glee as she bolted off the road and through the trees. "Big and fast they may be," yelled Patrick. "But Arabians they are not."

The other horses crashed along behind them for a few miles at times seeming to draw nearer. But Patrick would just whoop to Nadirah and she would shake her head and add another burst of speed. At last their pursuers fell behind, but Nadirah galloped on, ears perked, tossing her head now and again in sheer delight.

When they broke back into open farmland, Patrick finally pulled her up. The little Arab danced and shook her head in eagerness, begging to go farther. "That's my Nadirah. Good girl," Patrick said, sliding off and helping Augusta down.

Augusta was flushed and breathless with excitement, her golden hair a lovely, windblown mess. "Oh how fun! What a funny little horse she is. And how fast and far she ran." She went around to Nadirah's head, attempting to pet the saucy black muzzle. "She's the most perfectly adorable thing I've ever seen. What is she?"

"An Arabian," Patrick said. "They are the finest horses on earth. Nadirah is my secret treasure. She was a gift to me. I've never shown her to anyone before, and to me she's the most precious thing on earth— with one exception, of course."

Impulsively, Patrick dropped down on one knee and gave Augusta the reins.

"Which is why she is my gift to you."

Augusta looked down at him with a playful smile. "And this is supposed to show me your heart?"

"No, no. This— she is something far greater I hope. You understand— This is not a glimpse of my heart that I give you. This is a piece of it." He looked at his little mare, then back up at Augusta. "If I owned half the world I could not give you a more precious gift."

Augusta pressed the reins back into his hands, and clasped hers over them. “Your gift was well chosen. Keep your gift and keep me, and may your heart be whole.”

By Larissa Sprecher