

A Donkey Kneels

'Will you kneel down tonight, Fred ?' Becky fondled the donkey's soft ears. Fred was used to the attentions of Becky and her brother Jeremy. They spent time with him most days on their way home from the school bus. Fred had come to expect the carrot end or piece of apple Becky saved for him. Now, even during the holidays a day did not seem complete without a visit to see Fred.

'Kneel down ?' Mrs Villiers was about to put Fred into his stable in the small barn and had come just in time to hear Becky's question. 'Our Fred's nearly too old and too fat to get up and down at all ! It's all those carrots you give him !' She said it with a smile. The children had no idea the pleasure they gave her by their visits. She had often thought that if Fred died they would have to get another donkey just to keep the children coming.

'Don't you know about the animals all kneeling down ?' Becky replied. 'You only know because Miss Lucas told you. That doesn't mean everybody knows.' Becky ignored her brother. 'Miss Lucas did tell us. At school last week when we had our nativity play. You didn't come did you ?' She looked at Mrs. Villiers who just shook her head and bit her lip. Becky thought she looked as though she had just felt a pain. With hardly a pause, Becky went on to tell her what Miss Lucas had said. 'They say that every Christmas eve, like tomorrow night, all the animals in their stables kneel down to remember that Jesus was born. They kneel because he's the King.'

'Load of rubbish they teach you at school these days.' Rob Villiers had come up the lane with a bundle of hay on his back. It was for the ewe who had had twin lambs early. Rob grumbled about that as he did about most things. 'She would have to start early. As if we didn't have enough to do !' He had heard the end of the conversation. 'That, and all the nonsense they show you on television. I dread to think what the next generation'll be like.' He walked on up to the barn.

'Can we see the lambs ?' Jeremy asked.

'Well.. not just at the moment,' Mrs. Villiers said it as kindly as she could. 'Perhaps tomorrow.' Then she added quickly. 'Don't take any notice of my husband. He doesn't really mean it. And if you want to believe the animals kneel, you do. I think it's a lovely idea.'

'Have you ever seen them kneel ?' Becky asked.

'No, but then I've never been in the barn at midnight on Christmas Eve.'

The children made their way home, waving to Mr. Villiers as they passed the barn. He just raised his hand. It was hardly a wave. Rob Villiers was a gentle, loving man, but the last five years had hidden that side of his character. Hurt and guilt and sadness had gradually built a thickening crust of bitterness over the real man. Karen Villiers shared the hurt, sometimes more for his bitterness than for her own sorrow. Daniel had been her son too. He would have been ten now, and as excited as all children before Christmas.

Daniel's death had been a genuine accident, but it was Rob's tractor caused it. He had convinced himself it was his fault. There were no other children. While Karen had been able to find comfort in other children like Becky and Jeremy, for Rob every young child was Daniel, and every meeting with Jeremy the touching of an ever open wound. The farm which had been his life, now had no meaning or future. Every job was a chore. Years ago, Rob would have found solace in his faith in God. Now, that was a closed room, and he was determined not to open the door. Every day of the past five years, Karen had prayed for him to trust God, and find the comfort and hope she knew. It helped her to live with questions which had no answers.

After tea that day, Becky called Jeremy away from the television into the living room. Her mother took no notice. This was the time of year for secrets and whispers. Becky was in the corner of the room behind their Christmas tree. 'Come over here. I want to whisper.'

When Jeremy was close enough, she said. 'I don't want Mum to hear. Would you like to see the animals kneel ?' Jeremy looked puzzled. Becky explained. 'It's not far to the farm...and it wouldn't take long. If we get up when everyone's in bed, we could go up to the barn for midnight. We won't be away long !'

Jeremy took his time answering.

'Please. I can't go on my own, can I ? It'll be our Christmas adventure !'

'All right then.'

All Christmas Eve, Mum noticed the private huddles and whispering with no idea of the careful plans being made. She and Dad, were rather surprised when, after all the presents had been stacked around the Christmas tree and Granny had gone to bed, just after half-past ten,

Becky and Jeremy both agreed with Mum that they should go to bed, so that they could be up early on Christmas Day.

Becky had agreed to call Jeremy at about twenty to twelve. It seemed as though Mum and Dad would never go to bed. It was half past eleven before the hall lights went out. Soon dressed, exactly at twenty to twelve they were both creeping downstairs. Becky stroked Ginger, their cat who stirred as Jeremy opened the back door. The key made a terribly loud click as it turned. They waited, expecting someone to call. A cold draught met them as the door opened. 'Why don't we just stay here and see if Ginger kneels down?' Jeremy suggested. 'Because they only do it in a stable.' whispered Becky, with the patient sigh of all little girls who have to think for their brothers.

A three quarter moon made the short journey to the barn quite easy, but Becky insisted on using the torch to show them their way. The barn door opened easily. It was warmer inside. The moonlight through the clear panels in the roof enabled them to see the outlines of the animals. Fred, the donkey, was lying in a stall. The ewe and her lambs were in a enclosure of straw bales next to him. The lambs lay close to their mother.

Both the donkey and the ewe turned their heads towards the children, but made no sound, even when Becky quickly flashed the torch towards them. She shone the light on her watch. 'Three minutes!' she said in a loud whisper. Then quickly she pulled from her pocket three packages. She unwrapped the plaster figures of Mary, Joseph and the cradle and placed them on a bale of straw above the ewe. 'We can be the shepherds,' she whispered, and then, 'Any minute now.' She turned the torch on the holy family. They both waited, watching for Fred and the ewe to stir.

Then a light flicked on inside the barn door. 'What's going on in here?' Jeremy jumped up, frightened by the tone of Rob Villiers' voice. 'Shh! Look!' Becky said in a loud whisper. 'They're praying!'

Some would attribute it to the farmer's voice and the sudden movements. Others would say it was that perfect timing which makes a miracle of God. All three stood in silence. The old donkey had tried to struggle to his feet, but only made it to his knees. The ewe had also started to rise, and the ever-hungry lambs had nuzzled her, keeping her in a kneeling position. The light from inside the barn door shone through a gap between beam and bales, spotlighting the holy family.

Rob Villiers found himself looking in several directions. He took in the kneeling animals, the spotlighted nativity scene, and the open-mouthed wonder of two incredulous children. And it happened, as often it does, by the grace of God. Something snapped inside him. A love, long buried, broke through the crusts of bitterness. For a moment he was a child, with the thoughts of a child and the faith of a child - the faith which opens the door through which God comes to us - God who himself became a child. It was not only God who had come. For the first time, Rob felt the presence of his child. He knelt between the children, an arm around each.

Becky turned her face to his. She had not seen a big man cry before. 'It's true,' she whispered. 'And we're the shepherds.'

Rob wanted to hold on to the moment, but concerned now for the children he walked home down the lane with them. Both Becky and Jeremy held his hands. It seemed the natural thing to do.

Once home, their going in was not so careful as their leaving the house. A security light flicked on. Dad met them in the kitchen, wanting explanations. Rob refused the invitation to stay for a drink. 'It's late,' he excused himself. He turned again to the children, 'Will you come up and see us - soon?' He went out quickly.

'Happy Christmas,' Dad called after Rob.

Rob hesitated a moment. Long repressed emotions were surfacing. They could not be held back much longer. 'Yes,' he stammered, 'Happy Christmas!'