

Ode on a Grecian Lamp

By Ken Cable

In answer to my question the shopkeeper quickly dropped his head and glanced furtively about. Placing his finger vertically to his lips to signal silence, he shuffled to the door, leaned out and looked up and down the street. Ducking inside he hurried to the back of the shop, stopping near a large trunk in the corner. Signaling me to help, we pushed the trunk aside revealing a trapdoor in the floor. He lifted the creaking hatch to reveal a steep staircase disappearing down into darkness. A crook'd finger beckoned me to follow him as he vanished down into the gloom.

~~

We were traveling with friends in Greece in the early 80's and had arrived in the mountain town of Metsovo. Mahi, our archeologist guide, told us the people of Metsovo lived their quiet lives as a reflection of their ancestors and dressed as their ancestors did. Visiting Metsovo we would be stepping back in time and would experience the Greece of more than a century ago.

And so it seemed from the windows of our diesel bus as we rolled into the center of town. There were donkey carts, Greek men in baggy pants and caps, women in long, black dresses, and kids in colorful costumes. Our driver glided to a stop in a large space clearly marked 'BUS.' To the left of the square stood a row of vendor huts displaying a colorful array of tourist goods. Smiling proprietors, all dressed in the couture of times gone by, stood in eager anticipation of our arrival.

Mahi, who rarely smiled, did so as she pointed out these conveniently placed souvenir booths and admonished us to be sure to bargain for our treasures. It's part of their tradition, she said. Then she told us that for those wanting a more 'authentic' shopping experience, several more indoor shops could be found down the road leading from the town square. Traces of her earlier smile lingered on her lips as we exited the bus near the square, a place where the merchants mixed with the town folks in the evening to discuss the day's events.

After a cursory look at the souvenir booths, I started down the road toward the shops Mahi had indicated. I became separated from my wife Dorothy and our friends, Norm and Barbara Ayres, and found myself standing in front of a small building along a stretch of the road without other structures. The front of the store was adorned with colorful garments of every description – jackets, pantaloons, scarves and dyed woolen fabrics. A barrel contained a number of varnished and half-sized shepherd's crooks and another held ornate, hand-carved walking sticks.

~~

The furtive merchant crept into the middle of his secret cellar and pulled on a string hanging from the ceiling. A single 40-watt bulb produced half-light illumination and dark shadows. In this man-made gloaming I could see floor-to-ceiling shelves rising

against the back wall. On one of these shelves there appeared to be a number of small oil lamps of ancient design. I was suddenly transported. Here in this lonely little shop, high on a Greek mountain, I was in the presence of Greek antiquity! And it was for sale! My question to the proprietor upon entering the shop had been, “do you have any unusual items to show me?” He did.

Converting the drachma to U.S. currency revealed a price of about \$18 for my ancient oil lamp, a plainly designed and practical device, its bronze exterior showing the stains of history and time. In my imagination I saw it illuminating the interior of a shepherd’s hut – no, no, a Byzantine monastery – no, wait, perhaps the Parthenon? I quickly paid his price and hurried off to show my prize to my wife and companions.

Norm Ayres, a Rockwell systems engineer, immediately headed out for the shop, returning later with his own lamp. He rather smugly told the tale of the furtive behavior, the trap door and the dim cellar. His smugness came from the fact that he had bargained his price down to \$12. Bargaining issues aside, we congratulated ourselves on having obtained these priceless artifacts so cheaply from an old merchant who was clearly ignorant of their intrinsic value.

As we drove away from Metsovo, I began to worry. For centuries Greece has been looted of its treasures by foreign powers – and individuals. Wonderful sculptures, Byzantine Icons, marbles, urns, gold artifacts –and thousands of other Greek art items were taken and are displayed in museums all over the world, including the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London and the Getty Museum in California. Were we looting? Was it really okay to buy old Greek oil lamps from a conspiratorial old man? Would we get nailed at the airport when we got ready to leave the country? I resolved to take it up with Mahi at the end of the tour.

The Isle of Rhodes, or Rodos, is so much a favorite destination for tourists that local merchants, wanting to ease the terrible burden visitors carry in searching for stuff to buy, thoughtfully built a huge souvenir complex right on the road leading from the port to the interior of the island. To get to the interior this gauntlet must be run. And we ran it.

Entering the first major store we encountered in that glittering complex produced a major assault on the senses. Color, clamor and an endless selection of everything Greek, gleamed out at us from every side. Greek-style clothing, caps, gowns, capes, cloaks and boots. Colored glass jewelry, painted urns, replica icons, glass and ceramic vases, pens and pennants occupied the walls and shelves, display cases and alcoves. Heroic figures in bronze, marble, plaster and plastic loomed everywhere. It was chaotic – and a souvenir buyer’s paradise.

But unlike souvenir’s in a shop, convictions are durable, not easily shattered. It takes a lot sometimes to make us set aside some fantasies – such as the thought that humans cause global warming, that Roswell, N.M. has aliens (it does, but not from space), and that the earth is flat. But sometimes the evidence is incontrovertible.

Norm and I had lagged behind our ladies as we entered this mega-store in Rhodes. As we passed a partially curtained alcove, I spotted a box behind the drapes containing lots of dull metal objects with a familiar look and shape. I called Norm and we stepped behind the curtain – a place we obviously were not supposed to be) and examined the box. It was full of ‘ancient’ oil lamps – identical to the treasures we had hidden away in our luggage. Only these were raw and unfinished cast pot-metal lamps not yet gilded

with the bronze patina and evidence of historical significance. The finished product was available in an ancient artifacts bin in the store for \$8.

We did talk all of this over Mahi. That small smile returned to her lips as she listened. Of course, we let on we knew they were fake all along. We just wanted to help out the old merchant with a couple of sales. Her smile widened – but just a little.

~~

We imagined the scene in the Metsovo town square the evening of the day of our visit. All of the old men and merchants would be sitting comfortably about, recounting the events of the day. We imagined our old conspirator talking to a fellow entrepreneur.

“I did well today, Dimitrios,” he would say. “This American from the bus came in looking for a ‘special’ souvenir. I took him to the cellar and sold him a lamp. And then, Dimitrios, he sends his friend and I sold *him* one too. God *bless* America.”

We could almost hear the laughter as the story went round the square.

Ken Cable is a nature and travel writer. His new novel “Lost!” about three young boys attempting to survive in the high Sierras during a spring storm can be ordered at www.readerpublishing.com. You can contact him at Ken@readerpublishing.com