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## Donkey Ride

A buzz of excitement rippled through the orphanage. Today was a special one for the children who lived there, that time of the week when they always went on an outing. Normally, whenever they were taken somewhere like school it was in a motorised bus; but being the weekend there was no school. To make the coming event really special the manager of the orphanage had arranged with a local farmer to bring a different kind of transport. This was a hay cart drawn by a horse, and the children would sit in the cart on hay bales which made it more comfortable because the old cart used to bounce a bit. Not only was the ride fun, but where the children were being taken was even more so. They were going to the beach.

Before they started out there was something particular that they had to do, and that was to line up outside the kitchen where they would each be given a carrot, except for Marge who had two. Then out they trooped through the front door where the cart was waiting with farm worker Barney sitting at the front, reins in one hand waving to the children with the other. They waved back and began climbing into the cart, all bar one. Marge walked straight to the horse pulling the cart. "Hello, Conker," she chirped. "Have I got something nice for you?" and she offered him one of her carrots. Needless to say, Conker was well pleased as he began munching on the tasty treat. It was all part of the routine, and once Marge had joined the others in the cart they were off, bouncing their way out to the road.

Actually, they didn't turn onto the road at all. Barney drove the cart straight across, through an open gate on the far side and onto a dirt track. He preferred this route to driving along the main road which usually had a lot of traffic and Conker didn't like the noise from cars and trucks. The disadvantage was that the track had lots of ruts and holes making it quite a rough ride, but the children didn't seem to mind the bumps and lurches, especially as going this way it would take them along the cliff tops from where they could look out over the sea.

It would be nearly an hour before they were at the beach, but there were already a number of other children on the sands, playing at the edge of the sea, making sand castles; plus four who were having some extra fun. They were each seated on a donkey, and there were four of them being led by a man at the front, taking the children for a ride along the beach and back. In between the rides the donkeys were given a short break so that they could rest and get a drink of water. This gave them the opportunity to have a chat, in donkey speak of course.

"That last kid kept kicking me," complained Klippity.

"Same with mine," Klop put in. "I don't know why. It's not as if we could go any faster than the Boss man who leads us."

"Not all children are like that," Jenny reminded them. "The ones Conker brings in the cart are really nice. They give us pats and strokes..."

"...AND carrots," added Rodney, his mouth watering at the thought. "They should be here soon... Uh-oh, Boss man's coming with four more kids."

The morning wore on pretty much the same as usual, one batch of riders after another, and the donkeys continued to wait eagerly for the children from the orphanage to arrive; but for some reason they didn't. Boss man took them back to their holding pen for a longer break and they were to remain there while he had his lunch. After he had closed the pen gate, Rodney waited for him to leave and was preparing to give the gate a nudge with his nose as he often did. "Why do you bother doing that?" asked Klop.

"In case he hasn't shut it properly," answered Rodney, advancing on the gate.

"And what if he hasn't?" enquired Jenny, "What then?"

"Well," Rodney started to say, "If Boss man hasn't shut it properly and it opens we could go for a wander on our own without a bunch of children on our backs."

"Where to?" asked Klippity.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Rodney. "Maybe we could have a look to see what's the other side of that spot where Conker's cart stops. We might even meet up with the children there... Hee-haw!" he brayed as he nudged the gate and it opened. "Come on guys, let's go walkabout."

"What if Boss man comes and finds us gone?" said Jenny.

"No worries," Rodney reassured her. "We'll be back before he's finished his lunch."

So off they went. It took the four donkeys only a few minutes to trudge through the soft beach sand to the place where Conker used to stop, but he obviously hadn't arrived yet. There were, however, some motorised cars parked, and about to climb into one were the two children who had been kicking Klippity and Klop. "Hey look," exclaimed the girl when she spotted them, "The donkeys are here. Let's go and have a free ride." Before they could dash off a man who might have been their father ordered them into the car.

The donkeys couldn't understand human speak so they didn't realise how lucky they were. "Come on," said Rodney eyeing up a track on the far side of the car park. "Let's see what's along there." And off he trotted with the others close behind. What happened next was pretty scary.

The track was quite narrow and they had to walk two by two. It continued straight for a bit, then started turning in a shallow arc. They were just making their way round the bend when a loud noise from behind startled them. It was the horn of the car with the man and the children in. At first the donkeys stuttered to a sudden halt, just until the car horn blared again three times. What the animals didn't know was that these noises were a signal for them to move out of the way so that the car could pass. All they could imagine, however, was that they were in some immediate danger. "Come on!" brayed Rodney desperately. "We're out of here!" And they bolted along the track.

Although the horn didn't sound again, the car continued to follow them just for a while; then Jenny realised it wasn't there anymore. When she reported this the donkeys slowed to a walk and eventually stopped. Klippity glanced back along the track. "It must have turned off somewhere," she commented unnecessarily. "At least we've lost it and we can stop running. I'm not used to it and I'm getting tired. Can we go home now?"

Rodney thought on it for a moment. Finally, he suggested: "How about we see what's further along the track; then, if it's all the same we turn around and go back to the beach?"

There were a few moans and grumbles of disapproval. "I suppose so," muttered Klop eventually, "But no more running, okay? I'm tired like Klippity."

A short way along, the track started to rise. This made it harder going and caused much grunting and groaning. Even Rodney figured that maybe continuing wasn't such a good idea after all, but he was determined to go on. "Let's just get to the top of this hill," he offered, "Then we'll turn around and go home."

Unbeknown to the donkeys, they were on the track that Barney had driven the children from the orphanage along; only he'd had a problem. One of the wheels on the cart had come loose and he was trying his best to fix it, all to no avail. Straightening up, he announced: "Sorry kids.

It's no good. I'll have to get someone else to sort it, but I can't leave you here on your own; and it's still quite a way to the beach so it's probably too far for you to walk."

At the mere mention of the word 'beach' some of the children tried to convince Barney that they could indeed walk there and he nearly gave in, but eventually shook his head. "No, sorry. Just be patient for a bit while I have another crack at fixing the wheel."

Marge was already out of the cart and was talking to Conker when she noticed movement further down the track. "Hey, look guys. See what's coming."

At the same time Marge had spotted them, the donkeys had made it to the top of the hill and saw the cart. "That looks like Conker and the children," said Jenny. "Why have they stopped there?"

"You're right, it is them," confirmed Klop. "Let's go and see what the problem is."

Before they even reached the cart the children recognised them. "Hey, Barney," one of them called out. "These are the donkeys we ride on the beach."

Busy trying to fix the wheel, Barney hadn't noticed the animals. He looked up and frowned. "How can you tell? They all look the same to me."

"Oh no," said Marge. "It's them alright – Rodney, Klippity, Klop and Jenny." She turned to face the donkeys. "What are you guys doing here?"

Needless to say they didn't answer, not that they knew what Marge had said anyway. What they did understand, however, was the children piling out of the cart to give them pats and hugs; and best of all a carrot each. Barney was watching and had a thought: "I reckon they must have escaped from their holding pen somehow. The Boss man's bound to be worried about them, so they need to be taken back."

"We can ride them," said one of the kids. "Yeah," said another, "But there's ten of us and only four donkeys."

"Well," Barney began. "You're not wrong there. I imagine, though, that they could manage to take two each..." He paused and looked at his horse. "You wouldn't mind giving a couple of kids a ride would you Conker?" Same as the donkeys, Conker hadn't a clue what the man had said; but he soon found out when Barney went to the front of the cart and unhitched him from it.

With Barney leading Conker by his reins followed by four donkeys with two kids apiece perched on their backs it was a strange procession indeed that crossed the car park and continued onto the beach. As well as a number of people stood watching, the Boss man had seen them coming and raced over. "I've been looking all over for them," he blurted out breathlessly. "Where did you find them?"

"Actually, they found us," replied Barney, "And just as well they did. A wheel on the cart came loose and I couldn't fix it. Do you reckon I could use your phone to call the farm for help?" That wasn't a problem and the farmer arranged for a repair man to come out. "I'm to take Conker back to wait by the cart," he said to the Boss man, "But I'll have to leave the kids here with you. Will that be okay?"

The Boss man had already put the donkeys back in their pen and the children had gone in there too. They were making a big fuss of the donkeys; and because there were ten of them and they'd each brought a carrot with them there were still some spare, so everyone it seemed was having a great time. The Boss man smiled. "I don't think the kids will mind, nor will the donkeys," he said to Barney with a wink, "And if you bring the cart once it's been fixed you can take them home. I'll ring the orphanage and tell them the children will be there sometime this afternoon."

It was almost evening before they arrived back; then the orphanage again was abuzz with excited chatter, so too the donkey's holding pen. As you can imagine, the human speak and donkey speak was quite different; but they were really saying the same thing – what a lovely day, a happy, happy, HAPPY one.