

05. Driving Me Wild(ly)

I awoke and thought: Oh God, please don't let it be Monday.

Beside me, in the other bed, Ella yawned and stretched, looking first out of the open window, through which bright, golden sunlight streamed into the room, then turning to beam at me. 'What a beautiful Monday morning!'

Thank you very much, God.

Faced by the inescapable fact that Judgement Day was upon me, I simply lay there for a while, contemplating my doom. Ella, however, didn't seem to be aware of the fact that her sister was about to face a masculine monster from the pit. She was already up and dressing herself, humming a merry tune.

'Come on, Lill,' she said, calling me by my nickname she only used when nobody else was around. 'Get out of bed. It's already eight thirty.'

So what I wanted to answer, but the words stuck in my throat. Eight thirty? In my mind I heard Mr Ambrose's cool voice echoing: Be at my office, nine sharp Monday morning.

'Eight thirty?' I choked.

'Yes, why?'

Not daring to waste time with an answer, I jumped out of bed, struggled out of my nightdress, and hurriedly started throwing on the dozens of petticoats that we poor females had to stuffer under our dresses.

'What's the matter?' cried Ella, alarmed.

'I have to be somewhere at nine!' My own voice was slightly muffled because I was trying to force my way through three petticoats at once.

'Where?'

'Can't tell you. But it's frightfully important. Please, Ella, help me with these infernal things? I think I'm stuck!'

'Here, let me.' Ella, ever the helpful spirit, didn't even think of questioning me. Instead she untangled the knotted mess of petticoats I had been trying to ram my head through, and then handed me my dress.

'Not that one,' I said, shaking my head at my favourite, simple, gown. 'The other one.'

Now even Ella's curiosity was roused. She handed me the fancier of my two dresses, the one with lace trimmings she knew I hated wearing. When I had slipped into it, I rushed to the mirror and started untangling my hair. 'How do I look? Well? What do you think? Am I presentable?'

Ella stood behind me, watching something that was rarer than a volcano eruption in Chiswick: me, trying to make myself look stylish. In the mirror I could see her mouth open in a silent 'Oh' and a blush suffuse her cheeks.

'Oh, Lill!' She clapped her hands together, a sudden smile spreading over her face. 'You have a rendezvous, haven't you? A rendezvous with a young man!'

My jaw dropped, and I whirled around.

'No! Of course not!'

Ella didn't seem to have heard me. Quickly, she stepped to my side, that silly, secretive, girly smile still plastered on her face. Her hands came up, starting to style my hair and smooth my dress at a pace I would never have been capable of. It was as if she had ten arms. 'It's all right,' she giggled. 'I won't tell. Is he nice? Is he handsome?'

Yes he is. Very.

I pushed the thought out of my mind as soon as it appeared. It wasn't like that! I wasn't going to meet a man. Well, in a sense I was, but not 'meeting' as in meeting to do... well, to do whatever female's brain on earth, including that of my little sister, turn to mushy-gushy mushrooms the moment a man was mentioned? There were many legitimate reasons for a girl to meet a man, reasons that had nothing whatsoever to do with mating behaviour, such as... such as...

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Well, maybe I couldn't think of anything just now, but you see my point.

'Oh Lill, come on. Tell me at least what colour his eyes are, will you?'

I stomped my foot and crossed my arms. Ella more or less ignored my signs of protest and continued to work her magic on my hair.

'I said no, didn't I? I'm not going to a rendezvous, Ella!'

She just giggled again, and then winked. My dear, demure, innocent little sister, winking? And if my eyes didn't betray me, even conspiratorially!

'I quite understand,' she whispered. 'You have to be discreet.'

Why was I even bothering to correct her? It would be good if she came up with her own explanation and I wouldn't have to engage in inventive truth-modification again to spare her concern. But the thought simply drove me insane: I was going to meet Mr Rikkard Ambrose, and all the while my little sister would be sitting at home thinking that he and I were...

I shook my head. This was no time for mushy-gushy irrationality. My interest in Mr Ambrose was purely professional, and it didn't matter what anybody else thought. Did it?

No doubt motivated by her concern for the welfare of my pining, love-struck heart, Ella finished my hair in record time. I took about two seconds to admire myself in the mirror – really, Ella had managed to make quite a presentable lady out of her raw material – and then rushed towards the door. Over my shoulder, I threw my little sister a grateful grin. 'I'll owe you forever for this! Thanks!'

'You are most welcome,' she said, winking again. It was definitely conspiratorial this time.

Dear God, had the world gone mad?

I rushed down the stairs, past a bewildered aunt and out the door before she could shriek her protest. How much time was left until nine? Not enough, probably. I was just about to start sprinting on in the direction of Leadenhall Street when I spotted a cab, just driving by on the other side of the street. Huzzah! My life was saved!

'Cabbie!' I waved my parasol like a castaway signalling the rescue ship.

With a 'Ho there!' the cabbie stopped his horses and peered at me curiously. I clambered into the cab before he could even think of jumping down to help me inside, and whacked my parasol against the roof.

'Leadenhall Street, cabbie, number 322. I have to be there before nine.'

The name of the famous street, full to the brim with business and money, acted like an electrical shock on the poor man. Up until then he had been looking sleepy and not too pleased by his new passenger, but when I said that name, his eyes flew wide open and he cracked the whip.

'Gee up!'

The cab lurched forward and I was thrown back into the seat. Fiercely, I clung to the upholstery as we raced over the cobblestones. The uneven paving almost knocked my teeth out at the speed we were driving. We were lucky that there wasn't much traffic on the streets, or this insane tempo would have been plain suicide.

Outside the window, the buildings rushed by in a confused blur. I couldn't see much of them, but I did notice that, after a few minutes, the reddish-brown colour of brick buildings was replaced by the fancier colours of painted walls, which in turn were replaced by the gleaming white of marble. We had left the middle-class districts of London and were fast approaching the centre of the unrivalled power and wealth of the British Empire.

Anxiously, I listened for the sound of Great Paul, the bell of St. Paul's Cathedral, announcing the full hour. I had no idea if I still had twenty or only two minutes left till my appointment. If I only had a watch, then I would know! But apart from being expensive, watches were also only intended for gentlemen. As if girls didn't need to know the time of day!

'Hold tight, Miss!' the cabbie called, and I tightened my grip on the seat just in time. We swerved around a corner and I was almost thrown sideways onto the seat, but managed to right myself in time to see the black and white painted sign rush past the open window:

Leadenhall Street

Thank the Lord. Or maybe I shouldn't be too quick to thank him. That would rather depend on what would happen to me now...

'322, you said?' the cabbie called.

'Y-yes!'

Abruptly, the cabbie pulled on the breaks and I was flung forward, just managing to catch myself in time to prevent my nose from being bashed in. Panting, I sat there in the coach and tried to recover my equilibrium. Outside, the cabbie jumped down and opened the door for me. Ordinarily I would have protested at such a display of male chauvinism, but right now my legs didn't feel like protesting. With shaky steps, I climbed out and even accepted the cabbie's hand, which he offered to help me down.

'Here.'

I handed the man my pocket money of about half a year – thanks to my generous uncle just enough to pay the fare – and looked up and down the street. I didn't see number 322 anywhere. Hmm... What could the office of Mr Rikkard Ambrose look like? The likeliest candidate for the headquarters of a man of his wealth was a building right across from me, with a broad, showy façade and more pillars and scrollwork than on most royal palaces.

The cabbie had followed my gaze. 'Which one is number 322?' I asked. 'That one?'

He shook his head emphatically. 'Oh no, Miss. That's India House, the headquarters of the East India Company. Number 322, Empire House, is right opposite. Behind the cab.'

Oh. I turned and with apprehensive steps circumvented the cab.

Slowly, as the black-painted wood of the vehicle blocked less and less of my field of vision, something gigantic and steel-grey came into my sight, and I knew immediately: this was it. This was the office of Mr Rikkard Ambrose.

It was built in neo-classical style like India House. That attribute, however, was just about all the two buildings had in common.

Empire House was not broad. Not ostentatious. Not richly adorned. It was the highest building in the street, stacking levels of offices upon offices in the narrowest space possible, and by doing so towered over the flatter, broader houses. Its façade was not marble, but austere dark grey stone and cast iron. The portico, normally the pride of every building with dozens of pillars, was hardly fit to be called a portico. There were only two pillars supporting the projecting roof – but what pillars they were: grey giants that seemed to threaten everybody who approached them.

Grey giants under which I had to pass.

'Looks impressive, don't it?'

I jumped. The cabbie was standing right behind me.

'W-what does?' I asked, trying to make my voice sound steady. It didn't really work.

The cabbie took a critical look at my face, which for once I'm sure, in spite of my tan, was fashionably pale according to the beauty-standards of English society.

'Sure you want me to drop you off here, Miss?'

'Yes, yes, of course. Why wouldn't I?'

'Just saying.' He shrugged and hauled himself onto the cab's box again. Once more, he looked back. 'Quite sure? The gentleman who lives here is supposed to be...!'

For some reason he didn't finish the sentence, but glanced up at Empire House, and suddenly cut off.

'Yes, I'm quite sure. Thank you.' I nodded to him once more, and tried to give him my best imitation of a smile.

He just shrugged.

'It ain't none of my business. Good luck.'

With that, he cracked his whip and drove off, maybe a bit faster than was strictly necessary. I stared after him for a moment – then I remembered: I was running out of time. Quickly shaking off my paralysis, I turned and strode across the street.

Halfway across, the shadows of the great pillars enveloped me like giant bat wings. I couldn't help shuddering as I climbed the steep steps to the big oak front door. There was no doorman, which was a bit unusual for a building belonging to one of the world's most wealthy men, but which strangely fit the austere nature of the building and its owner. I was actually relieved – I wasn't entirely sure a doorman would have let me in. Yet deep inside I was also disappointed. A disapproving doorman might have been an excuse to turn around and go home.

Now I had no choice. No reason to excuse cowardice. I had to try. I owed it to myself.

Cautiously, I grabbed the large brass doorknob and pushed.

The door swung open, and I waited for the smoke of cigarettes to assault me as it had in all buildings ruled by men. Yet there was nothing but a draft of cool, clean air. Taking a deep breath, I entered and let the door fall shut behind me.

My dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In case any of you are interested, the dialect which the cabby uses in this chapter is called 'Cockney' and originated from certain parts of London. It involved such inventive language-modification as getting rid of any 'H' at the beginning of a word and always using double negative. So, who can tell me what 'This is not my hat' would be in Cockney slang? ;)

I hope I have managed to portray the dialect correctly. If there are any native Cockneys among my noble readers, I would be most glad to receive constructive criticism from those Ladies and Gentlemen.

Now I shall return to planning Lilly's and Mr Ambrose's encounter... Farewell! ;)

Yours Truly
Sir Rob

GLOSSARY:

Huzzah: The Victorian version of "Hurrah". Apparently, Victorians preferred double-zs to double-rs. What an abhorrent cozzuption of language, don't you think so?

Gee up: For all the non-equestrians among you, that's something you say to a horse to make it move faster ;-)