

THE THREE BRIDGES OF WORTH:



SELF-WORTH

The first signs giving directions to the Bridge of Self-Worth did not become apparent to the twosome until they had passed far beyond The Bridge of Elderworth over Conscience Canyon. Indeed the canyon itself and the last breaks at the margins of the high desert plateau (out of which the canyon had been patiently carved over the ages) fell almost completely away from view. But not so entirely away from view that Rachel, looking backwards and steadying her gaze on the horizon behind her, could not at once summon up the memories of the great heights and depths, of vistas and vantage points that lay just beyond.

For the next stage of their journey The Imp and Rachel had secured the use of a horse drawn vehicle called a jaunting car. They could have as easily rented a cyclette, a bicycle with seats for passengers in the front such as might be seen in Indochina, but, recalling the harrowing experience on the mountain bike built for two and considering the additional prospect of the Imp now propelling a vehicle from behind her so that surveillance of his antics would be impossible, Rachel opted for the jaunting car. This mode of conveyance is much in demand among tourists in Ireland, as they visit the Gap of Dunloe or Killarney National Park, for example. A jaunting car is little more than a box with a door in the back and buckboard seats inside upon which passengers and driver sit together, the driver angled to the front and holding the reins. An essential feature of the jaunting car experience is the driver who must excel in telling tall tales.

The Imp relished this role and regaled Rachel with his biggest lies, rendered in his best brogue. Sometimes Rachel asked for further details to catch him in his contradictions. But he offered no more excuse for the vagaries in his accounts than to say, as storytellers have said from time immemorial, "Too wondrous to be pictured.... too marvelous for tongue to tell." In her dreams in later years, Rachel made fewer and fewer distinctions between the passages of Impish fantasy and their real passage to the next bridge. Both seemed after all too wondrous to be pictured.... too marvelous for tongue to tell. Not such a bad thing, perhaps.



From the "Sarah and Joseph" Collection: "Views from a Jaunting Car," reprinted courtesy Conscience-berg Historical Society.

What was a little disconcerting, however, was the appearance of “detour ahead” notices affixed over the more permanent signs directing travelers to the next bridge. These were succeeded in turn by flashing arrows and lanes narrowed by lines of orange cones and then “This Exit Ramp to Self Worth Closed Take Alternate Route.”

“Inner States!!” exclaimed the Imp in annoyance, knocking over several cones as he ignored all the efforts to reroute traffic and urged the horse onto the exit ramp.

“Don’t you mean ‘Interstates’?” laughed Rachel. She could not disguise the mounting excitement she felt about ignoring the boundary markers.

“Always under construction, never finished--”

And that is what Rachel also gathered from the apologetic signs at the base of the Bridge of Self Worth:

“Forgive the Mess”

“Your taxes at work”

In addition there were other signs such as:

“Give them a Brake”

“Bridge Under Construction”

“Hard Hats Only”

“Well, is this a holiday or something?” Rachel asked the Imp.

“Holiday? No... no, it’s a regular workday.”

“Well where are all the workers?”

“Right here.”

“Where?”

The Imp pulled out two hard hats, “Here.”

Rachel understood all too clearly, “I don’t know anything about building bridges.”

The Imp pointed to another sign. Rachel read it slowly. She had seen those words before-but where? Then she remembered it was at the Bar Mitzvah of Cynthia’s friend Aaron. He had invited Cynthia and Rachel and their parents to come to the service and the celebration dinner and dance, afterwards. Aaron had gone to Hebrew school in the evening three times a week in order to read from the Torah. His parents and the rabbi and the cantor sat together on the bimah and responded as he read and chanted Hebrew prayers. Rachel was glad there were translations in the book she shared with Cynthia. Rachel thought that Aaron must be relieved to be finally done with his religious education. She herself had many more years of Sunday school to go to. Ever since her parents had enrolled Cynthia and Rachel in public school, religious education had been extra. Rachel hadn’t minded so much when it was part of the regular school day, in fact she liked religious studies but when it came to school--enough is enough. But she went to Sunday school because her parents insisted. How she envied Aaron--he was done.

Or so she thought. As the service proceeded, Aaron quoted a rabbi-Rabbi Tarfin. It was an assignment. Aaron’s class had been asked to interpret what this rabbi meant. What the kids had to say about the rabbi’s words were printed in the program for the service. The sign to which the Imp pointed was that same quote:

Although you are not expected to complete the task,
you are not excused from
engaging in the work....

Several kids had taken issue with what the Rabbi said. They said their Moms and Dads had taught them that if they started a project, they should not leave it undone: finish what you begin, they said.

In near despair, Rachel looked at the ramparts where the bridge could be built; she looked at the latticed panels and girders stacked on the embankment. They reminded her of how her father would tell about his life in the army as a medic for an engineer company. The engineers had to bivouac --camp out in the snow-- and then drive their trucks out to a river in a hilly area. Their mission was to construct a bailey bridge. The Bailey bridge was named for Sir Donald Bailey who invented it in 1901. It was a bridge that could be rapidly constructed to allow troop movements. Dad said it was like a giant erector set that could be snapped and bolted together in a hurry. "Not much to look at-but it does the job." Dad talked about having to stand by with his medical kit in the freezing cold New England weather while the engineers assembled the bridge and thrust it over the river to the other side. They could accomplish their mission in 7 hours--longer if there were mock attacks that had to be fought off. Dad said he sometimes wanted to help but he wasn't supposed to. So he watched and waited in case anyone had an injury while building the bridge and hopped from foot to foot to keep from freezing. Mom had been listening. Dad knew she was. He said "There's a saying, 'They also serve who only stand and wait--' and it's true I guess in some situations. But when it comes to things like school and work I hope that you girls won't just be onlookers waiting for something to happen--"

Mom stepped into the room, coldly eyeing Dad but addressing her daughters, "That goes for household chores too, come help me put the laundry away." Rachel and Cynthia got up reluctantly and followed their mother. Dad did not.

Rachel shook her head. "Couldn't you use some of your magical powers to help build this thing?"

"Why? What's the hurry?"

"Well, maybe I'd like to get to the other side or something?"

"Oh. I see. But this bridge is for you to build and for others to cross."

"You mean--I don't get to cross it ever?"

"I'm afraid not. That's just the way it is."

"So I have to stay here the rest of my life working on this stupid bridge?"

"No, you actually do much of the bridge building when you least expect it, when it seems you're furthest away from yourself. Look at what you've accomplished so far-- and you're not quite 10."

"You mean, I've brought all this bridge stuff here and made the foundations? But there's so much left to do- I know I'll never finish it in time--"

"Don't have to-at least that's what the rabbi said. Come on. You look like you need a change of pace."

"I'd better not waste anymore time if this bridge is going to get built--"

"Rachel, you're not listening to what I'm saying. Occasionally you need to come here and do work on the bridge. But oftentimes what's really needed is leisure--sometimes being deeply inside yourself and sometimes being open to what's around you. In fact those times aren't really work at all. On the other hand they may be much

harder on you than work, the way they transform you I mean. At other times what's needed is celebration."

"How can you celebrate when the bridge isn't even done?"

"Well don't you celebrate each time you travel around the sun?"

"What...oh I get it when it's my birthday--yeah, sure. O.K. O.K. So where should we go to celebrate?"

"Hmm. You still have that coupon from the souvenir shop?"

Rachel reached into her pocket and read the ticket "Good for one free admission to the House of Liminal Images"

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

There was no line in which to wait at the entrance to the House of Liminal Images. Rachel would not have minded in the least if there had been. The home had been set within a forest glade, topped by a canopy of mottled green and grey layering. Like aspen leaves, this foliage seemed to wave to (or perhaps even to applaud) the newly arrived visitors. All around them were small hillocks covered over with the dense verdure of mosses and liverwort. Rachel spotted a perfect fairy ring of mushrooms on one slope. As the path descended they came upon marsh grasses, reeds, rushes and cattails, which gave way to a lovely view of a water garden. It refreshed Rachel's spirit just to stand, watch and listen to the breeze. It made scarcely a noise but seemed in one moment to be held fast in the crown of one tree then in the very next moment to behave like an invisible and mischievous child swinging from the lowermost boughs of another tree across the way. Everywhere the breeze made itself known. Leaves were overturned in a triumphant show as if they were a winning hand of cards in a game with indecipherable rules. And when the play of moving air and leaves tumbled into the shafts of afternoon sunlight penetrating the glade, the effect was to dazzle the eye with glints and glimmers in a magical sleight of hand worthy of the Imp himself.

"A different kind of celebration than what you are accustomed to having at birthdays and New Years and the American Fourth of July--but still a celebration I think, don't you?"

Rachel nodded. Vowing to return to the water garden on the way back and to take yet another walk in the woods another time, Rachel ascended the porch steps behind the Imp and entered the house. It was a house with high vaulted ceilings, generously sized skylights and arched windows, which occupied nearly the full length of the walls. Rachel thought to herself, "People living in this house shouldn't throw stones." Everywhere the light poured in, as did the shadows of the moving forest. But from one window to the next the glass varied considerably in thickness and curvature. Sometimes, through these different lenses, the light was refracted into rainbow colors, and the shadows of the foliage outdoors were rendered into shapes as fantastical as the hoodoos Rachel had seen in Conscience Canyon. These were cast on the curved unadorned wall opposite them. There was music too. Rachel could not quite make the instrument out. Had she remembered last year's music appreciation class when the teacher played an old recording of **The Carnival of the Animals** by Camille Saint Saens with Leonard Bernstein telling about the musical instruments that were used for each animal, she might have realized she was listening to someone playing watery notes on a glockenspiel much like what the composer chose to represent his idea of an

Aquarium. She watched the images appear and melt away again. She saw shadow shapes of a family at dinner: a younger girl sitting across the table from an older girl who was pointing, appealing to a parent, and leaving the table in a huff. Rachel didn't need to hear the words being shouted. The shadowy shapes shifted and showed a family hug. When had they last had that in her family? Yet again there emerged different shapes, unfamiliar to Rachel, shapes that might come later, she thought. There were shades of a young woman in a canoe with a girl and a boy about Cynthia's age. "Could this be Cynthia and Aaron looking for me on the canal?" The girl hadn't Cynthia's shape and the boy was way too short to be Aaron, but there was something familiar about the woman. She had stopped paddling the canoe for a moment. She had a way of soothing herself by cupping her hand behind her head and drawing it down her neck that made Rachel think of--

Rachel became very, very self-conscious in that instant of recognition. She suddenly realized her own hand was cupped behind her head and she quickly removed it to the front of her body where she contained it with her other hand. She now watched the young woman in the silhouette with keen interest. What was she doing in a canoe? Who were those kids? Hers? Stand up shadow, how did I turn out? What do I look like? What are those kids doing rocking the canoe-- oh--"The shadow melted away. "Imp did you see what I saw? What does it mean?"

"Oh I never see what other people see here. They all have different experiences. As to what it means, most people see glimpses of their past."

"Does anyone see glimpses of the future?"

"Oh yes, sometimes. Why what did you see?"

"I think I was in a canoe with some kids who deliberately overturned it."

"You mean you fell in the river? Well, I do believe it must be you in the vision. Who else has your affinity for rivers? You certainly don't seem to stay dry for very long, do you?"

"Very funny. This time I was deliberately dunked."

"Shall we visit the inner room?" The Imp said. It's an old camera obscura. You go in and wait till your eyes get adjusted to the pitch dark. There is this huge lens in the ceiling and a concave dish for a screen on the floor. You look at the screen while the lens is being rotated. You'll see."

The camera obscura showed the glade through which they had come. It paused for a moment at the water garden. Rachel fancied she was standing there with Tov. Then the camera moved on, seemingly increasing its purview. The river came slowly into focus and just before it did, Rachel thought she had a glimpse of a finned extremity plunging below the surface. The camera panned over and there vigorously plying the waters was Uber the Overman. He paused amid his efforts and looked about him uncertainly then faced Rachel squarely smiled and waved. Rachel waved back. Uber was pointing at something just out of range. The camera panned further over. Rachel recognized the Bridge of Selfworth. Only there was more to it than before.

"Look someone has been building the bridge since we left it--"

"I know. Looks well crafted too," the Imp smiled at Rachel.

Rachel smiled back.

The camera now showed a bustling community rich in differences, both cultural and ethnic. Among the throngs, Rachel thought she could discern some familiar faces.

Yes...the camera focused and confirmed her suspicions. Xuan, Mahesh, Addie, and Ingrid were threading their way single-file though the crowd. Where were they going?

“That’s our next destination,” the Imp pointed to the screen.

“The next bridge?”

“Yes.”

“Why it looks like Golden Gate Bridge! In San Francisco.”