

AMERICAN PIED PIPER

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AMERICAN
TRILOGY
BOOK 3

A NOVEL



SAM FOSTER

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Research materials which have been used to direct the narrative include: *History of Cass County, Illinois*, edited by William Henry Perring; *History of Cass County 1915*, by Charles A. Martin; *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois* and *History of Cass County*, by Bateman; "Beardstown Yesterday and Today 1829–1979," by *Beardstown Gazette*; the Great Courses; *Los Angeles*, by Benedikt Taschen; *Caught in the Middle*, by Richard C. Longworth; *The Boys in the Boat*, by Daniel James Brown; *The Beardstown Ladies' Common-Sense Investment Guide*. Also, newspapers including *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, Bloomberg, and various issues of newspapers from Beardstown and Cass County, Illinois, from 1834–1999, including: *Beardstown Chronicle and Illinois Military Bounty*; *Beardstown Gazette*; *Beardstown and Petersburg Gazette*; *Central Illinoian*; *Beardstown Democrat*; *Cass County Messenger*; *Beardstown Enterprise*; *Beardstown Star West*; *Illinoian-Star* and *Cass County Star-Gazette*, and finally, Google. With very special thanks to the research staff and librarians of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

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This book is dedicated to my grandfather, who first introduced me to many of the places and stories included here. But more than that, he taught me enough about human character to begin to understand that a man's choices make him what he is.

PART I

THE CALL

In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace—and what did they produce? The cuckoo clock.

—Orson Welles as Harry Lime
in *The Third Man* (1949)

CHAPTER 1

October 25, 1906

Mokane, Missouri

The huge birds rose in a slow upward spiral, their long black necks and heads extended stiff as tree branches before their fat grey-brown bodies; the brilliant white triangle, formed from the back of their heads to the bottom of their necks, evoked the image of the chin strap below a palace guard's black beaver hat. But what it really was, was a perfect target.

C.C. Cunningham had fired both barrels as soon as the flock of Canada geese rose from the quiet eddy downstream. He had missed both times. Sam Clark rose slowly from the blind, all six feet of him standing tall and all two hundred pounds poised, a granite statue, holding the big 10 gauge pointed straight up into the sky.

As the lead bird leveled out, the others rose to it, forming their flying "V" to head upriver.

"Sam, even you will never reach them now."

Without moving, the statue answered, "Bet you twenty-five cents, Mr. Cunningham."

“You’re on, son.”

Over the steady honking of the flock came the tremendous roar of the big long-barreled shotgun. A second later they watched as the lead bird’s head snapped up into an impossible angle and then the bird tumbled, no glide at all, the body rolling over the head again and again, its fall ending in a large splash into the Missouri River.

The rust-brown dog, with curls waving down the length of his back, sat at the front of the blind, a statue just as his master had been save that the tip of his pink tongue jerked in and out of his mouth, steadily drooling saliva. Clark said not a word but leaned down low enough for the motion of his hand to show in his dog’s peripheral vision, palm flat and fingers held rigidly together as he swung his arm in an arch from his hips to his waist. The dog bolted from a sitting position into the air, a vision of leaping perfection, hind legs extended behind, front legs tight up against his chest, only his paws hanging down and his head extended as far forward from his body as his neck would allow. The leap pulled him two feet off the ground and landed him five feet into the river with a splash. He didn’t head to the floating body of the goose but swam as directly out into the current as he was able until he was as far from the shore as the goose. Only then did he turn his head upstream and dog-paddle easily until the drifting trophy floated into his mouth. He turned and headed to shore, the current pushing him downstream as he went.

“I believe you owe me twenty-five cents, Mr. Cunningham,” Sam said.

Cunningham had long since risen from his camp stool to admire everything he had just seen—the majesty of the bird, the not-to-be-believed skill of the shot, and the perfection of the training of the retriever.

“Nobody can shoot flyers that high. I wouldn’t have thought even you could do it, Sam,” Cunningham said, looking into the

light-brown eyes of Sam Clark. He saw a man of no more than twenty, but a man nonetheless. There was no boy in his face anymore. His mass of light-brown hair was almost as wavy as his dog's. The face was wide and the jaw square. The rounded ears lay quietly against the side of his face. Only his nose, which was long and straight but a bit too thick, saved him from being handsome. His lips were neither thick nor thin, but something about them and the flare of his nostrils, even in this small moment of glory and in his role as guide to his father's boss and manager of this entire line of the Missouri, Kansas and Eastern Railroad, showed a hint of cruelty, or perhaps just arrogance.

C.C. Cunningham reached in his pocket, took out a quarter, and flipped it into the air. Sam looked once, extended his hand palm up, and allowed the falling coin to drop into it.

"How do you do it?"

Sam smiled now. It was a smile that softened his face and made him look a touch humble. "I've been doing it as long as I can remember. Shotgun shells are not cheap, and what hard money I ever got was from running a trapline. This time of year, furs aren't worth much yet, so even if I bother to set the trapline, I don't earn as much. Not enough to buy a lot of extra ammunition for certain. So best not to miss; always has been really. Also, I'm prepared a bit differently than you or others." He held the shotgun before him and snapped open the breach. A huge shell popped out. "It's a 10 gauge, so a bit more giddyup than your 12. And I had in double-oh shot. Pretty small pattern, but it will reach a long way."

"Why did you let them get so high? You could have reached them as they circled downriver before they leveled out, but you didn't. Why?" Cunningham smiled now. "You just showing off, or egging me into betting that quarter?"

There was a crunching sound in the brush on the downriver side of the blind. The Chesapeake Bay retriever came crashing

through, the goose in his mouth seeming almost as big as he, its head dragging on the ground on one side of the dog's mouth, its feet on the other. He sat down on Sam's left side.

Sam bent down until his hand was under the goose, under but not touching. "Give, Teddy," he commanded softly.

The beast dropped the goose into Sam's hand and then stood and shook, violently throwing water everywhere.

Sam used his other hand to scratch behind the dog's ears. "Good dog." Sam straightened up, shifting the goose so he held it by the neck just below its mangled head, the black tip of the tail still touching the ground. Sam finally answered the question. "Mr. Cunningham, I'm pleased to take your money, and it pleases me to be better with highflyers than most, but that wasn't the reason I let it go so long, sir. It was for your pleasure."

Cunningham cocked his head to one side, looking up at Sam, a quizzical, almost skeptical, expression on his face.

"In the eight years we've known each other, you and I have never hunted birds on the Missouri before. So you didn't know that the problem isn't finding birds. The problem is retrieving them from that current." He pointed to the river. "Teddy is the first Chessie I've ever owned. He's unbelievably strong, and that curly coat of his keeps him warm long after labs have given up. Aside from the fact he likes to fight a bit too much, he's the best dog I've ever owned. But even Teddy can't swim against the current of the Missouri. Only way he was going to retrieve your dinner was if I shot it upstream so he could let it float back to him. As it was, he was pushed a quarter mile downstream before he could get back to shore.

"So, it was for your dinner, sir." Sam held the goose up between them. "That's why I had to wait."

Cunningham beamed a big smile. The two men and the dog walked away from the river into the tree cover above the bank. The leaves were turning golden. The morning sun even revealed a few flashes of red in the canopy above. Enough of the

leaves had fallen to make a soft crunching sound underfoot. The big palomino stallion and the smaller black mare stood where they had left them, tied to two small hickory trees. By the time Sam tied the goose behind his saddle, Cunningham was already up on the palomino. The big stallion nickered and nudged Sam's butt as he mounted. Sam, halfway up, stood in one stirrup, reached behind him, and scratched the white blaze down the middle of an otherwise golden face.

"I see the big guy likes you," Cunningham observed.

"I often ride him. But the stable belongs to your railroad. I figure he's yours. You should have him when you're here."

The two walked their horses slowly through the woods to the dirt road that ran along the bluff between Mokane and the bridge across the river at Jefferson City.

"Sam, you've been out of school for a couple of years now. Ever think about going to work for the railroad?" Cunningham inquired.

Sam gave a small laugh. "I already do, sir. I was born and raised in the only town named for a railroad—Missouri, MO, Kansas, KAN, and Eastern, E. MOKANE. My father has cooked in the railroad hotel my whole life. Everyone here works for the railroad. But I would like to drive for one."

Now it was Cunningham's turn to laugh. "Everyone wants to drive a locomotive. Those jobs are damn hard to come by. Seldom come along. How about working in the shop? I could get you a job there easily. Teach you pipe fitting and toolmaking and maybe even boiler making. Good money there."

"It's not that I'm not grateful, Mr. Cunningham. I am. It's kind of you to think of me. But that's just not me. I'm an outdoor guy. Being the engineer; driving a train; watching the world go by; seeing places. That would suit me just fine."

Cunningham pulled back on his reins and stopped the palomino. Sam followed his lead. The two sat facing one another in the shade of the tree-canopied lane.

"I'd like to help you, Sam. Like to have you with us. But an engineer's job just isn't in the cards even if I wanted to. We don't need any and don't know when we will."

Sam nodded and started back down the lane. When the stable was in sight, the two men rode in. Cunningham dismounted and handed Sam the reins of his horse. "Think about it, Sam. I'll be here all day and tonight. I leave in the morning on the 10:12 to Jeff City. Let me know if you change your mind."

* * * *

Sam used his left hand to push open the swinging doors separating the kitchen from the dining room. He held the serving tray high over his shoulder as he walked to the middle of the empty room. C.C. Cunningham sat alone at a round table, the picture of contemporary refinement. He was dressed in a three-piece sack suit, the white of his shirt showing only at the cuffs and the collar, his wide silk necktie covering up almost all the shirt not covered by his five-button vest. The gold watch chain looped between his vest pockets, shimmering even in the low light.

Cunningham saw him looking at it and pulled the large gold watch from one of his vest pockets and held it up by the chain. It became a swinging gold pendulum. "Ball Standard. Only kind a railroad man will have."

Sam lifted the cover off the soup bowl on the serving tray and placed the bowl in front of Cunningham as the railroad baron put the watch back into his vest pocket. "You always seem to like turtle soup, so I got one and had Dad simmer it all day. Hope you enjoy it. Goose will be ready in ten minutes."

Cunningham nodded. Sam collected the tray from the serving table, again hoisted it above his shoulder, and returned to the kitchen just in time to see his father take the goose from the oven and start cutting the delicious-smelling entrée.

“Sam, just five minutes to finish the vegetables and butter the potato and it will be ready for you.”

Sam looked across the kitchen at his father working so rapidly to pull it all together. He looked small and old. *Why has he accepted this as his lot?* Sam stood by the half-high swinging doors and watched the back of Cunningham’s head as he slowly spooned his soup.

Just then, the front door burst open and allowed in a blast of cold air as well as a stranger. The stranger looked bedraggled, cold, and very thin. It was a thinness not of athleticism or asceticism but starvation. His face was hidden behind a leather hat that looked as worn as he. The stranger shut the door and removed his hat, almost reverentially. It revealed a face gaunt enough to match the body. The cheekbones looked skeletally pronounced. The eyes were sunk so deep that Sam could not make out the color, but even from where he was, he could see they penetrated all they touched with a hellish flame. The man, the beast, whatever it was, walked with a measured pace, unbuttoning his threadbare coat as he came. When the last button parted, the coat fell open to reveal Levi’s as worn as the coat and a pistol as powerful as his eyes. The holster hung low from his hip. The gun barrel was so long, it extended out the bottom of the holster. He walked steadily toward Cunningham, who sat watching him come.

When he reached Cunningham, the stranger carefully laid his hat on the table and said, “You’re C.C. Cunningham.” It was a statement, not a question.

Cunningham appraised the apparition before him carefully. “I am. I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Oh, I know you, Mr. Cunningham, but no reason you’d remember me. I was twelve years old and part of a crowd. You were the station chief for Central Pacific in Fresno.”

Cunningham’s words came out with forced joviality. “I was

a very young man. Probably twenty-five. My first major assignment with any railroad.”

“My parents bought eighty acres from the Central Pacific in 1876. Bought it cheap because there was nothing there and, until the railroad, no way to get crops to market even if there was. But the Central Pacific helped them get a mortgage and promised the new rail would make them prosper. And they did; everyone did, as you remember, Mr. Cunningham. Everyone did until you jacked up the rail rates so high, there was no profit left.”

Cunningham started to rise.

The long Colt Peacemaker came out of the holster and leveled at his chest. “The day I saw you, Mr. Cunningham, was in 1882. You were on the courthouse steps. The bank had foreclosed on the mortgage, and the farm my parents worked themselves to the grave to make prosperous was being sold. We went to buy it back, knowing none of the neighbors would bid against us. But you did. You were surrounded by a pack of gunslingers to protect you from my parents and the other farmers. You bought our farm for past taxes and mortgage arrears. Daddy died the year after and Momma a couple later. I was fifteen when she died. That was twenty years ago. I been lookin’ for you ever since.”

Sam stepped back from the kitchen door, grabbed a serving tray, and threw the plate of goose on it.

“Sam, stop. It’s not ready,” his father called after him as Sam hoisted the tray to his shoulder and boldly threw open the door to the dining room.

The Colt muzzle came around until it was pointed at his chest. The bore got ever bigger as Sam got ever closer.

“No place for you here, son.” The eyes said more than the words.

Sam kept coming. “Mister, I see you have business with Mr. Cunningham. That’s between you and him. I have business with Mr. Cunningham as well, and I intend to do mine

just as you intend to do yours.” He set the tray down on the serving table and slid the plate of steaming goose in front of his guest. “I hope you’ll find it as you like it, Mr. Cunningham.”

Sam reached back to the serving tray, picked it up, and made a motion as if to hoist it to his shoulder. The edge of the tray slammed into the stranger’s Adam’s apple with a viciousness that drove him backward even as he dropped. Sam took one step toward the fallen man and kicked him between the legs. The only sound was the crunch of bone as the man, unable to scream through his crushed throat, grabbed at his groin. Sam picked up the fallen pistol, tucked it into his belt, grabbed one of the fallen man’s wrists, and dragged him across the floor and out the front door.

He was back inside in less than two minutes, the gun belt thrown over his shoulder. “I’ve tied him to one of the posts on the porch. I’ll let you decide what to do with him.” Sam stopped and gave an amused smile. “I’m sorry about your goose. Pa wanted me to wait to bring it until he had the vegetables ready, but I thought you’d prefer it now.”

A still-stunned C.C. Cunningham sat arms and legs akimbo and just nodded.

Five minutes later Sam came back from the kitchen, this time with the vegetables, a hot cup of coffee, a bottle of brandy, and a leaded crystal tumbler. “Thought you might want this, Mr. Cunningham,” Sam offered.

Cunningham smiled, his face showing its usual composure. “Sam, do two things for me?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Take that fellow to the sheriff and tell him what happened. Also tell him I don’t want him to do anything just now. I’ll be in in the morning to discuss it.”

“And the other?”

“Train’s at 10:12. Tell the sheriff I’ll be in about nine thirty. Have the surrey ready and out front at eight thirty.”

“Mr. Cunningham, it will only take you fifteen minutes to get there.”

“Sam, I want you to drive me. We have some things to talk about.”

* * * *

Sam sat in the surrey, watching Cunningham walk out of the Mokane, Missouri, Railroad Hotel. Cunningham, as usual, was dressed nattily—tweed three-piece sack suit, with well-polished lace-up boots, the derby he perpetually wore covering a receding hairline. Cunningham was a small man with a small frame, but his waist was beginning to bulge. The wire-rimmed glasses he wore gave him a scholarly look, which the fierceness in his black eyes betrayed. It may have been a small man’s complex, but C.C. Cunningham was a very hard man who wanted it to show.

He walked around the surrey and got in beside Sam. “Turn around and drive down by the river. We have time and I want to talk.”

Sam did as instructed and drove out of the little town of Mokane. Within five minutes they were back along the dirt track that wound through the fall woods.

“Sam, do you know who Andrew Carnegie is?”

Sam thought for a moment. “Steel guy? Right?”

“That’s right. Do you know who J.P. Morgan is?”

Sam thought again. “Can’t say I do. He from around here?”

“No, Sam. He’s from New York. He’s a banker. Or a financier, as he would call himself.”

“Why do you ask, Mr. Cunningham?”

“Ever heard of Gary, Indiana?”

“Can’t say I have,” Sam responded.

“No reason you should. It’s brand new. Carnegie and Morgan are building it.”

“Where?”

“Right at the bottom tip of Lake Michigan, Sam. Just across the line from Illinois.”

“Odd name for a new town,” Sam offered.

Cunningham gave a snort. “It is indeed. Elbert Gary is Morgan’s attorney and one of his business partners. They’ve named it for him.”

“Why are you telling me all this, Mr. Cunningham?”

“Morgan, Carnegie, and Gary are building the largest steel mill in the country and putting it in this new place. They say they’ll have four blast furnaces and employ five thousand people. You know what it takes to make steel, Sam?”

“No, sir.”

“It takes two things. It takes iron ore and coal. Lots of iron ore and lots of coal. And you know what those two have in common?”

“No, sir.”

“They are heavy as hell and really expensive to move. And you know what they don’t have in common?”

“No, sir.”

“Nowhere in America are iron ore mines and coal mines close together. So, to make steel, one or both really expensive and hard-to-move things have to be moved. Know where there’s lots of iron ore, Sam?”

This time Sam just shook his head.

“Bunch of low mountains called the Gogebic Range right where Michigan and Wisconsin and Minnesota all come together at the far west end of Lake Superior. Know where there’s lots of coal, Sam?”

Sam’s broad face opened into a tooth-displaying smile as he looked over at his companion. “That one I got. Southern Illinois and Northern Kentucky got more coal than they know what to do with.”

“Bingo,” Cunningham responded. “And can you guess how they get them together?”

Sam's smile became small and self-satisfied. "They run boats full of the iron as close as they can get it to the coal, say the bottom end of Lake Michigan, and then they run railcars of coal up from Southern Illinois to the same place. This Gary, Indiana, place."

"You are clever, Sam. Now let's keep going. Do you know the rail carrier that is dominant from Northern to Southern Illinois?"

"Not sure, but I'd guess the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy."

"Bingo, again. Now, Sam, you grew up with rail, so this next part is going to be easy. Will they drive those engines the length of the state and then return them with empty cars?"

"Nope. Too far for the crews. They'll uncouple the cars from the engine somewhere halfway, hook them to a new engine with a new crew, and let them take it to the terminus. That crew may even bring the empties back with it and allow the crew members returning south to take the empties with them for refill."

Cunningham looked over at the young driver, a real smile of satisfaction on his face. "You've learned more about running a railroad than just hotels, young man. When the CB&Q bought the Rockford, Rock Island and St. Louis, they inherited a small roundhouse and shop at a town in the middle of the state called Beardstown. US Steel—that's what Carnegie and Morgan are naming this venture—will open the first furnace in two years. CB&Q has that long to expand that Beardstown operation. Part of that expansion is new equipment and crews." Cunningham stopped his speech and turned to look closely at young Clark. He wanted to see his response when he said what he'd been leading up to. "It's your chance to become an engineer, to drive a train, if that's what you really want to do, Sam."

Sam Clark kept his eyes fixed on the road as he brought the surrey to a complete stop. Only then did he turn toward

Cunningham and let his joy show in his expression. "You tell me what to do, Mr. Cunningham, and I'll do it. And be forever grateful."

Cunningham's smile was genuine. "First, turn this thing around. I've got a nine-thirty appointment with the sheriff, and you need to get me there on time. I'll tell you what to do as we ride."

Sam swung the horse around and slapped the leather of the reins along its back and gave an enthusiastic "Click, click," a sound made with his tongue fixed firmly on the roof of his mouth. The horse understood and broke into a trot.

"I have three letters for you, Sam. I'll get them out of my valise when you drop me. The first is to a man named George Grainger. You'll find him at CB&Q's offices in Beardstown. It is a letter recommending he hire you and get you trained as an engineer. The letter is sealed, Sam. Don't open it. It's for Grainger, not you."

"Yes, sir."

"George and I have been friendly competitors for years. I respect him, and I flatter myself the feeling is mutual. I can't guarantee he'll hire you, but I'm hopeful. I'll wire him you're coming.

"Second letter is to a tailor in Beardstown named Lorenz Adler. He used to be in Jacksonville. He's made me suits and is very good. He's German, so it's pronounced like there's a *t* in front of the *z*. Comes out very much like Lawrence. I called him Larry once, and I recommend you don't. See him and get a suit before you go to Grainger's office."

"Mr. Cunningham, I don't have money for a suit."

"The letter takes care of that, Sam. I'm buying you the suit."

"Can't let you do that, Mr. Cunningham. I'll never be able to pay you back."

Cunningham laughed from his belly. "Oh, yes you will. I forgot to tell you, but this Beardstown place is just below

a thing called the Sangamon Slough. It forms where the Sangamon River flows into the Illinois. Forms the slough and the Mascouten Bay. They make the best duck and goose hunting on the Mississippi flyway. You owe me free guide services the rest of your life.

“But truth is, Sam, I’m the one who owes you a debt, and I will do my very best to repay it. Starting with that palomino. Take him. He’s yours.”