

CYRUS, THE GREAT...
CAMEL

A Christmas Story by Jewell Ellen Smith

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"Come on, Cousin Hadad!" Timsar called. "You're going to miss all the talk and the tales and the laughing!"

"I'll be there in a minute!" Hadad called back. "Soon as I can get Cyrus to lie down."

"Let that old stack of bones stand up tonight!"

Hadad didn't answer. He was anxious to join his Cousin Timsar and the other cameleers gathered at the evening campfire, but first he had to get his oldest and crankiest camel settled for the night.

The evening before, tired as he was, Hadad had enjoyed hearing the dozen or so camel-herders tell of their travels and adventures and of the animals they had owned. There had been little or no talk of the coming journey. Instead, there was a discussion, long and lively, on how to cope with camels. To a man, the herders had agreed that a camel dislikes everybody and everything, even other camels. And, that they never learn to obey orders. They will kick, spit, and bite. There is no way to even beat that out of them. No way.

The cameleers, especially the younger ones and the boys, had been surprised when Hadad mentioned that his Cyrus was fifty years old, for few camels live that long. And not a person sitting in the circle had believed a word Cousin Timsar said when he began telling how long Hadad had been dealing with camels.

"Why, I swear to you, I swear by all the gold in Sheba, that my Cousin Hadad here has been herding camels so long that he can even talk camel talk!"

The men laughed.

"Cousin Hadad has had this old cranky creature named Cyrus for what seems forever, and he understands every word Cyrus says!"

At that the laughter was so loud Hadad was sure King Baldasar could hear it all the way over at his tent.

Hadad grasped Cyrus' halter and began speaking quietly to him. At the same time, he held out a handful of dried dates.

"Kneel, Cyrus! Kneel! Look, I saved you some dates. Good, sweet dates. Kneel, boy! Kneel and lie down."

Cyrus gave a half-snort, spit, and jerked his head so high Hadad could scarcely hold on to his halter.

"Now, Cyrus, that's no way to act! When the sun goes down, it's time for man and beast to rest. See over there?" Hadad waved his hand toward the drove of forty or more camels, all lying on the ground, some already asleep, some still chewing their cud. They're resting, Cyrus, and you've got to rest, too. Tomorrow may be the day we start the journey."

"The journey! I'm not going, Hadad!"

"Cyrus!"

"This is one caravan that will take off without me." Cyrus craned his neck down and with his lips snatched the dates out of Hadad's hand.

"Now, now, Cyrus," Hadad murmured, "you're the greatest camel in all the East, the greatest who ever walked on desert sands. We both know that. Why, you can see the wind. You can smell water for miles. You feel the sandstorms coming, days before they begin. And don't forget, you were named for a mighty king of long ago: Cyrus the great, ruler of the Medes and the Persians.

"You are half-Persian, yourself, Cyrus! Descended from strong Persian stock, crossed with Arabian. My father told me so, when you were just a gawky calf and I was but a stripling of a boy."

Cyrus grunted and swallowed the dates, whole.

"I couldn't go on a long journey to a strange land without you, Cyrus."

"A strange land. That's Just it, my dear Hadad. You don't know a thing about that strange land. You don't know why you're going there, when you're going to start out, who is going--except our rich king Baldasar over yonder in his fancy tasseled tent. I tell you, Hadad, you have no idea where you are going, or if you will ever come back! I'm staying here in the land of Sheba."

Hadad sighed.

"Cyrus, you can worry me to death sometimes. I know I've told you twice who will be in the caravan and explained the reason for the wonderful journey, but I'll tell you one more time if you will--"

Cyrus stepped closer to Hadad and nuzzled his hand. "If you'll give me some more dates, and rub my knees with that sweet oil you hid in the saddle bag, I'll kneel and lie down."

"You don't need oil on your knees every night, but just this once I'll humor you."

Hadad gave the old camel another handful of dates and got out the ointment he had mixed some time back for his own aching and aging joints. It was an aromatic blend of oil and curative herbs, powdered barks and galls. He would have added a small amount of myrrh, had he been able to afford it. His father had always used myrrh in such a mixture.

The thought of myrrh, or, of frankincense, always brought back memories of his father, who all his life was a cameleer, herding for the spice merchants of Sheba. His father knew all there was to know about the spices of the East and about

camels. He always said myrrh might be prized as an incense to use on altars during holy rituals, but it was also a good medicine for a man or his animals. Frankincense, he called "chief of all spices," that spice most desired by the Greeks and Romans, and the Egyptians, too.

Hadad poured a generous amount of his homemade balm and thoroughly rubbed the tough, leathery skin pads covering his old camel's knees. This seemed to comfort Cyrus and in a few minutes he whined just a bit, bent his front legs and dropped to his knees. Then, with loud groaning and grunting, he folded his hind legs and let himself fall to the ground--in the manner of all camels.

"That's a good boy, Cyrus!" Hadad said aloud. To himself he said, "Maybe I shouldn't take this old fellow on the journey. He shows signs of getting decrepit. Worn out--like me. Still, he has the smoothest gait of any camel I ever rode."

As Hadad slid the saddle from Cyrus' hump, and carried it and the ointment into his tent, he talked on, not noticing that his favorite beast was already beginning to doze off to sleep.

"Cyrus, you don't realize it, but you and I are lucky. Not every camel and cameleer in the Land of Sheba ever gets a chance to go on a journey such as this one with King Baldasar. Don't think for a minute it will be just a long, aimless trek across deserts, mountains, and plains.

"This, my great camel, will be a search, a fantastic search. Mysterious. Sacred, in a way. Three kings of the East will be trying to find a holy Child King, born--they don't know where--to rule a vast kingdom that will last till the moon is no more.

"There will be King Baldasar of Sheba, King Gaspar of Tarshish and the Isles of the Sea, and King Melchior of Seba. These three will be following the Child King's brilliant new star."

"New star?" mumbled Cyrus.

"Yes, a new star! Yesterday after King Baldasar hired me on--with all my camels, and Cousin Timsar and his--he explained about the star and everything."

"I'm still not going--not for forty kings or a million stars."

"Hush, Cyrus, and I'll tell you exactly what King Baldasar told us cameleers. It seems that generations ago, many generations ago, the Land of Sheba was ruled by a beautiful queen who--"

"Ah, Cousin Hadad, just what are you telling old Cyrus?"

"Why Timsar! It's you! I didn't see you walk up. I was just going to explain to Cyrus what King Baldasar said yesterday about the importance of the journey. Then I was coming to the campfire."

"I'm afraid you're too late. The fire died down and all the herders have gone to their tents. What all did the king have to say?"

"I was thinking you were there."

"No, remember, I went into the city, looking for a new tent."

"That's right. I do remember. Did you buy one?"

"No, Cousin Hadad, I found exactly what I wanted, but the skin-flint tent-maker wouldn't trade on my terms. Now tell me what King Baldasar had to say about the journey."

"Well, as I was telling Cyrus, many generations ago the Land of Sheba had as its ruler a beautiful queen who delighted in traveling and in visiting the kings and queens of other lands. To each kingdom, she carried a vast store of the choicest Arabian frankincense and myrrh, to present as gifts. Naturally, in return she received many gifts.

"When this queen went to the Land of Israel--then ruled by the famed King Solomon--she brought home everything imaginable: singing birds, precious stones, fine linen, embroidered work, carved ivory, just everything.

"It is said that two unusual items from the Land of Israel were copies of songs and poems King Solomon himself had written and scrolls of sacred writings by ancient prophets who had lived in and near Israel. These writings were of much interest to the queen and to the astrologers and advisors in her court, for they revealed that King Solomon and his people worshipped only one God. For centuries--"

"Only one God? That's strange. But go on with the story."

"For centuries the Israelite writings were carefully preserved, but after a time they were lost--all except a fragment of one of the poems. However, what these ancient prophets foretold has been remembered in the palace of Sheba's kings and told over and over again, for nearly a thousand years. Especially the part about the star. King Baldasar said--"

"The star?"

"Yes, Timsar. A star. You see, a holy man from among the Midianite people prophesied that 'there shall come a Star... and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel.' King Baldasar said this was interpreted to mean that a Great King would arise and that his coming would be heralded by the appearance of a brilliant new star."

"That's all very interesting, Cousin Hadad, but what's it got to do with us and the journey?"

"Everything! King Baldasar told us that since childhood he has studied the stars in their courses, and he is convinced that the bright new star we see these nights is the one foretold by that ancient prophet of the Midianites. And King Gaspar and King Melchior agree with Baldasar. They believe the prophecy has come true. What's more, they see themselves as part of the other prophecy in--"

"You mean to say that all three kings think this Great King has actually appeared?"

"Yes, they--"

"But, where?"

"That's the reason for the journey, Timsar--to find the Great King! The star is the Great King's star."

"I didn't realize that! Like everyone else, I've noticed that bright star. But I thought these three kings were going on this journey just to be going somewhere."

"No, no! It's also the prophecy in the King Solomon poem that the kings--"

"Well, uh-- uh-- Cousin Hadad, I-- I-- I'll let you tell me about the poem some other time. I'd better turn in so I can get up early in the morning. I'm going back to the market to haggle some more with that tent-maker that wants to rob me."

"Sure, Timsar."

Timsar left, whistling as he went.

"Poor Cousin Hadad," Timsar thought. "He talks and talks to his old camel. He has let himself get all excited over one bright star. And now he wants me to listen to this poem some foreign king wrote a thousand years ago. Poor Cousin Hadad."

It took Hadad a long time to get off to sleep. There were so many things to think about and worry about. Would the other kings and their caravans arrive in three days, or three weeks; or would it be three months before they would come and the journey could get underway? Both had promised to meet King Baldasar on the outskirts of Sheba's capital city by the first full moon of the New Year, and that was only three days away.... Should he arrange to buy more grain for his camels or would the route of the journey take them through places where there would be an abundance of camel thorn and the sweet scented rush which camels so love to eat? ... Of course, he reasoned, camels can travel for days without food or water....

Should he send to the market place for more oil and herbs and mix extra ointment for old Cyrus' knees? Surely, the reason it was almost impossible to get Cyrus to kneel these days was that his knees hurt. They were stiff from age.... Ah, age. Hadad thought of his own years. Perhaps both he and Cyrus were too old to undertake this unique venture. Perhaps. No, they could make it--both of them.

In his dreams Hadad was young again and spent not one penny on soothing ointments for himself or his animals. Cyrus and all his other camels had somehow vanished and he was no longer a cameleer. He was a celebrated astrologer, a stargazer, one hailed with honor for he had been the first to see a brilliant new star.

The lovely Queen of Sheba heard of Hadad's fame and chose him to be her chief advisor and to accompany her on her travels--even to the Land of Israel and into the fabulous Jerusalem palace of King Solomon.

Clad in garments that would rival the splendor of any King's robes, Hadad was at his queen's side when King Solomon came into his throne room. Solomon was holding a scroll and was followed by attendants who carried many scrolls.

The Israelite king climbed onto his glittering throne and began to speak.

"Hear now, O Queen of Sheba, hear the record of the prophecy of Balaam the Midianite, the son of Beor. 'He hath said, which heard the words of God, and knew the knowledge of the Most High, which saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall arise out of Israel.' *Numbers 24:16, 17*

"O beautiful Queen of the South," Solomon continued, "you wonder at this prophecy, do you not? The God of our Fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will bring it to pass. Our God has promised to send a king who will rule on the throne of my Father David forever. He is the one who shall be the Great King."

Solomon stepped down from his throne and confided to the Queen of Sheba and to Hadad that he personally was composing a prophetic poem for the Great King. He unrolled a parchment and began reading the lines he had completed.

"In his (the Great King's) days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth.

"He shall have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.

"They that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before him; and his enemies shall lick the dust.

"The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts.

"Yea, all kings shall fall down before him; all nations shall serve him....

"To him shall be given the gold of Sheba....Daily shall he be praised....

"His name shall endure for ever; his fame continue as long as the sun; and men shall be blessed in him; all nations shall call him blessed...." *From Psalm 72*

Cyrus, too, dreamed a dream. In it, he was the lead camel of a huge caravan, moving across a burning desert and over dreary wastes of rocks and shifting sands. Night came, but the caravan did not stop.

"Look up in the sky!" shouted the cameleers. "The strange new star is as bright as the high-noon sun! Let us travel on!"

Cyrus looked up and there was the strange new star, brilliant and beautiful. Not far from the star--but higher in the sky--he saw a phantom caravan of many camels, gliding over sands that had turned to clouds. The camels were gleaming white; their saddles made of purest gold. Yet, they bore no riders or burdens of any kind.

The lead camel spoke to Cyrus.

"My son," he said, "be an obedient beast. Go on this journey with the three kings. Go willingly. Go gladly.

"You will behold the Holy Child King. He will come meek and lowly, yet like no other child of woman born. All camels, all creatures, all kings shall bow down before him. He shall be the Star King, the Great King."

The phantom lead camel called out again: "Go on the journey, my son. Go."

And the caravan passed behind thick clouds.

In the next several days, Cyrus thought many times of his dream. Over and over he could hear the voice of the phantom camel: "Go on the journey!... Go!... See the Child King!... Bend the knee and bow down before him!... Go!"

And Cyrus wondered how he could bear to bend his knees many more times--even before a king. He would try to make the journey. Yes, because of the dream and because of Hadad, he would go. But he would insist to Hadad that he, Cyrus--surely the most-traveled camel in all the East--would make this trip only on the condition that he would head the entire caravan. Ah, he could see it all. The caravan would be enormous--probably the greatest to ever leave Sheba--what with the three kings and all their beasts and their countless attendants and servants and guards. And he would lead them all.

If Hadad refused to place him in the front, it would be just too bad. He had no intention of eating the dust of all those scraggly camels from Seba and Tarshish and the Isles of the Sea--wherever those far-off lands might be.

Cyrus had watched yesterday as the two foreign caravans arrived. Motley looking droves they were. Of course, he had to admit a few animals in both herds were as big as he was. He had noticed that most of the she-camels had half grown calves at their sides. And, he would grant that the majority had firm, healthy lumps of fat capping their humps. Still, these creatures couldn't compare with the camels of Sheba.

As for the two foreign kings, they looked rich. Stately. About like King Baldasar, except that King Gaspar was shorter and fatter, and much darker than Baldasar, while King Melchior was considerably older. King Melchior looked almost as old as Hadad. His hair and beard were even whiter than Hadad's. But his step was sure and firm, not tottering like Hadad's.

Cyrus had not seen much of Hadad since the foreign travelers had reached King Baldasar's camp. Hadad was spending his time over at King Baldasar's tent, listening, no doubt, as the three kings worked out their travel plans.

Now if the kings were wise, Cyrus reasoned, they would let Hadad show them the way to go--no matter if they were planning to follow the strange new star. The star seemed to be moving toward the northwest, but Hadad knew all the roads in and out of the Land of Sheba, no matter which way you wanted to travel. He knew other roads and long-used trails, too.

When he was a boy, Hadad traveled with his father along the spice trail that led far, far westward into other lands. Sometimes when Hadad felt sad, he talked to Cyrus of his boyhood days on the spice trail with his father. The trail was winding, long, and dangerous.

Bands of vicious nomad robbers often attacked the spice caravans, beating and sometimes killing the cameleers, and stealing their camels and all their loads of frankincense and myrrh. But it had been some time now since Hadad felt sad enough to mention the boyhood time of his life.

Not long before sunset, Cyrus saw Hadad and his Cousin Timsar coming toward the tent. Hadad didn't look sad this afternoon. He looked extremely happy. And he wasn't tottering along, either. He was walking fast. That is, for Hadad it was fast. He was scarcely using his walking stick; and on his left shoulder, he was carrying an odd-shaped, ornate chest. Cyrus had never before seen such a chest. It was made of cedar trimmed with brass and bound with purple cords. No doubt, Timsar had traded for it when he bought his new tent. He was always doing things for his old cousin.

Timsar was leading the camel named Smerdis. Poor Smerdis. He couldn't see Cyrus or much of anything else for he had a high stack of dried buta bushes tied on his back. Buta, a common desert plant sold in the outdoor market for fuel, isn't heavy. It is just bulky and very annoying because with a load such as Smerdis had, a camel can only see straight ahead.

No camel likes to have such great bundles of the stuff piled on his back. Cyrus was glad it was one of the young animals, not he, who was loaded down with the fast-burning bushes.

Hadad and Timsar were talking, but Cyrus didn't half listen to what they said--he was busy chewing his cud--yet he caught a few words now and then.

"... A fantastic chest ... Lebanon is where the finest cedar comes from.... Of course ... very clever! Those three are no fools!"

"The kings trust you, Cousin Hadad."

"... guard it day and night."

"Any time you need me, just call."

"... a secret. Nobody knows, except you and me and the kings."

"... no problems, as I see it."

"No problems, Cousin Hadad, unless a band of armed raiders swoops down on us."

"Don't mention such a thing!"

As the two kinsmen talked, Hadad carefully wrapped a saddle blanket around the chest and set it inside his tent.

Timsar dumped the buta bundles down on the ground, very near where Cyrus was tied, and rode off on Smerdis. He called back: "I'll be here before day, to help you load up, Cousin Hadad."

"Good," answered Hadad.

Later, when Hadad gave Cyrus his usual evening snack of dried dates and began rubbing his knees with the soothing ointment, he seemed very pleased about something; rather excited, too.

"Cyrus," he announced, "we start out tomorrow!"

"Start on the journey?"

"Yes, my stiff-legged Cyrus. Tomorrow is the day. Oh, I'm glad!"

"I've decided to go with you--but only on one condition."

"And what is that condition, foolish one?"

"I will go, Hadad, if I am the lead camel--with you on my back, showing the kings the way."

"No, no, Cyrus! It can't be! You--"

"What do you mean, 'no, no, it can't be'? I just won't go then! I refuse to eat the dust of all those fat foreign camels. Besides you've told me yourself I'm the 'greatest camel in all the East.' So there!"

"Cyrus, you don't understand. The kings will take turns riding at the head of the caravan. They've already cast lots on whose turn will come first. The chance fell to King Melchior. He and his camels will be followed by King Baldasar and his. And then will come King Gaspar and his. And this time, I will not be on your back. I have to--"

"You won't be on my back? You've been riding on my back for over forty years, Hadad. What--"

"I know, I know, Cyrus! But--"

"But what? Who is going to be in my saddle? Your cousin Timsar?"

"It won't be a person. It will be this stack of dried buta here, and--"

"This buta? Never!" Cyrus whirled around, spit and snapped his teeth within an inch of Hadad's right ear.

Hadad grabbed the old camel's halter and shook his stick at him.

"Cyrus, if you ever bite my ear, so help me, I'll bash your empty head!"

"You won't do any such thing!"

"You think not? Camels have been killed for less!"

"Hadad, you're afraid of the old saying that 'If a man kills his camel, when he comes to the world the next time, he will be a camel himself!'"

"Is that so? Well, let me remind you of another old desert proverb that says: 'If a camel bites off his master's ear, when the camel comes into the world next time, he will be a man without any ears!'"

Cyrus snorted and backed away.

For a few minutes, Hadad didn't say anything. He just stood and looked at his ill-tempered old beast. When he did speak, it was in a soft, soothing tone.

"You are a cantankerous creature, Cyrus. But you are also fortunate, very fortunate. King Baldasar has forty-two camels ready for the journey. King Caspar

brought thirty-six with him. King Melchior has twenty-seven, not counting calves. That's more than a hundred beasts of burden, Cyrus. Out of all these, you are the one chosen to carry the treasures of the three kings."

"Treasures? I thought you said you were going to pile all that dried buta on my back!"

"The buta bushes are to hide the treasures! They will be a camouflage, to conceal the chest. The kings' treasures are packed in that chest you saw me put in the tent. What we'll do is fasten the chest on your hump and then tie on all those bundles of dried stalks and limbs and roots. You will walk in the midst of the other fuel-bearing camels. That way, no one--not even the sharpest-eyed raiders we could meet--will ever notice that under your high stack of buta bushes is a chest filled with the precious things of three kings."

"Well-l-l-l, in that case," said Cyrus, "I'll take it."

At sunrise the eager Kings of the East, their advisors and guards, their servants, the cameleers and their heavily laden beasts left King Baldasar's camp on the outskirts of Sheba's capital and headed northwest. As long as it was possible, they planned to keep to the ancient incense road of the spice merchants. But, if the position of the star they followed changed, they would leave the much-traveled merchants' trail and go in the direction of the star.

As the huge caravan moved into the countryside and passed through the streets of small villages, people ran out of their house to see the procession go by.

"Look!" the people would shout. "Three mighty kings! And so many camels! O Kings, where are you going?"

And the kings would answer: "We're going to find the Holy Child King."

The elders in the villages would ask: "Where is the Holy Child King?" And they had other questions. In each place, the kings would pause long enough to explain their quest.

Usually it was King Baldasar who would say: "We do not know exactly where the newborn Prince is. But tonight, good friends, when the stars come out, look high in the sky, toward the northwest, and there you will see the bright new star of the Child King. It is that star which we follow. We will follow it until we find him."

King Gaspar would then say: "The coming of this Great Star and the rise of a Great King was foretold centuries ago, by prophets among the Israelite people."

King Melchior would add: "We three Kings of the East will fulfill what the wise Israelite King Solomon prophesied almost a thousand years ago. We will bring gifts to the infant Star King, treasures from the lands of Sheba and Seba and Tarshish and the Isles of the Sea."

All the villagers who heard these sayings were amazed.

Even in the cities through which the travelers passed the people would flock around the caravan to hear the kings and to ask questions. And when the great procession moved on, the people murmured among themselves: "My, my, what a sight! And what a strange quest! Three powerful, rich rulers of the East searching for a newborn Prince. Do you suppose they will ever find him, with nothing to guide them but a star? We never heard of such a journey, such a search. It's strange. Very strange."

After a time, the kings' caravan left the well-worn road of the spice merchants to go due north and into a desert region, for this was the way the guiding star moved. Here, mile after mile and day after day, the travelers found no villages or cities, very few watering places.

The land, a bleak broad expanse of stone and rock, with vast stretches of sand, had no signs of life except stunted tufts of desert thorn. But the kings were not disheartened. They pressed on, always following the star.

To his surprise, Cyrus found himself enjoying the journey. He was glad the great white camel in his dreams had told him to go. His burden was light. There had been no blinding sandstorms, no desert raiders. And being in the center of the caravan wasn't too bad.

Hadad rode by his side, on Smerdis. In fact, Hadad never left him, day or night, because of the chest, Cyrus was sure--though Hadad never mentioned the chest or what treasures might be in it. Smerdis was not hard to get along with. And the six other camels laden with buta and those carrying dung dried for fuel were not disagreeable--not after Cyrus gave them to understand that as he was the greatest, most-experienced camel in all the East, he could tell them anything they needed to know about traveling long distances. That is, anything except how to keep their knees from getting stiffer and stiffer and how to stop their knee pads from cracking and bleeding every night as they knelt down to sleep. There was no need to mention such matters to young camels.

Then came an evening when Cyrus could not kneel. His knee joints would break if he tried it. He knew they would break. And he said as much to Hadad.

"You're just trying to fool me, Cyrus," Hadad said. "Come on, kneel! Night has come again. Kneel!" And he tried to coax his old camel with dates, then raisins, then more dates. He rubbed Cyrus' knees with the sweet oil, for a long time. But Cyrus just could not bend his knees.

Much upset, Hadad sent for his Cousin Timsar.

"What'll I do, Timsar? Cyrus' knees are as stiff as a stick! He can't kneel! And if he did kneel, he couldn't get up again. Do you think he may die, right here in the middle of this desert?"

"No, no, Cousin Hadad," Timsar said as he took a close look at Cyrus' front legs. "Don't let yourself get all worried over old cranky Cyrus. He's not going to die. Not yet. If he can't kneel, why that's not the end of the world, is it?"

"I suppose not."

"He can sleep standing on his feet."

"But the chest!" whispered Hadad. "I hide it every night! If Cyrus can't kneel, I can't get it down off his hump! The buta bundles fall when I untie the ropes. But not the kings' treasures!"

"Don't fret, Cousin Hadad. That chest and the buta are as light as feathers. It won't hurt Cyrus to keep the whole stack on his back."

"You think not?"

"I'm sure of it. So don't you fret. Anyway, the other cameleers are saying that soon we will cross the border into the land of the Israelites, called Judea. Surely it--"

"Ah, the Israelites! Among them we will find the Holy Child King!"

"I'm not so sure about that. But it won't be many days before we reach the great city of Jerusalem. And Cyrus will be all right until then. But now, Cousin Hadad, it might be a wise thing for you to do--when we get to Jerusalem--to trade Cyrus off for a younger camel."

"Wise? Perhaps so. But I wouldn't want to get rid of Cyrus. No, not Cyrus."

"Well, you think about it, Cousin Hadad. It's the only sensible thing to do."

From that night on, Cyrus slept standing up. But Hadad hardly slept at all. A vague, uneasy feeling he had about his ailing camel and about the chest the kings had assigned him to guard would not go away--night or day.

Finally, after many wearisome miles, the travelers from the East saw the walls of Jerusalem, just ahead. The kings stopped. And Hadad was glad. So was Cyrus.

When the kings had called the entire company together, King Baldasar announced that it seemed wise to make camp here on the outskirts of the great city and to rest, and to let the beasts of burden rest, for several days.

"We will send messengers into Jerusalem," King Baldasar explained, "to make inquiries and to find out if there is a caravansary large enough to accommodate such a group as we are. Also, the messengers will locate the open market place so that we can replenish our supplies. And we want to learn the way to the royal palace."

"It may be," said King Gaspar, "that later we will ask for an audience with the ruler of the land. King Herod, I believe his name is."

"Yes," declared King Melchior, "If anybody can tell us where the Child King is, surely it will be the old king. Why, it could be that the newborn Prince is Herod's son, or grandson--right here in Jerusalem! I must say I feel that our journey is almost ended!"

"Tonight, let us all watch," said King Baldasar, "and see if the Infant King's star is shining down on Jerusalem. If it is, we will know this is the end of the journey."

But when night came, heavy clouds covered the sky. Not even the moon, much less the stars, was visible to the weary travelers. On the second night, the skies were again dark. But on the third night a million stars came out. The guiding star was very bright, but it had moved to the southwest. It was not shining down on Jerusalem.

When the kings' messengers returned, they reported that the city of Jerusalem was magnificent, that the market place was big and noisy, easy to find--for its smell, if for nothing else.

King Herod's palace, they said, was not far from a beautiful temple. What had surprised the messengers was that word of the arrival of three kings of the East had already spread throughout the city, and "when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him."

At this report, the three kings were somewhat dismayed. Surely, Herod didn't think they were his enemies. Now, they would have to meet with Herod.

The following morning the three left the camp, early, to ride into Jerusalem and to King Herod's palace, to assure him that they had come in peace and to ask if they might speak to him privately just long enough to ask one question.

Not long after the kings left, Hadad's Cousin Timsar and many of the other cameleers decided they, too, would go into the city, just to look around for a little while. Timsar urged Hadad to go with them, but Hadad said no, that he was still bone-weary.

"Besides, Timsar," Hadad whispered, "as you know, I can't leave the chest."
"Oh yes, that's right," Timsar whispered back. "I had forgotten all about the chest. Can I bring you anything from the market?"

"Maybe a few dried dates, if you don't mind."

"For old Stiff-Knees, I'll bet!"

Hadad laughed.

"Sure! Cyrus will get most of them." And Hadad handed his cousin several coins.

Timsar knew it was useless to try to persuade Hadad that this was the ideal day to trade off old Cyrus; so he didn't even mention it.

King Herod, a swarthy man, well up in years, received the Eastern kings with considerable pomp and ceremony. And there was a lengthy exchange of pleasantries. Then, after Herod mentioned that he had been ruler of the Jews for some thirty years, he said, "Great Kings, what brings you to this land of the Israelites? You honor all Jerusalem, all Judea, with your presence; but I wonder why you have traveled so far.

"And, sirs, you have my curiosity at its highest peak! Will you please tell me what one question you wish to ask?"

"Honorable King Herod," replied Baldasar, "our journey is a search. We are seeking the one who is born to be the Great King, the one whose kingdom shall know no end. 'We have seen his star in the East and are come to worship him.'"

The three kings waited for Herod to reply but when he gasped and cleared his throat but said nothing, Baldasar continued, "It is our understanding that the coming of this Great Star King was foretold centuries ago by the holy prophets of your nation. So, we thought surely you would know where the Child King has appeared. Our question is, 'Where is he who is born king?'"

"Child King? Uh-- uh-- I-- I must-- ah, honorable Kings, this is most interesting. I think-- I don't think-- ah, now it comes to me how to give you the Answer!"

"If the prophets foretold this highly unusual--and unlikely--event, then we must consult the scribes and the chief priests who keep the sacred writings of the Jews. They can tell us exactly what the prophecy says and where this Child King you seek, can be found--if indeed there is such a Child. Unfortunately, this may require a little time so I beg you to wait here while I send for the chief priests and the scribes."

Herod left the throne room hurriedly and was gone more than half an hour. When he returned, he had regained his composure and was almost beaming.

"Ah, my fellow kings," he said, "you must go to Bethlehem, the ancient City of David! Go and search there!"

"We will find the Child King in this Bethlehem?" asked Baldasar.

"That is what the scribes read to me from the ancient writings. Bethlehem of Judah--a little place, just a few miles south of Jerusalem. Now, I urge you to search diligently for the Young Child, and when you have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also."

The Kings of the East thanked Herod profusely, bowed, and started to leave.

"O Kings," Herod called after them, "I, too, am much interested in the stars. Exactly when was it that the star you have been following first appeared?"

The kings spoke among themselves and then Melchior replied, "We first saw the beautiful star of the Child King two years ago, King Herod."

No more was said, and the Kings of the East left Herod's palace and rode back toward their camp. As their camels slowly made their way through the crowded, winding streets, the three talked.

"I don't believe we can trust King Herod," said King Gaspar. "He seemed much upset, yet very cunning."

"I detected some undercurrent in his words. While he was saying one thing to us, he had something entirely different in his mind," said Melchior. "What I don't understand is why he wanted to know exactly when the star appeared."

"I agree with you both," said Baldasar. "The man is cunning, and, I suspect, ruthless. But let us hurry to this place called Bethlehem, if it is south of here, for these nights the star has been shining toward the South."

And the three talked on--of the star, of Bethlehem, and of how wonderful it would be to finally find the Child King.

Timsar and his companions did not spend much time in the city. As they were returning to camp, they met two desperate looking riders who almost ran them off the road. The fleeing men were lashing their camels as if getting to the city were a matter of life and death.

One rider had a great bloody place on his head and more blood all over the side of his cloak. He was holding his bleeding head with one hand, beating his camel with the other.

The second man, also wounded, was evidently suffering more than his companion, for he was slumped over and it was all he could do to stay in his saddle. One of his legs and his foot were dangling down as if both were broken.

The startled eastern cameleers moved aside.

"That's odd!" Timsar cried. "What do you suppose happened to those fellows?"

"Looks like somebody beat them up!" said another cameleer. "And they're on their way to find a physician!"

"Let's hurry!" Timsar suggested. "There could be trouble at the camp!"

When the cameleers came within sight of their tents, they could see that there was trouble, and great commotion, throughout the camp. Their friends were running to and fro. All the camels were loose and straggling about. At least three persons were lying on the ground, wounded.

Timsar rushed to Hadad's tent. It had been flattened. Hadad was nowhere to be seen. Cyrus was gone. Blood was splattered on the tent and all over the ground. Then Timsar saw an ear! A human ear! It was just lying there in the sand.

"Hadad! Cousin Hadad!" cried Timsar. "Where are you?"

"Has anybody seen my Cousin Hadad?" Timsar called frantically as he ran from tent to tent.

"Here I am!"

Timsar whirled around and there, on the ground, with his head propped against a saddle, lay his elderly cousin.

"What happened, Cousin Hadad?"

"It was raiders! Camel raiders!" Hadad answered weakly. Timsar knelt beside his kinsman to see if he were badly injured. He could see a big swollen place on Hadad's forehead. But his ears looked all right.

"Are you hurt?"

"Not much. Just my head. But Cyrus! Cyrus is gone! And the chest! Timsar, I could just die! What'll I do? The chest! The chest! The kings' treasures! They

trusted... Oh, why was I ever born!... Why..." Hadad's voice faded away and Timsar saw that the old man had fainted.

Timsar ran for water to bathe Hadad's face. Another cameleer came to help. And they brought the battered old man back to consciousness. In a few minutes, they carried him over to Timsar's tent.

With every breath Hadad murmured, "Cyrus... Cyrus... The beautiful chest... treasures... the kings... all is lost... Cyrus, my poor old camel..." Finally he became quiet, and when Timsar was sure his cousin was resting comfortably, he went back over to Hadad's tent.

There stood Cyrus! The load of buta and the chest were still tied on his back, though the buta bundles were sagging to one side.

"Well, you old rascal!" exclaimed Timsar. "You got away from the raiders! Or maybe you ran off before they could catch you!"

Cyrus looked exhausted, out of breath. He kept turning his head about, as if he were looking for Hadad.

"Don't worry, old Stiff-Knees! Your master is over at my tent. The raiders knocked him out, but he will be all right."

Timsar led Cyrus back with him to his tent.

"Cousin, here's your cranky old camel."

When Hadad saw Cyrus, he cried like a child, so great was his joy.

Timsar asked Hadad about the attacking raiders.

"Those wicked men descended on us right at mid-day, and before I knew what was going on, one of the cutthroats knocked me cold. Everything just went black. I do remember hearing one fellow yell: 'Get that big one with the buta on his back!' But that's all I know, Timsar."

It was not until much later that Timsar, and Hadad, learned the extent of the raid. No one had been killed. But four men, besides Hadad, were rather badly injured. The armed marauders had managed to steal two male camels, a she-camel and her calf, but little if any grain or other provisions. Evidently, there had been at least ten persons in the raiding party. But the men and boys in camp had put up such a fight they drove the attackers off. One wounded man recalled seeing two of the injured thieves fleeing toward the city--screaming and cursing with pain--while the others rode off in the opposite direction.

When Timsar mentioned the human ear he had seen on the ground near Hadad's tent, no one could explain how it got there. Hadad said privately that he had a suspicion as to how one of the wretched raiders lost that ear, but he didn't want to discuss it. He didn't tell his cousin that he was almost certain Cyrus had bitten off the thief's ear.

The three kings returned from the city in such a happy mood that they did not seem the least bit upset over the raid and the loss of four camels. They ordered that

special care be given the injured cameleers and at the same time announced that the caravan would leave within the hour--for an old, old, village that had two names: the City of David, and Bethlehem.

King Baldasar sent his personal guard to seek out Hadad to make sure the raiders had not made off with the kings' chest.

"No!" Hadad declared to the guard. "They didn't get my Cyrus or the chest! You tell King Baldasar that Cyrus ran off and hid. Or, that's what I think he did. And the chest was strapped on his back! So the raiders didn't get it!"

"That's fine, Old Man," answered the guard. "I'll tell the king exactly what you said."

After the king's bodyguard had gone, and while Timsar was busy with his camels, Hadad went over to where Cyrus was tied. "I need to have a little talk with you, Cyrus," Hadad said softly. "Did you bite off the ear of one of those raiders?"

"What if I did?"

"I was just wondering."

"Yes, I bit off his old crusty ear! I sure did! And I kicked the one who hit you! So hard it broke his leg!"

"You don't say!"

"I did! And I don't care. When I get back to the world next time, I know I'll be turned into a no-good man with no ears. But I had to do it, Hadad. Those raiders had found the chest!"

Hadad gave his old camel a handful of the dates Timsar had brought from the Jerusalem market place.

"Cyrus, I'm proud of you! You're a grand old camel, even if you are cranky. But now, Cyrus, you will never come back to the world as a man with no ears. That old saying is just a saying. A plain superstition. Nothing to it."

It took far more than an hour for the servants and the herders to get the camels loaded and ready to travel again. The result was that it was almost dusk when the caravan finally left Jerusalem and made its way to the road leading south toward Bethlehem.

As they moved slowly along, the kings watched the stars coming out. When they saw that the guiding star was going before them toward Bethlehem, they were greatly delighted.

"Tell me, my friends," said King Gaspar, after they had gone some distance, "when we reach this little Bethlehem, shall we look for the Child King tonight? Or, wait until tomorrow?"

"Tonight! By all means," replied King Melchior. "Let us go from house to house until we find him! That is, if his star lingers over Bethlehem. If the star goes farther, then we must disregard what King Herod said and keep going."

King Baldasar started to speak, but stopped abruptly.

"I thought I heard music. Did either of you hear anything?"

"No," replied Melchior. "Oh, yes, I do hear music. It's far away, but I hear it."

"Yes!" cried Gaspar. "Sounds very sweet. Odd that we should hear music, out here on this lonely country road."

"Look over there! Across the field!" Baldasar exclaimed, pointing toward the East. "What an enormous light! The music is coming from that light!"

The kings stopped.

"This is amazing!" cried Gaspar.

"I never saw a light so strange!" said Melchior. "It's not a fire, for there is no smoke."

The music continued. And the peculiar light became brilliant as it spread over the fields, making the whole countryside glow. A hush swept through the caravan. King Baldasar whispered to his bodyguard, "That music--it's like the sound of many voices in a great choir. I wish we could hear the words."

The singing faded away, and the light became like a glowing white cloud, rising higher and higher until it passed into the heavens. For a time, the kings and all in the caravan remained still. Quiet. Even the camels seemed to sense that something wonderful had happened. The kings talked in low tones and wondered whether the mysterious cloud of light could have anything to do with the advent of the Child King. The cameleers whispered among themselves that this would be a night to remember when they were old.

Finally, the kings gave the order that the caravan should move ahead to Bethlehem. But just as the herders got all the camels walking again, a band of shepherds came running across the field, shouting and waving their arms and crying out that they had seen a host of angels.

"O, strangers!" yelled one shepherd. "Stop! Let us tell you the good news!"

"What news?" asked King Baldasar, as the excited shepherds gathered around his camel.

The shepherds began talking, all at the same time:

"Christ our Lord is born! For shepherds and everybody!"

"The angels told us! Lots of angels! They were singing!"

"He's in Bethlehem! In a stable! Sleeping on hay!"

"The angels said it's good news for all people!"

"We were scared to death, but they said 'fear not!'"

"The angels gave us a sign! How to find him! We know how to find him!"

"Now, now, good shepherds," said King Baldasar calmly, "please tell us, slowly, what has happened so that we may understand it."

"Well, Sir," said the shepherd spokesman, still so elated he could hardly speak, "we were out there in the field, keeping watch over our flocks, just like always--'cause it is lambing time--when suddenly there was a great light all about us. And

when we looked around, there stood an angel of the Lord! That angel was right there, not ten feet away, standing between us and the sheepfold.

"We fell down to the ground, scared out of our wits. But the angel said not to be afraid, that he had come to bring us glad tidings. And joy! Joy for all people, he said. And that's when he started talking about the little Babe in Bethlehem. I can hear him now! He said: 'Unto you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord... You shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger!'

"While the angel was still speaking, a great host of angels came floating down from heaven, and they were praising God and singing the sweetest song I ever heard."

"The words of the song, Shepherd? What were the words?" Baldasar asked.

"There were many words, Sir. Many, many words. What I remember was all about 'Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth! Good will toward men!' I just wish I could remember it all. It was wonderful!

"The next thing we knew the angels were leaving and the great light followed them. What a sight to behold! The angels and the light just floated up, up, and up 'til we couldn't see them any more.

"That's when we left our sheep and started out to Bethlehem. We're on our way to find the Holy Babe! You see, Sir, it's like we said to one another: 'the Lord made this thing known to us; so he must want us to see the Blessed Child!'"

The shepherd stopped speaking only long enough to catch his breath. Then he began again.

"Sir, you people look like you might be from far away. But you are welcome to go with us to find the Holy Child."

"Thank you, Shepherd," answered Baldasar. "We are from far away. We are kings from the East, and--"

"Kings!" gasped the shepherd.

"It seems a strange coincidence," Baldasar continued, "but we, too, are on our way to Bethlehem to find a Child. A Child born King. The one we seek is the fulfillment of prophecies made by holy men long ago. He is destined to be the Great King, ruling a kingdom that has no end. He will--"

"That's Him! That's Him!" cried the shepherd. "It's the same Holy Babe! Christ our Lord!"

"Do you truly think so?"

"It must be!" answered the shepherd. "The Saviour King we've been waiting for was promised by God, through the prophets of old. Sir, we are seeking the same Holy Child!"

"Then let us all go search together!" exclaimed Baldasar. And he quickly gave orders that camels be brought for the shepherds to ride.

When the caravan started moving again, the kings passed the word that all in the party should watch the guiding star closely, especially when they entered Bethlehem. And King Gaspar explained to the shepherds how the star of the Child King had been their guide throughout their long journey.

As the caravan came nearer and nearer to Bethlehem, the star grew brighter and brighter, and the kings were happy to think that they were near the climax of their journey.

"Soon we shall see the Child born King!" Baldasar declared to his fellow kings.

"We must have our gifts ready." Gaspar said.

"Yes, yes." said Melchior. "Baldasar, perhaps we should send for the old man who guards our treasures. I believe he is one of your cameleers."

"Yes, he is named Hadad. That's a Jewish name, but he is not a Jew. He calls his camel bearing our hidden chest 'Cyrus.' I would never have thought of naming a camel for a great Persian king, but that's the old beast's name."

King Baldasar turned to his guard and instructed him to have Hadad and the camel with the chest brought up to walk with the kings.

Cyrus was delighted at getting to move. He believed that he deserved to walk with the kings. Hadad was glad, too. There was less dust. But Hadad was also worried. He had not told King Baldasar that Cyrus could no longer kneel and that getting the chest of treasures down off his hump was going to be a problem. But this was no time to bother the king with such a matter. So Hadad said nothing.

All was silent in the streets of Bethlehem when the kings and the shepherds entered the city. By following the light of the star, they soon found a stable. And here, high above the crude structure, the star came to rest.

Through the stable door, the travelers could see a newborn Child, with his parents. The Babe, wrapped in swaddling bands, lay sleeping in a manger filled with hay.

"There he is!" cried the shepherds. "Just like the angels said!" And they hurried in and gathered around the manger to adore this Child for whom the angels sang.

The shepherds told the parents of seeing the glory of the Lord come down in a great light, and of the host of angels. They repeated to them all that the angels had said concerning the Child sleeping there before them--how he was the Savior and how his coming meant great joy for all the world. And the shepherds glorified and praised God for what they had seen and heard.

The young mother said to the shepherds that she would keep all these things, and ponder them in her heart.

As the shepherds were leaving to return to their flocks, the young father came to the door and invited the Kings of the East to come in, saying: "Come and see, strangers! Come! Come and behold the Divine Child! This very day, the words of the prophet Isaiah have come true: 'Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.'"

While the young father talked, the kings of the East silently entered the stable and stood before the manger. They stared down in amazement at the wondrous beauty of the Child and at the radiant light which surrounded him.

"Strangers, there he sleeps. On the hay--in his swaddling clothes. See? When he is eight days old, we shall give him the name 'Jesus.' Tonight we call him 'The Son of God.' For, so he is. He is the Son of the living God!"

"In time to come," the young father continued, "the prophet has said 'this child's name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace!'"

The three kings fell on their knees and worshiped the Holy Child King. And all their followers and all their beasts gathered close before the stable door and bowed down in humble adoration--that is, all except Cyrus and Hadad. But when Hadad led Cyrus to the doorway and Cyrus saw the Holy Child, he, too, bent his knees and knelt to the ground--without a sound.

Hadad loosened the ropes holding the stack of buta and it fell aside. Then he lifted the chest from Cyrus' hump and carried it to the kings.

As soon as the kings had opened their treasures, they gave it all to the Holy Child: much gold and frankincense and myrrh.

The kings bowed down again and then quietly left the stable. Like the shepherds, they were filled with awe and exceeding great joy.

Sometime that same night, the angel of the Lord who had come to the shepherds returned to the earth to appear in the dreams of the young father, and, in the dreams of the three kings.

To the young father the angel said: "Flee into Egypt! Take the Child and his mother, and go! This night! For the wicked king in Jerusalem will try to destroy the Child!"

To the sleeping kings the angel said: "O, Kings of the East, you have been blessed above all other kings. You have found the Holy Child King, born in Bethlehem as promised by God, and you have worshiped him. You have presented your treasures to him and in so doing you fulfilled the ancient prophecy that 'The kings of Tarshish and of the Isles shall bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts.'

"Now, great kings of Sheba and Seba and Tarshish and the Isles of the Sea, let me warn you not to go back to Jerusalem to tell King Herod that you found the Child--as he requested you to do. Return to your own country by another way. Even now the evil Herod is plotting that all the male children of Bethlehem shall be slain."

It was not the angel of the Lord who came into the dreams of Cyrus. Rather, it was the phantom caravan of many camels gliding on the clouds, which Cyrus had seen once before.

The gleaming white lead camel called down to Cyrus: "My son, you have done well. You made the long journey, as we told you to do. You saved the treasures of the Kings of the East and carried them to Bethlehem. And there you knelt and bowed yourself down before the Holy Child King.

"So, Cyrus, my son, great shall be your reward. Never more will your stiff, aging knees know pain. Then, one day, when you join this caravan in the sky, we will call you CYRUS, THE GREAT CAMEL."

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