Follow the Golden Road to Nowhere

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Abstract

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WHENEVER I get to feeling egotistical and proud of myself, thinking in my own mind that at last someone of importance has arrived upon the scene whenever I walk in, I use a very simple remedy. All I have to do is to take a leisurely walk that ends at a little crossroads cemetery, weedy and forgotten.

Then I sit down in front of a stone that says, "Johann Schwartz. Died 1870. Aged 40 yr. and 9 mo. 2 Children and a Loving Wife." I never actually knew the man. But it isn't hard to make up a character for him. Johann Schwartz brought his wife to the Golden West, in the period just after the Civil War. Two runny-nosed little kids also tagged along, with his spavined horse and his one good cow. Full of hope and pioneering spirit, Schwartz homesteaded a small farm. He worked mostly days but often nights. Hard work, frugality, saving, honest dealing, and a disinterest in the business of others were Johann's cardinal traits. In his day, he was counted almost a success. Quoting from the paper that published his obscure obituary, "He died in the prime of life at the untimely age of forty years." Maybe he met his Maker shouting and praying, but I doubt it. Probably he just breathed heavily, and then didn't breathe at all . . .

How is this related to a philosophy or a feeling? I really don't know. All I do know is that there are millions and millions of Johann Schwartzes, all intent on their own little purposes and all working and striving almost every waking minute. They're born, they laugh, play, pretend at love, marry, have children and fights with their wives, and eventually grow old. Theirs is a certain freedom of movement during the brief period of living allotted to them. But the ending is always the same. They always die. And they're always forgotten. Always.

It's a sad, wise and humble feeling I have as I walk slowly back towards home. Listen to the quiet. Isn't it a nice night? I just walk and think, walk—and—think, walk—.

But I feel small, smaller than a little boy that has been caught meddling in the cookie jar. God's cookie jar.