

THE LAST SPHINX

by Barbara Delaplace

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IT WAS the last of its kind. The once proud wings were now bedraggled and torn, with many missing feathers. The mane that had formed a noble frame around the creature's face was snarled and matted, and the supple tail that once had been so expressive in every mood showed no more life than a piece of rope. It limped on three legs, and every rib showed. But the dulled eyes were the worst of all. A Sphinx's eyes should reveal all the cunning wisdom of that ancient race, but this one's eyes showed only unutterable weariness.

The Dog was the first to be aware of its approach, for he was guarding his master's property. (Even on a night of bitter cold like this, he made his rounds faithfully.) Normally he would have barked a fierce warning at the Sphinx, for dogs and sphinxes are two very different kinds and they share no love for one another.

But this was not a normal night. On this one midwinter night each year, the Dog—and all the animals in home and barn—could speak.

“Who are you? Why are you here? You should go away!” said the Dog sharply.

But the Sphinx only looked at him and made no answer. “

What do you want? Why are you here?” demanded the Dog again.

And again the Sphinx did not reply.

The Dog was apprehensive because sphinxes are powerful creatures and could easily kill even a tough, shaggy-coated guard like him—though he had no thought of abandoning his post. But when he looked more carefully, he realized this sphinx was not whole and sound; that, in *fact*, he could probably kill *it*. And the Sphinx looked at him without hope of mercy.

Somehow that made a difference to the Dog. To attack, and kill if necessary, those who threatened his master's family or home, that was the proper order of life. But it

wasn't right to slaughter a creature obviously walking its final road to the End of All Things. Because he was a dog, he did not know "compassion" was the word for what he was feeling, but he knew it seemed fitting to offer what help he could: a warm shelter and water, maybe food. (Though he did not know what food a sphinx ate.)

So he spoke again. "Are you cold?"

No reply, but somehow he sensed that, yes, the Sphinx was very cold. "Come with me to the barn," he said, and turned away. The Sphinx limped slowly after him.

When the Dog pushed open the door, the Ox, master of the barn, greeted him. (Animals have their own rankings among species, and the oxen with their dignity, strength, and habit of slow, careful thought, were respected by all.) But when he saw the Sphinx enter behind him, he flung up his head in alarm and bellowed.

"Who is this? Why have you brought it here?" The other animals in the barn—the Cow and her Calf, the Donkey, the Cat, the Rooster and his Hens—were startled from their rest and gazed in fear or awe or hatred at the Sphinx. For they were all servants, each in their own way, but sphinxes have never served any but themselves.

The Dog stood his ground, for though he respected the Ox, he never feared him. "The Sphinx is weary and cold. It needs shelter and food. And it is hurt."

The Ox looked carefully at the Sphinx, as the Dog had done before, and saw the Dog was right. This creature was on the Last Road. Still, it was a sphinx, and they were well-known as a dangerous race. Therefore he spoke to it. "If I let you stay in the barn, you must not hurt us. Do you agree?"

But the Sphinx did not answer the Ox.

The Ox waited, then said, "You must agree, or I will not let you stay." (He felt his strength was a match for a sphinx, at least this one.)

The Sphinx still did not answer.

The Cat, always quick in thought and deed, spoke. "Why do you not speak? *We* all can."

No reply.

The Dog said to the Cat, "Perhaps the Sphinx is wounded and so cannot speak."

The Cat replied sharply, "It is not wounded. See how its throat is sound and untouched. Speak!" she commanded the Sphinx. At this encroachment of his authority, the Ox lowered his head and eyed her, but she was unabashed.

And the Sphinx was mute before the barn's inhabitants.

The Dog said, "We cannot turn it away. We should not leave any creature homeless in the cold. We can share the warmth of the barn."

"But what if it hurts my daughter?" said the Cow. "She is still young. I will not let anyone harm her. And sphinxes are killers." She stamped her hoof in angry fear.

The First Hen spoke in fear also. "My sisters and I are each barely a mouthful for so great a creature. Look how thin the Sphinx is—it must be hungry. I do not want it to stay." The Rooster and the other Hens murmured their agreement.

"You see how some here are afraid, and not without reason," the Ox said to the Sphinx. "You must agree, or leave."

The Sphinx said nothing. It stood, head held high, looking the Ox squarely in the face. The Ox began to gather himself in case he had to force it to leave. For a long moment the tension grew as the other animals watched fearfully. And then slowly, with obvious pain, the Sphinx bowed its head and knelt before the Ox.

So the Sphinx was permitted to stay in the barn, though the Cow still rolled her eye toward it, and made her body a barrier between it and her Calf. And the Rooster led the Hens to the farthest corner of the barn away from it.

The Dog guided the Sphinx to an empty stall well-bedded with straw, and the Sphinx lay down stiffly with a sigh. He was about to ask if it wanted water, when a distant howl came on the night air. All the animals lifted their heads to listen carefully, judging how far away the pack was, and the Dog's hackles stood up—he hated wolves. He said to the Sphinx, "I must go back outside and stand guard, for the Man and his family are away tonight. Donkey, will you help the Sphinx?"

The Donkey replied, "I will." So the Dog trotted to the door and slipped outside. The Donkey turned to the Sphinx and said, "I know you do not speak, but if you are thirsty, I will share my water with you." So saying, he took the handle of his water bucket between his teeth, and carried it over beside the Sphinx.

The Sphinx looked at the Donkey, then tried to reach the water in the bucket. It was too stiff and unable to bend its neck, so it got clumsily to its feet. But it stumbled, knocking the bucket over, and the water flowed over its paws and into the straw. It looked at the Donkey again, seeming apologetic for its awkwardness.

The Cat jeered at the Donkey. "Now you have lost your water, and to what purpose?" The Sphinx looked sharply at the Cat, who had leapt up to the stall's rail.

"It doesn't matter. I can drink from the Cow's trough, or share with the Ox," replied the Donkey. "But the Sphinx is still thirsty."

"It cannot share my water!" said the Cow quickly, while her Calf looked on with alarm in her eyes. "But you are welcome, Donkey."

The Ox said to the Sphinx, "If you come here, you can drink from my trough." Which the Sphinx did, and after quenching its thirst, it bowed its head to the Ox. Then it returned to the stall, where the Cat still sat on the rail.

Now cats do not love sphinxes either. For though cats have been worshiped by men as though they were gods, the cats always remember that sphinxes come of a far more ancient lineage that has been long revered. And like many younger siblings, they are never secure their place, but wonder if one day the eldest will demand it as well. So they pay close attention to their rights and comforts, to be sure others are always aware of them. For if they do not protect their rights, who will?

Thus, the Cat was displeased, because the stall was one of her favorite resting places, warm and free of drafts. She was sure the Dog knew this. (And perhaps the Dog did and had chosen the place deliberately, for dogs like to tease cats, whom they regard as far too self-important.) But because the Sphinx was so much larger than her, she could not make it leave her place. So she tried to assert her position another way.

She said, "Again I ask you, why do you not talk? On this night, all animals can speak."

The Sphinx simply looked at her.

She persisted, "Only say one word. Then I will know that you were found worthy of being given the gift of speech for one night, as we all were."

The Sphinx's brow lowered, and the Donkey hastily spoke. "Cat, we do not know why the gift was given to us. I do not know if I am worthy, but I am grateful."

"I am worthy," said the Cat. "My kind is worthy, for we have been worshiped. We know what it is to have people watch in excitement and awe as we walk before them."

The Donkey replied, "I know what that is like too, Cat."

"*You?*" the Cat scoffed. And even the others looked on in surprise, since the Donkey was normally quiet and unassuming.

“Yes. For once I bore a burden greater than even those the powerful Ox has borne a Man. And people threw palm branches down in my path for me to walk upon.”

“But that was not to honor *you*,” insisted the Cat.

“No, it was not. It was to honor the Man on my back. I was not important. Still, I know what it is like. And I will never forget.”

The barn was still, and even the Cat was subdued for a moment. For though her ancestors had been worshiped, she herself never had experienced anything like the Donkey. (Nor would she have ever guessed he had, because he was unpretentious.)

In the silence came again the howling of the wolves, much closer than before. All ears pricked up, listening. But the animals knew they were safe in the barn and that the Dog was outside guarding them.

Then the Cat sought to regain face. “Still, I have never heard before of one who could not speak on this night. Sphinx, again I ask you to say only a word.”

The Sphinx looked at her, then yawned. This angered the Cat, for among her kind yawning in the face of another is an insult. She hissed, “Perhaps you were denied the gift. Perhaps you have done something evil and thus are punished. Perhaps you are evil!”

The Sphinx’s eyes suddenly blazed in the unlit barn. Somehow it found strength and was on its feet with the awful speed of its kind, tail lashing around its haunches, a heavy paw raised to strike. The Cat crouched on the rail, fluffed in fear, realizing she looked at death. The Ox moved quickly toward the stall. And the Dog, who heard the Cat’s hissing from outside, came into the barn and followed the Ox.

But before they reached the stall, the Sphinx lowered its paw and turned away from the Cat. It looked at the two approaching animals, then looked away, as if ashamed of losing control.

“You promised you would not hurt anyone here,” said the Ox to the Sphinx.

But the Donkey spoke on the Sphinx’s behalf. “You know the Cat goaded it.”

“Yes, I know. But a creature that is so strong must also have strong self-control.”

“It showed self-control. It turned away from the Cat.”

“Because we were coming to stop it.”

“The Sphinx could have struck the Cat long before we could have stopped it. It *did* show self-control,” insisted the Donkey.

“It is evil! It should be driven away,” snarled the Cat.

The Dog was about to speak, when there was a howl, closer again than before. And suddenly the First Hen cried, "Our youngest sister is gone!"

"What?" said the others. The Rooster said, "She strays foolishly, thinking only to find the next morsel of food. And with the Dog on guard, she felt safe."

A cry full of fear came from outside. "Help me, sisters! Help me, my lord!" (For so hens call their rooster.)

And there was an unmistakable wolfish howl of triumph, "There, pack-mates! See our prey!"

The Dog lunged outdoors, shouting as he ran, "I come! I come! Go away, you wolves! Go away! Go away or I will kill you!"

And to the astonishment of all, the Sphinx followed the Dog in deadly silence, drawing on some last reserve of strength.

There followed a dreadful noise of snarling, scuffling bodies, and cries of pain. The Ox stood by the door in case the Dog failed to hold off the pack and its members tried to enter. And each animal wondered what role the Sphinx was playing.

Then the Dog gave a terrible scream of pain. There was the sound of paws moving away. And the Youngest Hen crying in pain and fear, each sound becoming fainter as she was carried off.

The Cat slipped between the legs of the Ox and through a gap in the door. After a moment she called to the others, "The wolves have gone." They came out of the barn and looked at the bloody moonlit scene of the battle.

The Dog was lying on his side, horribly wounded, his throat torn open. His eyes flickered toward them, but it was obvious he was leaving them behind to go down the Last Road. He had made the wolves pay dearly to send him on that journey, though, for three of them had gone ahead of him, their bodies already lifeless. There was no sign of the Sphinx.

"So that is how we are repaid for giving it shelter," said the Cat. "It took the Hen and ran away, leaving the Dog to face the wolves alone."

"I cannot tell what happened," said the Ox. "The ground is too hard to hold tracks well, and the frost has been scuffed because of the fight."

"What of our sister?" asked the First Hen.

“She is probably filling the belly of the Sphinx,” said the Cat with spiteful satisfaction. The Rooster replied angrily, “We all heard her calling us. We must go to her aid.”

“We cannot, Rooster. It is too dangerous,” said the Ox. “There were more wolves in the pack than these. We must stay here. We will mourn for the Dog, and I think you must mourn for your youngest sister.” At this the Hens began to weep.

The animals stood vigil over the body of their loyal friend for the rest of the night, and it was a long, cold night indeed. But it was made a little easier because they could talk together and share memories of the Dog and the Youngest Hen, and thus share their sorrow as well. So the gift of speech was a most welcome gift that night.

At the first light of dawn, their voices were stilled, and they were alone again, isolated by their silence. (Though animals have ways of communicating without words, those ways are not as rich and precise as speech.)

And the Donkey set out to follow the trail left by the remainder of the pack, for he did not believe what the Cat said about the Sphinx abandoning the Dog and devouring the Hen. The trail went a long way up into the hills, and the Donkey realized the Ox had been right—they could not possibly have gone safely in the perilous night for such a distance.

Finally he came to a small gully, and at its entrance were a few scattered feathers and some bloodstains. He entered it sadly, for now he feared he was going to find exactly what the Cat had foretold. But here in front of him was the carcass of a wolf, killed by the blow of a huge clawed paw, the gashes ripping across its body. And there, a few feet away, was a second dead wolf. The Donkey trotted deeper into the gully.

Whereupon he heard the clucking of the Youngest Hen! There she was, very much alive (though missing some feathers) between the paws of the Sphinx. She refused to move as the Donkey approached.

The Sphinx was alive, though grievously hurt, and the Donkey could see it would not live much longer. Since he could no longer speak, the Donkey lowered his head and touched his muzzle to the Sphinx’s face.

And the Sphinx spoke! “Greetings, my friend.” Its voice was weak. “You see, I did not betray your trust...” It saw the astonishment in the Donkey’s eyes and answered the question there. “Yes, I can speak, though last night I could not.” It paused, and the

Donkey could see it gathering what little remained of its strength. “I come of an ancient race under the dominion of an ancient and perhaps crueler god, and I am ruled by different commandments than you. Thus, on the night you and your brethren were given the gift of speech, I was bound in silence.” The Sphinx paused again, and now its voice was very weak. “But our time has passed, and the God you serve rules now...”

Its head drooped and it collapsed on its side, and the Donkey saw how the dark blood had flowed from the many wounds the wolves had inflicted. So the Youngest Hen and the Donkey waited together as the Sphinx took its remaining steps on the Final Road.

And as they waited, the Donkey considered what the Sphinx had said. Are we that different? We both are living creatures. The Sphinx responded to the Dog’s kindness and the Ox’s trust as any of us would have. And it had the courage and honor to defend one of the least of us to the death. But because he was a donkey, he did could not find a sure answer, ponder though he might. All he could do was stay by the Sphinx, with the Youngest Hen, so that it would not be alone. So died the last Sphinx. Then the Donkey and the Youngest Hen returned to their home, and the Rooster and the other Hens rejoiced to see their sister alive.

But the Cat never knew the truth of what happened, for the Donkey and the Youngest Hen could not tell her. Nor did she ever learn what the Donkey knew, that it is unwise to judge others solely by appearance. For one never knows what lies in the heart, except God.