

# A Daddy-Daughter Adventure

Adventure was a remote idea for eight-year-old Clementine. It's not easy living in a small village in Madagascar that is at least a three-day walk from the *closest* major village. In school, she heard about cities bustling with traffic and markets. She even studied about vast oceans that stretched as far as the eye can see. But she had never seen such things.



*Clementine's father, Frederic, wished he could protect his daughter from the teasing and the mocking she endured from the other children. He said it's not her fault that she was born this way, but he felt helpless to stop the insults.*

Clementine's family lived a very simple life farming beans, rice and peanuts. Born with a bilateral cleft lip and palate – two splits from her upper lip to her nose and a hole in the roof of her mouth – Clementine found eating and speaking very difficult. Local doctors explained to her father, Frederic, that the only thing that could fix Clementine's lip and palate was a very costly surgery in a hospital far from their village. Such a surgery was far beyond the family's reach financially.

The fact that Clementine had survived to her eighth birthday was nothing short of miraculous. Feeding cleft lip and palate babies is very difficult. Many suffer from a lack of nutrition and die. Despite her physical challenges, Clementine survived and did well in school.

However, her deformity made her an outcast, and the other children often made fun of her. The teasing was difficult for Frederic to hear, but his feeling of hopelessness was even more painful.

"As her father, I'm sad I can't protect her (from the teasing)," shared Frederic. "We couldn't do anything. We live so far away!"

Although the situation was bleak, a group of visitors from Helimission brought hope. Helimission is a non-profit organization that delivers help to remote locations like Clementine's village. Volunteers with the organization spotted Clementine and her bilateral cleft lip and told Frederic that a hospital ship in the port city of Toamasina could help.

Helimission volunteers worked with Mercy Ships volunteers onboard the *Africa Mercy* to set an appointment for Clementine to see a surgeon. After confirming the appointment, they sent a radio message letting Clementine know when she and her father would be transported to the ship. Riding in the helicopter was the beginning of an exciting adventure neither Clementine nor her father will ever forget.

The short helicopter ride was followed by an eight-hour bus ride from the capital city. Within 24 hours of arriving in Toamasina, Clementine's world opened up in amazing ways. For the first time, she laid eyes on the blue oceans she had often studied. She also met many others with cleft lips and realized she wasn't alone.

Within two weeks after her arrival, Clementine was onboard the hospital ship to have her free surgery under the direction of Dr. Gary Parker, Chief Medical Officer. Afterward, Clementine began working with a speech therapist to learn how to use her newly constructed palate. Years of speaking with a hole in the roof of her mouth made it a challenge to use her new palate, but Clementine worked as hard at her therapy as she did in her studies and achieved great results. Slowly she learned that all the sounds that were difficult for her to make prior to surgery were a lot easier to make now that her palate was closed.



Finally, the day came for Clementine and Frederic to return home. They stopped at the market, and Clementine browsed through the display of earrings. The choices seemed endless. She finally settled on a dangling silver pair with pink stones. As she put them up to her earlobes, she beamed up at her father. Frederic's heart melted as he realized that just six weeks ago, his daughter had a very different appearance. He returned her smile and said, "Every time you see these earrings, you'll remember our journey and adventure."

As they departed from the market with Clementine's new earrings, Clementine hugged her father tightly. His courage and sacrifice in bringing her to the ship had made her new life possible. She would never forget this daddy-daughter adventure, the adventure that changed her life.

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