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Square and Compasses

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Square and Compasses

Author Bio

Peter Rosenberger is a senior English and Philosophy double major with a Writing minor from Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. Peter works as an RA and a tour guide on campus. He sings in the Gettysburg College Choir and performs in GBurg SMuT shows. He is a lover of rap, film, video games, the NFL, and bland food.

Square and Compasses

Peter Rosenberger

George walked along the cobblestones. The towering trees on either side of the road were natural sentinels. The evening sun gilded the leaves with a sliver of warm gold. Every now and then, an outcropping in the trees would spring up, and George could see down the stone walkways that led to apartments hidden from view.

His eyes followed the line of trees and bushes as he walked. His footfalls drummed a steady rhythm, and the sea of green hues was mesmerizing. The deep, earthy clang of metal on stone rung out, and George squared his shoulders. The whole walkway was behind him now, and he stood looking out at a massive clearing.

In front of him were the beginnings of his father's greatest dream. The King's Circus. A family of architects was not unfamiliar with their designs coming to life, but seeing the foundations of the King's Circus being laid had been hard for George's father to describe. An image of his father hunched over the drafting table in their study, working by low lamp light late into the night, flashed into his mind. John Wood had slaved over the design for decades and barely lived long enough to see the project started.

George looked and sighed. The road he had just walked along was one of the three that pierced the circle of buildings. The Circus, with sections in varying degrees of completion, looked like a broken stone eye socket looking down on the city of Bath. The green, untouched northern section of the city was the perfect location for the Wood family to work, and the King's Circus would be their most stunning project yet.

The site was alive. Rushing builders and skittish horses moved across the site under a cacophonous cloud of clattering stone and wood. Builders ducked out of the way to avoid horses and carts pulling meter-thick blocks of stone and wooden planks that stretched taller than the tallest man working on the build.

The lines of his father's designs crawled steadily into existence. The white stone of the one completed corner stood out as vividly on its green and brown background as his father's dark charcoal drawings did on their crisp, white parchment. Charles, the man responsible for maintaining the builders' supplies and ordering materials, was walking towards George.

"The next shipment will not arrive until day's end on Friday," Charles said. Charles was a small man with dark hair and eyes. He was

fantastically mediocre at both of the two important assignments with which he was tasked.

“Dammit,” George exclaimed.

Charles’s eyes widened. “John will be here.”

“I am well aware!” George stalked off and left Charles standing, designs in hand, in a sea of builders, stone, wood, and dust. George had promised to spend Friday afternoon with his mother, Beatrice, and his sister, Matilda, in Prior Park. He had already rescheduled once and he would not be able to get away with rescheduling again. John, his older brother, would be on site all day Friday, so it wasn’t that George didn’t think the shipment would be handled. It was just that the project was already moving faster than he could keep up with, and he worried he would be further boxed out if he missed this shipment.

George started toward the west of The Circus, heading home, but John intercepted him. John Wood, the Younger, was a spitting image of their father. He got both the name and the appearance. He was tall and strong, with a head of rich brown curls and eyes a slightly lighter shade of brown. A few freckles spotted his nose and cheeks. He wore a crisp, white shirt, somehow untouched by the dust that lingered in the air of the work-site, and, around his neck, he wore a sky blue cravat lined with thin, gold stripes. A small, gold stitching of the Square and Compasses of the Masons was embroidered in the center of the tie, above his Adam’s apple. The cravat was given to John Wood, the Elder, when he became a master mason. When John, the Elder, died, the position at the head of the family business and the title of master mason were given to John, the Younger, and he now proudly donned the blue and gold tie every opportunity he got.

George remembered overhearing a conversation between John and their father when he and John were just teenagers. George had been in the small drawing room off of their study, slaving over a new design, when he had overheard his father telling John about how one day the tie would be his and how John would have to continue the family’s legacy.

George would often sneak into his father’s room, pull the tie from the top drawer of his father’s ornate dresser, and tie it around his neck. He would straighten his back and adjust the cravat, letting the light from the window above the dresser catch its gold details.

“Don’t pay any mind to the next shipment,” John said. “You had plans with Mother and Sister, correct?”

“Indeed, Brother,” George replied. He kept his gaze on the ground as he spoke.

“They are quite looking forward to it,” John said.

“I know.”

“It has still been very hard for them lately.”

“I think the afternoon will certainly help,” George said, turning back up the street. He left John behind him, just as he’d left Charles, and brushed the dust off his clothes with a scowl as he walked back down the street.

George sat with his mother and sister on a stone bench at the bottom of Prior Park. The three of them looked up across the clearing and over the roofed Palladian bridge to the mansion resting atop the property.

It wasn’t hard to tell that John Wood, the Elder, had designed Prior Park. He had yearned to turn Bath into a city to rival those of ancient Greece and Rome. If the smooth stone and simple columns that held Bath together belonged to anyone, they belonged to John Wood.

Prior Park was finished in 1742—13 years ago—and it belonged to Ralph Allen, one of Bath’s greatest entrepreneurs. Ralph Allen and the best gardeners in Bath designed the expansive garden that spilled down from the top of the hill and the Palladian mansion that sat proudly at the top. The gardens at Prior Park looked natural, but they consisted of imported trees and plants planted with precision. The thin, winding paths that curved through the dense gardens were eerie, and even the least imaginative visitors could find themselves seeing things in the shadows.

“The last time we were here, we were with Father,” Matilda said somberly. They hadn’t spoken in a few minutes, only walked and taken in the views and fresh air. George wished the silence had continued.

“I was just thinking that as well,” Beatrice muttered. “It doesn’t help that his beautiful building sits looking down at us either.” John Wood, the Elder, had been buried for months, but his wife and daughter were clinging to their mourning like children to their mother.

“We would have to move to an entirely different city if we didn’t want to see Father’s work,” George joked.

“Quit that, George,” his sister snapped. “You just don’t understand.”

“Just don’t understand?” George replied quickly through gritted teeth.

Matilda stood up from the bench and walked away from George and Beatrice. The bench edged the back of the stone platform they stood on. It was only a few meters wide, and it was surrounded by shrubs on the sides and a small pond in the front.

“There is no need to ruin this fine morning with silly squabbling,” Beatrice interjected. “We all grieve in our own way.”

“Some of us not at all,” Matilda said as she took a step further from the bench.

“What was that?” George asked, leaning forward.

“I think you heard,” returned Matilda, turning towards him.

George shot up toward Matilda, fists still clenched. He was a step away from her when he turned away. He paced and rubbed his temples with his palms. Matilda let out a victorious sigh.

George spun back to her quickly and barked, "Even the mere insinuation is enough to send me over the edge."

"Please, not now," Beatrice murmured.

"No, I think it's time we aired our grievances," Matilda said. She took a step towards George and her maroon muslin gown brushed against the stone bench. They were standing in front of where they'd been sitting. Their mother still sat in between them.

"If you think your lingering over Father's death shows anything other than your immaturity, you are wrong." George's snarl was stretched across his face menacingly. "You think it impossible for me to love him in life and be able to move on after his death? It's been eight months!"

"Impossible? No. Not impossible, but close. And it has been eight months, but you moved on three months ago. The new year came and thoughts of Father flew from your mind!"

"What choice did I have? Do you want to continue wearing your Indian fabrics and drinking your expensive wines? We are builders. And if John and I sat around and cried for months like the two of you," George gestured sharply, "then nothing would have been built!"

"You might as well have stayed at home with us anyway," Matilda snapped venomously. "Your brother is the builder. Not you."

Beatrice shifted uneasily in the silence that followed Matilda's words. George took a quick step forward and slapped his sister with the back of his right hand. She crumpled and clutched both her hands to the bright, red mark that immediately appeared on her face. George turned and sped off, his head down, toward the east exit of the park. He didn't look back as his mother called his name.

The sun was starting to dip behind the buildings on the streets when he reached The Circus. His feet throbbed as he finally stopped in front of the worksite. He had been walking for hours. Along the way, George had passed the South Parade buildings. Their original design had been his, and his father had liked it so much that he used it when he built the buildings. George was only twenty when he drew up the plans.

As he approached the site, he hadn't noticed what should have been a deafening silence. No clattering of carts and horses, no sliding and scraping of stone on stone, and no shouts rose up around him. He reached The Circus from the other side of the street this time, and as he took an arching glance around its north half, he saw the thick wooden support pillars that formed the grid where the tons and tons of stone would be laid and

mortared. They were shooting out of the ground like rigid corpses rising from their graves. His eyes fell back on the lone finished building standing on the west corner. Charles was standing, talking to Henry, who had just arrived with the day's stone shipment. George started toward them.

As George walked along the uneven street of dirt and loose stone, he saw Henry motion to his three men, all in carriages loaded with stone blocks. Henry jumped up into his own carriage, and the four men turned from the site and started off toward the West.

"Where are they going?" George asked once he rounded the street. Charles whipped around in surprise. His eyes were bloodshot and his clothes were covered in more dust than usual. His brow furrowed when he saw George.

"It's bad," Charles choked out after a moment.

"What is bad? The stone? Henry always brings us proper shipments. I don't believe that for an instant." George paused and looked around. "And where is everyone? They were told to expect a late finish today to unload the shipment—the shipment that you just turned away?"

"They're gone. George, he's gone." Charles fell back into the wall of the lone finished building and slid down until he was sitting, feet out, in the dirt and dust of the unfinished road. He stared off into the distance blankly.

"I can see that they are gone, Charles. But why are they gone?"

"There was an accident," Charles said without breaking his steady gaze. "I sent everyone home. He was just checking on the second building."

"Who?"

"It didn't look right. He shouldn't have gone in. It was the stone from the second level. It all fell. It was the supports. They weren't all notched properly. He should have noticed."

George felt faint, and he grabbed onto the rim of the empty cart next to him. He remembered clutching his sister when they heard about their father.

"Who?" George managed to ask again.

"John," Charles said, finally breaking his eyes from the horizon. He looked up at George. "He was alone in there, George."

"Where is he?!"

"He's gone, George. They took him to the surgery, but it was too late." Charles reached into his pocket slowly and pulled out the blue and gold cravat. "I was the last one with him." He handed the cravat up to George. "He wanted you to have it."

George almost dropped it when he noticed the small reddish-brown rivulets that stained its light fabric. It never looked this dusty. He

would have to clean it. The last few rays of sunlight bent around the roof of the building on the corner. For an instant, the light hit the tie and shimmered brilliantly on the gold Square and Compasses.