

# Concerning Praise for the Burro

## *Sage and Tumbleweed*

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by \*Inyokel



February *Westways*, official publication of the Automobile Club of Southern California, contains the item: "Several more treasure seekers in quest for gold buried by the Franciscans were entrapped in Los Angeles during December." Also an article by Idwal Jones "Luck and the Kicking Burro," dealing with the old desert tradition that *equus asinus* has a nose for gold. As Frank Dobie writes in his fascinating monograph on lost mines of the West, *Coronado's Children*: "Coyotes and burros seem to have directed more prospectors to 'pay' than all the practical geologists combined." So to the Los Angeles delvers the gibe should be appropriate: "Get a burro!" In fact, such good use did St. Francis make of the burro in his simile of body and soul, the donkey and his rider, making their joint way to heaven that-please don't take it amiss-I am reminded of a burro whenever I meet a Franciscan.

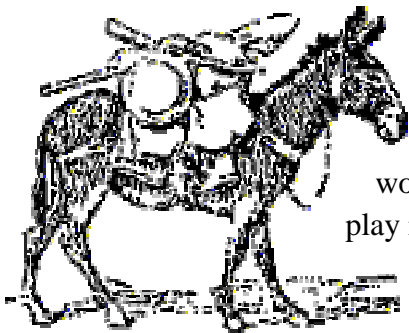
Idwal Jones discounts the burro's knowledge of ore attributing the association of the lowly brute with such discoveries to the fact that the prospector's life is largely ruled by chance, and the wandering burro symbolizes blind luck. There is much philosophy here, for the straying beasts have led their owners up many otherwise unexplored canyons in search of their foraging quadrupeds. I am certain that most of the "finds" uncovered in this fashion were preceded by sulfuric speech of a hue with the volcanic walls that echoed it. "I have been prospectin' these hills for nigh 40 years, 11 replied an old desert rat to a tenderfoot's query. Then he caught himself. "Not exactly 40, though. About 30 of them years I spent lookin' for burros; the rest I spent prospectin'."

"Sabe the burro?" is an old byword. But who does understand the burro? Not the miner, whose inseparable crony he has been for as many years as men have sought gold in western wastes. Not the packer, who rents him out to the unsuspecting hiker or fisherman determined to go it alone. Certainly not the tourist, who gazes upon him and his kin in some rockstrewn wash where he apparently finds enough nutrition to keep him forever fit. He has been damned without reservation and held in reverential awe. He will stand in one position for hours, "with no more concept of the time-flow than a Chinese philosopher," yet he will be as prompt as the rising sun at your campfire if you begin to set aside a flapjack or two for him in the morning. He is harmless as a child, but will crush the life out of a dog he does not like in a flashing leap. He will watch your packing and listen to your oburgations with aggravating equanimity, then drive you mad by bursting forth in an ear-shattering "hee-haw" a half-hour later. A desert man seeking demeaning epithets does not call his enemy "an ass." Those of us who have looked long and often into the unrevealing eyes of a burro, and have sensed therein the wisdom of the years, consider him complimented who is classed with our desert canary.



Someone recently asked in a magazine article: "Have you ever seen a dead burro?" I have yet to meet a man in Inyo who has seen one, save, of course, those slaughtered by intrepid hunters for fox-farm and poultry-yard feed. If he dies, and there are many of us here who doubt it, his carcass must be transported to some asinine Nirvana or Avalon by the jinn to look out for such things. For, his grave is like the grave of Moses; no man has seen where he lies. Old Red, solitary survivor of the animals that once packed ore from the Minnietta mine, still browses on the old dumps at the tunnel mouths in the Argus range, and men who knew him in the hey-day of the mine tell me he must have lived there at least 40 years. Sphinx-like he stands on a deserted terrace and gazes meditatively across to the Panamints. He has seen booms and depressions, life and love, hatred and death. Perhaps his lonely guffaw is his puckish comment on the ways of men: "What fools these mortals be!" When the millennium comes, I have a feeling Old Red will be around somewhere.

The Irish people have a great respect for the donkey. They see in the cross that marks the back of each a symbol of the Savior, who deigned to ride into Jerusalem on one of them. A donkey, too, tradition tells, served to carry Mary on her journey with Joseph to the cave of the Nativity, and there only the ox shared with the ass the privilege of representing the brute world at the birth of its God. The Jews, who had been previously accused by Tacitus and others of onolatry, or ass-worship, in turn accused the early Christians of this practice, and caricatures unearthed in Italian excavations represent Christians adoring a crucified donkey. While in the catacombs themselves, Christ is represented as preaching against Satan, or heresy, depicted as an ass. Anybody who has ever endeavored to keep a burro on the right path, literally or figuratively, will have no quarrel with the last two characterizations. He is frequently diabolical and always non-conformist.



But it was Balaam's garrulous beast, with his classic rebuke to cruel masters, that lifted the burro into the social register. It placed him on a par with the prophets of the Messias, and he was portrayed by a wooden counterpart, from the depths of which an actor spoke in the miracle play representing these prophets in the Middle Ages. So popular did he become that his part was gradually disassociated from the rest and became the occasion of the "Feast of the Asses," which we find celebrated by priest and people alike in the 13th century. In Beauvais, on the Feast of the Flight into Egypt, a beautiful girl with a pretty child in her arms was led upon a richly caparisoned wooden donkey to St. Stephen's Church. The ass was placed in the sanctuary and Mass was sung. How far we have come from those days of simple joys and sanctification of the commonplace!

\*Inyokel – Fr. Crowley's pen name.