

Dahabi the Camel

or

How The Camel Got It's Hump

All the animals were gathered at the market place patiently waiting under a huge, old date palm for their human's to return from trading and bickering with one another. It was hot and tiring and as always when one gets tired and hungry, the animals were getting irritable. And as always when one gets irritable and impatient one tends to behave badly and pick on other people.

There was a young camel called Dahabi (which means gold) standing near the vegetable stall. Dahabi was a tourist camel, which means she took tourists for rides to see the sights in the desert, like the pyramids. She had a camel saddle (which is called a howea in Arabic) on her hump. It was draped with brightly colored rugs and pillows in red and blue, yellow and green. She had little red and blue, yellow and green pom pom tassles on her bridle. The human who owned her had shaved beautiful patterns into her golden coat.

A donkey called Haga, tethered to a nearby post was losing her usual forbearance. It was hot and the flies kept buzzing around her eyes annoying her to no end. She sneered at Dahabi and said, "Why are you looking down your nose at us with such a snooty look - you think you are so high and mighty in all your finery!"

“Yes,” said a goat called Nazif, who had a sleek black and white coat and long beard, “You never talk to us. You don’t have to think you are such a big wig around here. Look how ugly you are with that scraggly old coat you have.”

“Yes, you’re probably so hoity-toity because you have all those fancy patterns cut into your bedraggled old coat,” squawked a chicken as she scratched around in the dirt picking up bits of fallen grain from the merchants’ bags.

A nearby sheep called Shahira stopped nibbling daintily at a bale of hay and added, “and look at your feet, great horny, old feet - what makes you think you can be so high-faluting?”

“And look at that hump,” said a buffalo called Bashir - “you look positively deformed.”

“Hmpf,” said a huge, fat pigeon, and you certainly have skinny legs and big ugly knees.”

“Not only that,” piped in a turkey, “She has a very funny long neck and thick ugly lips and the most hideous, brown sticking out teeth I ever did see.”

Dahabi, the little gold camel didn’t know what to say. She felt like hiding but there was nowhere to go. She felt so ashamed and ugly and wanted to start crying. She wanted to hide her head but it was so high up she couldn’t put it anywhere. So she didn’t say anything but just stood there while the other animals carried on ridiculing her and poking fun at her.

Now a great big black and white crow, called Malek (which means king) had been sitting nearby on the highest pole holding up the awning of the meat sellers stall watching for tasty morsels to fall to the ground - being as he is the the bird that cleans up all the mess in the market place. He heard what was going on and started getting very annoyed with the other animals behavior. He knew why the camel looked the way she did because he had heard the ancient stories of the desert from his father, whose father told him the stories that he had heard from his father before him. He knew the legends about the very, very long ago days when the desert had been a jungle.

He cawed raucously and imperiously and all the animals in the market place looked up and paid attention to him. They all knew they had to pay attention if crow spoke because he was a messenger from the gods and king of the birds and knew everything. No-one dared to be rude to him!

“A long, long time ago,” said crow, “the whole of the Sahara desert used to be a jungle. In those days the camel had dainty little round feet to pick her way through the leaves under the big trees. She had a soft brown coat, big brown eyes and a much shorter neck. Also, she didn’t have a hump. There was food everywhere and she ate jungle fruits, sweet grass and drank from all the clear, clean streams and pools hidden in the trees. But then a terrible thing started happening. People came to the jungle and wanted to keep goats and sheep, chickens and donkeys, turkeys and water buffaloes.” (Now all the animals were really listening to Malek the crow!) “They started cutting down the trees and using the wood to make houses to live in and fires to cook their food. They cleared away the jungle so they could plant food they liked to eat and could sell at the

market. Slowly the jungle started disappearing and the hot sun baked down. The cool jungle streams dried up and before long everything died. Eventually even the people couldn't live there anymore and most of them moved away except some that carried on living at the few places left that had water.

The humans, who can be very short sighted, made a big mistake. They used up the jungle and in the short term (because they were short sighted) they got a lot from the jungle. But in the long term (because they had no long term vision) they killed the whole jungle. All that was left was miles and miles of hot sand, being blown by the wind and burnt by the sun. Now there was nothing left for them either.

The midday sun beat down on the animals as they listened to Malek the crow. Now they were all ears except for the chicken who clucked disgustedly to herself about the humans and scratched distractedly in the dirt.

"Most of the other jungle animals," went on Malek, "died because they couldn't survive but the camel, being a very intelligent, resourceful and enormously brave animal learnt to adapt to the changes that were happening around her. Her little feet started spreading out and getting bigger and bigger. She discovered that if they got bigger they could stand on the shifting sand instead of sinking into it. In fact her footpads seemed to float across the top of the sand and she got to be called the 'ship of the desert.' Her feet got a thick layer of callouses underneath and the hot sand didn't burn her as she walked on it in the heat of the day. The desert is a strange place. Because there are no sheltering trees it gets very, very hot in the day and very, very cold at night. Camel had

to learn to adapt to hot and cold very quickly. She discovered that her thick wide, spread out feet covered with thick callouses could protect her from the icy cold sand at night and the stinging hot sand in the day.”

Shahira the sheep who had made comments about Dahabi’s feet started feeling rather sheepish and looked down, ashamed at herself for being so mean. Now she realized there was nothing wrong with Dahabi’s feet but there was certainly something wrong with her mean, superior comments. Suddenly her dainty hooves didn’t seem to be so much better than Dahabi’s big feet at all.

“There was another problem in the desert,” said crow, looking at Nazif the goat, not unkindly, but pointedly. “Because there were no sheltering trees left, the wind blew the sand into great dust storms. The sand stung right through camel’s soft fur and she cried with pain. But being an enormously intelligent and resourceful and very brave animal she discovered that if she grew some long scraggly, hard coarse hair over her soft fur, it protected her from the sand blasts that would just about knock her over.”

Nazif the Goat started feeling very uncomfortable. His judgmental comments and putdowns started making him feel really bad. It was true - there was nothing wrong with Dahabi’s fur but there certainly was something wrong with his superior, arrogant attitude. He didn’t know Dahabi and hadn’t even understood how camel got her fur. He also started realizing how vain he was about her own sleek coat - it was one of the things in which he took pride. As he thought about it he realized that when he felt kind of

worthless he would remind himself about his beautiful coat and feel better. So not only had he acted mean but he was also, in fact, quite vain.

Malek the crow looked down severely but gently at the animals. Another thing he said, "The swirling sand and hot, hot air would also get into camel's lungs and nostrils and burn her throat. She got so thirsty and cried in pain. But again, being a very amazing, intelligent, resourceful and brave animal she learnt that if she held her head just so, she could keep her eyes open to a slit and they would be protected from sand and wind by her very beautiful, long, black eyelashes. She learnt to close her nostrils so the sand and hot air couldn't get into her throat and lungs anymore. She also grew great tufts of hair out of ears to catch the dust before it got into her ears. She is certainly not snooty, she just knows how to keep sand out of her eyes. Crow paused.

Haga the donkey bowed her head in shame. She had behaved in a most unseemly way for a donkey who is usually a very humble animal and doesn't judge others. Suddenly she realized she was the one who had acted in a snooty way, not the camel. She felt especially bad because the camel was young and had been taught to always respect her elders, and so couldn't defend herself or speak back at an older, crotchety donkey who was acting like an ass. She thought some more and recognized a sneaking sense of jealousy that Dahabi got to carry tourists and was dressed in such finery, while he had to carry heavy baskets on either side of her back filled with papyrus reeds and vegetables. She felt especially bad that she was the one who started this all and led the other animals astray.

None of the animals were eating now - they were all paying close attention to crow who went on after a silence, "All the trees that bore fruits and nuts, all the the juicy, succulent plants and grasses died. All that was left were a few hardy trees called acacias that had big thorns. Oh, and very tough grass that managed to survive around the edges of small wells of water coming up from deep under the earth. The camel being the wisest and most intelligent and most resourceful of all the jungle animals learnt another trick. She discovered that when she found some grass she would eat and eat and eat and eat and learnt to store the good fat from the food in a big hump on her back, so that when there was no food in the deep desert she could use the stored fat in her body to survive."

"Now it was Bashir the buffalo's turn to feel the shame of his nasty comments." He realized he was acting like a dumb ox to make mean statements like that and he also realized that there were times that he had wondered about the hump on his neck and felt deformed and bad because he had it. A thought occurred to him and he felt relief wash over him, "Is that why I have a hump on my neck, too?" he asked crow. "Yes said crow, "Your body has also learnt to store fat for days when there isn't enough to eat he paused - considering whether to teach Bashir some more and then added, "You know, when you judge yourself and don't understand yourself, then you end up judging other people for the same thing you judge yourself for. Now that you understand both yourself and camel I am sure you will feel proud of your own hump and appreciate camel's hump."

Crow went on. "What I was going to say, is that the thorny, old acacia tree was one of the few trees that could still live in the desert and it had tiny green juicy leaves high up

and hidden in between big thorns. The camels neck grew longer and longer so that she could reach these high-up leaves. Her lips grew thick and hard so that the thorns would not prick her. Her teeth got very big and strong so they could munch just about anything, even if it was hard and woody, and unappetizing. She can chew up the long thorns of the acacia tree - now that takes some doing!"

The turkey started getting a very sad feeling inside his heart. Suddenly he could feel all the hardships that camel had had to endure and what that must have felt like. A strange warm melting feeling happened in his heart that made him want to cry. He wanted to cry because he felt bad about how ignorant he was and how badly he had acted because of his ignorance but also sad because of the strange warm feeling he had in his heart towards camel.

Crow noticed this and took note to himself that turkey had had a change of heart and went on, "Because camel was the only animal to be so intelligent, resourceful and creative, people came along who wanted to use her to help them get across the desert. She was the only animal strong enough to survive a long journey across the hot and the cold, the stinging sand and the unsheltered, vast empty, expanse of desert. Being a kind animal she agreed to do this, but there was one thing she knew for sure. These people were not going to be mean to her and when they were, she learnt something else. She would grab them by their clothes in her big strong teeth, that had learnt to eat the hardest, most coarse of grass, and would shake them around a bit. If they still didn't learn to treat her with respect, she would spit at them in rage and anger and so people, who can be very cruel and unkind and use animals without ever thinking about them,

learnt to treat her with the greatest of respect. She decided to be of service to people. She would help them by kneeling down so they could load her up, which by the way," said crow, looking at pigeon severely, "is why she has big calloused knees - but she would not allow herself to be treated badly by them. In honor of the great service she provides humans they carve beautiful patterns into her fur.

The chicken realized she had once again been clucking on mindlessly about the camels patterns, opening her beak before she thought. She shook her feathers in embarrassment.

There was silence around the circle as everyone contemplated the most noble and courageous, the strongest and most resourceful of all the animals in the desert.

Dahabi, the young camel wished she could hide - she was embarrassed about being the center of attention and she was very unused to anyone saying so many affirming things about her. She smiled shyly and thanked crow for helping her see that there was nothing wrong with her at all. Dahabi vowed silently that the one thing she would never do to others is make of fun of the way they looked or the way they coped with all the hardships in their lives. She felt a surge of power as she suddenly understood that now that she didn't have to be so quiet and shy and afraid of the other animals - she could speak to them as an equal and demand of them the same respect that she demanded of people. She made a silent internal promise to herself to be able to speak up like Malek the Crow.

Just then Abul-Hol (which means The Father of Terror) - the camel's human, came striding back to Dahabi - he looked irritable too and waved his hand at Malek the crow, "You noisy, pestilence he yelled - get out of here."

Crow gave a final caw of amusement and flew off in search of some more carrion to clean up.

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