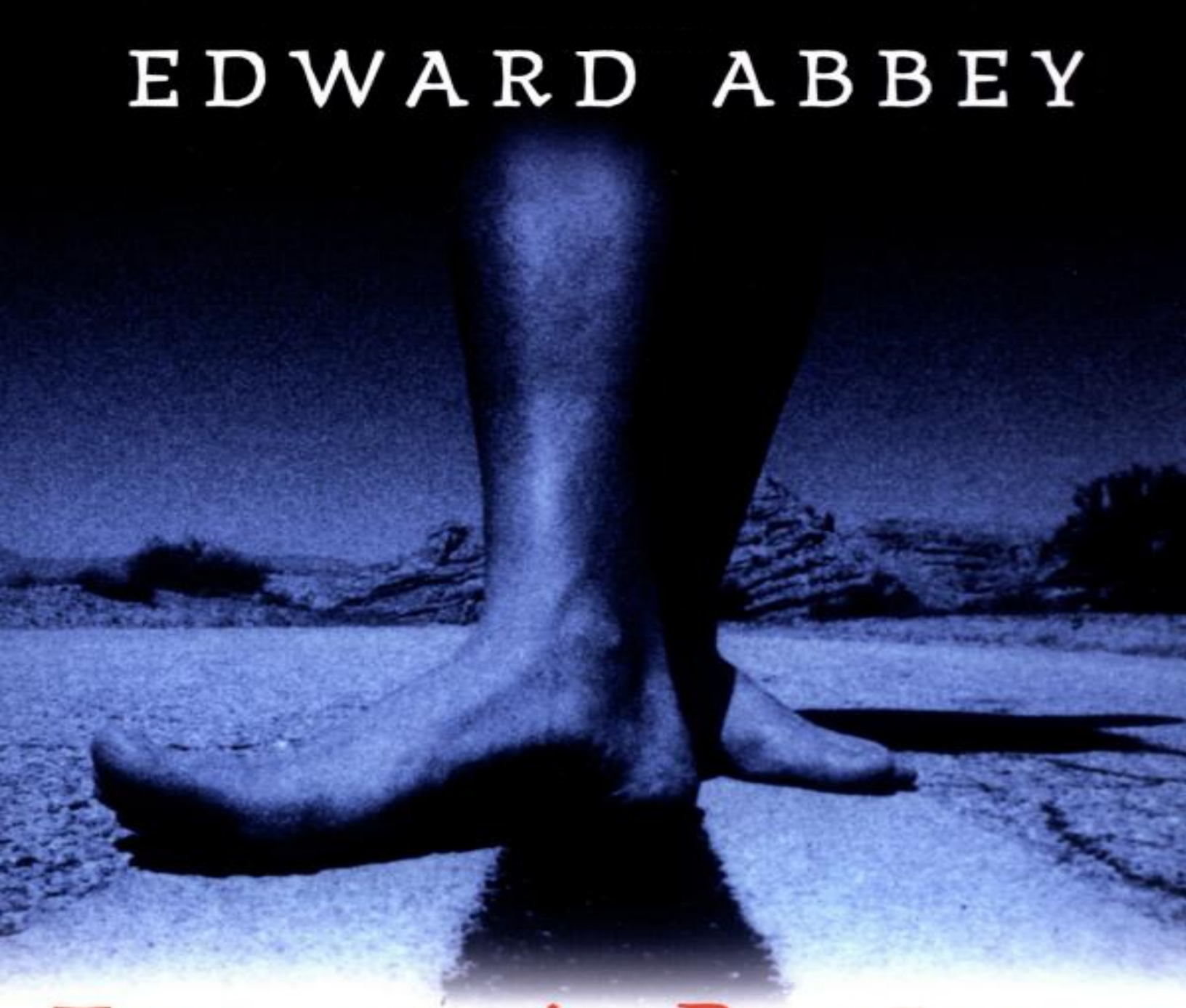
EDWARD ABBEY



THE FOOL'S PROGRESS

an honest novel

The Fool's Progress

An honest Novel

EDWARD ABBEY

A HOLT PAPERBACK
A John Macrae Book / Henry Holt and Company
New York

SIR SAMP: Has he not a rogue's face?
Speak, brother, you understand
physiognomy; a hanging look to me.
He has a damn'd Tyburn-face, without
the benefit o' the clergy.

FORE: Hum—truly I don't care to
discourage a young man. He has a
violent death in his face; but I
hope, no danger of hanging.

From William Congreve's *Love For Love* (1698)

Contents

A Prelude

Henry…?

Hen-reeeeee! Henry Lightcap!

The teacher stood in the open doorway of the one-room schoolhouse, looking out. A woman in her fifties, thin, anxious, exasperated. She wore a cotton print dress that came down to her ankles, a light sweater; her pale hair was drawn tightly to a bun on the top of her head. In one hand she held a brass bell with iron tongue, the wooden handle of the bell polished by years —by decades—of use.

She advanced to the doorstep of the building, stopped and looked up and down the dirt road before her. To the east a quarter mile away the road passed between the house and barn of the nearest farm; westward the road wound through a second-growth forest of hardwoods, disappearing into deep shade. On either side of the schoolhouse lay open fields of grass, beaten down by the running feet of children, intersected with pathways still muddy from recent rain. Both fields and roadway were empty of any human form.

The teacher stared intently into the woods of the hillside above the road —a scrubby growth of sapling trees barely beginning to leaf out, tangled jungles of sumac and laurel, dogwood and wild grape, the rotting remnants of a split-rail fence. Nobody there? The shadows of afternoon clouds folded slowly across the hill. Impatiently, angrily, she shook the heavy bell. The jangle of brass rippled outward through the soft and humid air. Nobody answered.

Shading her eyes with her free hand, the teacher peered far off into the shadows, toward the blue ridges of the Allegheny Mountains rising steeply into a hazy smoke-colored sky.

Hen-reeeeeee! the woman shouted, into the silence the trees the distance. No reply. She paused, took another deep breath, chest expanding. You, Henry Lightcap! she yelled—You…get…in…here….

She waited.

No response but the whispering of the leaves, the insects in the brush, a breath of air in motion—and from the farm up the road the rattle of team and

wagon coming off the barn ramp.

The teacher waited. From behind the window near the door a cluster of hovering children stared out through the glass. Large-eyed faces, freckle-skinned and towheaded—solemn little girls with bright hair and ribbons, smirking little boys in bib overalls and blue chambray shirts buttoned formally to the throat.

For one last time, as she had often done before, the teacher hollered up at the woods on the hill, pitching her voice toward the paired ears she thought were up there somewhere, toward that boy she imagined hidden under the laurels, hugging himself in mingled fear and delight. Henry! she cried—and her voice, trained by the years, carried well, carried all the way to the top of the hill—You there, Henry Lightcap!…

And one last time she jangled the bell.

But there was no answer from the green and vernal, the deep and haunted, the dark transpiring forests of the Appalachian hills.

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In Medias Res, Arizona

I

…slamming the door behind her. Slams it so hard the replastered wall around the doorframe shivers into a network of fine reticulations, revealing the hand of a nonunion craftsman.

I listen to her booted feet stomping over the graveled driveway, into the carport. (The “car-port”!) Then the vicious brittle *clunk!* of car door likewise slammed. God but that woman has a temper. Shocking. Now the thunderous roar of four-cylinder Nipponese motor starting up, the squeal of burning rubber, the yelp of a startled dog as she skids around the broomplant, past the dead saguaro and down the lane toward the street. Past the mailbox and fading away, out of my life again forever, into the dim inane of Tucson, Arizona.

I see police helicopters circling—blinking red like diabolical fireflies—above our doomed damned beleaguered city. Red alert. Elaine is on the loose.

Woman. Wo-man. Womb-man. Woe-man.

Easy come, easy go. My first and no doubt false reaction is one of relief. An immense and overwhelming sensation of blessedness. There never was a good war or a bad peace, as Abe Lincoln or Ben Franklin said. (We had similar troubles.) I sink slowly into my easy chair, hers actually, but it’s all mine now. For the moment.

Gloating, I look around “our” living room. Our “living” room. All those books jammed in their shelves—all that B. Traven and R. Burton and M. Montaigne and James M. Cain & Co., all them Sibelius Stravinsky Shostakovich Schubert records etc., Waylon & Willie & Hank Senior, that stereo, that 1922 Starcke upright grand, the Franklin stove and the leatherbound basket chairs from Mexico, that big solid blond slab table of California sugar pine, a masterpiece of the joiner’s art, nothing but dowel

pegs and butterfly joints, not a nail or screw or touch of glue in the whole thing—wealth. I am rich, rich at least for the next few days or until her attorneys get to work on me.

And so forth. When I hear the word “settlement” I reach for my checkbook.

The power of property. I will sell everything in this house in the next twenty-four hours, everything not bolted down; convert our goods into something better, cash, and buy a cheap houseboat on Lake of the Ozarks. No, Lake Tahoe. I have always wanted to live on a houseboat. No rent, no mortgage payments, no gas, sewage, garbage, phone or electric bills, live on catfish and bluegill, grow a hydroponic garden of my favorite vegetables—the carrot, the potato, the bean, the turnip.

Henry indulges himself in a favored fantasy. I shall live the clean hard cold rigors of an ascetic philosopher. A dive into the icy lake at dawn. Two quick laps around the shore. A frugal breakfast of cool water and unsalted watercress, followed by an hour of meditation. And then—then what? What then? Then I’ll row my houseboat ashore, jump into my rebuilt restored 1956 Lincoln Continental four-door convertible and speed away to the nearest legal whorehouse for some quick fun & frolick before lunch.

The GM Frigidaire in the kitchen, that giant and neurotic machine, starts revving its engine. Sounds like a Boeing 747 warming up for takeoff. I’ve never known a refrigerator that works so hard at keeping cool. For two years I’ve been living in the same house with this monster and I’m still not accustomed to it. I never will be.

The noise increases. An ugly hatred grasps possession of my soul. I march to the bedroom, take the revolver from under my pillow, enter the kitchen, confront the machine. Vibrating, roaring, the Frigidaire presents to me its bland broad bronze-colored front. On the door panel a bunch of magnetic letters say, “Go to Hell Henry.” I raise the revolver—a .357 Magnum—cock the hammer, fire. Pointblank, right through its smug face. A black round hole appears in the center of the door, the letters slide down a few inches but maintain rough syntactical order:

GO TO HELL HENRY

Losing cool through its new nostril, the Frigidaire roars louder than before. Or am I hallucinating? Going down on one knee, taking no chances, I