



IX

OUR Teacher RESCUES a SWAYBACK DONKEY

The rowerless boat docked at a lively port full of large ferry boats and cruise ships. Our Teacher and MD climbed onto a long pier. While the beagle sniffed bird droppings, Our Teacher talked to a woman in an information booth.

"If I were two Australian tourists and I had just arrived in Greece from Egypt, where would I go first," he asked.

The woman gave Our Teacher a look. "Many tourists go to the Plaka in Athens," she said. "She handed Our Teacher a map. "It's very nice."

Our Teacher thanked the woman and quickly found the subway station to central Athens. Minutes later, he and MD were walking along a narrow street in Athens' old historic district. Outdoor cafes and souvenir shops lined both sides. MD sniffed table legs, while Our Teacher searched through the shops. No round couple carrying a blue backpack was in sight.

At the end of the street rose a high rocky hill. On top stood the ruins of a limestone building.

Our Teacher checked his map. "That hill is the famous Acropolis, MD," he said.

"The structure on top is the Parthenon, built in 430 BC, as a temple dedicated to Athena, Goddess of Wisdom. Chances are the Australians went up there."

The boy and beagle started walking toward the hill. They climbed a flight of stone stairs and turned up another street. The day was hot, and Our Teacher longed for one of the icy drinks people were drinking at the tables outside the cafes. MD walked with his tongue out.

Halfway up the street, an odd sound reached their ears.

"Hee hawaaa! Heee hawwaa!"

On a sunny terrace stood a skinny donkey with a sagging back. His head was lowered toward the dusty ground, and his long ears drooped. A rope tethered him to a wooden post in the hot sun.

"Hee hawaaa!"

Here is the Swayback Donkey Our Teacher saw:



Our Teacher ran up to the donkey. "Are you OK, friend?" he asked.

The donkey slowly raised his head. "I'm all right, I guess."

"You must be very hot. You're standing in the sun."

"My master left me here while he went to lunch," said the Donkey. "But nothing's wrong, I guess."

"No, you should be in the shade. You need water."

Our Teacher untied the donkey and led him into the shade of an olive tree. He found a water spigot, filled a bucket with cool water, and brought it to the sad creature.

At once the donkey dunked his muzzle into the bucket and drank his fill.

"Thank you," he said. "I guess I was thirstier than I thought."

Our Teacher saw raw sores on the burro's sagging back. "You have a cruel master," he said.

"Hee hawaaa! I guess."

"Your back is bad," Our Teacher said. "You've been carrying loads that are far too heavy for you,"

"Yes, I wish my master was kinder," said the donkey. "He whips me with a stick if I go too slow. He forgets to feed and water me. He works me all day long and long into the night."

"Then I must take you away from here," Our Teacher said. "We'll go someplace where you will be safe."

The Swayback Donkey swished his tail. "I know of such a place. Other Plaka burros talk about a large garden beyond the Acropolis, a place where donkeys run wild and free. There is fresh grass to eat and a fountain with cool water to drink. Best of all, each morning, children come to the garden to play with the burros."

"That's where I will take you," said Our Teacher. "MD and I were headed to the Acropolis just now. We're looking for a round Australian couple carrying a blue backpack."

Heee hawwaa! went the donkey. "I drove such people to the Parthenon a short while ago. Oh, oh, they were heavy. So heavy. My master whipped me the entire way. And yes, the people carried a blue backpack."

"Can you take me to the place where you left them?" said Our Teacher. "Afterward, we'll go to the garden where you'll be free from your cruel master."

"Hee hawaaa! Freedom! I never thought freedom was possible. Quick, climb onto my back. We must leave before my master returns."

Our Teacher studied the donkey's sagging and sore-covered back. "No, we'll walk with you." He grabbed the tether rope. "Come, donkey. Come."

With one last *Hee Hawaaa!* the donkey followed Our Teacher from the terrace.

MD came last, wagging his tail and sniffing the ground.