

Claudia Camel was well known for being clumsy. She could never be trusted to carry fragile loads on her hump, because, try as she might, she never seemed to be able to avoid potholes in the road, and the slightest bump would trip her up. She turned Mrs Ahmed's forty piece tea set into a one hundred piece tea set by tripping over her own feet and falling flat on her tummy. Mr. Rajed's load of farm eggs ended up scrambled when she bumped into another camel and they both went down in a tangled heap. The only thing she could be trusted with was big, unbreakable things like carpets and cushions from the bazaar. At least if she fell over it would be a soft landing.

Yes, people were unhappy with Claudia, and she was unhappy too, because secretly she longed to dance. She longed to be graceful, to twirl and spin and pirouette; but the thing about dancing, as you will know, is that it happens best when you are happy. If you are unhappy, like Claudia, dancing is impossible. So Claudia spent her days hauling wood or rugs and cushions, dreaming of being free to dance. Maybe that was why she kept bumping into things - she just didn't concentrate enough.

Then one day her owner was asked if he would lend Claudia to some rich wise men to carry them on a journey. It seemed that their third camel, Charles, had a very bad cold, and there were no other camels to take his place. Katy Camel was away visiting her owner's aunt, Kevin Camel had sprained his back trying to haul a load too big for him (he always was a bit of a show off), and Calvin Camel was just too old to make the long journey. So even though her owner was truthful about Claudia's mishaps, the wise man took her. She was thrilled! 'I'll be the best camel I can be.' she thought. 'I'll prove that I can be really useful.'

She was bedecked with a colourful, jewel encrusted halter and reins and a beautiful leather saddle, and a head band with a fringe and bells hanging from it. She felt beautiful and proud, but then the fringe got into her eyes so that she couldn't see, and the bells startled her, and so she jumped sideways just as the saddle was being put on her, so the saddle and the wise man and everyone else close by went flying.

Oh dear.

It was a good thing that the man handling her was wise, because he talked quietly to her to calm her down, and presently she

got used to it all, and felt comfortable. And so they set out in a westerly direction that night, because, it seemed, they were following a star.

Now you'd think that walking on sand in the desert would be easy for a camel, but, as I said, it was night time, and dark, and somehow Claudia got her feet mixed up once or twice and had to be hauled up off the sand. Luckily she wasn't carrying anything fragile, just a casket of gold coins, and that was tied securely to the saddle, so nothing was broken or lost.

The journey took a long time - months, in fact, and there were other mishaps. Like when Claudia, who was plodding along, dreaming her dancing dream, failed to see that the camel in front of her - Cuthbert - had stopped, and bumped into him, giving him such a fright that he bolted, and had to be chased and brought back by his handler. She was ashamed of herself, and just wanted to hide away. But the wise man leading her spoke so kindly to her that she resolved never to let him down again. Well.....it worked for a little while at least.

Eventually they came to Jerusalem and a palace, where the wise men left them to drink at the trough while they visited the king. Claudia was amazed at the beautiful saddles and halters on the palace camels and horses - even more beautiful than her own. She plucked up enough courage to ask one of them what it was like to live in such a place. But it seemed that such a life was not as exciting as she thought. Despite the jewels and fineries, their masters could be ruled harsh, and didn't care if they were overloaded or tired. Claudia realised how lucky she was to have such a kind wise man for her master.

They continued on their journey (with just a few mishaps to make it interesting) and came eventually to a small stable in a place called Bethlehem. It was a very cold night, but before they went in, the wise men discussed whether they should ask if they could bring their three camels into the stable for shelter. It was a heated discussion, because they weren't sure whether Claudia would cause havoc in such a small space. Eventually, however, they came to an agreement, and all three camels were led into the warm stable and into their stalls.

Claudia took in the scene. There was a donkey, a goat and a couple of lambs in the stable, as well as a man and a woman sitting next to a manger. And in the manger was a baby, who was crying, which upset Claudia. She felt sorry for him. The three wise men knelt before the manger one by one and offered the gifts they had brought.

The first wise man offered his box of gold coins to the child, but everyone knows that you should *never* give a coin to a baby, because they might swallow it. So the baby kept crying.

The second wise man placed a box of frankincense before the manger and opened it, which only made the baby sneeze and cry all the more.

Claudia was becoming more and more concerned for the baby.

The third wise man took out his beautiful glass bottle of myrrh to show the baby, but it was too big and too expensive to play with, and didn't help at all.

Claudia just wanted to help, so she started to move out of her stall to get closer to the baby, but didn't notice the goat who had laid down at her feet. So Claudia tripped and went sprawling and the goat bleated loudly as it got squashed under her, and.....and.....the baby laughed! It was such a beautiful giggling sound that filled the stable, that Claudia, despite her embarrassment, had to laugh too. And then she got up and began to dance. She just couldn't help herself. She danced all around the manger and in and out of the stalls. She danced and she danced with joy, and you know what? Even in that small, crowded space, she didn't tread on anyone's toes or trip up once! And the baby laughed and laughed and laughed!

Eventually she had to stop, because the baby was getting very tired and needed to sleep, and so did she. Then they all said goodbye and went to find a place to stay for the night. In another stable and another stall Claudia dreamed her dancing dream, but this time she knew it was real.

And all the way back home Claudia never put a foot wrong, because she was happy. And from then on she never stumbled or bumped into things, because the laughter of that little baby in the stable at Bethlehem danced through her for the rest of her life.

Claudia the Clumsy Camel



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