

The Old Man And The Camel

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THE camel was the ship of the desert — Basu had read in his primary text book about eighty years ago. The book also contained a picture of the animal which fascinated Basu even though he was not sure whether its wonderful hunch deserved pity or awe.

He longed to see a camel. Once an illustrious *sadhu* happened to camp in the bazaar a few miles away from his village. The *sadhu*'s party comprised nearly a hundred human beings who never tired of chanting holy phrases, a dozen of cows which never tired of giving milk, and for some mysterious reason, a camel.

The young Basu was then down with fever, consequent on his devoting a long Sunday noon to diving in the muddy waters of the river. He could not accompany his pals who went out in their best clothes to gaze at the camel. On their return from the bazaar the boys, their status gone higher because of their first-hand knowledge of the camel, had fantastic tales to tell him.

One of them said that the camel could change its colour like a chameleon, another that its hump was its

personal store-room of victuals. It had taken him more than a year to realise that his pals were spinning yarns.

He missed the camel for the second time, narrowly again, soon after coming over to the town for study. It was a pleasant evening and he had bought a ticket for a circus show which promised a dancing camel, among other animals.

He was about to leave his lodge when, like a hunted animal, someone came darting in and sat down on his bed, gasping for breath.

Fresh from the village, Basu was yet to learn the ways of the town. He stood blinking at the intruder.

"When they ask you, say that you have seen no stranger coming this way. If they find me out, say that I am your brother-in-law from the village, suffering from asthma," whispered the man as he sprawled on the bed.

Hardly a minute had passed when two policemen, panting and sweating arrived there and asked him if anyone had taken shelter in his house.

"Shelter? Yes," answered Basu, still in half a mind to give out his unwelcome guest. But he was surprised to hear himself echoing the guest's ad-

