



Simulacrum

That evening I couldn't sleep I was so overwhelmed with excitement and trepidation.

The college rooms were freezing cold and, of course, Newton and his students had the best rooms. Still I always did my best work at night when I got up shivering from the sheets, pulled around a blanket and sat at the oak desk thinking. Newton wastes his time. First rate thinker in his way, with his infinitesimals, his gravity and laws of motion, but he thinks too small and he spends his time on philosophising and exploration of the Bible.

'What use is all this, Sir Isaac?'

He insists on the 'Sir', of course.

I taunt him and he hates it, but then he takes away my funding and my best students, he tells the faculty I am "not in the pursuit of the furtherance of human endeavour". Pompous ass!

So I tried to sleep because tomorrow was the day I would reduce his achievements to nothing. He would sit and stare and wonder and he would be forced, grudgingly, no doubt, very grudgingly, to take my hand and look me in the eye and admit that I had surpassed him.

I had invited him, very courteously, to my rooms for morning tea. I knew it

would intrigue the old lion. I had worded the invitation so carefully, hinting that I wanted a reconciliation, perhaps even a word of advice. Oh, he pretends to humility but how he loves to demonstrate his superiority over us. He cannot believe that anyone can think so deeply as he does. Poor Leibniz! A fine gentleman in my opinion. Who would not fight with a man so determinedly self-righteous as the Chair. The Chair! Of course everyone knows who that is, never mind that there are many other Chairs in England, the public only know one, the most famous Chair in the world, the Lucasian Chair at Cambridge. I was there in '05 when Her Majesty knighted him and it was hard to say which of the two of them thought themselves more favoured by God. Enough of this! That night at least I stayed awake from excitement more than the cold and the anguish at the humiliation that he heaped upon me.

At eleven the next morning there was a loud knocking on my door and, having no servants who would live with me at the moment, I opened it myself, expecting Newton in his long black cloak as I had seen him two years ago when I last took some interest in the affairs of college. Instead I found an old man all covered around in blankets with a young man at either shoulder. I almost dismissed them immediately until the old man whispered.

'Frederico Enriques?'

'Sir Isaac?'

'My eyes are failing I'm afraid, Frederico, along with everything else in this old body.'

The students pushed past rudely. I could see how they looked at the squalor of my living space. Young gentlemen - they arrived in Cambridge with servants and lodgings all paid for. I had taught for a while, especially after my paper on

binomials which Newton himself had quoted, but students had soon seen my circumstances. To them money and power were so much more important in education than a powerful mind.

They helped him on to my wooden settle, thinking no doubt how tasteless that I had not the means to have it upholstered. I took him my old woollen blanket and allowed them to sit him at his ease.

‘So Frederico, as you see I am not as strong as I was, but if I can help you in any way, I will set my mind to it.’ He turned to the young men. ‘Frederico has an unusual and creative mind. When he turns it to matters of scientific interest he can produce great wonders.’

He was laughing at me, I could sense it, and the young fools probably knew it too. Well no matter. I ignored the students.

‘I will show you, Sir Isaac, a wonder indeed.’ I walked over to the end of the room by the window. It threw little enough light but it also meant that my works had been secret from prying eyes. ‘Under this sheet is an experiment that I have repeated to my satisfaction any number of times but you,’ I gestured to them, ‘will be the first other than myself, to see the application of a science previously unimagined by mankind.’

I threw off the sheet to unveil my apparatus, although the workings were carefully hidden. Oh, I did not underestimate Master Chair so much. If he worked out my thinking with a glance he would, I was sure, take it for his own. He may refine it, improve it, but it would be mine and no-one would ever know. Perhaps he had brought these flunkies along for this very reason! To support his planned calumny.

‘Take note, gentlemen. I see a large slim wire cage, about the height of a

man, not unlike a bird cage, and near the top I see an apple, held by metal pincers on a metal tray. Beneath the apple, is a bed of straw, perhaps to break its fall although that is conjecture. I suspect,' he wagged his finger at me, playfully, 'I suspect that dear Frederico has used an apple to honour me!'

I bowed and smiled. Indeed I had, although honour was perhaps not the word.

'Sir Isaac, if I were to release these pincers and the tray moved from under the apple I am sure you can tell me what would happen.'

One of the students half stood, his moustache bristling.

'You insult the greatest mind of our time with naiveties.'

Newton held up his hand.

'Frederico is building his story, Charles. Please do not interrupt. To answer your question, Frederico, the apple would fall of course, accelerating according to the force of gravity, until, or unless, acted upon by an external force. From what we can see that force would be provided by the bed of straw! It would then lie there until another force caused its further movement.'

He laughed, his thin shoulders shaking weakly.

I strode to the cage and reaching through released the pincers as I had done many times before. The tray dipped and the apple fell. I watched the men, not the fruit, hearing the tell-tale crack as it reached the straw and then seeing the puzzlement on their faces.

The moustachioed one, Charles, almost barked at me.

'You have discovered a way to destroy apples?'

I had only eyes for the Chair. Had he seen. He had! Even at his age he saw more than the others.

'Charles, sit down! I know you too well to think that this is a trick, Frederico. But you wish us to believe that the apple that now sits back between the pincers is the same one that you gave over to the force of gravity just seconds ago?'

I bowed.

'It is conjury, mere conjury, Sir Isaac.'

'George!' Sir Isaac could still be very fierce. 'You are making a very serious accusation against Professor Enriques. I am sure that Frederico will allow us to investigate his device in a scientific manner?'

'But of course, Sir Isaac. It is why I invited you, the best scientist of our age, to see my device.'

A little flattery always went a long way with the old man.

I opened the wire doorway on the cage and took out the apple, carrying it to them.

'It is perfectly edible still, I assure you!'

Newton's eyes were half closed in a sort of trance. He was thinking.

'What exactly do you think you have achieved, Frederico? I wish to understand.'

'Is it not obvious, Gentlemen? I have transported through space a solid object. Transported in a fraction of second. Imagine what could be done with such a device. We could send packages the length and breadth of the country. No! More! We could take them ourselves, stepping into the transport cage here Cambridge and arriving a second later in Oxford, London, even Edinburgh!'

'First, if I may I would like to test this hypothesis, Frederico. Perhaps I could mark the apple in some way, and activate the device myself?'

'I was going to suggest it myself, Professor.'

I had done the same tests, of course, many times. I handed him a knife so that he could cut the skin of the apple in some way. It did not surprise me when he carefully peeled away the skin so that the white flesh formed a cross with a pink circle of skin left in its centre. I caught his eye and held it for a second. He had carved a perfect Rosy Cross, although the Rose should be white of course.

'George! Charles! Help me, please, to Professor Enriques' device.'

I noted with some satisfaction that he was calling me professor now. I had no Chair because the snobs and xenophobes at the University would not find one for a man such as me, no matter what my achievements. Let them find a way to argue against me this time, with Newton on my side! Or would they say I was too old? Oh, nagging doubts. In my fiftieth year already and not many could expect Sir Isaac's eighty plus years. I hadn't realised how old he had got, if I'm honest - hadn't expected this decrepit old man at my door.

It is over twenty years since I was a young visiting professor and saw Queen Anne knight him. He still has the intellectual vigour though if he would only apply it.

I unlatched the cage for him and he marvelled at its construction, something which he had been unable to see clearly from the settle.

'It is iron, beneath the waxy exterior, Frederico?'

I nodded, unwilling to give too much away. Had he already perceived the use of magnetism?

He reached gently inside taking great care not to touch the side of the cage and placed the apple carefully on the plate between the pincers. There was no need for him to take such care but it pleased my heart to see his respect for my

apparatus.

‘What do I do to activate the mechanism, Professor?’

‘Merely close the cage and release the pincers from here, Sir Isaac.’

The two young men held his arms steady as he reached up and pressed the pincers, each of them staring intently into the cage.

The apple fell. As it reached the straw bottom there was the faint crack and that momentary lightness to the air, an unnatural clarity around the point where the apple had been. I felt a breath of air on my cheek and there was the apple, upon the tray again as if nothing had happened.

This time, knowing what to expect, they were silenced. The students were staring intently at Newton, waiting for his response. Bah! He should have been teaching them independence of thought not this respectful adoration. It was why, I suppose, he had never liked me.

‘Did you feel it, George? The light touch of wind on the forehead as the apple displaced the air on the tray?’

It had been weeks before I had appreciated the importance of that breath of wind, and of the distant whip crack of the air rushing in to replace the apple as it disappeared.

‘Professor Enriques, does the apple have to start and end on the tray?’

It was George, the quieter and more perceptive of the two.

‘No, of course not. It is just convenient for repetition of the experiment. The tray is the receiver.’

‘Have you tried other ... subjects?’

I had tried many but I had decided that, at most, I would show Newton the mouse. I was sure that a living creature would amaze him more than anything

else. I walked to my bureau where I had put the wooden box that I kept the creatures in out of the way.

‘Would you like to mark the animal in some way, Sir Isaac?’

He stepped back.

‘A mouse! I fear you have gone too far, Frederico.’

‘Really, Sir Isaac, I have done this experiment many times. The mouse feels nothing and is none the worse for the experience.’

He shook his head, I assumed in wonderment, as I popped it on the floor of the cage.

‘We could use the same mechanism as with the apple but to see the mouse accidentally wander into the field of the device is amusing and of some scientific interest.’

Indeed it took only a few moments before the mouse performed its unintended trick, running into the centre of the cage and then appearing, still running fast on the metal tray at the top. It dropped harmlessly onto the straw beneath and looked a little dazed as I reached in and removed it, placing it back in the box.

Newton made his way back to the settle and stared moodily at my device.

‘I am sorry, Frederico, but this is both dangerous and blasphemous. The Good Book tells us that God is the Creator of all things but you have destroyed and created life before our very eyes. Do you not see how far you have fallen?’

This was unexpected. What manner of argument was he trying to forestall me with?

‘I have created a device for moving things around, Sir Isaac. The value of such a device! And the mouse! If I can move a mouse then I can, to be certain,

move a man!’

There was a look of absolute horror on his face.

‘I think that you really believe what you are saying, Frederico, but there is an even stronger objection to such a use! I believe that you are destroying one object and creating an exact replica somewhere else. How else could you be overcoming the natural forces of God’s Universe? To do such a thing with a man! You would be killing the man and recreating an identical version. Identical, did I say? Identical in appearance. Identical even in memory. But not the same man. Not one of God’s creations. This man would not have an immortal soul.’

I saw it now. The craftiness of the man. He would not let me have this victory, although in truth I did not perceive how he would stop me. I had all I needed right here in my rooms. I could perform a demonstration anywhere in England and he could not stop me. I felt the yellow bile rise in my throat and fought to contain my anger.

‘Leave! You will not stop this, Chair! This is the greatest scientific breakthrough of our age. It will change the world and my name will be honoured above all scientists.’

I took his arm and started to pull him up and George came between us, pushing me hard away so that I sprawled upon the floor. I pushed myself up and launched at them and he punched me hard upon the nose, making me fall again and lie there, dizzy and confused. I could hear them leaving and then a small whispered voice.

‘I am sorry, Frederico. Truly you have discovered something magnificent but it must not be admitted. I hope that you understand.’

I locked myself in my rooms for three days. The beating that George had given me had left me feeling sick, and I had little desire to be seen outside my rooms anyway. I had no idea what Newton and his cronies would have done once they left. I could see little that they could do.

On the third day there was a knock at my door. This was so unusual that I answered without thinking. The man on the other side was a commoner. A labourer in all probability from the look of his clothes and his dark unwashed skin. He looked me up and down quite impertinently.

‘Mister Enreeks?’

‘My names is Enriques.’

‘Aye, that’s what I said. I’m Osgood. Yer don’t look like the chap I was expecting but I’ve been told yer’ve got something worth showing. I’ve got a proposition for yer. I’ve booked a field out Fen Ditton way. We charge ha’penny a go, get in a big crowd and if this show yer’ve got is as good as I’m told then we’ll both be in the money. Fifty-fifty’s my proposal.’

He looked at me slyly.

I began to lose my temper again and it was only the ringing in my ears recalling George’s fist in my face that held me back. I would demonstrate my device to the proper scientific authorities the way I had to Newton.

He laughed at me.

‘Oh, scientific it is? Yer won’t get away with that in this day and age, Mister Enreeks.’

I felt my blood run cold.

‘What exactly do you mean, Mr Osgood.’

‘People ain’t that easy to trick these days, specially round Cambridge. They

won't even give you a hearing from what I've heard. Chap what told me in the alehouse said it was a good trick but he reckoned he could see how you'd done it, and he wasn't no Sir Isaac Newton, I can tell you.'

'This chap? His name, Mr Osgood?'

He tapped his nose and I felt an urge to do the same.

'A moustachioed fellow, Mr Osgood? Tall and hale?'

He stayed quiet and I took a guess.

'And a second, perhaps quieter, sat watching? Bright blue eyes drinking everything in?'

We stared at each other for a long moment and then he gave the most imperceptible of nods.

Charles and George. This was Newton's way of telling me that he would, and could, convince the world that I was a charlatan.

'There will be conditions, Mr Osgood.'

I would run the demonstration but I insisted that I would be able to invite, free of charge, anyone who I chose. I would circumvent, the Chair and his immoral, self-important meddling in my affairs. I would invite the whole Royal Society, the very best scientists in England and even in Europe! A public demonstration that no-one could deny, not even Newton himself.

I sit in my cage now among the tatters of the carnival. I had dreams that they would all come, that they would see beyond the eccentric, and see the writer of papers on binomials and take me seriously. Those that came were chunterheads and gawpers from the local villages, and perhaps a few mockers from Cambridge itself and what they saw was not a scientific demonstration but a sideshow

amidst the double-headed cow, the bearded lady, the wolf-boy. How could anyone take that seriously?

And perhaps, for all his pomposity, Newton was right. Not about my soul, oh no, I have no fears for that, whatever it may be. But am I, sitting here in an iron cage like one of my mice, am I the same man who sat in a different cage just a few hours ago with the excitement that Daedalus must have felt before taking flight? Daedalus lost a son. What have I lost? Who am I.

I will not repeat this experiment again.

