

Candice, the contented cow



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She watched Gerald as he stood very still gazing at the baby, and wondered what was going on in his head. Then he moved away, back to his place next to the camel, and Candice saw that he was walking more slowly and thoughtfully. And when he talked to the camel, he was no longer cross. In fact, he went to sleep leaning against the camel. 'I think the baby might have worked a miracle in Gerald.' thought Candice, and smiled to herself.

Then she, like the humans and the other animals, she dozed off.

Sometime later she woke up to find Clawed rubbing up against her leg and purring. She hadn't noticed him come into the stable and creep into her stall. This was the first time she had ever heard him purr, and realised what it meant. She bent her head down, looked at him with her big, gentle eyes and said, 'Have you seen the baby too?' He simply nodded, let her lick him, and then curled up between her legs and went to sleep, still purring loudly.

Then Candice worshiped in her own way, giving silent thanks for the miracle of love found in that tiny, helpless child. She gave thanks for Gerald and Clawed and the other animals, and for her own life. She knew that she was getting older, and that soon her milk would dry up. Then she would no longer be useful, and she also knew what that meant. But it didn't matter. She had been given the gift of seeing the Love she had always known in her heart lying before her in, of all places, a manger in the middle of *her* home. She had been given the privilege of seeing that love change Gerald and Clawed and, no doubt, the other animals and humans in the stable.

And she was content.

If there was a word to describe Candice the cow, it would be 'contented.' She had learned a long time ago not to fuss over small things, things that she had no control over, like the shoddy state of the stable she lived in. Most importantly, not fussing gave her more time to look and listen - I mean, *really* look and listen. And this meant that she knew a lot more than the other animals in the stable.

Not that it set her above them, as though she was superior in some way. In fact it was just the opposite. She knew when an animal was sad or tired or hungry or ill, and she knew just what to say to cheer them up. She knew when to offer advice, and when to simply be silent and listen. She was kind and thoughtful. When Gerald the Goat (who liked to boss the other animals around) got too cross, she would gently remind him that he didn't have to boss the other animals around in order to be respected and loved - he already was; at least by her. And she always knew when Clawed the feral cat was coming in off the streets, and would kick over the bucket while she was being milked, just so he could have some fresh milk. She would even give him a motherly lick. 'Heaven knows he never gets any affection out on the streets.' she would think to herself. Clawed himself never thought to thank Candice - he was too tough for that.

Sometimes the other animals asked her why she was so nice. She replied that she didn't really know, but that it was sort of like being with someone who loved her very much, and who talked to her about what was important. And what was important a lot of the time was the animals she spent her time with in the stable. This explanation was puzzling, but it was the only way Candice could describe what it was like for her.

The other important thing about it all was that Candice would sometimes be able to sense that something was about to happen. Oh, I don't mean things like what the weather would be like the

next day, or whether Flossie the sheep's lamb would be a boy or a girl, or twins. It was more like the feeling that something important was in the wind, something that they needed to keep a watch out for.

And this was the feeling she had during one winter, when the weather was too cold to spend much time outside the stable. Candice knew, simply *knew*, that something wonderful was going to happen. She tried to tell the other animals, but because she couldn't say exactly what *was* going to happen, most of them took no notice. So nobody else shared the tingling excitement that grew in her. Then when a new bright star appeared one night through the little window high up in the wall, flooding the stable with a soft light, she was sure that whatever it was, it would happen soon.

And it did.

One very cold night, soon after the star appeared, two humans came into the stable leading a donkey. The donkey was put in the stall next to Candice, and the humans, a man and a woman, made themselves comfortable next to the manger. Candice saw that the woman was pregnant, and wondered how they came to be in the stable, and not the inn next door. She asked the donkey, who looked exhausted, just like his human friends.

"Have you come a long way?" she said. "You seem very tired."

"Nazareth," said the donkey, "with the baby due any minute."

"But why aren't they in the inn with other humans? Surely that's a more comfortable place for them. A stable....." ('especially *this* draughty stable,' she thought) ".....is no place for a human baby to be born."

"No room." said the donkey simply.

Candice saw that the donkey was very tired, so she didn't bother her with more questions. Instead she watched the humans. She became concerned when it was clear that the baby was on its way, and when the mother was in the pains of childbirth. And her heart swelled with pride when the baby - a boy - made his appearance, as though he were her own child.

The child's mother wrapped him in her shawl and placed him on some fresh hay in the manger. But first his father had to shoo Gerald away, because he was trying to eat the hay. Gerald went back to his stall in a huff. 'If only he could see the wonder of the baby.' Candice thought, and felt sorry for Gerald.

If that had been the end of it, Candice would have been happy enough, but there was more to come. A little while later some shepherds came into the stable with a couple of lambs, which they placed in front of them, before kneeling down before the child. 'It's like they're giving him gifts,' thought Candice, 'not just the lambs, but themselves. Oh, this baby *is* special.'

And there were more gifts to come. Later in the night three more humans entered the stable leading their camels. They were obviously rich, and the gifts they brought were obviously expensive, encrusted with jewels and gold. They too knelt in worship before the child.

Candice noticed that Gerald was getting to be very cross, and was taking it out on one of the camels. 'Poor Gerald. If only he could see what I see.' she thought. Then, as if he had read her mind, Gerald trotted over to the manger and peered in. The baby's parents were too busy talking to the visitors to notice.