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nightmare on the nose

by . . . Evelyn E. Smith

Incubus won every race but one. Yet though in this respect she matched Man o' War's record she wasn't actually a horse at all.

EVERY TIME he lost money at the track Phil Watson had a nightmare. They grew increasingly frequent as his bankroll dwindled and his hopes of getting rich dwindled accordingly.

The night after he had dropped two hundred dollars at Jamaica, the nightmare grew particularly oppressive. In the darkness he could see her red eyes glowing at him as she sat on his chest.

"Would you mind not turning over so much?" she asked, seeing that he was awake. "It makes me uncomfortable."

"It makes *you* uncomfortable!" he moaned. "How would you like to have a couple of tons of horse sitting on you?"

"I do not weigh a couple of tons!" she snapped. "And furthermore I assure you I'm sitting on your chest out of duty, certainly not out of pleasure. If you don't think I have lots better things to do with my nights than go around sitting on people . . ." Her large white teeth gleamed in a significant leer.

He sighed and squirmed again. A sharp hoof kicked him in the side. "That'll learn you not to wiggle, Watson. Since you're not sleeping," she added, "how about a couple of games of Canasta?"

The gifting of animals with human speech is scarcely an unique idea—see Dal Stevens' THE UNDOING OF CARNEY JIMMY in this issue should you have doubts—the idea of a talking horse goes back at least to the siege of Troy, for certainly there must have been some dialogue amongst the Greek warriors enclosed in the wooden horse's belly. But we think you'll agree that Miss Smith's filly has something special.

"I've been losing enough on the races—I'm not going to start gambling with a supernatural card shark."

"Listen here." The nightmare bristled. "I can beat you at any game without the use of supernatural powers. You're known as the number-one sucker at all the tracks."

"That's right. That's right. Kick a man when he's down."

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I didn't mean to be unsporting. But you get me so mad!"

"Unsporting . . ." he mused—then sat up as a terrific idea hit him.

"Watch your step, Watson," the nightmare warned when the sudden movement nearly threw her off the bed. "I've been standing for a lot from you but—"

"Listen, can you run?"

"Run? Whaddya mean run?"

"How fast can you go?"

"Well, I'll be honest with you. Down—where I come from I'm known as 'Old Slow Poke.' I can't move much faster than speed of sound while all the other girls have the velocity of light. But that's the way it is—some are born with brains and some with speed."

"The velocity of sound is good enough," Watson decided. "Look here, Nightmare, how'd you like to run in a race?"

"A race?" Then the nightmare chuckled evilly to herself. "Oho, I see what you mean! But that wouldn't be cricket, would it?"

"Cricket and horse-racing are two distinct sports!" Watson stated. Then, alluringly, "How'd you like

to run down the track five lengths ahead of all the other horses, with the band playing and the crowd cheering? You'd be led into the winner's circle and they'd drape flowers all over you. People would yell 'Nightmare, Nightmare!' You'd be a popular figure, a celebrity. This way nobody knows you. You work at night, alone—unappreciated and unsung . . ."

"That's so *true*," the nightmare murmured. "I really haven't received the adulation I deserve. Here I've done my job faithfully for years, scared thousands of people into fits—and what thanks do I get? *None!*" She sobbed. "Other people get all the credit and glory. I just work, work, work like a horse."

"If you work for me," Watson said, "you'll only run a mile or so two or three times a week, get the finest of care *and*"—he pointed out significantly—"your nights will be your own."

"Watson," the nightmare assured him, "I'm sold. When do we start?"

"It isn't as easy as all that." Watson rose and paced up and down the room. "First of all you're not in the stud book. We'll have to forge some papers and pass you off as an Argentinian horse."

"*Si, si, señor*," said the nightmare, wriggling with pleasure. "*Hablo muy bien el español. El estrivo de mi padre es en el establo de mi madre. Yo soy del Rancho Grande. Olé!*"

"It isn't necessary for you to speak Spanish. As a matter of fact

you won't get to do any talking at all. Horses don't talk."

"But I do," she said, wounded. "Where I come from I am known as a witty and distinguished raconteur. You know the one about the two geldings?"

"Never you mind," he told her. "From now on you don't talk—except to me. Get it?"

"Yeah," the nightmare agreed. "All right, Watson, I'll give it a whirl. I've always wanted to be in the public eye."

For the sake of expediency Watson decided to give the nightmare, now officially registered as Incubus, her preliminary workouts himself—although he was no trainer. But then Incubus really needed no workouts. It merely looked well to take her around the track a few times.

"Remember, Inky," he whispered, "not too fast. We want to give 'em a big surprise at the meet."

"I dig you," she whispered back.

Reuben Goldlove, the well-known trainer, sauntered past and looked at Incubus. "My God," he told Watson, "what kind of a monster are you running! She's got a face like a gargoyle and a rear like a hippopotamus."

"You want I should clout him in the crupper?" Incubus whispered.

"No, no!" he whispered back. "I'm glad he doesn't take to you, because if he thought you were any good he might claim you."

"Claim me? Whaddya mean?"

"Well, you see," he explained, "since you're unknown and have no record I've had to enter you in a

claiming race. That means anybody who's running another horse in the same race can put in a claim for you before the race, for the price I set on you, and become your owner."

"What's the price you set on me?"

Watson hemmed and hawed. "Three thousand dollars," he admitted.

Incubus cocked an eye at him. "You selling me down the river for a mess of pottage, Watson?"

"No, no," he assured her, "I can't help it—this is some goddam silly racing rule. You have no reputation so I've got to enter you in a maiden claimer."

Incubus raised an eyebrow. "A maiden claimer?"

"A maiden horse," he explained austere, "is one which has never won a race."

"Oh-h-h-h," she said. "Sorry."

"Now, if the worst comes to the worst and you do get claimed we can figure out ways and means of getting you back. Can't we, Inky?"

Incubus laughed richly. "Clout him in the crupper!" she chortled. "Oh, man!"

The day dawned when Incubus was to make her debut at Belmont. The odds on her were a hundred to one. Laughing softly to himself, Watson put five hundred dollars on her nose.

"You crazy, fella?" the seller said to him. "The horse to bet on is Godlove's Pamplemousse. He's a natural to win."

"Incubus is my own horse," Watson explained patiently.

"Oh, I guess it's like my kid. He plays the pianner and stinks but I gotta clap for him all the same."

"Why didn't you give her some hip reducing exercises," Godlove sneered as the jockey led Incubus out into the paddock. "She'll never get through the starting gate with that spread."

"Take it easy," Watson told her, as she reared. "Now, listen," he said to the jockey, a sullen young apprentice—all he could get—"she responds to direction very well. Talk to her. She practically understands."

"Oh, sure," the jockey jeered. "Is snookums gonna win the race for daddykins?"

"Ess," replied Incubus.

The jockey stared at her and at Watson. Watson laughed, a trifle too hard. "I'm a great ventriloquist," he explained. "Can't break myself of the habit."

"Well, you better begin now," the jockey said, "because I'm temperamental and when I'm emotionally disturbed the horse senses it."

"The horses," the announcer declaimed through the loudspeaker, "are at the post. . . . They're off! . . . All of them, that is, except Incubus. She can't get through the starting gate. She's stuck."

"Yah, wear a girdle!" the crowd called derisively.

With a wrench of sheer rage Incubus pulled herself through the gate and dashed after the other horses. "In the backstretch it's Pamplermousse in the lead with Disestablishmentarianism and Epigram

running half a length behind and... But who's this coming up from the rear? It's Incubus! She's ahead by a length . . . By two lengths . . . By three lengths! What a horse! What a jockey! He's giving her the whip! . . . Oh, oh, something's wrong. Incubus has lost her rider! Too bad, Incubus."

The horses raced up the stretch, with Incubus keeping five lengths ahead of Pamplermousse as per direction. She was much annoyed to discover that he had won the race.

"But I won it!" she kept whispering to Watson as he led her off. "I was first. This is a frame-up. I'm going right to the judges and raise an objection."

"It doesn't count if you don't have the jockey on you," he told her. "That's the rule."

"Flap the rules!" she said. "You mean without that pee-wee it doesn't count? A fine thing! I hate the rules, I hate the rules, I hate the rules!" She stamped her foot. "He hit me with a whip, the little bastard, so I gave him the old heave-ho."

"Aw, come on now, Incubus, we'll get another jockey who won't whip you. You see how easy you can win a race?"

She tossed her head. "I'm not so sure I want to run again."

"You know you want to run, Incubus. You've made a big impression, I could see that."

"Who cares what people think?"

"I saw Pamplermousse giving you the eye," Watson murmured. "Good-looking horse, isn't he? Any filly'd

be glad to have him interested in her."

"Oh, I dunno," Incubus said. "He's all right, I guess, if you like them tall and dark. But, okay, I'll try it again for you, Watson."

Godlove accosted them again as Watson led Incubus into her stall. "I take back what I said about your horse, Watson," he apologized. "She looks like a fiend, but she runs like one too. With the proper handling, she might be a stake horse." He looked speculatively at Incubus. "Give you five thousand for her, big rump and all."

"Not on your life."

Godlove shrugged. "Suit yourself. But she'll have to run in another claimer, you know." He left, laughing softly.

After two weeks of steady diet and vigorous massage, during which her hip measurements were considerably reduced, Incubus was entered in a four-thousand-dollar claimer. Even though she was still a maiden she was favored next to Pamplemousse by the players, for her unusual first start had not passed unnoticed. Watson bet another five hundred, to obtain which he had mortgaged the old homestead. But this time he could get only even money.

"Remember, Incubus," he instructed her as he buckled her saddle, "if Godlove claims you you know what to do."

"Sure do. Shall I let him live afterward?"

"Yeah, let him live. Just make it uncomfortable for him . . . Now

look here, sonny." This to the new jockey. "She doesn't like the whip. You saw what she did to her last boy?"

The jockey nodded and gulped.

"All you have to do is sit on her and let her go where she wants. Then you'll be all right."

"I wooden even get near her," the boy said, "if I didn't have an aged mother to support."

The starter waved the yellow flag and the horses were off. Incubus raced neck and neck with Pamplemousse until they were a furlong from the finish line. Then she surged ahead to win by five lengths. When she rode into the winner's circle the crowd boomed, as is their pleasant custom with winning horses and jockeys.

"A popular figure, eh?" Incubus sneered. "*Tcha!*"

"Y'know, Mr. Watson," the jockey said as he was assisted from the horse with a dazed but beatific smile on his face, "I'm so steamed up over this win I even thought Incubus was talking to me."

The men standing around laughed. "You've let excitement go to your head," Godlove remarked. "Personally I would never hire a jockey who has no emotional equilibrium."

The jockey reached a tentative finger toward Incubus' nose. "Good horse," he said. "Good Incubus."

"I think you're pretty nice yourself," Incubus murmured out of the side of her mouth. There was a stricken silence.

Reuben Godlove's eyes narrowed.

"That jockey who rode her the other day told me about your ventriloquism," he informed Watson. "Seems like a pretty cheap trick if you ask me." The others murmured agreement, color flowing back into their faces.

"Anyhow, now that she's my horse," Godlove went on, taking possession of Incubus' bridle. "She's going to be trained serious."

"Now?" Incubus asked Watson.

"Later," he whispered back.

"That ain't funny, Watson," Godlove assured him. As he led Incubus off she looked back over her shoulder and winked.

"Mr. Watson," the jockey said, following him off the field, "you're not really a ventriloquist, are you? That horse talks, doesn't she?"

Watson nodded.

"You gonna let Godlove get away with her?" The boy's voice rose to a shrill squeak.

"I'll claim her back in the next race."

"Yeah, but you can't claim her back less'n you've entered another horse in the same race and you don't have another horse, do you, Mr. Watson?"

Watson's jaw dropped. "I never thought of that! What'll I do?"

"You've got to get another horse, Mr. Watson. Do you have enough money?"

"Well, the purse from this race is almost two thousand, and I made another thousand betting on Incubus. And, of course, Godlove gave me four thousand for her. But that won't be enough to buy a decent

horse and maintain him—expenses are terrific."

The jockey chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. "I know what you can do," he said at length, "you can buy Prunella. She's set at a price of five thousand dollars but her owner's pretty disgusted with her—she has good lines but she finished last in twenty-seven starts—and I think you could have her for four thousand in cash."

Prunella, a meek-looking chestnut filly with big brown eyes and a vicious temper, was enthusiastically disposed of for four thousand and installed in Incubus' vacant stall. Watson shed a silent tear to see Incubus' second-best saddle hanging there on the wall.

In the dead of night he slipped into Godlove's stable. Incubus was awake, reading the *Morning Telegraph*. "Look at the picture they have of me," she snapped. "Obviously taken by an enemy. Next time Watson, remember—my right profile is the best."

"I'll remember," he promised and told her what had happened.

"You're sure this Prunella isn't taking my place in your affections?" she demanded severely. "That all this isn't a subterfuge?"

"My God, no! She quits before she starts."

"All right," Incubus said. "Now, I am reliably informed by the stable grapevine that Godlove's entering me in a six-thousand-dollar claimer. You spent almost all your money on Prunella—how're you going to claim me?"

There was dead silence in the stable.

"These men," she sighed. "Without us females to think for them they'd be lost. The answer is simple. Prunella's got to win that race. Then you'll have the purse, plus whatever you can bet on her, and you'll get good odds."

"Prunella win the race! She couldn't beat a speedy snail."

"She'll win the race." Incubus grinned happily.

The weather was clear and the track fast. Incubus was running at three to five—Prunella ninety-eight to one. Reuben Godlove appeared with his arm in a sling and a bandage on his forehead and glowered at Watson. "A fine trainer you are," he snarled.

"Let's see how well you've done with her," Watson suggested, smiling amiably.

The starting gate opened and all the horses dashed out—all except Prunella, who sauntered forth and stood admiring the view. Incubus turned, ran back and nipped Prunella viciously in the forequarters. With a whinny of rage Prunella proceeded to chase Incubus, who was showing a fleet pair of heels along the track. But there were six horses between Prunella and her attacker.

With a thrust of her powerful shoulders, Incubus sent Dernier Cri staggering into the geraniums that bordered the field. She thrust a hoof into the path of Kropotkin and sent him and his rider sprawling on

the track. She murmured something into Epigram's ear and that black colt turned light grey and refused to budge another step.

There were now three horses between Incubus and Prunella. Polyhymnia suddenly started to run backward. Sir Bleoberis buried his head in the sand and pretended he didn't notice the race was still going on. Cachucha—who had hitherto not been known as a jumper—hurdled the rail and dashed into the crowd of astonished players.

Still Incubus ran lightly before Prunella, half a length ahead, kicking dust in her face and making irritating remarks, while the enraged filly laid her ears back and bared white teeth to snap at her rival. One length before the finish line Incubus suddenly stopped short, leaving momentum to carry Prunella over the line to victory!

Prunella had won the race. Incubus was second but was disqualified for conduct unbecoming a horse and a lady. It was never determined who had run third.

"Together again at last, Watson," Incubus said during the joyful reunion in the paddock. "Ah, but it's been a long, long time . . ."

"Two weeks," commented the jockey, who had ridden Prunella.

"Listen, pipsqueak," Incubus told him irately. "I've spent the whole two weeks cooking up this speech and I don't want a half-pint like you spoiling it. It's been a long, long time, Watson . . ."

Prunella nickered.

"None of *your* lip, either,"

Incubus said. "Where would you have been if I hadn't won your race for you? Oh, you can run if you want to, can you? *Ha! Ha! Plater!*"

Prunella neighed angrily.

"Okay, Watson'll enter you in a claimer without me and we'll see what you can do." She turned toward her owner. "And now, Watson, I trust you have a hot tub prepared. I'm so-o-o-o tired . . ."

The racing secretary entered Incubus for an allowance with some misgivings. "But if she behaves again this time the way she did last she's out, Watson. Suspended—disqualified! Can't have that sort of thing going on, you know."

"She's actually the most tractable of horses, sir," Watson assured him. "It's merely that Mr. Godlove didn't know how to handle her."

"Oh—ah," the racing secretary said.

"And I'd like to enter Prunella in the five-thousand-dollar claimer."

The racing secretary smiled. "Well, Mr. Watson, you don't have to be afraid that anybody'll claim *her*. Godlove has spread the word around. Now everybody's afraid to claim a Watson horse."

Prunella won handily in her claimer and Incubus breezed to victory in her allowance. "Bet on Watson horses," the word went round the tracks. Incubus won a Class C, Class B and Class A handicap in swift progression. Prunella came in first in two seven-thousand-dollar claimers and second in a ten-thousand-dollar one.

And then Incubus came in last in a stake race at Aqueduct.

"What's the matter with you, Incubus?" Watson demanded. "You can run ten times around the track before any of these nags could reach the quarter-mile pole."

Incubus lay on her back in the hay and chewed reflectively on a straw. "You know, Watson," she said, "there are finer things in life than racing."

"What, for instance?"

She smirked. "I've been talking to Pamplemousse—you know, Godlove's horse—and he says it isn't ethical what I'm doing, that I'm competing with horses way below my class, that it isn't fair."

"But there aren't any horses in your class."

"I know," she sighed. "Sometimes superiority can have its disadvantages. That's what Pamplemousse says—he says it isn't fair for me to run at all. Says woman's place is in the home. Do you think woman's place is in the home, Watson?"

Prunella neighed in the adjoining stall.

"That's a dirty lie!" Incubus shrieked, getting up. "I double dare you to say it once more." Prunella kept silence.

"You're in love, Incubus?" Watson asked gently.

She bowed her head. "I didn't know I could be—I thought I was too tough. But you're never too tough. Oh, I know I'm a stake horse and he's still only a claimer but I love him just the same."

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it, Inky, I guess you have a right to. Only"—he gulped—"I'd entered you in the Belmont Futurity and it means . . . so much to me."

Incubus wiped away a tear with a wisp of hay. "All right, Watson, I'll win the Futurity for you. After all you have first claim on my loyalty. Who brought me out of obscurity? You! Who recognized my potentialities? You! Who made a horse out of me? You!"

Incubus won the Belmont Futurity and was carried off the track on the shoulders of a cheering crowd. Retouched photographs of the big black horse hit not only the sport pages but the front page of every newspaper in the country.

But the question of her racing again was shelved for the nonce. Shortly after the Futurity, Watson discovered that Incubus was pregnant. "Pamplemousse?" he asked.

She nodded shyly.

"But how could you do it? You two were in separate stalls."

Incubus snickered. "I have my methods, Watson."

"He's a low cad," said Watson.

"I knew what I was doing. I went into it with my eyes open."

He wondered just how he was going to enter the foal in the stud book. Although it would be of impeccable ancestry its escutcheon would be marred by a bend sinister.

Some months later, Incubus called Watson to her stall.

"What is it, Inky?"

"I don't know how to tell you this, Watson. I've got to go back."

"Back! Back where, Inky girl?"

"Back where I came from. Oh, I might have known it was never to be, that you can't wipe out the past. Still I'd hoped that somehow—some way . . . But the Big Bookie says no. I've got to go back where I came from—I don't belong here. He says I was sent as a punishment, not as a reward."

She extended a hoof toward Watson's hand. "I had my baby tonight, Watson. Take good care of her—she's half equine, so she can stay here—and she'll be the fastest thing on earth when she grows up. Prunella'll help you raise her and support the family."

Watson wiped his streaming eyes. "I'll take care of your baby, Incubus," he vowed. "I'll call her Incubus Two and I'll treat her as if she were my own daughter."

"I knew I could count on you, Watson. Well—this is goodbye."

Incubus slowly vanished.

It was hard losing Incubus. He'd grown attached to her, looking on her not only as a horse but a friend. Still, at least he had the colt. In two years she would take up where her mother had left off and again the Watson name would reverberate through the racetracks.

He went inside the stall, looked down at Incubus' daughter, who reposed on the hay looking up at him with big blue eyes. He gasped.

He had forgotten. Incubus was not a real horse, she was merely a demon in the shape of a horse.

Incubus Two was not in the shape of a horse.