

24. The Beauty and the Vegetables

Following Mr Ambrose out of the safe, I saw that he had crossed my
o ice and was standing at the connecting door to his own. He thrust
it open and we followed him inside the large, bare and empty room.

A room which was no longer bare and empty. I had been mistaken,
thinking that my o ice was the thief hunter HQ. It had just been a
temporary space until things were set up in here.

People were standing all around: men with nondescript faces, in
nondescript clothes. On the desk lay a gigantic map, larger than any I
had seen before, even in the British Museum. It detailed not the
world, but to judge from the web of jagged lines, some vast city in
fine detail.

Immediately I knew what it had to be. A map of London. A map for
the hunters.

What in heaven's name could have been stolen that Mr Ambrose was
so desperate to discover? And why wouldn't he tell anyone what it
was? Why wouldn't he tell me?

"Gather round." Mr Ambrose took up his position at the desk and
gestured for Karim, Warren and me to do likewise. The two dozen or
so men whom Warren had brought with him posted themselves at
either entrance to the room.

Some of the men, including Warren, but excluding Mr Ambrose, took
out cigars and lit them. Not used to the smell, I wrinkled my nose –
but I would have to get used to this if I really intended to work among
men.

"We have to come up with a strategy to track Simmons," Mr Ambrose
said. "Suggestions, gentlemen."

And Ladies! I thought, but didn't say it. Instead, I said: "Well... maybe
we should start by thinking about motive. Why did he steal the file?"

"Because he wanted it, obviously," said Mr Ambrose. "I should
perhaps have clarified: Intelligent suggestions."

"That is not what I meant," I snapped. "I meant... what does the file
contain? Why exactly did he want it for himself?"

"None of you are to know what the file contains, Mr Linton. Nor do I
see that it is in any way necessary."

"It is necessary if we want to know where he will go next and what he
will do," I persisted. God, he really had trust issues. "For example – if
it simply is a folder containing banknotes, he'll just flee the city. If it is
some important document, he might try to sell it. If it is a letter from
one of your secret lady friends, he will try to blackmail you."

Mr Warren almost swallowed his cigar. Slowly, Mr Ambrose, who had
been staring down at the table, looked up at me and fixed me with his
cold gaze. I tried my best to meet his eyes without flinching.

"Well, I can guarantee you, Mr Linton, that it is nota letter from one of
my secret lady friends. They would not waste their time writing
letters to me they know I would not read."

Now it was my turn to stare. Was he being serious? Did he really have
a secret lady friend, or God forbid, several? For heaven's sake, I had
been trying to make a joke!

Perhaps not the best of ideas, where he was concerned.

"Well," I said as steadily as possible, "that leaves two of the
possibilities I have outlined. Which is it?"

He remained silent.

"Just a general indication," I coaxed. "Come on. You have got to give
us something."

Warren cleared his throat, taking this opportunity to rid himself of the
bitten o pieces of his cigar that were still stuck there.

"I think I must agree with Mr Linton, Sir. Without any idea of what the
document in question is, we have little hope of catching the thief."

Mr Ambrose stayed silent for one moment longer – then he nodded
curtly.

"Number two," he stated.

I frowned. What was he talking about? "Excuse me?"

"Number two," he repeated. "The second possibility you outlined.
There are no banknotes in the file. It is an important document."
Taking a deep breath, he added: "More important than you can
imagine."

"Now we're getting somewhere," I sighed.

"Can he sell it to anyone, Sir?" Warren inquired.

"Only to the right people. And by right I do not mean 'right' as in
'right and honourable'. I mean people with limitless cash and little
conscience."

I almost said "Oh, you mean people like yourself?" But I held my
tongue. My natural tendency to bad manners was not well placed
here, if I wanted to keep my job.

"These people," I asked, "are they here in London, or could they be
anywhere in the country?"

"Theoretically, they could be anywhere. But it is most likely that they
would be here. This is the centre of the British Empire, the power-hub
for a fi h of the earth's surface – the best place to transact any kind of
business, whether legitimate or otherwise."

"But we had better make sure, hadn't we?" I said with a sweet smile.
"Somebody told me once it's better to always verify."

Mr Ambrose gave me another one of his cold stares. "That must have
been a very wise person." Turning, he nodded to Karim. "Go, take a
few of the men and check Euston station. I want a description of all
the passengers that le in the last few days and don't care how you
get it. If there's anyone there who fits Simmons' description – find
him, grab him, hold him. I do not care if it should happen to be the
Prime Minister."

"Is Simmons easy to recognize?" I asked, as Karim marched out of the
room with seven henchmen at his heels.

Mr Ambrose nodded grimly. "Oh yes. That is the one piece of good
luck in this mess. He's tall and gangly, with a long nose, long blonde
hair and a thin moustache, and a scar over his right eyebrow. If
anyone saw him, they'll remember him."

"He might have altered his appearance," I pointed out doubtfully.

Beside me, Warren nodded. "That's very likely, Sir."

"No, it isn't. He's always been a vain fellow. Clever, but with a too
good opinion of himself and his looks. No doubt he thinks we have no
hope of catching up to him."

"And do we, Sir?" Warren wanted to know. "Assuming he has not le
the city – and I for my part think it likely that he is still here – how are
we going to find one man hidden in a labyrinth of a city among three
million people?"

"The task is not as impossible as you might think, Warren." Mr
Ambrose tapped the map on the table. "Most of those three million
people are working class folk. I doubt very much Simmons would
hide out in one of their miserable little sheds. Oh no. He did this for
money, and he would want to live in style."

In quick succession, he pointed out various buildings on the map,
marking them with pushpins.

"These are the best hotels in town. I do not approve of such frivolous
behaviour as betting, but if I did, I would bet my top hat on the fact
that he is staying in one of them, under some alias."

"Just... staying in a hotel?" I asked, incredulously. "Isn't he afraid of
the police?"

"He knows my a airs," was the curt reply. "He knows I cannot involve
the police in this. The results would be..."

His voice trailed o into nothingness. We all waited, with baited
breaths, but not a word came. So the results would be too terrible
to speak aloud, would they? What in heaven's name could be in this
infernal file?

"The police is not an option," Mr Ambrose finally continued, "so
Simmons feels confident and secure." For a moment, lightning
flashed in his dark eyes. "Very soon he will learn of his mistake."

"This is all very well, but these are over a hundred hotels," I pointed
out. "How are we to find out in which one he is staying?"

"I can take care of half," said Mr Ambrose. Without further
explanation, he strode to the pneumatic tube at the wall, wrote a
message in his meticulous handwriting, and pulled the lever. Shortly
a er, the answer came. He checked it and returned to the desk.

"You can cross these-" pointing to about half of the hotels on the map
– "o the list."

"How on earth can you check the guest lists of more than fi y hotels
with just onemessage?" I demanded.

He fixed me with his dark glare.

"Because I own them."

"You own fi y per cent of all the hotels in London?"

"No. I own seventy per cent of all the hotels in London. But the
remaining twenty per-cent are too expensive even for an escaped
criminal with a bag full of ready cash to a ord."

Of course. I should have guessed.

"Well," I asked sweetly, gesturing to the remaining hotels on the map,
"do you plan on buying the rest of them to make things easier for us?"

"That would not be making things easier, Mr Linton. Unfortunately,
such things take time – time which we do not have."

"You could always bribe someone in the hotels," I suggested, raising
an eyebrow. "You have enough cash, don't you? And you don't seem
to be above bending the law a little."

The room went deadly quiet.

Before I knew it, Mr Ambrose was at my side, and his hard hand was
gripping my arm. Slowly, he leaned down towards my ear until I could
feel his breath there, tickling me in a delicious threat.

"I am perfectly well aware that you are no real lady, Mr Linton. There
is no need to prove the fact further by impugning my honour in front
of my associates. I will let you be a part of this only if you can behave
yourself properly. For a start, when you speak to me, you will show
me proper respect. You are to address me as 'Mister Ambrose' or 'Sir'.
Is that clear?"

I smiled at him as sweetly as I could manage.

"Sir! Yes, Sir, Mister Ambrose, Sir!"

His eyes narrowed infinitesimally, but he didn't say anything. He just
stepped back and looked down at the map again.

"So how do we deal with the remaining hotels and determine
whether or not he is there?"

"We could simply ask," suggested one of Warren's men. But Warren
shook his head. "No, Jim. We could if we knew the Alias Simmons is
using, that wouldn't appear too suspicious. But we can't if we only
know his description."

I nodded. "That's right. I mean... How do you think a receptionist is
going to react if you come marching into his hotel, demanding to
know if a man with long blonde hair is staying here, without o ering
any explanation as to why you're looking for him. He would throw
you out."

"He would not throw meout," stated Mr Ambrose darkly.

"Err... probably, Sir. But he wouldn't answer the question, either,
would he?"

He shot me a look that was a shade darker than the one before.

"Do you have a better idea?"

Suddenly, I smiled. Inspiration had struck. Yes!

"Actually," I told him, "I do. I know exactly how we can find him. Or
more precisely, how I can. It'll be easy. I just need a beautiful dress
and a sack full of onions."

**Greetings, my dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen! Isn't this a
marvelous morning? Just right for a little bit of thief-catching,
don't you agree? Does everyone have their rifles, wooden clubs &
pitchforks ready? Then let us all go on the hunt! All of you, please
join me in the old English hunting song:**

A-Hunting we will go, A hunting we will go...

**Any guesses what exactly Lilly needs her "special equipment"
for? :D :D**

Your thief-catching Victorian writer

Sir Rob

GLOSSARY:

Euston Station: Euston Station was the first ever inter-city train
station built in Great Britain. It was built in London during the
nineteenth century (and, by the way, is still standing tall
nowadays). The station opened its doors in the year 1837. Back
then, Euston station had only one single railway connection to
another city in Great Britain. Going by train, you could only travel
from London to Birmingham and back. In case you wanted to go
anywhere else, you would have to move with your own two legs,
or, in case you had su icient coins to a ord it, hire a coach. I
included an image of a historical painting of the original Euston
Station beneath, painted shortly a er its opening.



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