

Chapter 11: Restless friends

The journey seemed endless. Pilgrims and travelers flooded the roads during the day. Camels complained about the heat, and donkeys brayed at whoever would listen. Only night travel was safe for an animal without an owner.

It all happened so fast.

Well, not really.

Clarence rubbed his nose as he remembered. Years and years had passed. Generation after generation of Far-outers had come and gone, but strangely nothing seemed to happen to him and Agnes. They had discussed for centuries. Was it the encounter with the flaming bush that kept them young and fresh? Was it living on Mount Horrible? Was it the water from the spring? Whatever the answer was, they both knew it was because HE wanted them to live on. So much had happened, even on the mountain, so out of the way for visitors. The young master had come back with a great crowd of people. He looked old and tired from their complaining. When he saw Clarence, he had smiled and laughed. Together they went to the niche to see the bush and drink from the fountain. It was great.

Other saintly men had come and gone as well, each searching for solace and understanding. Agnes and Clarence helped as much as they could.

Then last year, things started to change. The spring that had flowed so strongly for so many years started to falter. Finally, it dried up. Worst of all, their bush that had thrived for centuries began to dry up. Agnes had flown miles and miles looking for good earth and fertilizers, but to no avail. Sadly, Clarence brought the little water that remained from the spring to the roots of the shrub, but one by one, the limbs dropped as their leaves withered up. Finally, with one last surge of effort, the bush for the first time grew a bud on its remaining branch. The companions waited and waited for it to open. The wait was very trying. The friends, who had lived together for so many years, started to quarrel about everything.

One evening, it got particularly bad. Agnes wanted to go looking for water, and Clarence wanted her to look for more good soil.

"It's going to die, Clarence! Face it!" the crow had cawed harshly. "We can't deny it!" Clarence felt like crying, so he ran off without looking back. "My little shrub! My lifelong

task! And now it's dying!" he wailed.

He climbed and climbed until he was on the upper ridge of Mount Horrible. The stars winked at him as Clarence Bahh-ed all his fears and anger at his Maker. It just couldn't end this way. Late into the night, he wrestled with God. WHY? WHY ME?

God did not answer.

Or did he?

High in the sky above the Big Hunter and to the left of the One Humped Camel, something started to shine forth. Had he seen that star before? Clarence watched, and the light got bigger and bigger. "Wow!" he thought, "a new star!"

He was startled out of his reflections by a raucous cawing. "Rence! Rence! Where are you? Come on! It's flowering!"

With a leap and a bound, Clarence bounded down the mountain back into the niche. There, to his amazement, was the bush with its one living branch, and from it was growing a huge, bright red flower.

The sun that rose after that, with all its reds and oranges, was nothing compared to this flower. Agnes and Clarence spent the whole day looking at it as if in a trance.

Finally, after watching it all day, as the sun was setting, the flower started to shrivel and wilt. As it dried, it simply fell off the limb. The bush that had burned was now dead.

Both crow and sheep were beyond tears. It was hard to believe that it had just died after having lived for so long.

"Now what?" said Clarence as he poked at the dry flower on the ground. It broke open, and out of it rolled a hard, round object.

"Clarence, look!" exclaimed Agnes.

There could be no doubt about it... There was a deep red seed that looked surprisingly like an acorn.

The discussion about what to do next raged the whole next day. The spring dried up, and there was no more grass to graze on. It was after their meager lunch, when they were quietly looking out over the mountain, racking their brains, that Clarence remembered the new star.

"Maybe that star I saw last night is a sign? It came up at the same time the bush died. Why

not see where it leads us?" he said.

"Beats staying here," crowed the bird. So, they decided to try their luck following the star. Clarence tucked the new seed into his wool, and with Agnes mounted on his shoulder, they bid farewell to the niche and Mount Horrible.

That was two weeks ago already. The journey had been terrible. Dust and darkness, strange noises and barking dogs everywhere. But the star seemed to lead them. It grew higher and higher in the sky. So they felt they must be close.

Just before sundown, Agnes flew back. "I scouted out the whole area. The sparrows didn't know anything, but a flustered-looking robin said a couple of nights ago the sheep around here were running wild because the shepherds started running off and there was a bunch of singing and stuff... she couldn't sleep at all..."

"Yeah, yeah, but do you have any idea where?"

"Not really, but there are tons of people milling around this village. It would be better if we skirt around the edge of town."

"Alright."

As darkness set in and the stars came out, they moved out cautiously. The last thing Clarence wanted was to be caught by some zealous shepherd and made part of his flock. Cooking fires started to light up the cool night, so it was easy to avoid the humans. The star was high above them and did not seem to help out at all. They tiptoed through the holding areas, where the townspeople keep their animals.

"Phew," muttered Agnes as they walked, "there must be camels around here somewhere." He agreed that it stunk. And then, as they walked, somewhere from within the stalls, there was a soft voice singing. It reminded Clarence of the Master's daughters when they sang. The song was simple but beautiful. Without consulting the crow, he followed the voice.

There was a fire blazing cheerfully in the hut where the voice sang. The walls of that place were poorly constructed, with large gaps between the boards. Clarence pressed his eye up to the crack and peered in. "Why, it's not even a hut!" he thought. He could see a couple of cows and a donkey. The fire was in the middle of the open area at which a man sat stirring a pot. The voice came from the far corner. Clarence strained to see.

"What'cha looking at, Rence?" whispered the crow.

"Nothing," he replied angrily.

"Yeah, right. Let me see."

Clarence flicked the bird off his shoulder.

"Let me concentrate here!" he hissed.

In the far corner, was a youngish-looking woman singing to something wrapped in the hay.

Whap! Clarence felt a piece of mud hit him.

"What are you..."

Whap! Another piece.

"Aggy, quit it..." Whap! Whap!

"I'm sick and tired of you bossing me around." She cawed loudly, waking up the cows in the building.

"Now look what you've done, you... you... Bird brain!" said the indignant sheep.

They started chasing each other around the lot, yelling at each other, when they heard a baby start to cry. A lantern was held high, and a strong hand grabbed Clarence by the neck.

"What do we have here?" said the lantern holder. He flipped the sheep over his shoulder and entered the hut.

When the baby had calmed and Clarence was set on his feet next to the woman.

"This was the fellow making all that ruckus," he said.

The woman looked at Clarence closely. She smiled and waved him over. She twisted his cowlick and then whispered to him,

"You too can take a look at the King."

Clarence looked at her, perplexed. She pulled back the blanket, and there was the red-faced newborn, snuggling down for another nap.

He stared in awe.

Somehow, he knew this baby. He looked up at the mother. "Bahh?"

"Oh yes, Clarence, he knows you too."

Nuzzling down into his wool, Clarence pulled out the dark brown seed, all that remained of his special thorn bush. He set it on the child's chest and bowed down.

The End