Lesson 13

The Ship of the Desert

Picture a long line of camels *wending* its way slowly across the skyline. This sight was once a common one in the North African and Arabian deserts. The animals are dromedaries, the kind of camel most familiar to people in the West. The Bedouins, the migrant people of the Arabian and Sahara deserts, call the dromedary “the ship of the desert.” This creature has transported goods and people over some of the most arid regions in the world for thousands of years.

Bearing its burden patiently, and seemingly *oblivious* to hunger and thirst, the dromedary can keep up a steady, plodding gait over great distances. It can travel fifty miles a day for up to five days without showing signs of *fatigue*. When it reaches water, it *quenches* its thirst by drinking as much as fifteen gallons at a time. When food is not available, it lives on the fat stored in its hump. The hump is not filled with water as some people think. The dromedary’s hump fills out and is quite *prominent* when the animal is well fed; it gets smaller as the fat stored inside is *depleted*.

The dromedary is very well *adapted* to life in the desert. Its broad feet do not sink into soft sand. It can close its nostrils completely during sandstorms while protecting its eyes with double rows of eyelashes. The dromedary is comfortable in the *searing* heat of the desert. It will stretch out in the full *glare* of the noonday sun even though shade may be available. The dromedary is capable of carrying up to six hundred pounds on its back. It knows its limits, though. If given too heavy a burden, it will obstinately refuse to budge until the load is lightened.

Closely related to the dromedary is the Bactrian camel. Its *habitat* is the cold desert regions of Siberia, in central Asia. The Bactrian camel is smaller and sturdier than the dromedary. It has shorter legs, and is covered with long, shaggy hair. Its coat protects it from the *rigorous* Siberian climate. But the most obvious difference between the two types of camel is their humps. The dromedary has a single hump; the Bactrian camel has two. Although both kinds have been domesticated for thousands of years, the Bactrian camel, unlike its cousin, is still found in the wild.

To the Bedouins and the migrant people of central Asia, the dromedary and Bactrian camel are much more than beasts of burden. Their hair provides
wool for making clothes and carpets; their hides can be used to make tents and footwear; they can be milked like cows; and their meat, which tastes like veal or beef, forms an important part of these peoples’ diets.

In spite of their great versatility, both kinds of camels are becoming outmoded means of transportation. Four-wheel-drive vehicles are more efficient; they can travel faster and further and carry heavier loads. That long line of camels wending its way across the Arabian desert is disappearing from the modern world. Like the American wagon train that headed west in the 1800s, it may someday be seen only in the movies.

Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson’s word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. Why are camels called beasts of burden?
   
2. How has the use of camels as beasts of burden been affected by jeeps?
   
3. Name one way in which four-wheel-drive vehicles are more efficient than camels.
   
4. What is the habitat of the dromedary?
   
5. Why might it be advisable to wear sunglasses in the North African desert?
   
6. Why can the North African desert at noon be an uncomfortable place for humans?
7. What is the meaning of *adapted* as it is used in the passage?

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___________________________________________________________________

8. How did the Bedouins once travel across the desert?

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9. Why do you think dromedaries do not bother to seek shade?

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10. What is the meaning of *prominent* as it is used in the passage?

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11. What would a shrunken hump on a dromedary tell you about the animal?

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12. What is the meaning of *quenches* as it is used in the passage?

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13. What sort of weather might one expect in Siberia’s *rigorous* climate?

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14. How do dromedaries and Bactrian camels conserve energy while moving?

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15. How might a dromedary be affected if made to travel more than fifty miles a day?

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- **Adapt** means “to change in order to fit new conditions” or “to make changes in, so as to be of use.” **Adopt** means “to choose and take into one’s family.” (Childless couples often would like to adopt a child.) **Adopt** also means “to take and use as one’s own.” (The English writer Mary Ann Evans adopted the name George Eliot because women novelists were not taken seriously in mid-nineteenth-century England.) Adapt and adopt can be confused because their meanings overlap slightly. It is possible to adopt someone else’s idea and then adapt it so as to improve it or use it for a different purpose.

- **A gait** is a manner or way of walking. A person in a hurry may walk with a fast gait. A sailor, used to being on a ship, may walk with a rolling gait. A gate is a hinged door in a fence or wall. The words gait and gate are homophones.

- **Fatigue** is a French word that comes from the Latin verb fatigare, which means “to tire.” Fatigue has been taken into English with its spelling and pronunciation unchanged. This word has two other meanings, which are used in the military. Fatigue is domestic duty performed by people in the military; fatigues are special clothing worn by military personnel while performing these tasks and while in the field.

- Don’t confuse oblivious with obvious, which means “easy to see or understand.” (The answers to the questions were obvious to anyone who had read the book.) Oblivious takes either of or to after it. (I was oblivious of the danger. The party in power remained oblivious to the need for change.)

- **Fun & Fascinating Facts**

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