

IN THE EYE OF THE CAMEL

Jagged, forked streaks of lightning dominated the western sky. Hunkered down in the massive log house that served as the focal point of the 10,000-acre ranch his family owned, Jackson Davis III fidgeted with the gold necklace around his neck. The young man's impatience ebbed and flowed with every thunderous boom. An hour later, blue sky emerged from the dingy gray clouds.

Jackson walked to the enormous stable, stopped at the third door, and saddled a fine-looking stallion. He still had time to make his appointment with a cattle buyer in Bascom. When Jackson reached the edge of the Davis property, he looked down the trail that bordered the ranch. Not liking the muddy track as far as he could see, he decided to take an alternate route through Hawk's Gulch.

Rarely traveled, Hawk's Gulch could be dangerous because there were so many blind turns in the path, but Jackson practically had it memorized, so often had he explored it as a youth. The deeper he got into the gulch, the more uneasy he felt. He

couldn't see anything behind him, but he felt like something followed his every move. He glanced back again, but still found nothing raising its head. As he rounded the last curve before exiting Hawk's Gulch, he suddenly faced six men with six revolvers aimed at his head.

Although Jackson could handle a gun with proficiency, he had absolutely no chance. The outlaws made him get off his horse and walk behind the trail rider. Stumbling on a rock, the young man continued to be drug along by the rope that bound his hands. The rider stopped long enough for him to get to his feet.

Jackson's mind drifted. Surely his father would eventually get word that he hadn't made his appointment and he would come looking for him. His father would come riding down on his magnificent white horse and rescue him. The hired hands would form a posse and track down the outlaws. Everyone would see justice served. That's how he had been taught it should be done. That's how he expected it would come.

When the young man opened his eyes later that afternoon, he realized the outlaws had left him

for dead in the middle of the desert. Bruised and sapped of energy by the brutal sun, Jackson struggled to sit up and feel for his canteen. Of course, the outlaws wouldn't leave it for him if they had left him for dead, but he had to try. Without success, he slumped back down and closed his eyes.

“No, I can't give up,” he said to himself. “My father will rescue me.”

His left eye now swollen shut, he had to turn his head slightly to avoid looking directly into the sun with his right eye. As he tried to focus, he kept getting a reflection of what appeared to be another eye. The surreal reflection of the eye got closer and closer until it filled his entire range of vision. He knew many men who, as they approached death in the grip of the deadly sun and barren sand, began seeing things that were not there, but what he saw looked so familiar. The reflection appeared to be a cascade of everything he had done in his life looking back at him. The most haunting flashes were of wrongs he had committed without acceptance of responsibility. He vowed that if he ever made it out of the desert, he would seek reconciliation and make amends. As soon as that thought left his

awareness, the reflection seemed to move backwards and get smaller.

As Jackson tried to refocus on the diminishing object in front of him, he suddenly felt his face being wiped by something warm and wet. Standing over the young man, a large camel repeatedly licked his entire head.

“How did... how did you get here?” asked Jackson, now lucid enough to know the answer would not come verbally.

The camel backed up and knelt down, waiting for Jackson to mount him.

Realizing what the camel’s actions meant, Jackson said, “Okay. Okay, boy. Just give me a minute. I’m not moving real fast right now.”

With awkwardness, the seasoned rider eventually completed the mount. The first hundred feet of travel required every ounce of ridership skill he could muster to just stay atop his rescuer. The camel’s unorthodox gait gradually became more fluid, or at least Jackson’s perception of it became so.

“Look, big fella, I’ve never seen anything like you around these parts. I heard tell there was somebody in some little backwater town upstate who worked with camels, but I’m really glad you came down here. I don’t really have bearings on where we’re at, so I’m going to have to put my trust in you to get us out of here.”

About a half hour into the journey, the camel veered sharply to the right, went about a hundred feet, and climbed a small hill. At the crest of the hill, Jackson could see a water hole below. When they reached the little spring, the camel knelt down, allowing his rider to get off. The camel then went to the water’s edge and began drinking. He stopped momentarily to look back at the young man as if to say, “It’s okay. The water is safe to drink.” Never had Jackson had such a thirst and never had his thirst been so quenched.

As the orange sun slipped behind the horizon, it bathed the camel and his rider in an almost eerie purplish hue; one could say almost a royal hue. Off in the distance, Jackson could see the familiar silhouette of the Davis ranch house. You can imagine the sight of the young man riding a camel into the

domain of horse and cowboy. The camel came to a stop in front of the house and knelt down to let his rider off. Jackson's father came rushing out of the house and ran to his son. Jackson collapsed into his father's strong arms, remembering little until he awoke in his comfortable bed some twenty hours later.

As Jackson gradually recuperated from his ordeal, his rescue story spread far and wide throughout the region. Many came to see the dromedary at the Davis ranch where he now stayed. They marveled at the creature in the lush stall with the gold name plate over the door that read "King". Some doubted Jackson's story. Many believed it. Some secretly ridiculed the young man, calling the whole thing "Jackson's Folly".

Jackson understood why some people reacted the way they did. No one could have remotely imagined that one of the richest men in the state could have escaped death by the actions of an animal considered so lowly in comparison to the fine steeds so prevalent in the region. In Jackson's eye, there couldn't have been a finer gift, whether or not others could see that gift. And, most assuredly,

Jackson H. Davis III would never forget the things he had seen that day in the eye of the camel.