89. Lessons in Power

"The centre of the world is a canal. A canal in Africa."

It took a few moments for his words to register. Had he really... had he really just said that? That couldn't have been the truth! He had to have told me a joke just now, right?

Stupid question. This was Mr Ambrose.

He had been serious. Absolutely serious.

My hands flew up to grasp his collar, and not with the intention of kissing him. I started shake him like a rattle.

"*What*? A *canal*? I have been risking my life for a *bloody irrigation ditch*?"

His hands shot up to grasp mine, and ripped them off his collar. There was the sound of tearing cloth.

"That tailcoat was almost new, Mr Linton!"

"It was ten years old, you blasted miser! Ten years old is not almost new!"

I tried to kick out at him, but he captured my well-aimed knee between his legs. Next I tried to butt heads, but he ducked to the side.

"That is a matter of opinion, Mr Linton. I shall deduct the cost for repairing the collar from your wages."

"You're never going to pay me any wages, you son of a bachelor, because we'll never get out of this alive! And for what? A bleeding, stinking irrigation ditch!"

"Mind your language, Mr Linton! You have been warned that you will have to address me respectfully."

"You can take your respectful address and stuff it respectfully up your..."

"Mr Linton!"

With all my might, I shoved against him, and somehow managed to haul him to the side, slamming his back against the wall of the crate. Wood wool flew around us like snow in a blizzard. Only that things were not cold here. Oh no. They were just about to get hot.

"Mr Linton!"

"My name is Lilly! Do you hear me? Lilly!"

"Mr Linton, I forbid you..."

I tried to bite him. To my credit I must say that I only missed by inches. My teeth sank into the cloth of his precious, nearly-new-10-year-old tailcoat and probably left a good set of teeth marks. Hopefully they would be expensive to remove, or better yet, permanent!

"Mr Linton! Be rational."

"*Rational*? Don't you dare tell me to be rational! It's you who is crazy enough to risk your life and mine on this damned adventure! And for what? For a bloody irrigation ditch!"

My hands were still firmly caught in his grasp. I tried to bite again, but this time caught only air between my teeth. We rolled around in the little, dark space we had, bits of wood flying all around us, and I flatter myself that I got a few good kicks in now and again. But I didn't manage to free my hands, which was a pity. You need hands for strangling someone.

"You... you.. I'm going to kill! Do you hear me! I'm going to–"

Suddenly, he pushed against me with unbelievable force, and I realized that he had been holding back up to that moment. In a flash, he was on top of me again and pressing my arms down at my sides. His legs snaked around me, trapping mine, and preventing me from delivering any more kicks. He had me. I could not hope to escape from his stone-hard prison.

"Firstly," he said, his voice as cold as a winter solstice night, "Nobody *made* you to risk your life. In fact, I seem to remember locking you up to prevent that exact possibility."

I hesitated. Admittedly, he had a point there. A small, but nonetheless existent point.

"Secondly, you *asked* for the contents of the file. It is most ill-bred behaviour to try and bite my fingers off for a truthful answer. And thirdly, if you ever call the masterpiece of diplomacy and engineering which has been stolen from me an irrigation ditch again, I will deduct half your wages for stupidity."

Colour rose to my cheeks. Thank God it was too dark for him to see.

"So what exactly is this canal, if not an iri..." I remembered his threat just in time, and amended. "...if not what I said before?"

There was one more moment of silence. I waited. I could feel it in the air: he was finally going to talk.

Yet when he started, it wasn't at all how I thought he would.

"Four years ago, a British officer and explorer called Francis Rawdon Chesney submitted a report to Parliament. Nobody paid much attention to it at the time – the country was too busy with the death of King George and the general election. But I heard of the report, and tried to get hold of it. Something, which, interestingly enough, proved to be more difficult than usual with official parliament papers. Somebody had taken very good care to suppress this particular paper, which made me only more eager to lay my hands on it."

He made a pause. By now he had my full attention. I waited with rapt attention for him to resume.

"Finally, I managed to obtain a partial copy of the report by bribing an MP. It was a costly investment, but one that proved worth the expense. I knew that the moment I got to see the report. It detailed calculations of Mr Chesney as to the comparative sea level of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. You see, up until this point, the sea levels of the two oceans had been believed to differ significantly. According to Mr Chesney's new calculations, however, this was not the case."

I still couldn't see where he was going with this. Of what earthly importance could sea levels be, no pun intended? Yet I sensed that there was more to come, and so, for once, kept my mouth shut.

"I sent a man out there to check the calculations," he continued. "They were one hundred per cent correct. The red sea and the Mediterranean were on one level. Yet the fools in the government hadn't seen the significance of this. And I suppose," he added, coolly, "neither do you?"

I bit my lip. Indeed, I didn't see how it could be of the slightest significance. What could it matter? The Red Sea and the Mediterranean were separated by land, so what could possibly...?

Land.

Land which could be bridged by a canal.

It all clicked into place. Clearing my throat, I said, tentatively: "It was of significance because a canal could be built to link the two, without the different sea levels causing a natural catastrophe?"

He was quiet for a moment.

"Mr Linton?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Your intelligence is greater than that of an average British Member of Parliament."

"Err... Thank you, Sir."

"Don't get too excited, though. Nowadays, this doesn't mean much."

"Oh." I hesitated. "And why is it so important to build a canal from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean?"

He sighed, coolly. "Only *slightly* greater than an MP's intelligence, I see. Well, Mr Linton, why do you think?"

"I have no Idea, Sir."

"What, Mr Linton, is the most potent instrument of power in our world today?"

"Um... guns?"

I could almost feel him close his eyes in exasperation.

"A typical answer, and very dangerous misconception. The most potent instrument of power in our world today, Mr Linton, is trade. It was trade that built the British Empire, trade that lost it its American Colonies. It was trade that destroyed the might of the Incas, Turks and Chinese and made Europe, and above all Britain, the master of the world."

"Um... I think guns played some part in that, too."

"Yes, yes. They played a part." He waved my comment away as if it were of no more importance than an annoying fly. "But if not for trade, Europe would never have become inventive and rich enough to develop the gun and put its to its full use. If not for trade, great ships would not have been built, the world would not have been circumvented, the Americas not discovered, the farthest corners of the world not reached and then subjugated. Trade is what keeps Europe's power alive today, and it is what has enabled me to build my very own Empire. And now imagine, in such a world, dominated by trade, what you could do if you were able to open a new trade route, a trade route to the richest lands of the east which would be only half as long as the existing ones."

As he spoke, I saw the map of the world from my father's old Atlas appear in front of my inner eye, and I could see red lines flowing across it, marking the most important trade routes of the British Empire. I had never thought about why exactly these trade routes were shown on every map, but now, listening to Mr Ambrose's almost passionate words, I realized: they *were* the Empire. Without them, it would not exist.

And I also realized something else: All of the trade routes to the east ran around the Cape of Good Hope, circumventing the entire continent of Africa before they reached their destination. They did *not* go through the Mediterranean and from there to the red Sea, because on this far shorter journey, there was a piece of land in the way.

Of course! Lilly, you blockhead, how could you not have seen this sooner!

"Suez," I whispered. "You are planning to build a canal at Suez!"

Again, he didn't say anything for a moment.

Then: "It seems that not just your intelligence is slightly above that of an average MP. Your knowledge of Geography, too. Adequate thinking, Mr Linton."

Would it kill him to say 'good' instead of 'adequate' for once? Yes, it probably would. He'd choke on it.

"How much trade goes around the Cape of Good Hope every year?" I enquired cautiously.

He made a low, derisive noise.

"All the trade with China, India, Indochina, Australia, New Zealand... practically half the world's trade. Certainly the most profitable half. And if everything had gone according to plan, all this was to be channelled through one thin lane of water." Underneath the coolness, his voice almost became passionate as he spoke. "All this was going to flow through one centre of the world. All this I was to hold in the palm of my hand. Can you imagine, Mr Linton? Can you?"

I shook my head. I had to work hard to resist the urge to shiver.

"N-no. I cannot."

"That is because you have never seen a fleet of clippers or East Indiamen set sail for the far East, or the Americas. If you had, if you had witnessed the majesty of the great white sails coming down, catching the wind, and carrying the ships off to every corner of the world, you would. Ships are my arrows, the sea my bow, the world my target."

There definitely was passion in his voice now. It was a cold passion, a passion for things, not for people, but it was passion.

"Do you see the power of trade, Mr Linton? The power of the ship? It makes our world what it is today. And I was going to possess the knot where all these strands of power came together. The knot that connected East to West, and made me master of all."

His last words seemed to echo with significance in our little, dark space.

"East and West..." I murmured. "That's it. That's why Dalgliesh took the file from you!"

"Yes." There was resignation in Mr Ambrose's voice, and if I was not very mistaken, grudging admiration. "If I had been able to go through with my plans for that canal, I would have had him by the throat. His company may have the monopoly for trade in India, it might even rule India as if it were its own Empire, it might even have its own army, but its Ships still need to pass from East to West. If they cannot do this at competitive speed and cost, the company, like any other business, would collapse within a few years. If I had built that Canal, all ships passing through it would have been able deliver goods twice as fast and at half the price of any competitor. I could have could have decided who would get past and who wouldn't. I could have could have demanded *any* price I wanted."

"And you would have made Dalgliesh pay a lot?"

"No." The word was a block of frozen stone. "I would have cut of my right hand before one of the cursed ships of that man ever passed into my canal!"

He still held my wrists firmly in his grasp as he spoke. Thus it was that I could feel his little finger twitch.

"What did you say?" I demanded.

"You heard me."

"Yes, but... You would have denied him entry? Even though you could have asked any price you wanted?"

"Yes."

"Even though denying him entry would mean driving him into ruin?"

"Yes."

"Surely that is a little harsh."

"No."

"Oh."

His little twitched again.

"This is Business, Mr Linton. Business is about ruining your competitors, burying them so deep that they never get up again. And I would have buried him. Oh yes, I would."

By now, his finger was tapping a staccato on my wrist. Somehow, I didn't think Lord Dalgliesh was only simple business competition to Mr Ambrose. Yet I didn't probe further into the matter. Instead, I gently slipped my hand out of his grip and took his fingers in mine. The twitching of his little finger ceased.

He gave a sigh.

"What is the use?" he muttered, darkly. "What sense is there in 'would's and 'might have's. I have played the game, and lost. There will be no centre of the world, no canal at Suez, no new routes for the world trade under my direction. There is no chance of getting the file back now. We can only hope, if we are lucky, to escape from this with our lives." He took a deep breath. "Now listen. There is a remote chance that not too many men will be present when they open the crate. I will engage them, and it will be your job to–"

"No."

I think my abrupt interruption caught him off guard. He said nothing for a moment, then demanded: "*No*? What do you mean no?"

"I mean no, there still is a chance to get the file back. Think, Sir. Nobody knows we are here. If we could somehow manage to get out of this crate unseen..."

"Which is extremely unlikely."

"If we could manage it, we could get to the file..."

"How, without being discovered?"

"We still have our disguises. They got us into one of Dalgliesh's buildings – why not another?"

"There still remains the little matter of getting out of there alive."

I smirked in the dark. "Since when have I become the one suggesting dangerous schemes and you are the pessimist to reject them? Are you frightened of a little adventure?"

"Mr Linton?"

"Yes?"

"If I had enough room to move my arm properly, I would take you by the scruff of the neck and..."

"Yes, Sir?"

Silence.

"Nothing, Mr Linton."

"Just as you say, Sir."

Another spell of silence. When he spoke again, his voice was a curious, cold mix of tones I couldn't decipher.

"You are seriously suggesting that on reaching our destination, I get out of this crate unseen, manage to sneak into Lord Dalgliesh's secret hideout, steel the file, and then manage to flee, and that all on my own?"

"No. Not on your own, Sir. After all, I am here."

"That makes me feel so much better."

EARLY UPDATE! :) :)

To thank you for your awesome support in the crowdfunding campaign, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have worked like a serf to bring you this early installment of your favorite Victorian story!

Three Cheers, everybody, for we have reached the funding goal! Storm and Silence will be published as soon as editing and formatting is concluded. Since the funding goal is reached, the campaign on Indiegogo will be over soon. If you want your name in the book as a supporter of Storm and Silence, a personal autograph from Sir Rob, or another campaign perk, now is your last chance! :)

I myself will now delve back into the depth of my writing dungeon to bring you the usual Wednesday update on time! Thank you again! **Gentlemanly bow**

Yours Truly

(an incredibly exited) Sir Rob

Continue reading next part