

The Foster Lover

Rafael Sabatini

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The Foster-Lover
by Rafael Sabatini

Up the hill from Horsebridge, dust-clogged in every pore, jaded and saddle-worn, I urged my weary nag the second that I had spent since leaving London at daybreak on my traitor's errand. On the hill's crest I drew rein, as much out of instinct and sheer habit as out of mercy for the poor beast that bore me.

On my left a long line of shadow, tall and black, stretched the trees of Dunstock Park adown the hill half-way to Romsey town. And yonder, through the thinning topmost branches, was a golden glory where the moon was rising, big as a millstone, yellow as a guinea. Here, close at hand, atop its flight of terraces, stood Dunstock House, holding the thing dearest to me in all the world; and Dunstock House, to my vast surprise, was now one blaze of light, its windows glowing like jewels in the setting of the cool, fragrant night.

Sir William entertained that much was plain and I had known nothing of it; but then, where was the wonder of that, since for three weeks I had lain close in London, waiting to receive and bear my lord the news for which all true lovers of King James, the exile, were now athirst? A ball, it seemed, was toward. The scrape of fiddles reached me there at the park gates; aye, and the shuffle of feet, I could have sworn, so calm and silent was the summer night.

I sat awhile, what time my horse, with pendent head and neck outstretched, breathed raucously in its greed for air. And as I waited there the gavotte came to an end, the fiddling ceased, and in its room arose a babble of many voices, touched off with frequent laughter, and out on to the terrace came by twos and threes Sir William's guests to breathe the grateful cool.

It occurred to me then that I need ride no farther. Here was my goal; for if Sir William entertained, there was little doubt aye, and the thought was bitter enough, God knows! that here I should find my lord. So I roused the mare and urged her through the gates and up the broad avenue, black now in the shadow of the elms. A truer motive lay, no doubt, in the hope of seeing another than my lord Alicia, whom I never tired of seeing whom I sought every chance to see, although I knew that she was not for me. She was a matter that lay between Captain Percy, whom she loved, and my lord, whom she detested, yet who was insistent and persistent, and being a great man, had, every hope of winning her, her detestation notwithstanding. As for me But why say more of myself, who, after all, am of small account the foster-lover, no more in this tale of that sweet lady's nuptials?

Erebus was not so black as were the shadows there beneath the elms, and when my horse had stumbled twice I thought I should be safer afoot. I tethered the brute to a tree and went on. Quitting the avenue, I struck a well-known shorter road, a pathway through the shrubbery, leading to the lower terrace; and Fate herself, I think, must have been leading me.

At the shrubbery's end I paused, however, on the edge of the gloom. The sweep of lawn before me was now alight from the risen moon, and I bethought me that I was proceeding a thought recklessly. How should I, charged with

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that secret business, present myself thus, all grimed and dusty from the road, to seek my lord among Sir William's guests? Such an advent must fire the train of much surmising; and all surmising was dangerous to my lord and me, and to the Cause itself. I paused then and pondered. Aye, I were better away to Romsey, to await my lord's coming. But since my lord would not yet be leaving you see, I had no doubt touching his presence at that dance there was time to spare, and it was sweet and fragrant in the shrubbery after the dust of the high road; sweet it was to know although the stiffness and the impression of it still abode with me that there was no horse between my knees; sweet to spy upon the merry-makers, what time I stretched my legs and snatched a brief rest, to which the great diligence I had made that day gave me the title; and there was the greatest sweet of all and this may have been the real truth of my abiding the chance of a glimpse of my dear Alicia.

And presently this glimpse I had and more. A couple descended the steps from the upper terrace, where other couples sauntered; a man, tall and graceful in a lilac satin that gleamed silvery in the moonlight, and a lady, more graceful still though not so tall, a white ghost in that ghostly radiance. They were Alicia and Captain Percy, the man to whom her heart was given. A good fellow enough he was, a blundering, honest, good-natured lad, yet scarce worthy to be the custodian of that treasure. But then where was the man of whom I should not think the same? Moreover, she loved him, as I knew, for she herself had told me. Was not I her friend the sometime playmate of her childhood, who had now the confidence of her adolescence and was it not to me she came for counsel when she had need of it? And that was scarce as often as I could have wished.

More than once as they advanced she looked behind her, and the impulse of that backward glancing was not to be mistaken. It was fear. Lest I should have played the eavesdropper on that pair of lovers, I had departed then, but those timid, over-shoulder glances argued trouble. The thought of my lord surged on the instant in my mind, and I decided to remain.

Nay, nay, sweetheart, I caught his ardent murmur. Never tremble. Let the ogre come and be eaten.

You'd not she began. You'd never

Aye, sweet, would I? More I will; it is the one clear way. Since 'tis not possible to unravel his vile knot, we'll cut it, as did Alexander that other Gordian one, spoke the man he was, direct and simple, with no mind for subtleties.

Ah, no! She clutched his arm, and her fears, 'twas plain, were all for him so plain that I had some ado to choke down some certain bitterness that arose in me. Ah, no! she cried again, and added the anguished prayer. Dear God, is there none to help me?

There is one at least very fain, said I, did he but know in what case the help is needed.

They started back, and Percy claps hand to the hilt of his dress-sword. Who's there? he bellows, mighty fierce.

Jocelyn! It is Jocelyn! cried Alicia, and my soul was glad that she had been so quick to recognize my voice; glad, too, to catch in her accents a certain note of welcome. I acknowledged my identity, and gave good reason for not quitting my concealment.

What do you here? quoth Captain Percy.

You were ever over-inquisitive, Percy, I answered him. Take it that I am playing guardian angel to the pair of you. And now your story.

What can you do, dear Jocelyn? cried Alicia.

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I shall be in better case to say when I have heard what is your need. Is it my Lord Hedingham who troubles you?

It seems I had put my finger on the plague-spot. Much has happened since you went to town, says she by way of preface, and then Percy swore under his breath, and looking up to see the cause of it, I beheld a slim gentleman, all white and gold like the Cupid on a bridal cake descending from the upper terrace. She saw that dazzling vision, too, and went on breathlessly: I must speak with you ere I sleep, Jocelyn, for you may help me. You are ever wise. Which I swear is a compliment she had never paid her lover.

Shall I await you here? I asked her.

Aye, do, said she. I'll come to you as soon as may be.

My lord drew nigh as swiftly as aged legs allowed him; there was no time for more; her arm in Captain Percy's she turned to meet him. He bowed, and I almost fancied I could hear the creak of his old joints for it was a very senile Cupid just as I thought I could see the leer upon his painted face.

Madam, said he, and simpered. La! You run a risk of chill. The night is so insidious, child, and the moonlight Oh, I vow 'tis vastly unhealthy!

To your rheumatics, not a doubt, my lord, growls Percy.

Hedingham looked him over with an eye that glittered in a smiling face. I have not the rheumatics, sir, says he, as one who would repulse an insult.

Why, then, quoth Percy readily enough, you'll be acquiring them if you come tripping it on dewy lawns o' nights. A foolish practice at all times, my lord; a deadly one at your age.

What a physician was lost when they made you a soldier, Captain Percy! simpers his lordship, with a giggle to mask his frenzy.

Maybe, says Percy, very sweetly as they moved away. But as it is, the trades go hand in hand, for a physician is sometimes needed to mend my work.

Sometimes? says my lord, with much depth of meaning. Ah!

Aye, my lord only sometimes, Percy explained, for at others it is past mending.

The last I heard of them my lord was laughing a high-pitched senile cackle and commending Captain Percy's wit; and so they passed up the steps, using defiance wrapped in pleasantry, like a gall pill smeared with honey.

On the upper terrace figures moved, the windows shone. And the music was taken up once more, to be silenced and again resumed ere I was disturbed. And when at last, nigh upon an hour later, a visitor I had, that visitor was not the Alicia for whom I waited, but Captain Percy. He came hot-foot and panting, as much from the haste that he had made as from the anger and excitement that were quickening his pulses.

Jocelyn, he bawls, wildly. She's gone! They've taken her!

I quitted the trees and came out on to the lawn, heedless now of who might see me. What a plague do ye mean? quoth I. Taken her? Who's taken her?

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He caught me fiercely by the arm and let out his tale. I had it from Mowbray, the footman, who saw the whole thing happen from an upper window. She was walking in the clearing with Hedingham. He had drawn her thither, away from all the others. Suddenly two men appeared from the bushes on the far side. They flung a cloak over her head, swung her up, and ran with her to a carriage that stood waiting at the top of the avenue. Hedingham jumped in after her and the carriage went off at a gallop.

I groaned an oath. How long since? quoth I.

Some ten minutes, scarcely more, he answered. I told Sir William the moment I had the news, and he answered me that I was in error that Mistress Alicia was in her room; that she had withdrawn in consequence of a headache.

Now here was more villainy than I had feared. I dragged him with me across the lawns towards the house. I'll fathom this, said I, and when we came to the clearing in front of the classic portico, I bade him await me there. The next moment I stood in the hall of Dunstock House, all travel-stained as I was, demanding to see Sir William instantly. A lackey ushered me into small room that was Sir William's study, and thither he came to me at once.

Back from London, Jocelyn!

I cut him short. Where is your niece, Sir William? I demanded. A change swept over his great face; his pale eyes changed from vacuity that was their habit to one of mingled fear and malice. He snorted first, then informed me that Alicia kept her chamber.

You have been misinformed, Sir William, answered I. She does not keep her chamber. She has been carried off by that villain Hedingham.

Another change crept over his countenance. It grew livid. You mistake, says he. She is in her chamber.

I looked at him between the eyes a moment; then I took up my hat and whip, which on entering I had set upon the table. Abundantly clear it was that here I but wasted precious time. He watched my going with a face that told me nothing. I paused, my hand upon the doorknob.

Sir William, said I, I know not how my Lord Hedingham may have won over you the hold he very plainly has. But if this is the price at which you bought your freedom, I think you have paid over-dearly for it in parting with your honour.

Sir he began.

Spare yourself, I begged him. The riddle is not difficult to read. You seek to use compulsion with Alicia. Alicia sets you at defiance, and so you give his lordship all opportunity for carrying her off. But hark you, Sir William, in spite of you and of Lord Hedingham, Alicia marries where her heart is set, and that so soon as I shall have freed her from his lordship's clutches. In purchasing her freedom from him, it may be that I purchase yours. I mention it but to add that I do so of necessity, not intent; so that you may harbour no gratitude for me.

The change in his demeanour was amazing. You would do that? he cried, the blood mounting to his cheeks, a gleam of hope quickening his eyes. After all he was more fool than knave. Then he put the altered manner from him as swiftly as he assumed it. Pshaw! What are you, fool, to pit yourself against Lord Hedingham? You'll not so much as gain admission to his house.

I thank you, sir, at least for telling me where to look, said I, and left him.

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Outside I found her lover fuming. Get a coach, I bade the booby, and follow after me. Use all dispatch and drive to Lord Hedingham's door. But do nothing further. There I will bring Alicia to you.

Odso, he cried. Are you mad? How are you to win into Hedingham's?

'Tis what Sir William is wondering, I answered him. But I think I have a key to his door. See that you make haste! And so I left him gaping after me, and sped down the avenue to my horse.

It was a nag as near dead as any that I had seen stand that I fetched up before his lordship's door that night. Before dismounting I transferred the pistols from the holsters to my own pockets; then with the butt of my whip I drummed a sharp tattoo upon the oaken panels.

Who's there? came from within, a voice which I recognised for that of his man Geddes.

'Tis I, Jocelyn Talbot. Open! I urged.

There was an exclamation from Geddes. Clearly he had received his orders to admit me at whatsoever hour of the day or night I should present myself, for a chain fell with a clank, the key grated in the lock, and the door stood open.

Not yet abed, says I, as I stepped past him. Where is my lord?

If you'll wait here, sir, he answered hurriedly, what time he fumbled with the door chain, I'll tell his lordship.

With my knowledge of the house and of my fellow-traitor's ways, I made a shrewd guess that he was in his cabinet beyond the library. I'll find him for myself, said I, and started to cross the hall.

Nay, nay! cried Geddes in alarm. Wait, sir, wait! But still he was fumbling with the chain. Leave the door open, knowing what he knew, he did not dare. I quickened my step and was in the library, the door closed behind me, ere he could start to follow.

The room was empty; but across it the door of his closet stood ajar, and even as I paused I caught Alicia's voice ringing with anger and contempt. I had run him down.

You cannot use compulsion, my lord, she was saying, and this man dare not marry us without my consent.

Soho! His thoughtful lordship had fetched a parson, it would seem.

Dearest Alicia, he clucked most hatefully, who am I to use compulsion. I faint, I expire, but I do not compel.

Then let me go, my lord, came her impatient answer.

Nay, not that either, answered he, his accents more detestably caressing. Do not mistake me. I will not use compulsion. Shalt wed me to-night, to-morrow, or a week hence. Despite my impatience, it shall be as you please.

Yet were you wiser to wed me now, and place your fair name within the shelter of mine.

You mean, my lord? she demanded angrily. 'Swounds ! but she was a girl of spirit!

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Why, simpers he, that Lord Hedingham does not bear the reputation of a an anchorite; no not quite, my dear. And he laughed in a mock deprecatory laugh. And the world hath a way of talking a vile, insidious way. But you shall choose. I'll never use compulsion.

I advanced, my step ringing on the paraquetry, my spurs a-jingle. Instantly my lord's face, startled and angry, appeared at the half-opened door. Seeing me it lightened to surprise.

Give me leave a moment, Master Cave, said he over his shoulder, and came forward, closing the door.

Under the paint his face was livid, and there was an unhealthy flush beneath his eyes. He licked his lips a moment, then: Why, Jocelyn! says he in a subdued voice. You took me by surprise. I have been awaiting you these ten days. His glance went past me. Get you gone, Geddes, he bade the man, who at that moment opened the door behind me. Then turning to me again: What news from London? he inquired.

Let that wait, said I, and I think my tone must have warned him, for he looked at me more sharply. I am concerned to-night with the news of Hampshire.

Ah? And what may that be? quoth his startled lordship.

That my Lord Hedingham is a satyr and a villain, I informed him.

'Sdeath! he cried, as if I had stung him, and stood before me, an evil glitter in his eye.

Do you go down on your old knees, my lord, and thank Heaven that I am come in time to take this lady away from you, else it had been very ill for you, I think.

At that a spasm of fury crossed his face. You fool! he snarled at me, and then, You shall be taught! he croaked. You shall be taught! And stepping forward he made shift to reach the bell-rope.

Stay where you are, my lord, I cried, drawing a pistol from my pocket, or I'll rid this lady of you in another way.

He paused; his jaw fell; he looked like a corpse with red-raddled cheeks. Would you do murder? he quavered, fearfully.

If need be, I answered pleasantly. Stand away from that bell-rope, my lord. I have no mind to shoot the bullies you keep about you. So! That is better, said I, and pocketed the pistol. And now, my lord, will you please to call the lady?

He considered me a moment, regaining by an effort some of his composure. You fool, Talbot, he said. You pitiful fool! Tchah! Since you demand with threats and violence, I must needs accede. But what ends do you hope to serve?

From the street I caught at that moment the faint rumble of wheels.

I will tell you, said I. Captain Percy, whom this lady loves, awaits her without to complete the elopement for which your lordship has so thoroughly provided. The minister is yonder, and shall go with them. They shall be tight-bound by morning.

He shook his head, and his lips took on a mocking smile. You reckon rashly, and without your host. I have but to summon Alicia and tell her the price I would exact from Sir William if she were to dare do this, and I dare

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swear she would not go with you. I hold Sir William in a springe which shall tighten and crush him unless his niece is my Lady Hedingham this month. He leered at me in factuous triumph. So now, my cockerel, the cards are on the table. You shall suffer for this night's work, and that is all that shall come of it your suffering.

He looked to see me taken aback, confused. But I smiled calmly, and, I hope, contemptuously. You tell me nothing that I did not know, I informed him. For I can make as good a guess as any man. Cards on the table, do you say, my lord? Cards on the table be it then. And here's my pack. And from my pocket I drew the letter from King James, of which I was the bearer.

What's that? quoth he, with a sudden sucking in of breath.

The trumps, I think, said I, and Dutch William for the King of them. My lord, I neither ask nor care what manner of hold is yours upon Sir William, but I tell you that you shall relinquish it even as you shall relinquish his niece. This is the letter you been awaiting from King James that was. There is enough treason in it to bring your hoary, sinful head to the block. The lady you shall set free at once. Her lover will be growing impatient out of doors. Sir William also you shall set free. When this is done you shall have your letter; not before.

I caught his faint sigh of relief. That, he thought, was to be the full extent of my threat. And if I refuse? says he. If I refuse?

If within four—and—twenty hours Sir William fails to bring me word himself that you have complied, I lay this letter before the nearest justice of the peace.

Great Jove himself never launched a deadlier thunderbolt than that. For an instant he beat about for air. Then, You dastard! he screamed. You hound! You foul, infernal traitor! When the King comes to his own again

We deal with the present, not the future, I cut in. Your answer, my lord?

He stared at me awhile, sucking at his nether lip, his face blank now as a mask. Thus a moment; then he exploded once more. Fool, there is one thing you have forgotten. If you pull me down, you will be crushed in my ruins. You are as deeply in it as I am. How can you incriminate me without bringing yourself to the gallows? Resolve me that, he crowed in wicked triumph.

It is a cost I have counted, I answered very quietly. I am concerned to—night neither for myself nor you, my lord. But for my lady there. And she goes hence with me.

Surprise was not the only emotion on his face. He sank feebly to a chair. Oh! he cried. You are mad.

Of a most sweet madness, my lord, answered I. Have I played trumps enough, or must I play King William?

He rose as with an effort. Again he fell to reviling me for the double traitor and villain that undoubtedly I was. Then checking at last, he crossed the room, and threw wide the door of the inner chamber.

Mistress Alicia! he called. She came forward.

Jocelyn! she cried, and stood at gaze upon the threshold, her hands clasped and held to her bosom, and in her eyes such a light of gladness as I'll swear not even the sight of Captain Percy pretty fellow though he was could have haled thither. And that I had for balm.

I have come to fetch you, Alicia, I informed her. Bid the parson to come too. He is no longer needed here.

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A moment she stood there, her eyes wandering from me to the crumpled figure, all white and gold that was my Lord Hedingham, then back to me again. What miracle have you wrought upon my lord? she asked in sweet bewilderment.

Shall I tell her, my lord? I mocked him.

Get you gone! he snarled in a passion. Get you gone!

I opened the door to the hall, where Geddes waited. Geddes the door! I ordered. Mistress Alicia is leaving. Then, to the minister who had now come forward, too a poor hedge-parson whom his lordship had suborned to do his vile work. You shall not be disappointed of your fee, I comforted him, nor need you soil your conscience in the work that's to be done. This lady is to wed; the mistake was in the groom. You'll find the right one waiting without with a carriage.

Jocelyn? quoth she, with parted lips and questioning eyes, a frown between them.

Faith! 'tis Captain Percy, I informed her. You were best elope with him, since your fate is to elope this night. Go, Alicia, and be happy! Tarry no longer here. The air of these rooms is foul and smirching.

Dear Jocelyn! she murmured, her hands outheld to me. Dear, dear friend.

You shall thank me another time, said I, when we have greater leisure. I kissed her hand, and wrenched mine away from her when she would have kissed it, and so set a term to that pretty comedy.

When she was gone, and the minister with her, I still remained with my lord, and waited until the sound of wheels had faded in the distance. He never stirred, but sat there in his great chair, clutching its arms with his jewelled claws, a carrion fowl despoiled.

Give you good night, my lord, I said at length, and turned to go.

A moment, sir! said he, his eye upon me with the dead glitter of a snake's. Bitterly he set me his last question. Why have you crossed me in this?

I looked him over quietly, reflecting. Then I turned from him with a shrug. You would not understand, said I, and left the room.

As I reached the street a peal of bells went clanging through the house. He was rousing his bullies to the chase. So leaving my jaded horse, I relied upon my heels, and ran, forgetful of fatigue, and for greater safety I lay at the King's Head Inn that night. I lay there, but I did not sleep. The exaltation of my poor victory spent, I fell a prey to a bitterness of sorrow and self-pity, which I now hold to have been unworthy in me. For I had helped the lady of my heart to the man of hers, and what more than that can a true lover ask?