

REUBEN THE DONKEY – A CHRISTMAS TALE (OR TAIL?)

It was market day. I was standing with a row of other donkeys, waiting to see if someone would buy me.

I had to wait a long time before anybody looked interested in me. I'm a bit wee, and funny looking. Mind you, some of the people who were buying donkeys that day were scary, so being overlooked by them was fine by me.

Eventually a big man with a beard came along and stopped beside me. He had kind eyes. He would be heavy for me to carry but, if he picked me, I'd do my best. The big man and the trader had a very long discussion. I was getting worried but suddenly they shook hands and the big man came up to me, patted me on the head, and led me away.

As we walked along, he talked to me. I'm Joseph he said and I'm going to call you Reuben because you're part of my family now. Wow! I'd never had a name of my own before. Sometimes I'd been shouted at - lazy, smelly, useless - now I was Reuben, and I had a family.

Joseph explained that I had a very important job to do. I was to carry his wife, Mary. They both had to go to a place called Bethlehem. It was a difficult and dangerous journey but they didn't have a choice. They had to go there to be counted by the Romans who were in charge of things.

Mary wouldn't be heavy to carry. She only looked big because she was expecting a baby.

The journey took us seven days because it was a long way and I had to walk very carefully so as not to shoogle Mary on my back. Each night Joseph lit a fire so food could be cooked. The fire also kept the wolves away. I don't usually like fires because it was a fire that burned my nose, and also burned the end off my tail. That's what made me funny looking. I made sure I didn't get too close to the fire this time!

We made it to Bethlehem in time for the big count but Mary and Joseph had to stay with me in the stable because the inn was full up. I liked sharing the stable with my family.

We were settling down for the night when Mary whispered something to Joseph. The baby was coming! I thought they'd like some privacy so I went outside. There was a shiny sort of person hanging around. He saw me and said "Hello I'm Gabriel. You're the donkey that brought Mary here. You did a really good job and deserve a reward. What would you like? Would you like me to make that red scar on your nose vanish? Or give you a new tail?"

Donkeys don't often get rewards so I had a think, then said I'd like to stay with Mary and Joseph for ever but, if that wasn't possible, I'd like my next owner to be as kind as them. Gabriel laughed and said "I'll mention you to St Nicholas. If you ever leave Mary and Joseph, he'll give you a job." Then Gabriel said he had to dash because a very important event was about to happen and he had things to do. This was on the evening before what we came to call Christmas so I suppose that was the first Christmas Eve.

It was getting really cold and I was wondering whether the wee baby had arrived so I went back into the stable to be with Mary and Joseph. What happened next, well, we all know the story, don't we!

Meantime, this Christmas Eve, if you catch a glimpse of a sleigh in the sky, pulled by a team including someone with a red nose and a short tail, it might just be Reuben, the red nosed donkey.

