



Chapter 18

Queer Street, Number Forty



Lady Muriel was the speaker. And, for the moment, that was the only fact I could clearly realize. But how she came to be there and how I came to be there—and how the glass of champagne came to be there—all these were questions which I felt it better to think out in silence, and not commit myself to any statement till I understood things a little more clearly.

‘First accumulate a mass of Facts: and then construct a Theory.’ That, I believe, is the true Scientific Method. I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and began to accumulate Facts.

A smooth grassy slope, bounded, at the upper end, by venerable ruins half buried in ivy, at the lower, by a stream seen through arching trees—a dozen gaily-dressed people, seated in little groups here and there—some open hampers—the debris of a picnic—such were the Facts accumulated by the Scientific Researcher. And now, what deep, far-reaching Theory was he to construct from them? The Researcher found himself at fault. Yet stay! One Fact had escaped his notice. While all the rest were grouped in twos and in threes, Arthur was alone: while all tongues were talking, his was silent: while all faces were gay, his was gloomy and despondent. Here was a Fact indeed! The Researcher felt that a Theory must be constructed without delay.

Lady Muriel had just risen and left the party. Could that be the cause of his despondency? The Theory hardly rose to the dignity of a Working Hypothesis. Clearly more Facts were needed.

The Researcher looked round him once more: and now the Facts accumulated in such bewildering profusion, that the Theory was lost among them. For Lady Muriel had gone to meet a strange gentleman, just visible in the distance: and now she was returning with him, both of them talking eagerly and joyfully, like old friends who have been long parted: and now she was moving from group to group, introducing the new hero of the hour: and he, young, tall, and handsome, moved gracefully at her side, with the erect bearing and firm tread of a soldier. Verily, the Theory looked gloomy for Arthur! His eye caught mine, and he crossed to me.

“He is very handsome,” I said.

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“Abominably handsome!” muttered Arthur: then smiled at his own bitter words. “Lucky no one heard me but you!”

“Doctor Forester,” said Lady Muriel, who had just joined us, “let me introduce to you my cousin Eric Lindon Captain Lindon, I should say.”

Arthur shook off his ill-temper instantly and completely, as he rose and gave the young soldier his hand. “I have heard of you,” he said. “I’m very glad to make the acquaintance of Lady Muriel’s cousin.”

“Yes, that’s all I’m distinguished for, as yet!” said Eric (so we soon got to call him) with a winning smile. “And I doubt,” glancing at Lady Muriel, “if it even amounts to a good-conduct-badge! But it’s something to begin with.”

“You must come to my father, Eric,” said Lady Muriel. “I think he’s wandering among the ruins.” And the pair moved on.

The gloomy look returned to Arthur’s face: and I could see it was only to distract his thoughts that he took his place at the side of the metaphysical young lady, and resumed their interrupted discussion.

“Talking of Herbert Spencer,” he began, “do you really find no logical difficulty in regarding Nature as a process of involution, passing from definite coherent homogeneity to indefinite incoherent heterogeneity?”

Amused as I was at the ingenious jumble he had made of Spencer’s words, I kept as grave a face as I could.

No physical difficulty,” she confidently replied: “but I haven’t studied Logic much. Would you state the difficulty?”

“Well,” said Arthur, “do you accept it as self-evident? Is it as obvious, for instance, as that ‘things that are greater than the same are greater than one another’?”

“To my mind,” she modestly replied, “it seems quite as obvious. I grasp both truths by intuition. But other minds may need some logical—I forget the technical terms.”

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“For a complete logical argument,” Arthur began with admirable solemnity, “we need two prim Misses—”

“Of course!” she interrupted. “I remember that word now. And they produce—?”

“A Delusion,” said Arthur.

“Ye—es?” she said dubiously. “I don’t seem to remember that so well. But what is the whole argument called?”

“A Sillygism?”

“Ah, yes! I remember now. But I don’t need a Sillygism, you know, to prove that mathematical axiom you mentioned.”

“Nor to prove that ‘all angles are equal’, I suppose?”

“Why, of course not! One takes such a simple truth as that for granted!”

Here I ventured to interpose, and to offer her a plate of strawberries and cream. I felt really uneasy at the thought that she might detect the trick: and I contrived, unperceived by her, to shake my head reprovingly at the pseudo-philosopher. Equally unperceived by her, Arthur slightly raised his shoulders, and spread his hands abroad, as who should say “What else can I say to her?” and moved away, leaving her to discuss her strawberries by ‘involution,’ or any other way she preferred.

By this time the carriages, that were to convey the revelers to their respective homes, had begun to assemble outside the Castle-grounds: and it became evident—now that Lady Muriel’s cousin had joined our party that the problem, how to convey five people to Elveston, with a carriage that would only hold four, must somehow be solved.

The Honorable Eric Lindon, who was at this moment walking up and down with Lady Muriel, might have solved it at once, no doubt, by announcing his intention of returning on foot. Of this solution there did not seem to be the very smallest probability.

The next best solution, it seemed to me, was that I should walk home: and this I at once proposed.

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"You're sure you don't mind?", said the Earl. "I'm afraid the carriage won't take us all, and I don't like to suggest to Eric to desert his cousin so soon."

"So far from minding it," I said, "I should prefer it. It will give me time to sketch this beautiful old ruin."

"I'll keep you company," Arthur suddenly said. And, in answer to what I suppose was a look of surprise on my face, he said in a low voice, "I really would rather. I shall be quite de trop in the carriage!"

"I think I'll walk too," said the Earl. "You'll have to be content with Eric as your escort," he added, to Lady Muriel, who had joined us while he was speaking.

"You must be as entertaining as Cerberus—'three gentlemen rolled into one'—" Lady Muriel said to her companion. "It will be a grand military exploit!"

"A sort of Forlorn Hope?" the Captain modestly suggested.

"You do pay pretty compliments!" laughed his fair cousin. "Good day to you, gentlemen three—or rather deserters three!" And the two young folk entered the carriage and were driven away.

"How long will your sketch take?" said Arthur.

"Well," I said, "I should like an hour for it. Don't you think you had better go without me? I'll return by train. I know there's one in about an hour's time."

"Perhaps that would be best," said the Earl. "The Station is quite close."

So I was left to my own devices, and soon found a comfortable seat, at the foot of a tree, from which I had a good view of the ruins.

"It is a very drowsy day," I said to myself, idly turning over the leaves of the sketch-book to find a blank page. "Why, I thought you were a mile off by this time!" For, to my surprise, the two walkers were back again.

"I came back to remind you," Arthur said, "that the trains go every ten minutes—"

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"Nonsense!" I said. "It isn't the Metropolitan Railway!"

"It is the Metropolitan Railway," the Earl insisted. "This is a part of Kensington."

"Why do you talk with your eyes shut?" said Arthur. "Wake up!"

"I think it's the heat makes me so drowsy," I said, hoping, but not feeling quite sure, that I was talking sense. "Am I awake now?"

"I think not," the Earl judicially pronounced. "What do you think, Doctor? He's only got one eye open!"

"And he's snoring like anything!" cried Bruno. "Do wake up, you dear old thing!" And he and Sylvie set to work, rolling the heavy head from side to side, as if its connection with the shoulders was a matter of no sort of importance.

And at last the Professor opened his eyes, and sat up, blinking at us with eyes of utter bewilderment. "Would you have the kindness to mention," he said, addressing me with his usual old-fashioned courtesy, "whereabouts we are just now and who we are, beginning with me?"

I thought it best to begin with the children. "This is Sylvie, sir; and this is Bruno."

"Ah, yes! I know them well enough!" the old man murmured. "Its myself I'm most anxious about. And perhaps you'll be good enough to mention, at the same time, how I got here?"

"A harder problem occurs to me," I ventured to say: "and that is, how you're to get back again."

"True, true!" the Professor replied. "That's the Problem, no doubt. Viewed as a Problem, outside of oneself, it is a most interesting one. Viewed as a portion of one's own biography, it is, I must admit, very distressing!" He groaned, but instantly added, with a chuckle, "As to myself, I think you mentioned that I am—"

"Oo're the Professor!" Bruno shouted in his ear. "Didn't oo know that? Oo've come from Outland! And it's ever so far away from here!"

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The Professor leapt to his feet with the agility of a boy. "Then there's no time to lose!" he exclaimed anxiously. "I'll just ask this guileless peasant, with his brace of buckets that contain (apparently) water, if he'll be so kind as to direct us. Guileless peasant!" he proceeded in a louder voice. "Would you tell us the way to Outland?"

The guileless peasant turned with a sheepish grin. "Hey?" was all he said.

"The way—to—Outland!" the Professor repeated.

The guileless peasant set down his buckets and considered. "Ah dunnot—"

"I ought to mention," the Professor hastily put in, "that whatever you say will be used in evidence against you."

The guileless peasant instantly resumed his buckets. "Then ah says nowt!" he answered briskly, and walked away at a great pace.

The children gazed sadly at the rapidly vanishing figure. "He goes very quick!" the Professor said with a sigh. "But I know that was the right thing to say. I've studied your English Laws. However, let's ask this next man that's coming. He is not guileless, and he is not a peasant—but I don't know that either point is of vital importance."

It was, in fact, the Honorable Eric Lindon, who had apparently fulfilled his task of escorting Lady Muriel home, and was now strolling leisurely up and down the road outside the house, enjoying; a solitary cigar.

"Might I trouble you, Sir, to tell us the nearest way to Outland!" Oddity as he was, in outward appearance, the Professor was, in that essential nature which no outward disguise could conceal, a thorough gentleman.

And, as such, Eric Lindon accepted him instantly. He took the cigar from his mouth, and delicately shook off the ash, while he considered. "The name sounds strange to me," he said. "I doubt if I can help you?"

"It is not very far from Fairyland," the Professor suggested.

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Eric Lindon's eye-brows were slightly raised at these words, and an amused smile, which he courteously tried to repress, flitted across his handsome face: "A trifle cracked!" he muttered to himself. "But what a jolly old patriarch it is!" Then he turned to the children. "And can't you help him, little folk?" he said, with a gentleness of tone that seemed to win their hearts at once. "Surely you know all about it?"

'How many miles to Babylon?
Three-score miles and ten.
Can I get there by candlelight?
Yes, and back again!'"

To my surprise, Bruno ran forwards to him, as if he were some old friend of theirs, seized the disengaged hand and hung on to it with both of his own: and there stood this tall dignified officer in the middle of the road, gravely swinging a little boy to and fro, while Sylvie stood ready to push him, exactly as if a real swing had suddenly been provided for their pastime.

"We don't want to get to Babylon, oo know!" Bruno explained as he swung.

"And it isn't candlelight: it's daylight!" Sylvie added, giving the swing a push of extra vigor, which nearly took the whole machine off its balance.

By this time it was clear to me that Eric Lindon was quite unconscious of my presence. Even the Professor and the children seemed to have lost sight of me: and I stood in the midst of the group, as unconcernedly as a ghost, seeing but unseen.

"How perfectly isochronous!" the Professor exclaimed with enthusiasm. He had his watch in his hand, and was carefully counting Bruno's oscillations. "He measures time quite as accurately as a pendulum!"

"Yet even pendulums," the good-natured young soldier observed, as he carefully released his hand from Bruno's grasp, "are not a joy for ever! Come, that's enough for one bout, little man! Next time we meet, you shall have another. Meanwhile you'd better take this old gentleman to Queer Street, Number—"

"We'll find it!" cried Bruno eagerly, as they dragged the Professor away.

"We are much indebted to you!" the Professor said, looking over his shoulder.

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“Don’t mention it!” replied the officer, raising his hat as a parting salute.

“What number did you say!” the Professor called from the distance.

The officer made a trumpet of his two hands. “Forty!” he shouted in stentorian tones. “And not piano, by any means!” he added to himself. “It’s a mad world, my masters, a mad world!” He lit another cigar, and strolled on towards his hotel.

“What a lovely evening!” I said, joining him as he passed me.

“Lovely indeed,” he said. “Where did you come from? Dropped from the clouds?”

“I’m strolling your way,” I said; and no further explanation seemed necessary.

“Have a cigar?”

“Thanks: I’m not a smoker.”

“Is there a Lunatic Asylum near here?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Thought there might be. Met a lunatic just now. Queer old fish as ever I saw!”

And so, in friendly chat, we took our homeward ways, and wished each other ‘good-night’ at the door of his hotel.

Left to myself, I felt the ‘eerie’ feeling rush over me again, and saw, standing at the door of Number Forty, the three figures I knew so well.



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“Then it’s the wrong house?” Bruno was saying.

“No, no! It’s the right house,” the Professor cheerfully replied: “but it’s the wrong street. That’s where we’ve made our mistake! Our best plan, now, will be to—”

It was over. The street was empty, Commonplace life was around me, and the ‘eerie’ feeling had fled.