

## 76. Secrets of the Toilet

There was a moment of silence, then a faint jingling as of coins or keys – then the footsteps turned, and retreated back to where they had come from. A chair scraped across the door in the neighbouring room.

What's this? What is he doing, damn him?

He didn't leave me a lot of time for wondering, or for damning. Two minutes later, a small metal container shot out of the pneumatic tube and landed with a 'pink' next to me on the desk. I jumped and grabbed the thing, pulling out the message. It read:

Mr Linton,

You are three minutes late. This will be deducted from your wages at the end of the month.

Bring me file 38X1301.

Rikkard Ambrose

All right. So, at a guess I'd say he wasn't pining with passionate love for me.

So he didn't want me.

Ergo: the kiss never happened.

Well... so much the better. I wasn't even a tiny bit disappointed. No, I wasn't. In all, the fact that last night's morose... inimate occurrences had just been a dream had been what I had been trying to convince myself all the time. Now that I knew it was true, I ought to feel nothing but deep satisfaction.

Ought to, yes, but...

Hurriedly, I stood up and marched to the shelves of files. In no time at all I had discovered the required document and transported it to the door. I reached for the doorknob, turned it – and almost ran head-long into a closed door. A very unladylike word escaped my lips as I stumbled back, the file clutched to my chest.

What the...!

I tried the door again. I hadn't been mistaken. It was firmly and utterly locked.

"Hey!" With my free hand, I pounded against the heavy wood.

"What's the matter? Why is the door locked?"

Silence.

"Didn't you hear me? I said why is the door lock—"

A so plinkinterrupted me. Turning my head, I saw that another metal cylinder hand arrived on my desk. Mystified and annoyed, I stomped over to the desk and grabbed it. Now what would he have to say

Because I locked it.

Rikkard Ambrose

I took a deep cleansing breath, trying to calm my stormy temper. It didn't work.

Crossing out the original with maybe a little bit more force than strictly necessary, I wrote under his message:

Dear Mr Ambrose,

And why did you do that?

Yours faithfully

Lilly Linton

Hal I wondered what he was going to say now. Was he going to claim you could work more efficiently with all the doors locked? I wouldn't put it past him, the stinky, stony old...

Plink.

Ah!

Mr Linton,

It is a measure to further your abstinence and thereby the efficiency of your work. There is a liquor store only two streets away and a sweetshop selling solid chocolate right beside it. From your behaviour at the tavern, I deduced that keeping you locked up is the only way from succumbing to irresistible urges.

Rikkard Ambrose

How on earth did he know I liked chocolate? Wait... irresistible urges! My eyes sparkled!

I'll give him irresistible urges!

Not alcoholic once, though – the ones I was feeling right now tended more towards homicidal!

Still... there might be other kinds of irresistible urges, too. I brushed, as unbidden, memories flooded into my mind... so skin pressing against my lips, moving, caressing...

Dreams! Hallucinations! The whole lot of them! Things like that would never happen in real life. In real life, Mr Ambrose didn't go around kissing people. He went around bossing people around and locking them up.

I'd show him!

Fuming, I grabbed the next best bit of paper.

My very, very dear Mr Ambrose,

May I inform you that the strongest urge I feel at the moment has nothing whatsoever to do with alcohol, and everything to do with your disembowelment? OPEN THAT DOOR!

Your affectionate secretary

Lilly Linton

The answer wasn't long in coming.

Mr Linton,

You may say anything you like as long as it distracts neither me nor you from working. The door stays locked.

Mr Ambrose

The obstinate...! But why was I wasting my time like this, anyway? I was in a superior position.

Dearest Mr Ambrose

You might not recall, but I have the necessary keys in my possession to open the aforementioned door. You gave them to me yourself.

Therefore, I shall see you in a minute.

Yours affectionately,

Lilly Linton

I studied the message into the tube, pulled the lever and marched triumphantly towards the door without waiting for an answer. My triumphant march was somewhat impeded, however, when my keys wouldn't fit in the lock. I tried them again, and again. Still, they didn't fit. Marching over to the other door, the one to the hallway, I tried to open this one, but discovered that it, too, had been locked and my keys didn't fit. By the time I had returned to the desk, another message had arrived.

Mr Linton,

I had the locks changed.

Rikkard Ambrose.

P.S. A cation is not among the services I require of you.

Heat rose to my cheeks on reading the last line. I had reached for the pen before I had started to think.

Dear Mr Ambrose,

I wonder you went to the expense of two new locks, simply for the sake of my abstinence! How wasteful of you.

Yours

Lilly Linton

P.S: If you do not require it, I shall not o er it.

Only half a minute, his response arrived.

Mr Linton,

They were not new, but second-hand. I am still waiting for file 37W288. Shove it under the door.

Rikkard Ambrose

I'd like to shove it up his...

Oh no. I didn't want to have anything to do with his... Well, with that part of him. No matter how juicy it looked. Not even for shoving files up it.

Dear Mr Ambrose,

I demand to be let out immediately!

Yours

Lilly Linton

His reply was short and to the point. Who could have guessed?

Mr Linton,

You work for me, not the other way around. You cannot demand anything. Now bring me file 37V/288.

Rikkard Ambrose

What did I do? Yell? Hammer at the door in protest?

No.

I brought him the file.

I just managed it, all the while chanting in my head "Think of the money. Think of the independence it will bring you. Think of what you can do for Ella if all goes horribly wrong. You must have that money, You must."

My chant was interrupted by the plink of another message arriving. --.-.-.-.-

"Mr Linton?"

"Yes?"

I resurfaced from a mountain of files I was sorting through and looked around. But there was no one there.

"Mr Linton? The door to your office is locked."

It was Mr Stone's voice, coming from the other side of the door leading to the hallway.

"Yes, um... Mr Ambrose wanted me to lock it."

"Oh." From Mr Stone's bewildered tone I could tell he wanted to ask why, but didn't think it was worth the risk of arousing the wrath of Mr Ambrose. "Well, I have his letters here. Sorry for the delay, the postman got here late."

"I see. Can you just shove them under the door, please?"

"Of course. See you later, Mr Linton."

"Yes, thank you, Mr Stone."

Hurrying over to the door I grabbed the pile of letters and began to leaf it through. Business, business, business, charity (waste), charity (waste), more charity (definitely waste!), pink envelope –

My hands froze as I stared at the crest on the pink paper. Not another one of these!

Heat rushed to my cheeks as I stared at the name of the sender. Samantha Genevieve Ambrose. Already once before had I entertained the idea that this might be Mr Ambrose's wife. The idea had liked me back then. It drove me through my vanes now.

Flashes of last night again appeared in front of my inner eye. His arms around me, his lips on mine – no, no, no! It had all been a hallucination. What did it matter if he was married? He and I hadn't engaged in c –

Well, we had certainly done nothing that non-married people weren't supposed to do. All this in my head, it was a dream.

Quickly, I ran over to my desk and stuffed the pink envelope into the drawer to keep the others of its kind company. The old saying said 'out of sight, out of mind'. I slammed the drawer shut and took a deep breath.

And soon I discovered that the old saying was complete poppycock. --.-.-.-.-

I would like to be able to say I worked like a slave that day, but it wouldn't be true. Slaves are shouted at and brutally whipped, too. I, for my part, was simply badgered to death with little bits of paper.

The latter method turned out to be quite as effective as the former, though. He kept me at it for about three or four hours without one pause or break. And if that wasn't enough, thoughts of the letter tormented me ceaselessly. And the hallucinatory kiss! And... and... finally it started to feel like it all built up as a physical pressure, growing inside me. It built and built, waiting to be released –

Until I finally realized that it didn't just feel like a physical pressure. It was physical pressure.

Oops.

"Mr Ambrose?" Marching up to the connecting door, I hammered against the wood. "Mr Ambrose, I have to use the powder room. Now."

Silence.

"If you don't let me use it, I'm going to pee in the waste paper basket," I threatened.

That worked. Footsteps approached, and keys jingled in the lock. A moment later, the door open and he stood before me. Rikkard Ambrose, in all his cold, stony glory. His eyes were like dark pools of unfathomable deep water. His mouth could have been carved from granite. And his lips...

Luckily, my bladder took my thoughts o that subject fast.

"Finally!" I hissed. "What the dickens do you mean by locking me up like this? Are you—"

He interrupted me with a curt motion of the hand towards the powder room.

"Get in."

I would have liked to stay and argue, but my pressing need was becoming ever more pressing. Oh, well, I could always argue a reward.

Two minutes later I sat on cool ceramic, sighing in contentment – probably the first time ever I had felt contentment within the walls of Empire House, 322 Leadenhall Street.

As my feeling of contentment slowly faded, my thoughts dri ed to Mr Ambrose's behaviour. I couldn't make head or tail of it. Why would he lock me in like this? To prevent me from drinking and thus being distracted from my work? But that was preposterous! If I was in danger of becoming a drunkard, if I ran away and succumbed to alcohol during my work hours, he would have the perfect excuse to dismiss me – exactly what he had been waiting for all along. So why should he try to prevent that? To want to keep me from drinking to excess, that wasn't the act of an employer for whom one employee was like another, easily exchangeable. It sounded more like the act of somebody who cared about my safety...

Who cared about me.

I slammed the door on that thought immediately. I slammed it so hard I almost thought I heard the sound of a door shut with my actual ears.

Then, when I heard Karim's voice from outside the powder room, I realized I had heard a door shut: the door of Mr Ambrose's office!

"Sahib!"

Mr Ambrose's reply was unintelligible. His cool voice was much quieter than the rumble of the mountainous Mohammedan.

Quickly I jumped up and pulled up my trousers. This male outfit was pretty nice. Had I been in a dress and crinoline, it would have taken me a quarter of an hour to get up from the toilet. As it was, I was up and across the room in a few seconds, my ear pressed against the keyhole.

"...perimeter is watched closely. Shipments have been asking questions – it seems, no unusual shipments have gone out."

"So it might be that the file is still there?"

My ears grew to the size of bat-ears. They were talking about the stolen file!

"Yes, Sahib"

Yes! Dalglish hadn't gotten away with it yet, that slimy little... incredibly powerful peer of the British Empire.

"And what about the house itself? Number 97, East India Dock Road?"

That was it! That was the address I had discovered. I remembered that much from last night and knew that this part had not been a dream.

"It is better guarded than the Queen's hulks, Sahib Men with swords and guns are everywhere, some even professional soldiers.

Something is in there, that much is sure."

"I see. We will go ahead as planned then."

Go in? As planned?

Was there something planned? And if so, what? And most importantly, why hadn't I been told? It had been me who discovered the ruddy place, a er all!

"Be ready in three days. I shall need all the things on list I gave you by then."

Three days? And then... what? What were they going to do? Just march up to the door and demand that they be given back the file? No, that couldn't be it. But the only other explanation could be...

A shiver went down my back.

Secret preparations. Scouting. These words sounded familiar. They sounded like something you would do when you were planning something illegal.

"Sahib... I must once more raise the matter of—"

"No! Karim, we discussed this."

"Still, Sahib going in there by yourself..."

Violently, I jerked away from the keyhole and stared at it in disbelief. But as soon as they started speaking again, I pressed my ear back against the metal. Surely I could not have heard right!

"I have always done what needed doing myself."

I had. Damn and blast the arrogant bastard!

"Yes, you have, Sahib In the colonies, when we were dealing with bandits, and gold-diggers and other fools who thought too highly of themselves. This is an operation of Dalglish's, Sahib" Karim's voice hesitated. "You know what happened the last time you faced him, Sahib"

The silence that erupted on the other side of the door could have cut iron.

What? What happened? Lord Dalglish and Mr Ambrose have met before? Go on! What happened? I want to know!

Silence.

Speak up, blast you!

Then, a voice.

Silence. But not the one I had been hoping to hear.

"I... am sorry, Sahib."

"I will go alone." Mr Ambrose voice was as cutting and cold as his silence had been. "Who else can I trust to do it right?"

"You can trust me, Sahib" If I wasn't very much mistaken, I could hear something like hurt in the bearded mountain's voice.

"I know. Which is why I need you to say here to keep an eye on things."

"I... Very well. As you wish, Sahib"

To the dickens with the Sahib's wishes! Mr Ambrose was not going alone! I was going to stick with him, if it was the last thing I did!

If there had been other men in the room, they might have exchanged a few pleasantries before breaking up the meeting. But I had learned enough about Mr Ambrose by now to know that he wasn't given to chatter. Karim le the room, and I hastily got up o the powder room floor, dusted o my knees and cracked the door open, peeking out.

Mr Ambrose was sitting behind his desk. When I entered, he looked up from the papers he was studying, meeting my gaze coolly. I had to catch my breath when I looked into his eyes. How come I had never noticed quite how beautiful their deep, dark depths were until this moment?

"You heard." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, Sir."

"Then forget what you heard."

"I cannot do that, Sir."

"Oh? I gave you an order."

"You can take your order and stick it up your— um, I mean you can take your order and feed it to the ducks in Green Park! I'm coming with you!"

There was no need to say when and where. We both knew what I was referring to.

"No."

"Yes, I am!"

"No, you are not." His eyes glittered with frost. "Mr Linton – believe me when I say that if we could recapture the file by excessive consumption of alcohol, you would be in the front lines. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and I therefore decline your request."

"It was no request! I can't let you go in there alone!"

"You can, and you will."

Dear God! Had he always been like this? Was this, why his wife had le him and was bombarding him with pink letters? Were they living apart? But why would she be sending him letters if they were?

Although I had to admit to my shame that in her place, I might be sending him letters, too, just to have him snap back at me.

In defiance, I shook my head. "I won't let you go alone! I won't!"

"Yes, you will."

"But... For some reason my voice was unsteady. "But Karim said... he said armed guards you could be hurt out there or killed."

Silence.

"At least tell me what it is," I pleaded. "Tell me what that damned file is! Tell me what is worth risking your life for!"

The silence stretched between us as we gazed at each other.

He swallowed.

"You want to know what's in the file?" he asked, his voice like a raw winter blizzard. "You really want to know?"

"Yes." My voice was nothing like his – small, tense, expectant.

"In the file," he said, "is the centre of the world."

My Dear Lord, Ladies & Gentlemen,

I'd like to extend a great big "thank you" to every single one of the two-thousand of you who were kind enough to register at Twitter.com and follow me there in order to vote for "Storm and Silence" during this year's Wattys! However, unfortunately, we seem to still be at least 100,000 followers behind the other writers! (\*\*Mr Ambrose giving all of us a cold glare\*\*) I hope all you other awesome fans will join in soon. Together I'm sure we can do this!

As an extra-special surprise for all of you, I'm currently working on a little something in my gentlemanly cook-pot of ideas (also known as "head"), in order to celebrate our participation in the Wattys 2015. I will let you know all the details about the big surprise in soon, via twitter! (WHICH IS WHERE YOU WILL NEED TO FOLLOW ME TO VOTE FOR STORM AND SILENCE IN THE WATTYS IF I DIDN'T MENTION THAT BEFORE :))

Here's the link straight to my twitter profile:

<https://twitter.com/TheSirRob>

Since the above link is part of the chapter text, you probably won't be able to click on it. But you can also get to my twitter profile via a Google search for "TheSirRob" (my twitter username). Simply pick the top search result from the list of results that pops up on the screen.

Phew! :-)) This social network stuff is difficult when you are a Victorian Gentleman-writer who knows next to nothing of modern technology :)

Yours Truly (Twittering his head o )

Sir Rob

### GLOSSARY:

**Hulk:** By 'Hulk', Karim is not referring to an overgrown green monster who likes to smash things. In Victorian times, prisons were overflowing with criminals, and 'Hulk' was a term for an old navy ship that was no longer fit for sea, and was therefore used as a temporary, floating prison. I don't know why the Victorians preferred to store their prisoners on water rather than on land. Maybe they thought the ship rats deserved some company.