

An Honest Man

Book One of
the Donkey and the Wall
trilogy

*Two roads diverged in a wood and I - I took the one less traveled by,
and that has made all the difference. ---Robert Frost*

Introduction: Doors of Perception

Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't. --Mark Twain

A first breeze of the new day, laden with the rich odors of the pasture back of the house wafted around him, catching the hair on his neck and tickling his ears. It was wonderfully cool this morning for late July. The yellow and orange shafts of the rising sun were just filtering through the willows around the still quiet pond in front of him, and one lone gray heron passed low, over the series of watery hunting grounds on an early morning reconnaissance.

But the morning was the same as any other in many respects. His body had creaked slowly to the bathroom from the bed, then to the kitchen and the coffee press. The porch was chilly, the sky was a brightening promise, and the cat welcomed a scratch on the ear she had slept on.

The evening before had been grand. It was really encouraging to him that his friends celebrated at the reception of his decision to begin his vocation as a writer. The party was well attended and lasted perhaps longer than anyone anticipated, and each of them threw in their own two cents for his consideration.

Everybody had an idea, he mused. "Just do it," was the most recurrent offering. Yet, lurking there in the shadows of future failure, was a glimmer of the hope that somehow it would happen.

"I've got a world of experience, unlike when I first thought of it an age ago. I've got the time necessary and the skills. It's not exactly the ordinary thing to attempt, but I have never been accused of being ordinary.

I suppose it can't be any worse than taking up golf or fly fishing... But..." And the all too familiar wave of trepidation at the first step of something new washed through him. This time around it wasn't the debilitating numbness or white haze of confusion that whelmed his

thoughts; it was resolution and surrender. Maybe that's what it felt like to everybody else after all when one at last 'just did it' and knew it was doable, possible, even practicable.

"Not the same any more." He muttered in counterpoint to the purring. "It's even a bit easier; don't you think, Mocha?"

She didn't answer except to expand the range of his scratching her ears to her neck. A bird dropped from the branches of the Tallow tree off the porch to peck at an early bug in the grass. A breeze riffled the water of the pond as if in sympathy with his sigh as he got up to fetch the morning's first cup of coffee.

"Where to begin?" he sighed almost aloud.

'*At the beginning...*' Startled, he looked around for the voice. He peered about uncertainly at the porch, then the kitchen.

"That's odd indeed," he muttered and sat down again.

'*Stories usually do, you know...*' Again the uncomfortable feeling of intrusion, but still no body to append to the voice. Stopped in mid-sip at this last contribution, he burned his tongue on the hot liquid and splattered himself trying to rescue his mouth.

'*Good stories, anyway...*' and the voice trailed off quietly.

"Uh, thanks?" His forced courtesy was mechanical. Though he questioned his own voice for answering at all. "So this is insanity. Where to now I wonder, catching at imaginary butterflies?" Strangely, he was only slightly unsettled and decided to pursue ordinary activities as the best defense against further lapses. He proceeded to go upstairs and change from his pajamas, going about the normal routine of a morning.

"No history of nutters in the family closet," he reflected, "never a mention of hearing voices," nor he emphasized, "of seeing things. Must be a sign of getting older I suppose," he concluded. As he descended the steps and had almost convinced himself there hadn't been anything out of the ordinary after all...

'*If you cannot think of a story of your own, I have some good ones...*'

"I can hear you, you know! And I am unused to conversations with the

empty air. Where, who... you're..." words weren't coming easily.

'You talk on the telephone,' the voice replied as if making a point.

"So?" he challenged, scanning the room for some evidence of a source for the voice.

'There's only empty air then, isn't there?'

"This isn't a phone call and it is definitely not..." he stammered leaving: "normal," left unsaid.

Mocha chose that moment to scratch at the sliding door. He turned to let her out, then froze. On the other side of the glass was a person. Conflicted by the relief at having a body to append to the voice versus the abruptness of the sudden arrival and manner of the surprise guest, he was only able to feebly reach for the door handle and pull it aside.

The man had already begun to speak as he slid the door open, *"Indeed, I am* not a phone call I'm afraid," he reached down to stroke the cat at his shins, "and I am not normally empty air," he finished with a tone of self deprecation. "May I sit down with you on the porch here?"

It was the same voice.

"The coffee smells good," prompted the man.

"Uh, let me get you a cup," responded the younger man numbly and moved woodenly into the kitchen, fumbled in the cabinet for a mug and went through the motions of pouring a fresh cup. He hesitated as he reached for the cream.

"Yes please, just a bit" came the voice from the porch.

He poured a dab into the steaming coffee and returned to the porch, padding out through the still open door. Mocha was already in the stranger's lap napping. The man smiled up at him and reached out a tanned hand to receive the proffered mug. Sitting down across from the visitor, he stared expectantly not knowing what to say nor what to think.

The visitor began, "It was the Scotsman, Murray, praising Goethe who put it best: 'Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness...'" he paused to fix his host's eye, "Concerning all acts of initiative there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which

kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred." He waited for the words to have an effect and continued, "A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way." The effect of the visitor's words were concrete, he sat rapt, expectant. "Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it." There was a slight inflection on the last words: 'Magic in it,' and the visitor continued to look at him with a gaze that begged an answer or a response of some sort. The host had heard every word, and they felt to him as if he had been parched and the voice was clear water.

"It was your voice," he said at last, then asked unclearly, "But how, uh... where... who..."

"You ask all the proper questions a writer should ask, at least," responded the guest mirthfully and sipped his coffee.

The flummoxed host searched for something to say, then blurted out, still in somewhat of a fog, "You said start at the beginning; like what?"

"Well take any whole phenomenon, say... Music. Pick a note, any note on a keyboard, and it is a beginning that doubles itself; it travels along a definite path to achieve an end."

Still fazed but now feeling he was gaining some composure, the young man retorted, "But, life doesn't have clear beginnings and endings. It's all fuzzy, you know?" Perhaps this last was more reflective of his own condition rather than a sincere expression of his views, but he was rolling now.

"Oh of course it does. Look at our meeting this morning," the guest winked, "it began when you made a real decision and then committed to it."

"And it will end...!?" was the host's only plaint.

"Well yes, when you accomplish this aim," concluded the older man

easily.

“Sounds simple,” conceded the host, “but life's not always like that!”

The stranger stroked his chin absently, and the host began to think he was at last gaining ground on his own sanity. The cat stretched in his nap as if reaching for phantom prey. The guest pushed his hands through the silver hair on the sides of his head in an overture to starting a fresh tack.

“Let's agree to not be silly, and instead adhere to reality in order to avoid lapses into pure illusion,” he offered.

Taken aback by the assertion that the obvious was being obviated, the host insisted, “I'm talking about reality! Work, pay taxes, die! Everybody knows it!”

“No.” The calmness of the guest's simple response was intended to brook any further argument. “The world is more fantastic than is dreamt of in your philosophy. Only because a proposition is commonly held, does not certify its validity. People live in a half-waking, half-sleeping state where things are done through them while no one *does* anything; existing as they do in a dream world of illusion, believing any old tale, and constantly changing the positions of their incomplete attention.”

The host recoiled in the crashing cold of this new wave of information. Feeling his new purchase on sanity slipping from him, he whimpered, “But, I'm not talking about some philosophy! I'm talking about how it is; it's just facing facts---isn't it?”

The stranger sat, the cat slept, the ripples on the pond grew in the breeze, birds flitted amongst the Tallow branches, insects buzzed and reeled, and the stranger just sat quietly, resolutely, calmly smiling reassuringly at his host. After what seemed an eternity, or just a moment, his soft voice affirmed, “What you've related is merely a description of a very poor, very drab, albeit ubiquitous, illusion. That is all.” The finality of the statement came and left and the host was without a lifeline again.

After a further quietus in which they sipped their coffee and gazed into the morning, the stranger recited almost to himself, “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear as it is, infinite. Blake

put it beautifully; don't you think?" mused the guest, then began again, "Permit me to lay some groundwork for our endeavor: there is philosophy, there is theory, and there is the practicable. Each of these has its own merits and each may describe some facet of Reality. Only the Practicable must be based entirely upon reality, for only in the presence of reality can anything be truly done. Do you see the necessity of this?"

"Yeah, I guess so," responded the host blankly.

"Then when we speak together of beginnings, and the gamut of a course to an end, we shall speak practicably. Agreed?" offered the guest drawing the host into the confidence that they should speak more of these things, and that felt as a sort of relief; though he couldn't explain to himself why. The stranger continued.

"Your lack of understanding on this point is wholly understandable." The guest continued gently, "Modern man is besieged with a barrage of misinformation and half-truths to such an extent that where he should have a functioning conscience able to discern the actual from the mistaken, he has only hearsay and old wives tales as his guide through a complex world. His defense is always to blame another, or to blame fate itself when things go wrong, and then blithely accept as his just reward the accolades for any success he encounters, which however is often the result of coincidence, then at best: haphazard." Depressing as it sounded, the young man listened carefully in spite of himself. "And to add insult to injury, he claims for himself the most unjust prize of all---that he is, de facto, a unified individual. Simply because he uses the same name throughout his life, because he sees the same image in his mirror morning after morning, and refers to himself always as 'I'. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. It is therefore no wonder that when recounting any remarkable event, he is lost. Unsure of his own participation, unsure of the agencies involved outside of himself, and almost always unclear as to any event's exact importance, unless he was perhaps impacted intimately."

Unable to bear the weight of any more debilitating news, the host whimpered aloud trying to use any means to deflect the stranger's assertions, "And what does this have to do with a story and where to really

begin?"

The old man answered, "That is the gist of this conversation. To make this information clearer let me provide an illustration of my meaning and you may take notes of the methods and content employed so as to better understand it. Does that sound to you like a good course of action?" asked the guest, then he waited as the young man deliberated the proposal.

"Yes, that actually makes sense; thank you. I'll just get some paper and a pencil." With something at last to do he went into the house and returned in a moment ready to write.

The earlier chill of the morning had given way to a comfortable warmth pleasantly punctuated by an occasional breeze. Across the pond a couple red eared turtles were dragging themselves up onto the bank into the sunshine. From where they lolled, the porch of the house appeared as a stage upon which two actors played the parts of teacher and pupil. One with the silver hair of age looking to a distant screen for his cues, the other, young and studious, diligently scribbling notes as his elder spoke. The backdrop of empty, fallow fields below the sharp blue Texas sky held the titanic shadows of tall clouds gliding across the landscape as if it really were a grand stage set in motion.

Gazing long enough, one might begin to descry the story of the land. The seas which once covered it dotted here and there by short expanses of archipelago, and the gradually receding waters leaving the silted river deltas and fertile soils for new grasslands and forests. Next came the rise of animals to graze and hunt its bounty. Then the cataclysm that ended it. Rising from the ash and dust, life tenaciously resumed its march to dominance once again. The earth rejoiced once more in its bounty and awaited the coming footfalls of its new master. And the old man began a tale of Man.

1

Life

Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We would not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most outre results, it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable.
--Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

“It seldom appears to the casual observer that any thing is truly out of the ordinary, save on those rare occasions when the extra-ordinary sneaks into everyday life; then even certain well adapted places aren't immune from this phenomenon. Take for instance Fred Livingson and his Mercantile store in Tahoe City, California,” the old man began as the young man jotted notes.

“Fred started at the Mercantile when he was ten. A legitimate age for the heir apparent to begin training for his role and purpose in life. His father inherited the shop from his father, and his father from his father who sold mining and panning gear in the 1870s to those daring souls looking to strike it rich in silver and gold out west. Every several years a new demand in the market took hold so that each generation of Livingsons had to meet the cyclical vagaries of supplying needed 'thingies' to a ever more fickle public. Gadgets and tools which were essential one year may become useless inventory two years later. The Livingson family motto seemed to be: Never throw anything out; it'll sell someday. That was the prime reason for the ever growing stockrooms and the every decreasing showroom. From floors to ceilings, on many levels, in many rooms, closets and cupboards, over nearly the entire block were the tools and widgets of Americana spanning a large swath of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A person and a place with a history, indeed.

Fred was at the store each morning at 6:30, save Sunday when he opened for afternoon hours only after church. His routine varied little. The

store varied little, but for the aforementioned inventory cycles. The townfolk knew the shelves and stock as well as he himself did so most of his real attention-to-business-time involved special orders and balance sheets, which is what he occupied himself with from 6:30 until he unlocked the door at 8:00. Ordinary days doing ordinary things--so it appeared." Thus the story began.

"Fred's Great-great-grandfather sailed into San Francisco harbor as Wang Fu Kong, the youngest son of a Chinese entrepreneur. He inherited a portion of his father's fortune and in order to avoid losing it, or his life, at the hands of his greedy brothers, he sailed into the sunrise looking to make his fortune in the New World. He promptly adopted the name of George Livingston, a name to which he took a fancy, picked randomly from a handbill in the streets of Chinatown. He made a significant deposit of gold, smuggled in his overcoat lining, into the investment bank of Sutro & Co., one of whose directors was a second generation Cantonese from the British colony in his own Guangdong province.

A bachelor of twenty-two, he quickly found prospects grim for a prosperous future in the city, so he purchased a small stock of durable goods, a small wagon and a horse and headed for the Sierra Nevada to try his hand at prospecting the new Comstock Lode. He made it almost as far as the Great Tahoe Lake when a broken wagon axle stranded him quite a few miles shy of a village with the pretentious epithet: Tahoe City.

His first several weeks in the mountains were fraught with struggle and hardship. His frustrating untutored attempts to pan the local streams were dismal and unrewarding at best. The soil was contemptuous of the seeds he brought for a garden. At least his horse could forage for itself so he was spared the constant and demoralizing threat of dragging another creature into his spiral of failure. Resourceful as he was, he could not command the weather, much to his chagrin. His several initial camp arrangements had been repeatedly modified because of the unpredictably fickle mountain storms.

So finally accepting the verdicts of nature on his attempts to ignore the elemental realities of his situation, he at last decided to surrender his

preconceptions and faulty ideas and fall back on his strengths. Relying at last upon his *actual* experiences as a youth, and the practical knowledge he had acquired over the course of his life, he set about to build a more permanent shelter, now in harmony instead of at odds with the vagaries of the Sierra's temperamental climate. He cannibalized the wagon to build a serviceable pavilion fitted with racks and shelves on which to display the remaining supplies he might now vend to whomever might pass by in need of such things. Thus from his makeshift camp store, set up out of necessity as a result of his native talents rather than long and careful planning, he began trading his meager wares and staples. Stocks ran low while demand for his wares grew among the residents of the nearby village, mountain men, wannabe prospectors and the Indians who seasonally traveled through the forested little valley.

George Livingston had also brought with him some stock which could not be purchased in America. Among those special items were a cache of Tonkin cane poles. When split properly, planed, fashioned and glued, the resultant cane rod was lithe as willow and as durable as oak. With rod in hand George was able to keep himself in trout and salmon, and his camp store in dried varieties of same. Each Saturday afternoon he ventured into the hills and mountains, up creeks and streams, returning late in the evening Sunday with enough for himself for the week and more to add to his store's largess, or trade for other merchandises when the opportunities arose.

These walks into the wilderness gave George the invigoratingly solemn opportunity to see his new world from a perspective only a handful of people of the masses teeming on the face of the planet ever experience. With a bag over his shoulder, his rod and a length of rope, and walking stick in hand he strode into the shadows of Ponderosa and Jeffrey Pines. Jays and squirrels, unheeding of his passage, foraged and cavorted between the floor and canopy of the vast forest. The dews of the early morning gave way to the cooling mists and breezes of afternoon as George plied his rod in the eternal waters of the mountain streams, ever watchful for fellow fishers--the black bear, brown bear, the mountain lion and the wolves. Often during the strolls between fishing spots he would practice his English

on the ducks and herons, or else serenade the chipmunks with the English versions of the folk songs from his youth or ballads of his maturity. He felt more at home in this personal wilderness than he ever remembered feeling in the common intercourse of any city.

The summer season was faltering before the chiller airs of early autumn and the evenings arrived sooner and sooner. It was upon one of these abbreviated forays that a serendipitous event unfolded. George had begun to cast up and down the riffles of a wide bend in a stream while unaware of being watched carefully by a silent observer. The watcher moved only to keep the angler in view and made no sound other than frequent silent gasps of surprise and respect for the performance in front of him. When George had landed several good sized trout and prepared to move downstream along the bank a ways, it put him enroute exactly where the observer was positioned. With a moment's surprise on his part, George met the old man courteously and made to pass on. As he glanced up in greeting he recognized a familiar face; White Feathers, the first of what had become a long procession of Indians who frequented his little camp store.

The old man beamed back in admiration and fell in with George as he trekked to a new patch of the water to fish. They spoke of the other streams, creeks and rivers in the mountains, of the prospects George had for his little store, and of his family back in China. They lingered together chatting like this on the bank as George prepared to begin anew when brilliance touched him. With a flourish of rod and line, he offered for the old man to have a go with the tackle. Delighted, White Feathers held the rod firmly and made a couple false casts to feel in his own hands the gentle power of the cane and line he had so recently witnessed in action.

Then with a few pointers offered by George, he moved into the stream and made an inaugural cast. An hour and a half later, the old man had landed two good sized fish and allowed himself to be coaxed out of the water, grinning like a boy all the while. He wasted no time in trying to discover what would in good trade be acceptable to George to build for him a rod like this one. They wrangled and laughed as they walked, and as they finally neared the camp store, they agreed to terms. George needed

some special assistance to more permanently establish his store, and White Feathers, well, he said he only wanted the fishing rod.

True to his good word, White Feathers used his influence to get George something he needed and could not get himself: a courier--in this instance, a mountain man. His name was Bridger, and he set off immediately upon receiving the special request of his long time acquaintance and friend, ready to fulfill the promise to White Feathers, made between them long ago. He arrived at George's camp store a week or so later prepared for anything. George entrusted to him a letter personally addressed to a Bank Director at Sutro & Co. in San Francisco, which had to be delivered in person. Bridger hadn't been prepared for this and it took him some few minutes to be sure he had heard correctly. George explained that, through this letter he had instructed the Director to procure certain merchandise, sundries and wares, and to release those goods into the care of the trusted courier, Bridger, for return shipment to himself in Tahoe City. In addition, a second letter attached to the first was to be posted to his only trustworthy Uncle in Haiji County, Guongdong Province, China requesting a shipment from him of a quantity of high quality Tonkin cane. Payment was to be made on terms of his uncle's own choosing and arranged through the aforementioned Director.

The mountain man made him repeat it once more, not because he hadn't understood, in fact he memorized everything the first time. He needed this mission to sink in: Escorting settlers, he understood. Guarding gold shipments, he had done. Hunting Buffalo, Bear, Elk, Moose, Wolves, Mountain Lions, Deer, Raccoons, Rabbits, or Squirrels, anything you name, he'd done that. What he'd never done was venture into San Francisco, into a wealthy Bank, as a courier to deliver a letter. That stymied him, but he shrugged and accepted the letter. He'd try anything once, however crazy.

During the months of waiting and worrying over the shipment venture, George built White Feathers his own rod and added an excellent reel at his own expense; not anticipating even once how this tackle would prove so important to the great good fortune of his future. It so happened that the old Indian was very highly regarded by all who knew him, and had

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