

Operant Conditioning

by Naomi Rivkis

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When Gregory invited them over that Saturday, Valerie dressed smartly, expecting good wine and gossip. Dani came straight from the aquarium, still smelling faintly of fish. Neither expected the afternoon to spiral into conspiracy.

“Bernard Ignacci just fired seventeen union organizers,” Gregory said, pacing his SoHo loft with his phone in hand. “*Seventeen*. And next week he’s getting some goddamned humanitarian award for his foundation.”

“Bernard Ig-whocci?” Dani asked, settling into a corner of the leather sofa.

“Tech manufacturing. Eighteen billion dollars, came from nothing.” Gregory threw himself into a chair. “My parents know him — he comes to the big fundraisers, writes enormous checks, tells everyone about growing up poor. He’s charming at dinner. Then his company does crap like this.”

Valerie had worked for Gregory’s family publishing house years back, before she figured out what to do with her data science degree. She’d met Bernard Ignacci twice at company events. Both times he’d been genial and eager to please, wanting to be liked.

“He probably doesn’t connect the two things,” she said slowly. “Personal generosity in one box, corporate operations in another box entirely.”

“Could we change that?” Gregory stopped his pacing suddenly in front of Dani, locking eyes with the marine mammal specialist. “Actually condition someone to make the connection?”

Dani laughed. “You want to train a billionaire?”

“You train animals all the time. Reward the behavior you want.”

“Humans are more complicated than sea lions,” Dani said. But she admitted slowly, “The basic principles are the same, though.”

“What would even *work* as a reward?” Valerie asked. The problem was interesting. “Money means nothing to him anymore.”

Gregory leaned forward. “Acceptance. From old money, specifically. *Real* acceptance — not just showing up at a gala to write a check. The intimate stuff. My mother’s salon, the small dinners, actually being part of the conversation. He’s virtually never invited to those.”

“New money seldom is,” Valerie noted.

“Usually, no. But you’ve met my parents’ circle — they’re not activists or anything, but they actually care about this stuff. They want the world to be better, they just... do it from their living rooms. My mother genuinely *likes*

people who do good. So does Constance Alderman, so do the Whitmores. It's like... everyone in their circle has money, so that doesn't impress them. People with ethics impress them."

Valerie sat up straight, her brain whirring almost visibly. "Right. So... what if every time Bernard's company did something genuinely good — real labor practices, not PR because he throws money at something — he suddenly discovers openings into the circles he's been craving? And it'd be real, because those people would actually be impressed."

Dani set down her wine looking between the others. "You're serious."

"*He* might be serious. *I'm* curious," Valerie corrected. She was mapping the data structures in her head. "Just how much access do you have, Gregory?"

"My parents know him socially, a bit." He hesitated before adding, "And... Aidan works for him."

Valerie raised an eyebrow. Aidan was Gregory's ex, and still a close friend. "Would Aidan help?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe. He really hates the union stuff — he's the one who told me about it. But he likes Bernard as a person; he would never hurt him."

"We wouldn't be hurting him," Valerie answered. "We'd be making him better."

Three weeks later, Gregory's loft looked like mission control. Behavior charts covered one wall. Five years of Bernard's business decisions, printed out and mapped against his social calendar.

Aidan had joined them, nervous but willing, as Valerie walked them through the data. "His company operates like most at that level — maximize profit, minimize short-term cost, don't think much about the human side. It's not malicious. It's just standard practice."

"Efficient extraction," Aidan nodded quietly. "Bernard calls it that."

"Right. But look at these three outliers — times he made decisions that cost money but helped workers. All three came right after he'd been socially included in something meaningful to him. A private dinner at the Whitmore estate. Gregory's mother's salon last year. A musical gathering, where he was treated as belonging."

"He wants to please them," Dani observed. "Like a puppy learning what makes its owner happy."

"Exactly. The impulse is there. He just needs to learn the pattern consciously."

Aidan studied the timeline. "He's been sitting on a minimum wage proposal for six months. Keeps bringing it back even though his CFO shelves it. Says he wants to 'do right by people.'"

“Then let’s help him learn how,” Valerie answered firmly.

The timing had to be perfect.

Aidan scheduled the proposal review for a morning when the CFO was vacationing in Thailand. Bernard signed the wage increases at 10:47 on a Thursday.

At 11:15, Gregory called his mother.

“That dinner next week, Mom — what about inviting Bernard Ignacci?”

“Darling, he’s pleasant enough, but that’s not really his crowd.”

“I know. But did you see his announcement today? Real wage increases across all facilities, not just PR. I thought it might be interesting to hear his thinking. You’re always saying you wish more business people cared about doing right by their workers.”

His mother paused. “Your father mentioned that announcement. Said it was unusual. Rather impressive, actually.”

“And you know Bernard would be grateful. He’s always generous with your causes.”

“True. And if he’s genuinely trying to do better — well, that should be encouraged, shouldn’t it? So rare these days.” His mother’s light voice turned decisive. “Yes, all right. I’ll have him added to the list.”

The invitation arrived by messenger Friday afternoon. Aidan texted: “He’s staring at it. Just called his wife to tell her. Not texted, like he always does — actually called her.”

Valerie monitored the dinner party from the loft via texted updates from Gregory and Aidan, tracking it like experimental data.

“Constance Alderman is really engaging with him about the wage increase. Not just polite — actually interested.”

“He told a story about his grandmother. People are charmed.”

“Mom just asked him to join her arts education committee. He said yes immediately.”

Dani looked up from reviewing her training videos. “Is it working?”

“Maybe,” Valerie said. Her screen showed Bernard’s calendar filling with follow-up lunches, meetings, and — most importantly — an email memo Aidan forwarded about Bernard wanting to “explore more progressive initiatives.”

Dani nodded with satisfaction. “The real test comes at his next decision point.”

It came five weeks later.

Bernard's legal team recommended fighting a class-action lawsuit from workers exposed to unsafe conditions. Standard practice: drag out the time, minimize payout.

"He's hesitating," Aidan reported. "Asked me to compile a report on the response after the wage announcement. Wants to know if 'those people' really noticed."

They arranged for Bernard to sit next to Constance Alderman at a museum benefit the next week. It took careful work through Gregory's mother's network, but they made it look natural.

Constance, whom Gregory had gently briefed about Bernard's "interesting evolution in corporate thinking," spent the dinner drawing him out. When Bernard mentioned the lawsuit, she looked at him with mild surprise in her warm brown eyes, "Surely you're not the type who fights his own workers, Bernard. You're a better man than that."

Three days later, Bernard settled for more than his lawyers recommended, and committed to improved safety standards.

Constance called him personally to say that she was impressed.

"He just sat at his desk afterward," Aidan reported. "Didn't move for ten minutes."

Over six months, the pattern became consistent.

Bernard stopped fighting union organizing. He divested from a subsidiary with major environmental violations. He implemented real parental leave. Each time, the rewards came: intimate dinners, board positions at institutions that mattered, genuine warmth from people whose approval he'd spent years chasing. And it worked because those people — Gregory's parents' circle of comfortable, liberal old money — genuinely valued what Bernard was doing. They weren't deliberately manipulating him; they were responding authentically to someone demonstrating real ethics.

"You realize," Valerie said one evening, scrolling through the data, "It only works because he's Bernard. Most billionaires wouldn't care about Constance Alderman's opinion. Wouldn't notice not being invited to a salon."

"So we can't scale it," Dani sighed. She came less often now, her time absorbed by her work at the aquarium and a new program she'd started, training service animals.

"No. One billionaire with very specific psychology. That's all we've got."

Gregory shrugged ruefully. "But it'll help his workers, and anyone else his company touches. It's like the old story about the kid who threw starfish back into the sea before they dried out. It matters to that one."

Bernard's head of security noticed the patterns eventually. The timing, the connections, the precision.

He presented his findings in a private meeting. Bernard sat alone in his office for three hours afterward, unmoving, his head in his hands. Then he called Gregory and asked to meet — just the two of them, somewhere neutral.

They met in a small Brooklyn park. Bernard was already there when Gregory arrived.

He looked levelly at Gregory. "I know what you did. Most of it, at least. The timing was too perfect. I know your family's network. Once I knew to start looking, it wasn't hard."

Gregory sat carefully on the other end of the bench. "Bernard —"

"I should be furious," Bernard interrupted. "Part of me is. But... my employees don't leave anymore. My wife is proud to be seen with me. Constance Alderman asked my opinion yesterday. *My* opinion."

He was silent for a long moment, looking into the distance over Gregory's shoulder. Then, abruptly, he asked, "Why did you think it would work?"

"Because you want to be good," Gregory said simply. "You just didn't connect that to how you run your company. You wouldn't have believed me if *I* told you it mattered, but you believed the people whose opinions were important to you."

Bernard was quiet a long time. "I want to continue."

"What?"

He waved his hands expressively. "This. Whatever you call it. But I want to know when you're doing it. Conscious conditioning."

Gregory stared.

"I'm serious. For the first time in years, I'm making decisions my parents would've been proud of. Not just making money — treating people well. Yes, it's because I'm getting rewarded. But it works. I *like* being the person they think I am."

Gregory looked at his fingers as if he could find crib notes from Dani there. Finally he said weakly, "I'm... not the expert on operant conditioning, but... I'm pretty sure that's not how it usually works."

"Then maybe I'm unusual." Bernard smiled slightly. "Or maybe when the reward is good enough, you stop caring why you want it."

A month later, the four friends gathered again at Gregory's loft. Aidan mentioned that Bernard had told some friends about the whole experience over dinner.

Other tech billionaires, frustrated with their reputations, wanting to be seen as more than just ruthless.

“Do you think they’ll contact us?” Gregory sounded amused. “We could start a coaching business. ‘Teach your billionaire to be a decent person.’”

Valerie shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. Bernard’s unusual. Most wouldn’t want to admit they need help, even to themselves.”

“But if even one or two did —” Gregory said.

“Then we’d have three instead of one,” Dani finished. “Still not changing the world.”

“No,” Valerie agreed. “But it would be three more than we started with.”

They sat with that for a moment, each silently turning over the idea.

Across the city in Midtown, Bernard Ignacci met with the union about expanding benefits. His mind flashed on the dinner invitation he was hoping for, from some people whose respect he’d always craved. He steepled his fingers on the table.

“Tell me what’s most important to your people,” he said to the union representatives, with a faint smile. “Let’s see what we can do.”