

THE DANCING CAMEL

By Besty Byars

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ON THE HOT, white desert moved a long line of camels. They walked slowly, surely, following one behind the other like a string of beads.

Suddenly the camel at the end of the line gave a graceful hop. She stepped to the side, paused, pointed her toe, turned around, pointed her toe again, bowed, and then followed the other camels.

No one in the caravan noticed what the last camel had done, and the camels moved on as before.

After a while it happened again. The last camel gave two hops, turned to the right, turned to the left, swayed back and forth, clapped her feet together, ended in a graceful bow, and then followed the other camels. No one in the caravan noticed what the last camel had done, and the camels moved on as before.

All across the desert, while the other camels moved slowly and evenly, the last camel, Camilla, was stepping and pointing and bowing and spinning and swaying.

Now it happened that a lone man on a camel was passing the same way. He was known as Abul the Tricky, and he was making his way from the town which could be seen on the horizon. As he sat on his camel, he looked toward the caravan.

The camels moved slowly, surely, following one behind the other. Suddenly at the end of the line Camilla gave a light leap. She crossed her legs, pointed her toes, hopped backward and forward, bowed sedately, then followed the other camels.

No one in the caravan noticed what she had done, and the caravan moved on as before.

But Abul the Tricky had noticed. He passed his hand over his eyes. "Does the sun play tricks on me," he asked, sitting straighter on his camel, "or was that a *dancing* camel?"

He shielded his eyes from the sun and stared through the waving heat to the last camel. He urged his own camel closer.

“It could not be,” he muttered. “Such a thing could not be.”

Suddenly, as he watched, the last camel in the line paused. She stamped her right foot, stamped her left foot, tossed her head two times and then spun slowly around, falling finally into a graceful crouch. Then, with another toss of her head, she rose and followed the other camels.

“It is! A dancing camel!” he cried, pressing his camel into a run. “I have got to have her.” He threw back his head and laughed in his delight. “Ah, there is no other camel in the world such as this. She will be famous. First, she will dance in the market place, then in the Sultan’s Palace, then all over the world. I MUST have that camel.”

Without pausing, he rode to the front of the caravan and raised one hand in greeting to the leader.

When the leader of the caravan saw Abul the Tricky, he stopped and tapped his camel lightly. The camel knelt so he could dismount.

“I am Abul,” said Abul the Tricky with a slight bow. “And you? You are the owner of these camels?”

“That is right,” said the leader. “What is it you want?”

“I do not know if you are aware of this,” Abul said, stepping closer, “but there is something wrong with the last camel in your caravan.”

The caravan leader turned slowly to look at the end of the line where Camilla was spinning with one foot in the air.

“Camilla Camel?” There is nothing wrong with her.”

“But I saw her! While the other camels walk, she moved this way - she moves that way.”

“Oh, yes, she moves this way, that way. She is a dancing camel.”

“I should think she would not be a good worker,” Abul the Tricky said with his eyes closing slightly.

“No, she is not a worker, but she is a pleasing animal.”

“I tell you. I could use a camel such as that. She is no worker, as you agree, but I will take her off your hands.”

“What would you do with such a camel?”

Abul shrugged. "Perhaps I would let her dance in the marketplace. Who knows?"

The caravan leader smiled. He shook his head. "You do not understand. Camilla only dances for her own enjoyment, because she is happy here with the caravan. The hot sands, the warm air, this is why she dances."

Abul the Tricky shook his head impatiently. "Sell her to me."

The caravan leader smiled again. "That is not a bad camel you have there. Let us trade. I will take your camel. You will take Camilla."

"Agreed," said Abul quickly, and while the little caravan paused there in the desert, the exchange was made.

"Come, Camilla," said Abul. He leaned close and put his hand on her neck. "Let us go to the city. There you will begin your life as a dancer. I will give you everything, EVERYTHING, and you will dance for me. That is fair, eh? You will dance and I will become the richest man in the world. How does that sound, my pretty?"

Camilla Camel looked out over the desert. She waited quietly until Abul was on her back, then she began to move toward the city. Suddenly she stopped. She stooped once, straightened, stooped twice, straightened, stooped a third time, and then straightened quickly and pointed her toes five times.

Abul the Tricky laughed, his teeth gleaming in the sun. "Ah, she is dancing!" he cried. "And she is mine, all mine!"

As Camilla and Abul the Tricky entered the city, two men who were standing in a nearby doorway came forward. One was fat, the other tall. The tall one spoke first. "Ah, it is Abul the Tricky returning to our city. What brings you to our gates again?"

"You will not believe this, my friends, but I am at this very moment riding the treasure of the desert!"

"I see only a camel," said the fat one, squinting in the sun.

"Not *only* a camel, my friend. This splendid beast is a DANCING camel."

The fat man and the tall man looked at each other and laughed. "Last time it was a magic bottle," said the tall one. "We had only to give you a gold piece, rub the bottle, and all our wishes would come true."

The fat man stopped laughing. "I remember," he said darkly. "And before that it was a machine that made gold. Bah! Magic bottles! Gold machines! Dancing camels! You'll not trick us this time, Abul."

“But it is true, my friends. Look on this dainty creature. Is she not fair? Is she not graceful? Can you not recognize a dancing camel when you see one?”

“She looks no different from any other camel,” said the tall man.

“Come to the market tonight. You will see her dance. Tell everyone!” He rode on with a wave of his hand. “Tell *everyone!*” He threw back his head and laughed. “Abul has a DANCING CAMEL!”

The word spread quickly throughout the city. Children stopped their play to speak with wide, dark eyes of the dancing camel; men laughed and talked of Camilla Camel over their coffee; women whispered of her behind their veils. Excitement rose. Soon everyone in the city knew that a camel was to dance in the marketplace that evening.

Only Camilla Camel stood calm in the midst of the bustle and excitement. She looked quietly out over the crowds who came to stare at her. She did not move when Abul placed a scarlet harness with brass bells about her neck. She stepped back only once when the three musicians Abul had hired came and practiced their music in her ear. Her eyes looked always over the wooden roofs of the shops to the long flowing desert beyond.

By evening, everyone in the city was pressing into the marketplace.

“Make room,” Abul shouted. “Make room for everyone. I want everyone to see the dancing camel. There never has been such a thing in all the world. And it is here, here in our little town that she will dance first. Come, everyone!”

He did not need to urge. Everyone wanted to see the dancing camel, and they pressed forward eagerly. Camilla Camel stepped back two steps.

“Quiet, now quiet, please,” Abul said with both hands lifted. “In a moment the camel will dance as I have promised, and then these small boys will pass among you and you will put coins in their trays.”

A rumble of displeasure came from the crowd. “You said nothing of coins,” one man called out.

“Anyone who does not want to see the dancing camel,” Abul said, “may now leave the marketplace.”

He waited. No one spoke. No one moved. No one left.

“Ah, how wise you are,” Abul said. His teeth gleamed as he smiled. “Someday you will tell your grandchildren that you were in the market place the night Camilla Camel danced.”

In the middle of the crowd Camilla Camel moved her feet uneasily, and the brass bells of her harness sounded in the evening air.

“Not yet! Not yet!” cried Abul. “Wait for the music. Now, you musicians. PLAY. Play as you have never played before. And, Camilla Camel, *dance*. DANCE!”

The three musicians lifted their instruments, and the low wail of their music filled the air. So beautifully did they play that some of the people began to sway and pat their hands together. Abul moved in front of Camilla Camel and patted his hands.

“Dance,” he said. “Dance, O Beauty of the Desert. Dance! Dance as you danced in the desert. Bow, nod, turn, DANCE!”

Camilla Camel stood quietly in the midst of the crowd. She did not move at all. She did not even look at Abul patting his hands before her. Her eyes looked ever toward the horizon.

“Dance, Camilla, dance.” Abul reached down and touched one of her feet. “*Dance!* Don’t you remember?” He tried to lift one of her feet and kick it in the air. “Remember?” He shook her harness so that the bells rang gaily.

Camilla moved her feet closer together and was still.

“Dance, Camilla,” said Abul. He began some lively steps of his own to show her what he meant. “See, Camilla! DANCE.”

But Camilla looked above him and did not move at all.

“Ah, is this another of your tricks, Abul?” one of the crowd called.

“Yes, where is the dancing camel? We look and look but we see only an ordinary beast.”

“Wait, wait,” cried Abul. “She will dance. Only give her a moment. Come, Camilla, dance.” He turned to the musicians. “Can you play no better? Give her a lively tune, a gay tune. Then she will dance.”

The musicians stopped and after a brief conference began such a lively tune that more of the people began to clap and sway in time.

“Now she will dance,” Abul said. “Come, Camilla, now you *must* dance. The crowd grows restless. Come, dance.”

Camilla Camel did not move. In the midst of the shifting, swaying crowd she stood like an unyielding palm tree.

“Bah! It is only another of Abul’s tricks! Let us leave!” one man said in disgust and, turning his back, walked away.

“It is no trick, I tell you. This *is* a dancing camel. Listen, listen, perhaps she is tired - yes, that is the trouble. Tonight she will rest, and tomorrow she will dance. Come tomorrow. Everyone come tomorrow.”

The musicians ceased playing, the people began to leave the marketplace, and the boys who were to pass among the people collecting coins put down their trays.

“Tomorrow morning!” shouted Abul at their backs. “Everyone return in the morning.”

But the next morning the marketplace was only half filled. Abul was not dismayed. “You can be glad you came, my friends,” he told the small crowd gathered there. “You can tell the others that you saw Camilla Camel dance in the marketplace.”

“We had better see Camilla dance in the marketplace, or we leave,” said one man.

“She will dance,” Abul said. “Come, Camilla, it is time. You have slept on the finest straw, you have eaten the finest food, you wear the loveliest harness. Now you must dance for me.” He waved his hands, and the musicians began to play.

“Dance, Camilla, please, dance. Just one simple step,” he pleaded.

Camilla shifted her weight once and then stood still.

“Again he tricks us! Come, we waste no more time here.” And before Abul could stop them, the people began to depart. Soon Abul and Camilla Camel stood alone.

Abul sat down and bowed his head. “She will not dance. She will not dance,” he muttered. “I am ruined. My money is gone. I have nothing left but a camel who will not dance.”

Suddenly a shadow fell across Abul’s bowed head. He looked up to see the caravan leader standing before him.

“What is wrong, my friend?” he asked Abul.

“What is wrong! Did you not see? I have a dancing camel who will not dance. That is what is wrong.”

The caravan leader smiled. “It was not meant to be. Camilla can not dance here where she is not happy.”

“It is easy for you to smile, my friend,” said Abul with a frown. “You do not own a stubborn camel who will not dance.”

“That is so. I no longer own the camel. And I find, now that I am ready to take my small caravan back across the desert, that I miss Camilla Camel.”

“Miss this beast? This stone of the desert?” Suddenly Abul stopped. “You miss this camel?” he asked quietly.

The caravan leader nodded.

Abul got slowly to his feet. His teeth gleamed suddenly in the morning sun. “I tell you,” he said. “Of course I want to keep this camel - a dancing camel is a rare animal. But I understand that you want her. I will trade her back to you.”

“I will give you your camel in return,” said the caravan leader.

Abul hesitated. “But, you see, I have spent much money on this camel. I have bought her this fine harness, food, and straw.” He stopped abruptly. “That is a handsome ring you are wearing, my friend.”

The caravan leader held up his hand to show a large silver ring set with a white stone.

“An uncle of mine, a man of great wealth, had such a ring,” Abul said. “He told me it was a ring of good fortune.”

The caravan leader smiled and shook his head. “This is no ring of good fortune,” he said. “It is an ordinary ring I bought in the marketplace.”

Abul’s eyes gleamed as he bent over the ring. “Give it to me and the camel is yours.”

“But this is not a ring of good fortune,” the caravan leader protested.

“I must have it,” said Abul, stepping forward in his eagerness.

“With a shrug the caravan leader twisted the ring from his finger and handed it to Abul. Then he led Camilla away. She went eagerly, her head lifted to catch sight of the small caravan loading just outside the city.

Abul the Tricky barely noticed their departure.

“See what I have!” he cried. “Come, everyone, look.”

“What now? How do you trick us this time?” said a man leaning in the doorway of his café.

“No trick, it is no trick. I have a ring of good fortune. Whoever wears this ring has good fortune. See, I have worn the ring only a moment and already I feel my fortune has changed. Who would wear the ring next?”

“I, Abul,” said the man. He left the doorway of his shop. “I am in need of good fortune. I have no business. No one comes to drink my coffee.”

Abul stepped closer to the man. “For one coin, one small coin” he whispered, “you may wear the ring.”

The man drew back at the mention of the coin. “I do not know,” he said.

“Very well,” said Abul. “I will give another the chance to wear the ring.”

“No, no, I will wear the ring. Give it to me.” The man took the ring and gave a coin to Abul.

Slowly, one by one, people began to return to the marketplace. One by one, they entered the café to see the ring of good fortune.

“See,” cried Abul in great spirits. “He wears the ring of good fortune only a moment, and already his shop is filled with customers. Come and see, everyone.”

“But, Abul,” protested the man, “Abul, my shop is filled, but no one buys my coffee. Abul, hear me, hear me.”

Around the café crowded the people. “Abul has a ring of good fortune,” they said excitedly.

“Who would wear the ring next?” shouted Abul above the noise.

“I, Abul, I.”

“No, I.”

Just outside the city, while the people gathered at the café, Camilla Camel was led to the caravan. She took her place at the end of the line. She stood quietly while the caravan leader mounted his camel and rode to the front.

Across the hot, white desert, the long line of camels began to move. They walked slowly, surely, following one behind the other like a string of beads.

Suddenly at the end of the line, Camilla gave a high joyous leap. She pointed her toes, dipped to the right, dipped to the left, touched her toes together, spun around three times, and fell in a graceful kneel. Then she got up and followed the other camels.

No one in the caravan noticed what Camilla had done, and the camels moved on as before.

