

18. The Peril of Flowers

I went home to lunch, but since I didn't have the wherewithal to cope with my aunt's incessant questions about Lieutenant Ellingham, I made my disappearance as soon as possible. I decided to go the King's Library to look a few things up. Maybe I'd find an interesting book on China, or a Colonial adventure story, or...

All right, I admit it. I was going to look up Rikkard Ambrose. So what? Was it a crime that I wanted to find out a bit more about the man I worked for? It was only natural that I would like to discover a few more things about him. It might help me avoid such blunders as the one with the charity requests. Maybe I'd discover that he kept a poodle, or was allergic to strawberries, or some other interesting fact.

Maybe I'd even find out whether he was, as I was beginning to suspect, more than a simple citizen. Books and newspapers could hold all sorts of interesting information.

Fortunately, unlike riding, shooting and pretty much anything else that I thought might be interesting to do in life, reading was not solely the domain of men. Nobody gave me a second glance as I walked along the gallery of the King's Library, between the mile-high shelves and imposing busts of historical personalities.

In passing, I sent up a glare at the busts. "Of course you're all men," I muttered, gesturing up at them threateningly. "It didn't occur to anyone to put a bust of Queen Elisabeth or Mary Astell up there, did it? Darn chauvinist sculptors!"

An elderly gentleman passing in the opposite direction stopped when he saw me shaking my fist at the statues, and blinked as if he wasn't sure he was seeing right. I quickly hurried on to the newspaper section.

Shortly afterwards, I stood in front of a row of shelves, examining the enormous books which contained the Times of the last few decades. Where to start? From the dates on the file boxes I knew his history went back quite some time. So I pretty randomly picked one of the massive volumes. Where to start, I managed to get it down from the shelf and transported it to a table next to a bust of Julius Caesar.

"Hello there, fellow," I said, petting Caesar on his head. "Let's see what we have on Mr Ambrose, shall we?"

~~*~*~*~*

Three hours and seven volumes later, I gave up.

He was everywhere: always on the edge of things, never quite part of society yet always in the middle because all of society seemed to orientate himself around him. Mr Ambrose had been spotted near the races – but did he bet on a horse? No! Mr Ambrose had been seen talking with business partners outside the theatre. But did he go in? Of course not! Once he had been spotted in the Opera, but had he before the performance ended.

What did he do in his free time?

Where was his family?

What nefarious activities had he engaged in to amass his enormous fortune?

There were no articles about his past, not even the indication that at some point he might have given an interview. Nowhere in the dozens of papers I leaved through did I find a single answer to my questions. But then again – why was I so anxious to find out? What business of mine was it how he had gotten his money? Why did I so desperately want to know?

Deep down I knew why. With a shiver I remembered his words, almost a threat, on that day he had sat opposite me in his office, his dark eyes burning holes into my head:

I need a man. A man, Miss Linton. Not a girl who will run off screaming at the things she will see where my business takes me.

By that, I was sure, he had meant more than seeing the inside of file boxes.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

I wanted him to accept me as his secretary. As his female secretary, however scandalous other people would consider that. Yet I was also slightly afraid of what would happen if he did. What would he do if I really manage to convince him to let me work for him for real? Or more importantly, what would I have to do?

~~*~*~*~*

When I got home, my aunt was waiting and ready for battle, glaring at me like an emaciated Valkyrie. I was half expecting her to be holding a sharp spear, and riding an eight-legged horse.

"Where were you?" she demanded.

"I was in the park walking, showing off my charms to the young men there," I lied brightly. "Just in case I might happen to come across Lieutenant Ellingham."

"Oh." My aunt's mouth thin lips relaxed a tiny little bit. "Really? Well... good. That's very good."

"I shall do that on a regular basis, now that I have been introduced into society, there are hundreds of men I could meet. Thousands, in fact. And the more I meet...."

"You're quite right." My aunt came up to me. For a moment I was worried that she might want to hug me, which would have been slightly awkward because a) we were both wearing hoopskirts and b) I hated her guts, skeleton and strict, black boots. But instead, she just laid a hand on my arm. It was enough for me to want to run screaming and take a bath in the Thames. "I'm very happy you finally start behaving like a lady, Lilly. I knew you would see sense some day."

I thanked her like a proper little lady and then hurried off. Not towards the Thames for a bath, because I knew perfectly well that it was full of dirty toilet paper. Instead, I directed my steps towards the garden.

Why the garden, you may ask?

Simple. Over all the questions about Mr Ambrose that were plaguing my poor, chocolate-deprived brain, I had not forgotten my Sister and her problems. When I had entered the house, the sun had just been about to set. I knew perfectly well what that meant.

Ella and Edmund would soon have their nocturnal rendezvous into the garden. So I went out there, and this time didn't even stop to take a book with me. Tonight, I was quite sure, I wouldn't need literature to take my mind off things. Judging from the amount of flowers that had arrived in my absence, the evening's conversation would provide more than enough distraction.

As soon as the moon rose over the streets of London, I heard a rustle from the door and, through the bushes behind which I had concealed myself again, saw Ella hurrying past. Only a moment later, Edmund appeared on the other side of the fence.

"Ella, my love," he called in damnably audible whisper. "Oh, how it fills my heart to see you!"

"And mine," sighed Ella. Then she hesitated. "I mean my heart is filled with joy from seeing you, not from seeing myself. That would be silly. I see myself every morning in the mirror." She brightened. "But now you are here!" She exclaimed. "I have been waiting all day to see you!"

"Your words make my soul sing, Ella. Please, step closer, into the moonlight, so I may behold your lovely face."

"I will. But first... first I have to tell you something Edmund."

"What?" he asked, his breath catching.

"It is the strangest thing," Ella muttered. "I would not even mention such a strange, trivial occurrence if not for your words yesterday, but..."

"But what? My words yesterday? What words?" Now I could hear a distinct note of anxiety in Edmund's voice.

It must have shown on his face, too, because Ella smiled at him hesitantly, caught off guard by his expression. "Well... what you said about the flowers. You remember? You told me to tell you if Sir Phillip sent me any more flowers."

I glanced at the young man. Now the expression on his face wasn't simply anxious anymore. It was panicked.

"Yes, and? Has he sent you another bouquet?"

"One?" Ella giggled. "No, not one. I tell you, the man must be very eccentric, I cannot otherwise account for his behaviour. He sent me dozens of bouquets. I had no idea there were that many flowers to buy in the whole city of London. I..." She broke off when she saw Edmund's face.

"Edmund? Edmund, what is wrong? What ails you?"

"My heart is breaking," he answered tonelessly, staring into the distance with empty eyes. "That is what ails me. It is as I thought. I am doomed."

I leaned forward, resting my head on my knees. This was good. Better than the theatre, except that I couldn't throw peanuts at the actors. I doubt Ella would have appreciated that.

"What is the matter?" My little sister wrung her hands in sudden desperation. "Oh Edmund, reveal to me this terrible secret you are carrying! What is it about those flowers that makes you fear them like death itself?"

"Worse than death," he mutters. "A thousand deaths and the tortures of hell."

Dear me! That fellow had definitely read too many romantic novels. I considered interrupting and telling him he was over doing it.

But then, on second thoughts, maybe I'd rather not.

"Tell me, Edmund! Tell me, what are they?"

"The flowers are a sign of affection," said Edmund, his voice as hollow as a drainpipe through which all his hopes were flooding away. "Sir Phillip wishes to seek your hand in marriage."

Ella stiffened. All colour drained from her face. I covered my eyes with my hand and let it slip it down my face. Good God in heaven, she was actually surprised.

"No!"

"Yes, he does."

"No, Edmund..."

"And who can blame him?" he continued. "You are indeed a fair maiden, Miss Linton. Every gentleman in England should be seeking your hand. You..." his voice broke, and a few moments later he continued: "You are far too good and beautiful for common folk."

"Edmund! What are you saying?" She cried out.

"I am saying good bye, Miss Linton."

"Good bye? Edmund, why do you torture me so? And why so distant? Why call me Miss Linton?"

"You are right," he said in the same hollow voice. "I should call you Lady Wilkins. For that is who you soon shall be."

Apparently, I had been wrong before: Ella had still some colour left to drain from her face. It vanished at Edmund's words, plummeting towards the earth's core.

Suddenly not at all amused by the scene, I sat up straight, staring whole arsenals of daggers at Edmund.

What was that bastard doing? Was he so heartless that he could just stand there and hurt my little sister? He should be pulling her into his arms and telling her all would be all right! A hand climbing over the fence, that is.

"I will never marry Sir Phillip," Ella proclaimed. "Never!"

"But why not?" Edmund asked, his voice still as hollow and dead as an entire graveyard. "Is he not a most eligible match?"

"I do not care how eligible he is," sneered Ella, taking two rapid steps towards the fence. Edmund stepped back hastily as she stuck her hand through the poles, trying to reach him. "I... I..."

"Yes? You?" he inquired and his voice wasn't quite as dead as before.

"I love you, Edmund."

"Ah. A platonic love, surely, since you are soon to be married?"

"No! A lover's love, Edmund. If I could, I would be thine, to have and to hold."

"Oh Ella! Come into my arms!"

What the heck? Just ten seconds ago he was egging her on to marry somebody else, and now he wanted them to snuggle? If all lovers behaved like this, they should be summarily committed to lunatic asylums!

Surely, Ella would be too proud and self-respecting to throw herself at a man who had just scorned her?

"Oh, Edmund, my love!"

No, apparently she wasn't.

I watched in mingled horror and fascination, as she indeed threw herself into his arms, or at least as well as she could with the fence in the way. I wondered how long it was going to take one of them to think of the ladder leaning against the garden shed. Probably a good long time still.

Anyway, both of them seemed to be much too honourable to just throw themselves at each other. I had expected at least some action and was a tiny bit disappointed when they only took hold of each other's hands and stared into each other's eyes. I had seen both of their pairs of eyes before. They weren't that interesting.

"So you do not simply feel friendship for me?" Edmund demanded, his voice deep with emotion. "There is more?"

A little colour returned to Ella's cheeks. "You know there is."

"Yes, but the delight of hearing you say it..." He closed his eyes for a moment, sighing blissfully. "There is no song of angels that is sweeter to my ears."

Yes. He really read too many romance novels.

My little sister, not in the least repelled by his sappiness, took one of his hands and lightly pressed it to her cheek. Now we were getting somewhere!

"I love you, Edmund."

When Edmund opened his eyes again, they looked a little more interesting than before. Certainly more intense.

"As I love you, Ella, my heart's delight."

"Oh Edmund. You do not know how long I have been waiting for you to say these words to me."

"They have lain ready on my tongue forever."

He pressed her hands again.

"So you will be mine?"

Suddenly, the colour left Ella's cheeks again. The radiant smile that had lit up her features until a moment ago became laced with sadness.

"Edmund, I..."

"What? What is this? You said you loved me!"

"I do! I do! But..."

Now there again were tears in Ella's eyes. She didn't seem to be able to continue. So Edmund spoke for her, slowly and gravely:

"But the objections to our love which you so conscientiously explained to me before, still stand. Nothing has changed. The fact that we love each other does not mean that we can be together."

Ella gave a shaky little nod.

"What if you told your aunt that you did not love Sir Phillip?"

"I? Defy my dear, dear aunt? Oh please!" She clasped her hands in supplication. "Please don't even make me think of such a thing!"

"Then what do we do?" he asked, sounding lost.

"I don't know!"

Behind the bushes, I bit my lower lip, deep in thought. Well, I didn't know either. But I'd be damned if that was going to stop me from doing something! At least I had plenty of time on my hands. My new job with Mr Ambrose was not very demanding. He didn't seem to want anything from me at all.

Had I only known then how wrong I was about that.

-

Sni, Sni... ;(

Please, my dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, hand me your handkerchiefs. Tragic romance is always so horribly sad to write.

Thanks! **blowing nose in a gentlemanly manner**

Oh, and incidentally, there shall be one more quick update, and a report that I will unfortunately have to return to my normal updating schedule of a single chapter posted every week, since soon, the terrible monster known as "university" shall once more swallow me up again! But, on a much more positive note, I have fantastic news for you! This little story of mine is turning out to be increasingly popular here on Wattpad! A great big 'thank you' with a cherry on top to everyone among you who gave me feedback & support, my dear readers! It's only through you and your support, your votes & your encouraging comments that Storm & Silence has already been able to reach the marvelous heights of the first page of the Wattpad romance charts!

All join me in a Victorian Cheer... Hip, Hip, Huzzah! :-)

Yours Truly,

Sir Rob

Continue reading next part [↗](#)