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OUR Teacher Visits THE PARTHENON

Our Teacher led the Swayback Donkey up two flights of stone steps and along a stone sidewalk. MD trotted a few feet behind them. To their right, the Acropolis loomed, high and bright in the sunlight.

Within minutes, the trio arrived at a rocky path that wound up to the Parthenon ruins.

"This is where I left the heavy people," the donkey said. "Burros are not allowed farther up, so you must go alone."

"Then wait for me here," said Our Teacher. "After I find the Thinking Cap, we'll go straight to the gardens."

Our Teacher and MD climbed many more steps to the top of the Acropolis. They stood with a tour group admiring the Parthenon, its many limestone columns, supporting the remains of a finely sculptured roof. But no round couple with a blue backpack was among the crowd.

Next, Our Teacher searched the rocky grounds. He was gazing out at the city of Athens when MD started to bark. Two elderly people sat on a nearby bench. Was this the

couple they were looking for? It had to be. Not only were they heavyset, but a blue backpack lay on the bench between them.

"Good work, MD," Our Teacher said.

The boy and dog ran up to the couple.

Standing in the man's large shadow, Our Teacher said, "Excuse me."

"Good day," the woman said in an Australian accent.

"What can we do for you, young man?" said the man.

"I was wondering if you have a hat, a mortarboard with a silver tassel, in your backpack."

The couple exchanged looks.

"Why, yes, we do," said the woman. "It's a gift for our grandson, Bernie. He's very smart. He'll be graduating from kindergarten this month and he can wear our present at his graduation."

"Why do you ask, young man?" asked the man.

"I've been searching for that hat across Europe," Our Teacher said. "It's special. I don't want to take it or anything. I just want to put it on for a second."

The man scowled. "Is this some sort of prank?"

"No, the mortarboard has strange powers," Our Teacher said. "Please, just let me put it on briefly."

"Strange powers?" said the man. "What's this all about? We don't like games. Where are your parents? Who are you with?"

The woman placed a hand on her husband's knee. "It's OK, Howard," she said. "The boy doesn't look like a prankster. Remember, Bernie likes to pretend, too." She smiled at Our Teacher. "Here, let me get the hat for you. I don't see any harm if you want to try it on."

The woman raised the backpack and reached inside. A look of disappointment came over her face.

"It's gone!" she said. "The hat's not here. I know I had it a few minutes ago. Someone must have taken it."

"What a shame," said the man. "We'll just have to get Bernie another gift. A T-shirt

perhaps."

The woman nodded. "Yes, he'd like a T-shirt with the Olympian gods on the front," she said. "He's such a clever boy."

Our Teacher wanted to cry. Instead he shrugged and said, "Thanks anyway."

Silently, Our Teacher and MD climbed down the hill. They found the donkey waiting in the shade of a cypress tree.

"It's time to take you to the garden and set you free," Our Teacher said. "At least some good can come from our visit to Greece."

He led the donkey up a trail and into the large National Gardens. They walked along a cement path lined with olive trees. Past a fountain shooting a geyser of water, they entered a weedy area where several burros were munching grass.

Our Teacher removed the bridle from around the donkey's head. "This looks like a good place for you," he said. "I hope a kind person finds you and cares for you."

The donkey trotted off into the grassy field. How good it was to see the new spirit in the mistreated creature.

Our Teacher sat on a bench. He patted MD on the head. "What now, old pal?" he said. "Where to next? We have no idea who took the Thinking Cap or where it is now."

As he spoke, a cuckoo bird flew onto a nearby rock. "*Coo! Coo! I doo! I doo!*" it said.

Here is the Helpful Cuckoo Our Teacher saw:



"You know who took the Thinking Cap?" Our Teacher said. "Please, tell me."

"*Coo! A man wearing a porkpie hat, that's who,*" said the cuckoo. "*Coo! Coo!*"

"So someone did steal the hat," Our Teacher said. "How close was I to finding it?"

"Coo! Coo! You missed it by a minute or two," said the bird.

Our Teacher shook his head. "I would know my calling by now if I hadn't stopped to help the donkey," he said. "But I couldn't leave him there suffering. I had to do something."

"Cooo! You have empathy, you do," said the cuckoo. "That is a good quality."

Our Teacher drew in a deep breath. "Where is the Thinking Cap now?"

"The thief was from India," said the cuckoo. "I've seen him before. He often robs from the tourists. He takes everything he steals back home. He lives in Agra near the Taj Mahal. He's on his way there now."

Our Teacher stood. "Then I must go to India," he said. "I must find a way to get there."

"Coo! Coo! An optimist, that's you," said the bird. "Another good quality to have."

The sound of a merry-go-round calliope drifted through the olive trees.

"Coo! To get to India, here's a clue," said the Helpful Cuckoo. "Follow the muuusic. *Coo! Coo!"*

The bird flew off. Our Teacher and MD stood and headed in the direction of the calliope music. With MD's keen sense of hearing, it was easy to follow. The happy melody brought them into a clearing where a small fair was in progress. Besides the merry-go-round, there was a Ferris wheel and thrill rides. They walked up a short midway lined with games of skill. At the end, a yellow hot air balloon rose above a large straw gondola.

A man with a large mustache stood by the balloon. "Balloon rides!" he called out. "Travel anywhere in the world in seconds flat."

"Can the balloon take me and my dog to India?" Our Teacher asked.

The man pulled on the suspenders that held up his baggy pants. "My boy, this balloon will get you to India faster than you can spell it."

"But I have no money for a ticket," Our Teacher said.

"My boy, all rides are free," said the man. "No charge. Hop into the basket."

Holding MD under his arm, Our Teacher climbed some wooden steps and swung his legs into the straw gondola. Above him, a gas flame heated the air inside the balloon.

"Steady yourself, my boy," the man said. "Once this balloon is airborne, it takes off like a jet plane."

The man untied the ropes holding the balloon to the ground. Slowly, the balloon rose above the garden.

Below, Our Teacher saw the Swayback Donkey, prancing about the field with other wild burros.

"Good-bye, donkey. Good-bye," he called out. Enjoy your freedom. Beware of mean masters."

"*Ruff! Ruff!*" went MD.

The donkey raised his head high. He let out a loud, happy, "*Hee hawaaa! Heee hawwaa!*"

At that moment, the Helpful Cuckoo landed on the rim of the balloon basket

"Look, bird," Our Teacher said. "I found a way to India! I'm going there by balloon"

"Coo! Coo! Lucky you," said the cuckoo. "You're flexible and adaptable. More good qualities."

All at once, the balloon shot westward. Within seconds, it was flying across the coastline of Greece and over the grape-dark sea.



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