

THE CAMEL BELL

BY Gladys Whitlock

As the tires sang along the hot macadam, there remained a coolness in the car that had nothing to do with air conditioning. They were no longer quarreling. On the contrary, they were being very polite to each other. It started after she asked the forbidden question. She knew better, but they were so close she couldn't resist asking, "Will, you have allowed an extra travel day; do you think we could stop to see the Grand Canyon on our way through Arizona?"

Will's defenses arose automatically. He couldn't help it. The question irritated him. Every time she accompanied him on a business trip, she wanted to go sight-seeing. He tried to hide his annoyance, but the tips of his ears betrayed him. They always reddened when he was angry.

"Lois, you know this is a business trip, not a vacation. We simply can't afford to waste the time!"

His tone was sharper than he intended and he could see Lois' jaw muscles tighten as she clenched her teeth in anger. "When will there be time for a vacation, Will?" she snapped, "You've been promising one every year now for four years."

"I've worked too long and hard to let anything go wrong now." he said defensively.

By the time they reached Gallup, New Mexico, that evening, there had been silence in the car for a long time.

With his usual efficiency, Will located an attractive motel with a service station and a cafe nearby. Tired and depressed, Lois sat staring through the splotted windshield while he registered.

Leaving the car at the station to be serviced, they walked to the cafe for supper. There was very little conversation.

Afterward, while Will was paying for their meal, Lois' eye was caught by a display of silver and turquoise jewelry in the glass counter. The piece that claimed her attention was a small bit of highly polished petrified wood on a silver chain. It glowed irresistibly with the colors of the desert.

"At least she has her souvenir," Will thought grumpily, as he included it in the bill.

The Indian girl behind the register smiled. "You have bought a piece of the desert. Now it's spirit will always call you."

"I hear the call, all right," Lois laughed, "but this pendant is about as close as I'll ever get to answering it."

Will was not amused.

When they arrived at their assigned room, a little man in a wrinkled white suit was

leaning against the door in a patiently waiting attitude. Will checked his key number. This was the right room. He got out of the car with an inquiring look on his face. The man came forward, a smile crinkling his weather-lined cheeks. His complexion and pointed beard were dark and Will thought he was probably an Indian until he remembered Indians don't have beards.

"Mr. Johnson," the man said, extending his hand, "My name is John Smith." Will smiled. Such a prosaic name for such an exotic looking little man.

Will shook his hand. "What can I do for you, Mr. Smith?"

"I would like to ask a small favor, Sir. My friend at the motel said you are driving to Quartzsite, Arizona tomorrow."

Will nodded cautiously. He didn't remember mentioning their destination when he registered, but the thought slipped past in his curiosity about his visitor's purpose.

"I collect desert curios," the man said. "Yesterday I made a rare find which I would like to place in my brother's museum in Quartzsite as soon as possible. If you would be so good as to deliver the article as you pass through, my brother would be happy to pay you for your trouble."

Will hesitated. There was something funny here. You don't just walk up to a complete stranger and trust him with a valuable package to deliver.

The little man seemed to read Will's mind. "You are trustworthy . . . I have checked." His eyes glowed with amusement.

Will began to suspect this might be a practical joke. How could anyone have checked on him in the time it took to eat a meal? He glanced suspiciously at his wife, but Lois was too fascinated by the shoe box under the man's arm to notice. Mr. Smith opened the box.

"You see, it is a camel bell. I found it in the desert near Zuni yesterday."

“A camel bell!” Now Will was sure it must be some kind of a joke. “What would a camel bell be doing in the middle of the American desert?”

“It’s a very interesting story,” John Smith answered. “The U.S. Army once experimented with camels in this part of the country.”

To her husband’s surprise, Lois knew what this man was talking about.

“Oh, yes, I read an article about that. They used them to explore the route that is now Highway 66, didn’t they?”

“That’s right.” Mr. Smith seemed pleased as she took the box and examined the engraved metal closely. It was weather-blackened and reminded Will of an old fashioned school bell with two metal loops at the base of a splintered wooden handle. She looked imploringly at Will who was less than impressed with its value.

In capitulation to the eager look on his wife’s face, he said, “Well, if it isn’t out of our way, we’ll be glad to deliver it without charge. “What is your brother’s address?”

Again that deep glow of amusement in Mr. Smith’s dark eyes gave Will the disconcerting feeling he was being laughed at.

“Oh, it won’t be out of your way,” he assured them. There is a monument to the camel corps right in Quartsite. My brother will be waiting by that monument.”

Renewed suspicion nudged at Will. Four hundred miles away a man would be waiting by a monument for a package to be delivered by a stranger? That was too much. On the verge of renegeing, he glanced at Lois and lost his chance. Mr. Smith hastily ended the conversation with a polite, “Thank you” and was gone. With the bell still in Lois’ hands the Johnsons stood staring after him in the dusk.

His presence, however, lingered in their minds throughout the evening. Will was ruffled by a feeling of having been out-manuevered, but Lois was frankly delighted by the whole thing. She studied the bell in detail and wagged it experimentally. The clang was loud in the small room.

“I’ll be hearing the echo of that thing all night,” Will growled as he put out the light.

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The clanging of the camel bells harassed Private Will Johnson awake before reveille sounded. He yawned and stretched in his hard bottomed cocoon of blankets, his breath frosting slightly against the creeping color of the new dawn.

When the bugle’s summons arose sharp and clear against the fading stars, it was like disturbing a beehive. In a few minutes the camp seethed with activity. An air of excitement hurried the troopers who swore at the exceedingly contrary animals. The mules were harder than usual to harness and every camel seemed eager for a bite of the nearest soldier. Usually placid sheep added their blating to the din as the hard-working dogs gathered them from their bedding grounds. In some mysterious way, the confusion resolved itself, and by the time the sun cleared the horizon, the first U.S. Army Camel Corps was ready to move out.

From his seat on the wagon box, Will watched the final scurrying movements along the weird column. Of all the fool ideas ever hatched by the army brass, he was convinced this had to be the most foolish. It looked more like a circus than an army unit. Camels! Lumpy, splay-footed, mean-tempered beasts tended by Greek, Arabian, and Syrian drivers. Some drivers wore their flowing native robes, while others combined theirs with army clothing. Some soldiers even sported buckskins and flannel shirts rather than uniforms. Their larder on the hoof , three

hundred and fifty noisy, smelly sheep, brought up the rear. Only the mule-drawn, canvas-topped wagons were regulation.

At least he had mules. Will eyed his work-wise team standing patiently hipshot in the traces. He was willing to concede it might be too much to expect a man to become really fond of a stubborn brute that might try to kick his head off, but at least a mule was an animal of dignity. If a camel felt his load was too heavy, he'd simply lie down and wait until his pack was lightened. The undulating motion of a saddle aboard that warped back made a man sea-sick and those ugly yellow teeth had marked many an anatomy out of sheer meanness. Will couldn't understand how even the most stupid desk fighter in the War Department could have been talked into such a cracked-brain scheme.

"Forward, Ho" The order ended the private's reflections. It rolled and echoed down the line and one of the strangest cavalcades ever to be part of the U.S. Army stretched westward to begin surveying and mapping a route across the wild Arizona territory.

Private Johnson's assignment was a bright red army ambulance converted to the care of the precious surveying equipment. He swung his well trained team smoothly into place behind Lieutenant Beale's easy-gaited horse. While he had his doubts about the expedition, one thing he approved of was the quality of the command. Lieutenant Beale was a capable young officer with a choice hand-picked company. In spite of Will's jaundiced view of the project, he had a secret feeling of pride in being chosen for it. His attention was jerked back to his team as they snorted and shied away from a camel jangling up beside the wagon. Although they no longer panicked, they still resented the strange animals. That Hadji Ali relished Will's momentary discomposure was evident in his sly grin. He was a self-styled "camel doctor" imported from Syria and

nicknamed Hi Jolly by the soldiers. His new name fit him well as he was a friendly, happy little man.

“You want ride camel?” he offered. The humor behind his offer showed in both black eyes and his smile. Will’s expected refusal was delivered in trenchant army terms for emphasis.

Laughing heartily, Hi Jolly turned his long-legged steed back along the line. The trooper grinned in spite of himself. Hi Jolly was a decent little cuss, even if he did associate with camels.

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Will woke himself chuckling. He stared blankly around the room. For a few seconds, he didn’t know where he was, then Lois’ soft deep breathing brought the motel room into focus. It was a foolish feeling to wake up laughing at a dream. He closed his eyes and could still see Hi Jolly in his long white robe and headdress rocking to the camel’s peculiar gait.

With the clanging of camel bells still echoing in his head he listened for them, but heard only the hum of the air conditioner. A shaft of moonlight cutting through the dark of the room like a spotlight, picked out the camel bell on the table. Its brightness must have awakened him, he thought. Softly, so as not to disturb Lois, he moved over to the table and stood looking at the bell, still seeing Hi Jolly’s teasing black eyes.

Then came the startling realization that it was Mr. Smith’s dark face laughing at him. Again he had an uncomfortable sensation of being the butt of some kind of joke. That couldn’t be, he decided. It was too far out. Thinking it over he concluded that the strange little man had made such an impression that he had dreamed about him. Will shrugged as if to shed his thoughts, pulled the drapes and eased back into bed.

The experience left a queer after-feeling he couldn’t explain and he lay wide awake for a

while. Then he deliberately pushed away his thoughts and closed his eyes to coax sleep. When sleep finally came, it brought back the echoing sound of camel bells in the distance.

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The bell notes carry a long way out on the desert, Private Johnson reflected absently. He slumped against the board seat, moving with sway and jolt of the wagon rather than fighting it. His ear heard the muted clanging, his eye saw the juniper trees cooking in the sun, but his mind was filled with the days behind him. Zuni lay a month back on the trail, but it no longer seemed to exist in the same world. This was a vast empty land of unbelievable distances. Every time Will took the transit out of his wagon he wondered why Uncle Sam thought a road through this wasteland was worthwhile. In the empty expanse the survey train seemed to contain the only living human beings in the void.

They had gazed up at high cliffs of solid red rock with strange fortress-like buildings perched under the rims, but saw no sign that they were occupied. They also passed many curious mound-shaped dwellings without catching sight of the Hostiles who were supposed to live in them. Sergeant Harrison said it was because the Indians believed the camels were evil spirits imported for the protection of the white man. It wasn't clear how the sergeant knew this, but it was a fact that the Indians gave the caravan no trouble.

A hard jolt drew Will's attention to his hip pocket and he prudently emptied it. He studied the curious memento in his hand. It looked like a chunk of wood. The growth rings and even the bark were traced in rich lifelike colors, but it was solid stone. He had picked it up in a weird locality where the baked earth was colored with splashes of garish reds, yellows and purples. Giant stone logs lay everywhere and under their weathered stone bark was the sterile beauty of

glowing agate. Arid and lifeless, it was a forest preserved in stone.

As they moved across another endless valley small scraggly bushes began to appear, gradually giving way to larger ones. They passed occasional stunted juniper trees dotted with little blue berries. Little cotton-tail rabbits scooted out of their path. They didn't appear to belong to the same family as the huge long-eared jack-rabbits which loped a short distance away and then sat up on their haunches to observe these strange invaders. Lizards darted in every direction.

Will wondered how both wildlife and plants could survive in this waterless plain. The caravan's water kegs were almost empty. They had crossed only dry washes since leaving Leroux Springs, and there had been no sign of rain in the cloudless blue sky. Drinking water was rationed and even the hardy camels were thirsty.

Under the burning sun, the heat that radiated off the rocks and gravel felt like it came from an open oven door. Dust coated Will's clothes and hat and outlined the little rivulets of sweat running down his cheeks.

Will's thoughts retreated to the entrancing mountain camp at Leroux Springs. For two days the expedition had rested under immense pines high above the desert. There was simple graze for the stock in small natural parks. The men repaired equipment and lounged on thick mats of pine needles. Venison provided a welcome change from mutton, but little sport. The deer were too plentiful. They even grazed with the camels.

Will longingly conjured up visions of that cold sweet spring water as he clucked sympathetically at his drooping mules. They were too hard pressed by thirst to react when Hi Jolly's bobbing mount shambled up beside the instrument wagon.

"You want ride camel?"

“Not now, Hi Jolly.”

To his surprise, closer acquaintance had changed the soldier’s opinion of these ungainly “ships of the desert.” Despite sore feet from the rocky ground they could carry a heavier load and go farther and faster than a mule. They had adjusted to the harsh environment and grew fat on creosote bush and cactus. While the muleteer still felt muzzles should be standard equipment, he had learned to cope with the queer rocking gate and occasionally traded places with the little Syrian.

Currently, however, he was too concerned for his flagging team. He gestured at the weary animals. “If we don’t find that river pretty soon, this outfit’s gonna be in real trouble.”

Hi Jolly nodded soberly. “No water, ver’ bad.”

Though the camels bore the short water ration better than the other animals, they were suffering also. Many of the sheep could not keep up and were lost. All eyes studied each new rise hopefully. The elusive river was one landmark every member of the company was painfully eager to see placed on the map.

Late in the afternoon a streak of green and yellow twisting across the distant plain lifted worried frowns. Every weary animal sniffed the air and quickened its step. Dark fell before camp could be completed by the clear desert stream, but there was no griping that night.

Wrapped in his blankets after the echo of taps had died away, Will wondered if the brass, comfortably warming their chairs in the War Department, had any idea how big this piece of the country really was. It seemed to go on forever. Anyway, it was a relief to have all the water casks full again. Private Johnson fell asleep to the liquid mutter of water splashing over the rocks in the stream.

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Lois was splashing water in the bathroom when her husband woke up at dawn. Vaguely, he wondered why she was up so early. As she crawled back under the covers, he opened one sleepy eye at her.

“Any thing wrong, Honey?”

“Nope. I just had a peculiar dream. You were lost in the desert and I woke up thirsty.”

Suddenly, Will was very wide awake. He sat up and lit a cigarette. “Tell me about it.”

“Oh, I guess it was talking to that strange little man last night. I dreamed you were in the army and Mr. Smith was too, and . . .” Her voice trailed off at the look on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Were we surveying the highway route?”he asked.

She nodded. “Did I talk in my sleep?”

“No,” he said. “I think I dreamed something like that myself.”

At first Lois thought he might be teasing her because she had been so fascinated by the history of the camel bell, but his expression made it clear he was not. They had actually experienced the same phenomenon in their sleep.

“It’s a little scary.” Her eyes were on the camel bell and she reached for Will’s hand as she spoke. “Do you suppose that thing had anything to do with it.?”

“I’m sure it did,” he reasoned carefully. “That was the last thing we talked about before we went to sleep last night. It probably started similar thoughts or something.”

“Yes, but I never heard of such a peculiar coincidence. Have you?”

“No,” he admitted.

“Mental telepathy, maybe?”

He laughed and put out his cigarette. Could be, but let’s talk about it later. It’s time we got on our way.”

Will drove steadily, watching the little mirages form in the dips of the road. They looked like little pools of water that vanished as the car drew near. Speed blurred the roadside. The ground appeared to be flowing past, but he couldn’t forget the sensation of jolting along on the wagon seat, eyes squinted against the sun and dust. It was as if the dream had shown the passing scenery in slow motion so he could see how much he was missing at sixty miles an hour.

As they bridged a small desert stream, Will spoke after a long silence. “This looks like the place where we were so short of water.” Then, with a self-conscious grin, he added, “In my dream, I mean.”

Hesitantly, Lois removed the lid of the box and looked at the camel bell again. She was almost afraid to touch it.

Teasing, yet not teasing, Will asked, “Think we’ve been bewitched?”

“Oh, don’t be silly!” She avoided meeting his eye as she closed the box and put it back on the seat between them.

By the time a highway marker appeared indicating the turn off for the Hi Jolly monument there was only one question in both their minds. ‘Who or what would they find there.

When they pulled off the road there was no one in sight, just the small pyramid made of multicolored petrified wood and quartz, and topped with a metal camel. They got out of the car and walked over to read the plaque that said, “The Last Camp of Hi Jolly.”

“Oh, Will,” said Lois, this is Hi Jolly’s tomb.

Will just nodded, not sure he could trust his voice to be appropriately nonchalant. The two of them stood beside little pyramid which seemed lonely and deserted in the late afternoon sun and silently read the plaque which told of Hi Jolly and the camel core. When they finished their story, they waited for something to happen. Finally Will said quietly, “Maybe it was only a joke, after all.”

Lois shrugged and peeked into the shoe box at the camel bell. They were about to get back into the car when an Arizona Highway Patrol car drove up and stopped and the officer got out and walked over to them. “Are you folks looking for a Mr. Smith?”

The Johnsons glanced at each other before Will answered. “Ah, yes, we are. We have a package for him.”

“I thought so.” The officer was smiling broadly. “What is it this time?”

“A camel bell,” Will told him. What do you mean, *this time*?”

The patrolman pushed his cap to the back of his head. “It happens every year on August thirty-first. Some tourist winds up here with a package for an imaginary Mr. Smith.”

You mean it’s just a practical joke?” Lois’s mouth tightened slightly.

“Not exactly, Ma’am, the officer smiled. The relics are genuine, and various southwestern museums are very glad to receive them. We’ve never been able to find out where this Mr. Smith get’s them or why he sends them to a non-existent brother here.”

“Have you met him?” Will asked.

“Nobody has except the tourist he chooses. My theory is that he’s just a nut on Arizona history and he gets a kick out of telling people about it this way. You see, today is the anniversary day. It was August 31, 1857, that the Camel Corps left Zuni, New Mexico.”

I know,” Will said. Lois picked up on the gleeful tone in Will’s voice and looked up at him.

He quickly shrugged and added, “I, I just read it on the plaque.”

The patrolman accepted the camel bell, assuring the Johnsons it would find an appropriate museum home. “So long, folks. Have a good trip,” he said and returned to his duties.

Will and Lois lingered after the patrol car rolled away. Slanting sunlight made the camel shadow march on the ground, lengthening as dusk drew near. A gentle evening breeze whispered past their ears and Will thought he could still hear the camel bells faintly, far away.

“Lois?”

“ What?”

He touched her little stone pendant on it’s silver chain. “I think I can arrange to take a couple weeks off when I’m through in L.A. Is there anything besides the Grand Canyon you’d like to see?”