

58. The Speech

"Silence."

The word wasn't shouted. It wasn't even loud. It was simply spoken with such chilling precision, with such power behind it, that all went silent instantly. The crowd, the birds, the other speakers in the distance, even - I could hardly believe it - Patsy closed her mouth and stared up at Mr Rikkard Ambrose. When she took in his six foot six of poor, hard masculinity, she nearly dropped her sign and for a moment, "VOTES FOR WOMEN NOW!" was upside-down.

Placing his hands on the balustrade, Mr Ambrose leaned forward, towering over the crowd.

"Milords, Ladies, Gentlemen." He gave a curt nod. "I do not pretend, to be as well-versed in scientific knowledge as our friend the professor here." With a derisive movement of his head, he gestured to his red-faced predecessor on the podium, who was backing away now, the remnants of his speech clutched against his chest. "I am no scientist. I am just a simple entrepreneur who has made it his business to own as large a portion of the world as possible."

Chuckles rose up from the crowd. They thought he was cracking a joke. I knew better.

"My name," he continued, cutting through the chuckles like a sword through silk, "is Mister Rikkard Ambrose."

The chuckles died abruptly. Eyes widened, mouths dropped open. Some people took a step backward. Aghast, I watched as he transformed the crowd. It was obvious he was far better known and his wealth far more legendary than I had imagined. They all knew of him. He had hardly had to say a word, and already he had them in his hands. A mountain of money combined with his magnetic and menacing presence was all that was needed.

"So far," he told his loyal audience when he was sure his words had taken their full effect, "I have met with not inconsiderable success in this venture to enlarge my power. And that is what I am going to talk to you about today, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen: success and power. Trust me, I am an expert on the subject."

He let his cold gaze wander across the crowd, at last fixing it on Patsy as if daring her to contradict this. She did not.

"I would be the last one to deny, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, that if women and men were equal, they deserved equal rights."

There were gasps from the crowd Patsy grinned.

Abruptly, he held up a single finger. "However..."

Her grin vanished.

"However, this is not the case. Women are weaker than men."

My hands, which had relaxed a little up to this point, formed fists again. They ached to find a target to practise, and the lean, black-clad men at the front of the podium looked deliciously tempting. His cold, gorgeous face downright seemed to be begging to be punched!

"Wonderful," that slug Cartwright murmured beside me. "See how he commands the audience? Simply wonderful! Did you know your employer was such an accomplished orator, Mr Linton?"

"No," I managed to get out between my grinding teeth. "Usually he's rather terse. This seems to be... a special occasion."

"I see. Well, if I should not get the opportunity, please do give him my thanks for exerting himself for our sake."

"I will, Mr Cartwright. And don't worry, I won't hold back my feelings on the subject."

"That's very kind of you."

"You may now justly ask - how do I know this?" Mr Ambrose called, pointing at the audience. He seemed to be reading the question out of their eyes. "How do I know of women's weakness? Have I scientific evidence?"

He gave a derisive snort and swept his arm around in one large gesture, including all around him.

"I say to you, Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, that all I need is the evidence of my own eyes! Do you see any women as Prime Ministers? As Generals of our Army? As admirals of our Navy? As leading entrepreneurs in our country's industry? No! Women have not been fighting and working alongside men for hundreds, for thousands of years. Why then, I ask you, should they be granted that right now, only because they are seized by a sudden fancy?"

The men in the crowd were muttering their ascent. Women were lowering their eyes demurely, as if afraid to meet his cold, implacable gaze. I could hardly believe it! Even Flora and Eve had cast their eyes down. Only Patsy was still staring at him, the expression of hate on her face the second most intense one in all of London.

Guess whose was first?

Yeah. You guessed right.

If my hate had been fire, Mr Ambrose would have been a smouldering pile of ashes by now. Women are weak. So that was what he thought of me? That was why he was trying to get rid of me? Aerial I had done, all the effort I had put into convincing him that I was loyal, trustworthy and reliable, he still saw me as a weakling, a shadow of the man he could have working for him.

The crowd was getting more excited now. Mr Ambrose raised his voice, and his fist along with it, hard as stone.

"Women have shown us for hundreds of years that which we weaker than men, that they require protection - protection which we have given them, because they are weak and we are strong! This world is about the survival of the strong. How can we grant political rights, the rights to govern our very own nation, to the weak when our enemies would leap at the chance to exploit any weakness?"

With a swift, cutting gesture, he brought down his fist diagonally, cutting to the mere notion of such foolishness. Even through my rage I had to admit - he was good. Infuriating, and chauvinistic, and exactly what I despised in every other possible way - but he was good at what he did.

"I tell you, we cannot afford it! And I tell you that in all my travels around all the colonies of the great British Empire and beyond I have never encountered a woman that would deserve to be called strong, that would deserve to be called my equal!"

It was then that Patsy decided she had had enough. She stepped forward, holding up her "VOTES FOR WOMEN NOW!" sign like a shield.

"Really?" she called to him. "Maybe you should look over here!"

No! Here! growled in my mind. If any girl was going to show this arrogant son of a Bachelor what females were capable of, it was going to be me!

Mr Ambrose's cold gaze met Patsy's - and she took another step back.

"How much money do you earn, miss?" he asked.

Patsy blushed.

"Well... I don't, not as such..."

"How many battles have you fought in?"

"Battles? But I'm a girl, I..."

She stopped, biting her lip in fury. Around her, snickers rose up from the crowd.

"Ah," Mr Ambrose nodded. "So you don't want to have to fight in wars. You just want to vote, do you? Well, since you want to vote, I'm sure you're up to date on politics."

"I... well..."

"Tell me, I'm curious: what is your opinion on our current political situation in regard to the French Empire?"

"I... I don't know."

"Strange, for someone as interested in politics as you. Then tell me, what is our gross national income?"

"I don't know that either! I'm not."

"What about all the cabinet ministers and, their political affiliations and allies in the House of Commons?"

Patsy's hand were balled into tight fists around her sign. "I-don't-know!"

With a sigh, Mr Ambrose turned from her and nodded, as if she were not even worth another look.

"I rest my case. Think on what I have said, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, for I am not a man to repeat myself. Success comes from power, and power comes from man. It always has. It always will."

With a curt bow, he stepped back. The crowd was muttering and nodding. His speech was unlike any other they had heard so far, I could see that just from watching them. It also was a heck of a lot more effective.

As he walked back to me, an expression of cold superiority on his face, I glared at Mr Ambrose in pure rage. How could I ever have believed I could not hate this man? Well, now he had revealed himself for what he really was. I would not make the mistake of trusting him again.

"Wonderful! Simply wonderful!"

Stepping forward, Mr Cartwright grasped Mr Ambrose by the hand and shook it energetically, not seeming to notice that Mr Ambrose looked down at the hand clutching his as if it were the arm of a slimy squid that was smearing goo all over his black jacket.

"You were marvellous, Mr Ambrose! I don't know how to thank you! How you put that shrew in her place... I have never seen anything like it in my life. On behalf of our little community, let me offer you our deepest thanks."

I could almost see the letters wasted time blinking in Mr Ambrose's cool eyes as he directed them at Mr Cartwright.

"It was nothing," he said, curtly, and pulled his hand from the other's grasp. "It was simply the truth."

Just as he said this, he looked at me, and our eyes met.

Oh yes, I hated him. But if he thought that this was going to make me give up my position, he was in for a disappointment!

"What did you think of my speech, Mr Linton?"

I did my best to keep my voice steady.

"It was very... impressive."

"Indeed? Was it, Mr Linton?"

"Yes, Sir."

I wouldn't scream! I wouldn't attack him, no matter how much I might have wanted to! And I most certainly wouldn't leave his employment! Not because of something like this. I'd had to listen to chauvinist diatribes all my life. Maybe none quite so terrifyingly effective as his had been, but still, I had only had to stand there and listen. It wasn't as if I had to do anything.

"I'm glad to hear that," Mr Ambrose told me in such a low voice that only I could hear. "Because the fun is only just beginning."

That didn't sound good...

Calm I reminded myself. You only have to listen. Just to stand still and listen.

"Thank you for your appreciation, my dear Mr Cartwright." Without warning, Mr Ambrose turned back to the black-bearded man. "I'm very flattered that you think so much of my oratory skills - particularly since you will be in for another, similar treat today."

Cartwright's eyes widened.

"You mean..."

"Yes!" Swif as a cobra, Mr Ambrose whirled to face me once again. "Now, Mr Cartwright," he said in a voice so cold and calculating that the devil would have been envious, "my trusted friend and employee Mr Victor Linton would like to say a few words on the subject."

For a few moments, his words failed to register. Then, comprehension sank in, and as the comprehension came, the colour drained from my face.

"You can't be serious!" My voice was just a hoarse whisper.

"Do I," he inquired, his gaze as arctic as the heart of an iceberg, "look like I am joking?"

I stepped closer and leant forward so Cartwright couldn't hear us. As I spoke, there wasn't just anger in my voice. There was desperation and pleading. But I didn't care.

"You... you can't do this to me. You can't! I won't do it!"

"You will, unless you want to lose your position, Mr Linton."

Taking me by the arm, he manoeuvred me forward. I tried to pull away, but his grip was like granite. Soon, I was standing at the edge of the podium, facing the crowd. Hundreds of eager faces looked up at me, expecting me to betray my most cherished beliefs.

"Go on," he whispered in my ear. "Speak. And make it memorable, if you ever wish to receive your first month's wages."

My Dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,

The next big question is: is Mr Ambrose really a devilishly evil chauvinist, or is he just playing a role once more for some ulterior motive?

Please cast your vote by leaving a comment down below! Cursing of chauvinists is explicitly welcome :)

Your Victorian writer (awaiting your opinion eagerly)

Sir Rob

P.S: For all those who haven't heard yet, my SPECIAL EASTER SURPRISE has been posted. If you're interested, have a look at Sir Rob's True Talesto be found on my profile.