

THE SIXTH BRIDGE: MORAL CHOOSING



AUTONOMY

The Imp and Rachel walked along the waterfront, each lost in his or her own thoughts. Before they knew it they were enveloped in a carnival atmosphere all

along the wharf. Several colorful kiosks and glitzy booths had been set up. Hawkers wearing striped shirts, straw hats on their heads and garters on their arms, called to the Imp and Rachel. "Try your moral luck," one cried.

"Is it chance or is destiny?"

"Come on lassie, test your strength of will-" one said sweeping off his hat in a mock-respectful gesture. With a wink he proffered Rachel a mallet and pointed to the gong at the top of something that looked like a thermometer. "Lay into it. Give it all you have and knock that old bell right off!!"

"Not interested," said the Imp to the hawker.

"Say, aren't you that Imp fellow? Then being such a great magician as you are known to be far and wide, perhaps you would indulge your colleagues less famous but no less skilled than yourself?"

The Imp seemed mightily offended. "Colleagues, is it? Why all you and your kind are capable of are cheap thrills and carney tricks."

Now it was the hawker's turn to seem offended. "To a person, we are artists. And you fault us for trying to provide a little pleasure and amusement to the public. Do you begrudge an honest carny the means to making a living, however meager that living may be?"

"'Honest Carny'? An oxymoron, if ever I heard one," the Imp said in an aside to Rachel. Rachel had heard her Dad use that word before--it meant two ideas put together that didn't make sense or fit with one another. The Imp was saying that Carnies and being honest didn't fit together. Rachel thought the Imp was being prejudiced against carnival people and was about to protest that some were surely honest. But before she could say anything at all, Rachel noticed that one of the carnies had overheard the Imp's words intended for her ears alone. Just now the man seemed to bristle at what he had heard.

"Here now. We heard that, Mr. Imp. Just because you're a high falutin' impresario or whatever you call yourself, you've no call to look down your nose at us. And you've certainly no call to refer to us as oxs and morons."

"Sorry," said the Imp. "I suppose you do the best you can. All we are interested in is finding the Bridge of Choosing. Can you direct us to it?"

"Maybe we can and maybe we can't. And maybe if we can, we choose not to--ain't that so lads?"

"That's so- right as rain."

"You took the words out of my mouth," another agreed

By this time, many more men and women had stopped hawking and gathered in a group around one they seemed to regard as their spokesperson.

The mood of the crowd was turning a little too ugly for Rachel's taste and she tugged at the Imp's sleeve, urging him away. The Imp resisted her. He was, perhaps, in an impish frame of mind, which rendered him impervious to insults and disposed to match wits with the carnies.

"Ah. You would like a demonstration of the finer points in the art of moral legerdemain and legerity?"

"Huh?" said Rachel.

"Nimbleness, dear," he explained in aside.

“We’re game if you are, Imp,” said a carny.

“Very well. I accept the challenge. Observe there is nothing up my sleeve.” And the Imp rolled his sleeve up past his elbow -or rather past the point where his elbow should have been if it could have been seen- but either his arm was invisible or there was in fact nothing up his sleeve. However Rachel could still see his hand covered with an immaculately white glove gesturing with a flourish. She was impressed. The carnies evidently were not.

“ If that’s all you’ve got, you’re wasting our time. I’ve seen as good or better from my apprentice. You call that magic?” a voice rose derisively from the carny mob.

“Tough audience,” the Imp spoke in aside to Rachel.

“I’ll say,” said Rachel. The carnies in the rear bringing out pots of tar and bags of feathers were beginning to make her nervous.

“ I’ve got to come up with something that will really stump them---wait a minute, I have it! Rachel, did you know you would make a great judge?”

“ No, I don’t think I do know that, Mr. Imp.”

“ Trust me. You will make a fine judge. Now here’s what I want you to do....” Somewhat later after explaining the scheme to Rachel, the Imp faced the crowd.

“ My esteemed colleagues-”

“ Now that he sees what we have in store for him, we’re his ‘esteemed colleagues.’ Bah! I say we tar and feather him and his assistant too.”

“ A moment please, I have not had a chance to perform my magic.”

“ He’s right about that.”

“ It’s the law of the carnival life. He should have a chance to do what he boasts he can do.”

“ Thank-you madam for your forbearance, your tolerance, your inestimable mercy and graciousness--”

“ Get on with it Imp.”

“ Yes, of course, where was I?”

Rachel, who had reappeared in juridical garb and a powdered wig, told him her costume itched something terribly and he should get on with the trick.

“ First I shall need from my esteemed colleagues two volunteers.”

Two carnies near the front were pushed by others behind towards the Imp and Rachel. “Here are your volunteers, Imp,” someone in the crowd jeered while others turned their attention to the tar they were warming over the fire.

“I challenge these two fellows, hale and hearty lads, to resolve a dilemma I shall pose to them. But first we must make the experience real to them.”

Exclamations of surprise erupted from the two as they found themselves in two separate single cell jails facing the crowd. Snickers came from the audience. “Well I knew it wouldn’t be long before Ol’ Tom was put back behind bars,” one carny guffawed.

Rachel gestured for silence and intoned solemnly: “ These two prisoners stand before you accused of a grievous offense against the Domain of Volition.”

“Tell us what they have done that is so bad that you’ve locked them up, Yerhonner.”

Rachel looked at the Imp uncertainly and whispered, “What did they do?”

The Imp shrugged, thought a moment. "Say 'they stand accused of conspiracy'." Rachel told the crowd, "Conspiracy!"

The crowd gasped, then one or two asked "Conspiracy to do what?"

Rachel looked back at the Imp, who was frantically searching through several tomes of local laws. The crowd was getting ugly again. Finally the Imp whispered his suggestion in Rachel's ear.

"These two prisoners stand accused of conspiring to loiter and jaywalk on the Bridge of Choosing."

Almost instantly the ugliness in the crowd was redirected to the hapless prisoners. Rotten produce and even pieces of brick-a-brack were hurled at their cells. They hastened to remind the crowd that they were volunteers for demonstration purposes only and had committed no real crime.

"The judge will determine that!" Came the reply from the crowd. Now all eyes were on Judge Rachel.

"The prisoners have only been accused of the misdeed. The case has not been proved against them.... yet. But the prosecutor (Rachel motioned to the Imp who had also dressed himself as a barrister) believe it is only a matter of time to develop the case-"

"Lynch them now--it will save the taxpayer money."

"The court is mindful of the expense of trial, and is disposed to offer the prisoners each two alternatives."

TO CONFESS OR NOT TO CONFESS.



IF ONE PRISONER CONFESSES AND THE OTHER DOES NOT, THE CONFESSOR WILL BE RELEASED AND THE OTHER WILL GO TO PRISON FOR TEN YEARS.

IF BOTH CONFESS, BOTH GO TO PRISON FOR FIVE YEARS.

IF NEITHER CONFESSES, BOTH GO TO PRISON FOR A YEAR.²⁵

"Now prisoners, do you or do you not confess?" Rachel asked. There was silence at first. First one and then the other prisoner started to speak up but did not after all break the silence. They regarded

one another at turns warily or puzzled or pleadingly. Then the advice started coming from all sides. "Big Eddie, go ahead and confess then Ol' Tom will have to spend time in the slammer. While you go off scot-free."

But Big Eddie appeared more thoughtful. "Ol' Tom might have the same idea, thinking I won't confess, he'll confess. Then, if I confess too, we both get five years."

"If we just keep our mouths shut," thought Tom, we would only get 1 year each. A year is practically nothing. I can do that time with my hands tied behind my back. But how do I know he won't confess after all, even if he promises not to? Then I wind up getting 10 years and he goes off free as a lark. I have to think about this more."

Many in the crowd also had to think about the prisoner's dilemma more and took to arguing their points with one another. Could anyone be trusted to keep his promise or were the stakes too high to trust one another?

Rachel was pondering the same thing when the Imp pulled her away and said, "Come on. This is a good time to get out of here."

"What about the prisoners-the volunteers, I mean? They're still locked up in their jails? We can't leave them in jail forever."

"Don't worry those are time released jails. They'll disappear after we are safely away."

"O.K. O.K. I'm right behind you."

They hurried down to the river. The Imp said, "We're almost there, I think."

"Almost where?" Rachel was perplexed.

"The Bridge of Choosing."

"Well where is it then?"

"I don't know exactly-"

"Why not, Mr. Imp?"

"Because it must be chosen before it appears."

"So how do you choose it?"

"You just choose it--you tell yourself which way to go across the river and you step on out."

"Just anywhere at all?" Rachel said. But the Imp was distracted by angry voices coming up from behind them and before he could give her an answer Rachel jumped out onto the river in what amounted to a leap of faith.

"No, not every choice will work." The Imp replied finally looking back around at Rachel. Rachel plummeted into the river with a splash and came up soaking wet.

"Like that one?" She spluttered.

"Why, Rachel. Are you in the river again?"

Rachel made several more choices that left her drenched. The voices from the search party were getting louder.

"About the prisoner's dilemma, Mr. Imp?"

"Rachel I think you must choose faster-"

"I've been thinking-"

"Rachel, hurry up-"

"I've been thinking about real people who have been prisoners of conscience, like Nelson Mandela. He chose what was right and went to jail for his beliefs without letting the number of years in prison ever change his mind. He held tight to what was

important. So I guess you'd say that some people choose the good of others or a principle they hold dear-"

"Yes Rachel and in so doing transform the bridge. A person of conscience changes from just being and asserting herself to being a moral person empowered to choose. She changes again from being an agent to being a caring individual who advocates and even sacrifices for others. Now, Rachel, please make another choice."

This time the leap Rachel took out into the air and over the river did not result in another soaking. A good sturdy bridge appeared, one she and the Imp could cross-- which they did in the nick of time before the carneys found their way to the river's edge.

²⁵ Attributed to the Princeton mathematician, Albert Tucker in a 1950 lecture on game theory. The version cited appears in Kidder (1995), an alternative version with references to the literature on game theory appears in Nozick (1981).