

20. Threats and Secrets

The moment I saw him I knew I had been wrong. Wrong about two things, to be exact:

Firstly, the missing file box was important.

And secondly, seeing his profile might actually be worth losing your job over.

There he stood: a lean figure, his arms crossed tightly in front of his chest, revealing taut muscles in his upper arms. In his black tailcoat, trousers and shirt he looked like some menacing manifestation of the night, come to banish the day before it was time. The fact that he had a face that seemed to have been cut from a mountain by some ancient master didn't hurt either. I was paralysed in my chair – not with fear exactly. No, certainly not! I would never be afraid! Rather with... oh, I didn't know! Whatever it was, I had to get a grip, and fast!

"Mr Linton." His voice was just as I remembered it. Cold and clipped. He nodded at me, but before I could even open my mouth or think of a reply, he had marched past me. I stared after him until he vanished between the shelves at the other end of my office.

Mister Linton? Mister Linton? So he was still going to keep that up, even now he was forced to talk to me again?

My paralysis suddenly lifted, and I jumped to my feet. I'd show him! I'd show that son of a bachelor!

With three quick steps I was between the shelves. There was no sign of him there, but the door to the safe still stood open. He was in there.

For one moment I was tempted to shove the door closed and lock it – but no. If I ever did choke him, I wanted my hands around his throat. Letting him succumb in an airtight safe was much too impersonal.

Taking a deep, relaxing breath, I stepped in after him – and stopped in my tracks.

The inside of the safe room was a mess. Files were scattered everywhere on the floor. Standing before the shelves containing the boxes, Mr Ambrose was thoroughly busy dismantling and examining every part of every file box he could find, and once he was done with them, throwing them over his shoulder onto the floor. He was like a ravenous animal burrowing through the carcass of a deer. The only difference was: while a ravenous animal might have found what it needed to still its hunger in a carcass, he appeared to come up blank.

"It must be here," he muttered. "It must be!"

"What must be here?" I asked. He completely ignored me. By Jove, [1] what a surprise!

Why did I even bother to ask? I knew what he was looking for, didn't I? File S39XX300. But what was so bloody important about that file?

"It must be here. It must be." He didn't say it angrily as such – but the determination in his words was like iron. Hundreds of files, which before had been in impeccable order, now lay scattered all over the metal floor of the safe, and still he continued his wild hunt.

I stood mute at the door and watched him. Even I had known how to help, I wouldn't have dared get in his way. It took him about half an hour to turn the orderly file boxes into a monumental mess. Finally, the very last file was in his hand. He looked at the number, and let it drop to the floor with a clatter.

He stood like that for a moment, rock-still.

Then he whirled around. The look in his dark eyes made me retreat a step.

"You!" he hissed, coldly. He didn't say anything more. He didn't need too. I knew it was an accusation. My breathing sped up.

Dear God! He suspected me of stealing the file! Me! Sweet little me!

What was he going to do? Call the police? Looking into his eyes, somehow I doubted that. I remembered Karim, and the huge sabre, and my heart sped up some more.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

"Where is it?" he asked.

"The file? I don't know."

In two steps, he was in front of me. Hell's whiskers! I hadn't noticed how tall he was before. He was towering over me.

Why the hell was I so nervous? What could he do to me, anyway?

Well... looked pretty sharp the last time you saw it, don't you think?

He wouldn't harm me, would he?

"Tell me what you have done with the file," he said in his usual cold, hard voice, "or you will learn how to swim face down in the Thames tonight."

All right... that answered my question pretty succinctly. My whole body felt cold all of a sudden. Darn! Was he being serious?

I looked into his eyes.

Yes, he was. Absolutely serious.

"You... you wouldn't dare!" I managed to whisper.

"Really?" Raising his hand, he counted dispassionately: "Firstly, nobody knows you are really here. You do not exist, Mr Victor Linton!"

His lips didn't curve into a derisive smile, but even without that, I could hear the cold venom he put into my invented name.

"Nobody will care if you vanish, and nobody will connect your disappearance to the death of some young poor lady found drowned in the Thames," he continued.

He extended a second finger. "Secondly, I have very discrete associates. It would be a marvel if your body was even found."

Another finger. He caught my gaze with his, and held it. "Thirdly, look at me. Look into my eyes and then tell me again I would not dare to get rid of you."

Well, at least I now knew one thing. He was no industrialist who had made his fortune by producing tin cans or porcelain figurines. He was something else entirely.

"Where," he asked in a voice so low I almost didn't catch it, "is the file. Last chance, Mr Linton."

"I... I..." Dammit, what was happening to me? I could feel my whole body beginning to shake, and my eyes felt strange. They felt as if they were... wet.

Oh no! No, no, no and no again! I was not going to cry like some little girl! Not in front of him. Not now. I was going to be brave and prove to him that I was just as good as any man and... and...

I started to cry.

I admit it, all right? I started to cry.

"I... I don't know," I sniffled, lowering my head and searching desperately for a handkerchief. But this was my uncle's trousers, and he never went out, so there were no handkerchiefs in his pockets. Hurriedly, I tried to wipe away the tears with my sleeve before he could see them. "I didn't take your file! I didn't! I..."

I blinked up at him, breathing heavily. What was he going to do now? Call his henchmen and have me killed?

To my surprise I saw him not where he had been a moment ago. He had retreated a few steps. The ice had gone out of his eyes, and he was standing in a slightly awkward position, his hands tugged into the pockets of his waistcoat as if he didn't know what to do with them.

"Um... here," he muttered. Pulling one of his hands out of the pocket, he handed me a clean white linen handkerchief.

"You just threatened to kill me and now you're offering me a handkerchief?" I asked, tearfully.

He shrugged, and the awkwardness vanished as he fixed me with his eyes again. "I can hardly question you further while you are... leaking like this. It is noisy and messy. Put an end to it. Now!"

Taking the handkerchief, I blew my nose in a noisy and not very ladylike manner. Then I held it out to him.

"Here."

He shook his head.

"You don't want it back?"

"Are you mad?" he demanded. "Of course I do! That thing cost three shillings and tuppence! I would simply be very obliged if you washed it before giving it back, though."

"Oh... err... of course I will." I paused. "If you don't kill me, that is," I added, as an afterthought.

"Oh, that." He shivered uncomfortably for a moment. Mr Ambrose, uncomfortable? What was this?

Finally he, waved deprecatingly. "I have thought of a better way. A way I can determine whether you are guilty or innocent."

"Well, I'm very glad to hear it."

"I imagine so." Straightening into his usual erect pose again, Mr Ambrose clapped his hand. "Karim!"

He hadn't even called very loud, and there was a locked door in the way. There was no way the big bearded fellow could have heard him.

"You called, Sahib?"

With a yelp, I sprang back and whirled to see the Mohammedan stand right behind me, towering in the safe doorway.

With a curt wave, Mr Ambrose directed him back into my office.

"Search the room. File S39XX300."

Apparently, Mr Ambrose was as economical with his words as with his money and facial expressions. Karim didn't need any more explanation. He went back into my office. Soon after, I heard the noise of drawers being opened.

"So what is it?" I asked. "This better method that does not require me to learn to swim with my lungs full of water?"

Was my voice steady? I thought it was. I probably should have been more scared, but somehow this felt unreal. I was discussing with a practically strange man his reasons for not wanting to kill me. Was this really happening?

"Well, you did not have the keys for the safe until today," Mr Ambrose reasoned, his gaze wandering up and down my body in a strange manner. "I do not believe you are capable of cracking a safe. Ergo, if you took the file, you must have done it today. And if it is not in your office, you must still have it on you."

"And?" I asked. "What do you intend to do now?"

His gaze went up and down my body again. "As I said," he repeated, his dark, sea-coloured eyes intent. "You must have it on you." He stepped closer to me.

And suddenly, I understood.

My hands shot up to shield me. "Oh no. No, nononono, Mister! Don't even think about it!"

The Sun is rising, the Birds are singing! I wish you a good morning, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen!

I've started getting quite a few inquiries from some among you, my fabulous fans, regarding when & where exactly this story of mine takes place. So I concluded I should take a little bit of time to give you some background information regarding "Storm and Silence". All those of you who are up for a lesson in nineteenth-century geopolitics, sit up & listen. The rest of you, my dear Ladies & Gentlemen, please go ahead and plug your ears! ;-)

"Storm and Silence" is set in the named the "United Kingdom of Great Britain & Ireland", a 19th-century nation that no longer exists today in the same form as it did back then, because it has been split into two different nations. Its main legal successor is called the "United Kingdom of Great Britain and NORTHERN Ireland" (please note the "northern") because the larger (and southern) part of Ireland successfully seceded after the United Kingdom and declared its independence a few decades after the Victorian Era was officially over. This southern portion of Ireland is nowadays known as "The Republic of Ireland".

The 19th-century United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was composed of Ireland (well, obviously) and of Great Britain, which in turn consisted, as it still does today, of the following countries: England down in the south, Scotland up in the north, and Wales in the west. All those different countries were unified under the rule of Queen Victoria, who also ruled over vast areas of the globe in other parts of the world. These were known as the British Empire. They were under British rule, but were not part of the United Kingdom or Britain itself.

Now, everyone who hasn't fallen asleep yet, raise their hands please! ;-)

You are the only ones who shall escape my terrible punishment! ;-) All the others shall be beaten with birch twigs, as was the custom in Victorian schools

Ahahahahaha... (Evil Victorian Teacher Laugh!!)

Your Victorian schoolmaster ;-)

Sir Rob

By Jove: "By Jove" is a British English expression of surprise. Jove was an alternative name for the Ancient Roman good Jupiter. Why exactly the British Victorians, all good Christians, used the name of an Ancient God who hadn't been worshipped for thousands of years to express their surprise is one of the mysteries of history. My personal theory is that Christianity in Victorian times was all pretense, and secretly, the whole country still worshiped the Olympian Gods, meeting in midnight orgies in the vaults of the Bank of England. (—Example of Heavy Sarcasm!)