

Around the World in Eighty Days . . . the Rest of the Story

By Ron Brackin

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It was Sunday, September 29, 1872, Holmes' initial year at Christ Church.

The first month of the long vacation,¹ he had spent at Donnithorpe, in Norfolk, with Victor Trevor, the only friend he made at Oxford among the men of his year. He was engaged in his first case which would end with the sudden death of Trevor's father and the disclosure of the grim history of the *Gloria Scott*.

During the months that followed his visit to Donnithorpe, Holmes remained mostly in his London rooms working out private experiments in organic chemistry, Oxford, being keener on the classics than on applied science.

On frequent occasions, he enjoyed the assistance of his don, Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a brilliant mathematician as well as a most tedious lecturer.

Dodgson was an enigma.

His stiff posture belied the lithe, Puckish elf within, and a mop of curly hair clashed with his impeccable dress.

At The House,² he was the consummate academician and cleric, sombre, dignified and not a little priggish.

Yet, one could enter his rooms to find him crawling on his hands and knees, tossing his shaggy mane and roaring like a beast to amuse a child guest, of whom there were many and frequent, all eager subjects for his camera. For he was also an accomplished photographer whose notable subjects included many of England's finest artists, scientists and scholars, as well as several crowned heads.

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Despite his austere reputation as a member of the deaconate, Dodgson was an inveterate patron of the theatre, and he and Holmes were that evening returning to Oxford from the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly.

Predictably, Dodgson's childlike fascination with magic, indeed any trick, toy or invention, had got the best of him.

"I was confounded, Holmes," said he, "from the moment Jasper exploded onto the stage in a flash of lightning and a cloud of red smoke, and I've no doubt that I shall go raving trying to reckon how he subsequently managed to furnish a bare stage from thin air."

Though a superlative logician, Dodgson always preferred to set aside his deductive talents when he attended the theatre and allow himself to be manipulated into seeing only what he was meant to see and believing what he was led to believe. He loved fantasy and nonsense, but while master of both, chose to be their consumer as well as their creator.

"Perhaps I can offer some illumination, old fellow," said Holmes. "Tell me what you saw through your eyes of wonder, and through the eyes of logic, I'll tell you what actually took place."

"'Eyes of wonder' and 'eyes of logic,' indeed," mumbled the good reverend.

Staring at the wall of our carriage as though it had been transformed into the Egyptian Hall, Dodgson became more and more animated as he reviewed each movement and relived the wonder of the performance.

"After the smoke cleared a bit, Jasper looked about him at the empty stage, then at the audience, shrugging his shoulders as though surprised that someone had neglected to set

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out his furniture, flats and props. Continuing in pantomime as the orchestra struck a waltz, he strolled to the prompt side and with a broad sweep of his arm, caused to appear a slender crystal table. The wizard bowed to the table, and a large oriental vase filled with living flowers materialised.”

Dodgson’s excitement and frustration grew, threatening to trigger his familiar stammer.

“Walking confidently about the stage, Jasper caused heavy wooden tables, tall brass lampstands, plush divans, massive marble sculptures, busts and pedestals, and a great wicker cage filled with exotic, squawking birds to appear at his command until the entire area was richly furnished.”

“Wonderful, my friend!” said Holmes, applauding. “You described it precisely as the conjuror intended that you should. Your profound mystery, however, is easily explained.”

“ ‘Eliminate the impossible and whatever remains no matter how improbable must be the solution?’ ”

“Quite. Guided by my axiom, then, we may clearly eliminate sleight-of-hand. What you saw was not accomplished like so many cups and balls, palmed and secreted in hidden pockets; these were obviously solid, weighty, pieces.

“Nor were the furnishings mere illusions produced by lamps and mirrors. We saw Jasper pass before and behind the articles making it impossible for him to avoid breaking a lightbeam or revealing his reflection in even the most cleverly angled mirrors. No, Dodgson, we need spend no more time here.

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“The remaining possibility is that the furnishings did not come onto the stage out of concealment but rather that the concealment was removed to reveal the furnishings.

“All the furniture was already on the stage—hidden from our view—when Jasper made his entrance. How then was it hidden and where?

“Only one type of concealment will answer—a covering that the eye is unable to distinguish from the background. Black velvet, no doubt, the pile of which absorbs reflections.

“Once we know precisely where to focus our attention, we easily observe the barely perceptible movement of an assistant in a hooded and gloved costume of the identical colour and material as the back and side curtains, a virtually invisible assistant who follows the conjuror about the stage, and on cue, snatches away the draperies which covered the furnishings making them seem to appear from nowhere.

“Voila!”

“Bravo, Holmes!”

“Quite elementary, old man, really. But sometimes I envy your ability to lose yourself in these amusements. My mind, I’m afraid, habitually resists misdirection and is satisfied only by relentlessly searching out methods, motives and means.”

“Your analytical skills may be formidable, Holmes, but even you could not have seen behind every illusion,” said Dodgson, goading Holmes into exposing another secret.

“The floating young woman, for instance. Admit that it has you stumped.”

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Holmes was convinced that Dodgson would be far happier with his mysteries left intact than with a lesson in the methods of Hindu fakirs, so he left him to his ruminations until the train arrived at Oxford Station.

The rain had stopped by the time they reached the archway at Tom Quad, its air heavy with the smell of ancient stones and wet grass.

The two walked silently back to their rooms each absorbed in his own thoughts—Dodgson undoubtedly still puzzling over The Magnificent Jasper’s illusions and Holmes eager to resume his study of tobacco ashes.

He was savouring an aromatic Latakian when a loud pounding erupted. When he opened the door, Dodgson rushed past, handing off a note and pacing the floor while Holmes read: “Pritchard murdered. Jewels stolen. Please come, and bring Holmes. Bellingham.”

“Sir Arthur Bellingham is a fellow member of the Reform Club,” said Dodgson. “He served in Commons early on, a young zealot marching to the abolitionist drumbeat of Wilberforce and Buxton. In 1834, Bellingham abandoned Parliament and, with Buxton, established several foundations dedicated to humanising criminal law, a pursuit in which he is still quite active.”

“Why would he call upon you and me *être au desespoir?*”

“During a recent game of cards, I told him how you convinced the police of the innocence of young James Gaffney in the Bishopgate jewel case. I suppose he hopes we might be of assistance to him.”

“So we shall, Dodgson. An ugly business. Let us move quickly.”

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