

A BID FOR FREEDOM.

By Guy Boothby.

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(Continued.)

It struck me as being rather strange to invoke a blessing from Allah upon such a work, but it is needless for me to say that I did not mention the fact to him.

Having bade him a respectful farewell, I left the presence and returned to my own apartment, where I found the Grand Vizier awaiting me. He was a stately old gentleman, with a white beard, which he stroked continually. It was said that he was the only official in Madras who had a sort of reputation for honesty, and so far as my own interests were concerned, I can corroborate the statement.

"His Majesty the Sultan—whom may Allah long preserve!—has instructed me to pay to thee the sum of two hundred pounds in English gold. It is here."

So saying, he produced from the folds of his robe a leather bag, and he poured out upon a cushion.

"Be so good as to count them," he said, "for I would not have the faintest suspicion of the world's full of rogues and thieves, and it is well for such work to be done to the knowledge that they may trust each other."

"I paid him a pretty compliment, and then he turned to count the shining pieces. The work accomplished, I placed them back in the leather bag and slipped it carelessly into my pocket. My action horrified the methodical old gentleman, and he took occasion to warn me against the perils of the road and the chances I might stand of losing what he evidently considered was for me a considerable fortune.

"There is one other matter on which I am compelled to speak to thee, and that is concerning a still larger sum which will be paid to thee in London."

"His Majesty told me that you would give me the address where I was to appear. Have you got it with you?"

After some little fumbling under his robe he produced a small slip of parchment. He handed it to me, and on examining it I found an address written in English in a hand like that of a small school boy, but of which the old gentleman was inordinately vain. I placed it in my pocket, and then I inquired of him why he was so sure why I was receiving the money.

"Allah forbid!" he said quickly, looking round as if he were afraid some one might overhear him. "If my master does not tell me, I know nothing."

"Well, who'd have thought of meeting you, Lacey?" I answered, returning his grip. "How long have you been in town?"

"Just about a month," he replied. "Came home from Epsolia. Which way are you walking?"

"I told him my errand and he agreed to accompany me."

"After that," he continued, "you must come and dine with me at my club. We'll go on to a theatre later. I'm not going to lose sight of you, you may be sure of that."

"I would be better put it off till another night," I suggested. "I'm a wanderer, a prodigal son, you might say, just returned from among the swine who won't wear clothes."

"We are much of a build, and it won't be the first time we've worn each other's duds. Do you remember that fat old French priest who lent me a pair of boots that were nearly a foot too big for me round the waist, and didn't reach much below my knees? By Jove! those were jolly old duds!"

"Nice to look back upon, but scarcely so pleasant at the time," said the jolly old Governor who had his hand on my shoulder as he walked down Piccadilly.

"It was you who got me out of the scrape, old fellow. And I am eternally grateful to you for it."

"Rubbish!" I answered. "You'd have done the same for me. Well, here we are."

I entered the tailor's shop at which I had always been accustomed to deal. The proprietor, a bald-headed little man, who looked more like a distinguished artist than a sartorial one, greeted me as never forgetting a customer's face. It was three years since I had crossed his threshold, and I wondered how he would remember me. He came forward, bowing and washing his hands in the way that I so well remembered.

"Ab, Mr. Gasson," he said. "We have not had the pleasure of seeing you for a considerable time. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

"I informed him in reply that I had that day set out for abroad, and that I would excuse my saying so, if gathered as much immediately you entered my shop."

"The duds you did. And how did you manage them?"

"If you will pardon my saying so, by the cut of the clothes you are wearing, it is at least two years behind the present fashion. Terrible. It was evident that the subject was an extremely painful one to him, and he said no more.

"Well, you will have to fit me out again," I said. "And I want you to be as quick about it as possible."

"You may depend upon us, my dear sir. All that I can do to expedite matters shall be done. Think of your customers before yourself, Gasson. Let them come first."

"And charge them for it afterwards," I said, with a smile. "Well, every man to his trade."

He smiled a deprecating smile and washed his hands more carefully than ever.

"Still the same genial, merry hearted gentleman, Mr. Gasson, I see," he remarked.

"I could not help wondering what he would have said had he known the truth—that truth which I was trying so hard to keep behind me, but which would thrust its ugly head up every now and then. Having made an appointment with him for the following day, I set out for my room, and ordered the man to drive us to Lacey's lodgings, which were in a street leading out of Farnham Street. Having obtained the address he had offered to lend me, I returned to my hotel to dress, after which I proceeded to the club at which we were to dine. It was a pleasant little dinner for more reasons than one. I liked Lacey and I fancy he liked me. We had many bonds in common and our conversation embraced the wide world.

"I was lucky enough to secure a couple of stalls at the St. James's theatre," said my host, as we sipped our coffee. "What do you say to going together?"

"I should like it immensely," I replied. "The last theatre I was in was in Rio, and I remember, within a hundred yards of the door, seeing a man knife a man and then stab himself. She was a fine-looking creature."

"Women who do that sort of thing usually are. Now let's come along. We needn't take a cab. It's within easy walking distance."

We accordingly strolled quietly down to the theatre and took our places in the seats my friend had had the good fortune to secure. They were in the third row and commanded a good view of the house. The latter was rapidly filling, and it was only a few minutes to the rising of the curtain. Suddenly I noticed a little stir in the audience and all eyes were directed at the box in front of me.

"What is it?" I whispered to Lacey. "The royal box is on the other side," he whispered to me, as he spoke there came forward to the front of the box in question the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life. She was superbly dressed, and with an elderly gentleman who it was easy to see was her father. Again I turned to Lacey.

"I want to know her face," I whispered. "Who is she?"

"The most beautiful woman in England," he replied. "Lady Olivia Belhampton."

"By a picture for yourself my feelings. For a moment I felt as if the world were spinning round my head a million times a second. The theatre swam before my eyes, and in a moment, I pulled myself together, and glanced at my neighbors to discover whether they had noticed anything. Fortunately, the lady on my right was perusing her programme, while Lacey was watching some people who were entering on the left side of the house. Feeling half afraid to look, I glanced up at the box again. What an exquisite face it was! A diamond necklace encircled her slender throat, but she did not need it to enhance her beauty. And in that case, it was the woman whom I had pledged my word of honor, and sworn by all I held sacred, to deliver into the hands of the Sultan of Madrasore."

"What the devil! I have not the remotest notion. It may have been a tragedy or a comedy—I cannot tell you. I had no eyes and no ears at the moment," he said.

"During the interval Lacey and I went out for a cigarette."

"Splendid play, isn't it?" he remarked, when he returned. "I saw the 'Magnificent' when it was shown without enthusiasm. 'By the way, tell me about Lady Olivia Belhampton. I used to know her when she was a child, and heard that she had married the 'Varsity' together. I haven't seen her for years."

"I don't know what there is to tell you," he returned, "save that she is a young beauty in England, and that the old Duke dies she'll be immensely rich. She is also a great personage, and in that case my week as hours are out. I suppose they are up in town on account of the frost."

"From Burdun Hall, their place in Leicestershire."

"Not married, I suppose?"

"Oh, dear no; seems to take no interest in men. I have proposed to her, but so far she has refused them all. She has evidently got a will of her own. By the way, there is rather a joke connected with her. Rumor has it that when the Sultan of Madrasore was over here some little time back, he was very anxious to add her to his list of wives. He offered her exceptional terms, but the old Duke didn't see it in the same light. Fancy that! I'm sure he would have been glad to see her in the Sultan's harem."

"That is certainly my name," she said, "but I am not Mr. Gasson."

"That is my name," I answered. "But you forgive me now for speaking to you in the street, as if you were the Irishman by asking another."

"Mr. Gasson, whose have you been all these years? We have never heard of you since you left."

"Walking up and down the world," I said. "I was in London when I only arrived in England yesterday."

"And are you going to stay long?"

"On this point I did not enlighten her, for her voice told me that she took no secret of interest in me."

"It all depends," I answered. "I may be here a month, I may be here a year. At present I am anxious to get to bed, but this frost seems likely to last."

"It certainly would appear so," she rejoined.

"That she did not wish to be detained any longer, I bade her good-morning and went on my way in the opposite direction."

"She's not the same jolly little girl that used to be—and between ourselves I said to myself as I walked along, 'I can see her now, with her long hair flying in the wind, running across the lawn, with her young monkey, and prouder of her brother than anything or anyone else in the world. It seems that Society has knocked the girl out of her and has left a Woman of Fashion in her place.'"

"Thus moralizing I made my way back to the Strand, and thence to my hotel. The keen morning air had given me a rare appetite, and when I sat down to my sumptuous breakfast I could hardly repress a smile as I thought of the rice and dates to which I had even gone as far as to learn to look forward in the Kaashah. As I looked round the spacious room, where many were taking their morning meal, I found it difficult to believe that it was the same old place, where I had been the companion for so many days of that wretched Jew, and that still more wretched Jew. Yet here I was, with my pockets full of money, enjoying a breakfast as good as any I had had since I left a king; and on the other hand—but there, I am not going to dwell on that.

An hour or so after breakfast, when I had read the paper and had my pipe in the right corner, and it needed only a glance to see that the going would be perfect. The meet was some five or six miles from the city, and I never in the memory of the oldest member of the hunt had the covert in question been drawn blank.

"I work the same places, but we've decided, in order to fill in the afternoon, to take a run down and inspect them. The morning was occupied in visits to the latter, hatters, and other tradesmen. We lunched together at a

hotel, and afterwards drove to Waterloo, where we caught the train to Leatherhead. We were met at that station by Mr. Mansell, the owner of the establishment we were about to visit. He drove us out to his stud farm, which was some two or three miles from the station. On arrival there we overhauled the stables and carefully examined the four animals concerning which he had telegraphed to Lacey that morning. It needed very little knowledge of horse-flesh to see that they were something out of the common, and that made me suppose that the price was on a corresponding scale. At the dealer's suggestion we agreed to examine the animals as the frost broke to try them, when should they prove satisfactory, we would be prepared to purchase them.

That evening I wrote to the principal house agent in the neighborhood of Burdun and gave him a commission to find us a small residence in the neighborhood of the house we were purchasing, stating what we should require. He was a very important stipulation, and I had good reasons for wishing to have a look at it. By the time I reached the middle of the next day, I had been to see the house, and was busy engaged washing down the steps up to the front door. Upstairs the blinds were still down, and as I reached the top of the stairs, I saw a woman who I had recognized as Lady Olivia. But it was no use speculating. In order that it might not be thought that I was spying on her, I walked to the end of the street, and then returned on the other side of the road. Before reaching my home, I turned to take one last look at the house. To my astonishment, I saw the footman, who had been talking to me on the steps, move a little on one side and then bow. A moment later I saw a tall graceful figure, which I easily recognized, emerge from the doorway and come down stairs.

Reaching the corner, she made her way down Upper Grosvenor street. Early as the hour was, should I take advantage of the chance presented to me and make myself known to her? It was a delicate step, but it was just possible that it might succeed. On the other hand, if I were to offend her, she might forbid me to ever speak to her again, and in that case my mission, to all intents and purposes, was at an end. A man's success very often depends on taking advantage of an opportunity. Here was my chance, and I resolved to profit by it. Not wishing her to think that I had followed her, I waited till she reached the bottom of the street, and then I turned to the left hand, whereupon I went down South Audley Street as fast as I could, turned up Park Street, and then, as I had done before, I turned up Park Lane. When I turned the corner she was only a few paces from me. I think I have as much confidence as most men, and I believe it, that never in the whole of my experience have I been so much afraid as I was at that moment.

"I walked up to her and raised my hat, and she returned the compliment. 'I hope you will forgive my rudeness and that I am not making a mistake,' I said. 'Are you not Lady Olivia?'

"She was not in the least put out, but looked steadily at me out of her grey eyes. 'That is certainly my name,' she said, 'but I am not Mr. Gasson.'"

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"That she did not wish to be detained any longer, I bade her good-morning and went on my way in the opposite direction."

"She's not the same jolly little girl that used to be—and between ourselves I said to myself as I walked along, 'I can see her now, with her long hair flying in the wind, running across the lawn, with her young monkey, and prouder of her brother than anything or anyone else in the world. It seems that Society has knocked the girl out of her and has left a Woman of Fashion in her place.'"

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And I can assure you with the utmost truth that I meant it!

We reached our destination with a quarter of an hour to spare. The master and the hounds had just arrived, and the former, most courteous of men, was busily engaged making himself agreeable to his many and varied acquaintances. Being a true sportsman, as well as gentleman, his mud and cheery "good-morning" were to the Mr. Lord Tom Noddy as to Mr. Snooks, the sporting butcher from the neighboring town. Handing over our hooks to the grooms, we mounted our hounds and then had leisure to look about us. The field was a big one, but at last I espied her on the farther side of the hounds, talking to a lady and gentleman, the latter being Lord Carborough.

Leaving Lacey to his own devices, I walked my horse round in that direction. If she had looked lovely at the theatre, she was even more so now. Her habit fitted her to perfection, her hair was neatly coiled beneath her hat, and the toe of a particularly smart boot peeped out from beneath her skirt. She was splendidly mounted on an albino thoroughbred bay with black points, who looked fit enough to win the Grand National. Taking advantage of the conversation she was having with her neighbor in Park Lane, I rode up to her and wished her "good-morning." She was evidently surprised to see me.

"I had no idea," she said, "Mr. Gasson, that you intended hunting in this country."

"My friend and I have taken the Retreat on the Burley Road," I said. "Really?" she asked, as if she had not taken any interest in the matter. "Poor Colonel Beverley used to live there. He was a very good friend of my father's."

"From the way in which she said this, it might have been inferred that she very much regretted the change of ownership. For want of something better to say, I inquired after her father."

"He is very well indeed, thank you," she replied. "You will find him over there, talking to the master."

I could see that she was determined to keep me at a distance, and the knowledge of this was sufficient to put me on my guard. I asked her opinion as to the prospects of the run.

"Excellent, I should think," was her reply, and I noticed that a new light came into her eyes. For the first time she showed a little interest.

"We always find here," she continued, "and if he only goes away towards Grimsotow, we should have a capital run. You have a very nice horse, Mr. Gasson."

"I think I may safely return the compliment," I answered. "If appearances go for anything, yours should be fast enough to win a big race."

I could see that the compliment pleased her, for she smiled appreciatively as she stroked his glossy neck with her crop.

"Yes, I am very proud of him," she said. "He was a birthday present from my mother, and I am quite sure I never had a nicer. By the way, here is papa."

I wheeled my horse to find the Duke coming towards us. He was a good sportsman in the real sense of the word, and might have stood for a portrait of that proverbial individual, "the fine old English gentleman."

"Well, my dear," he said, addressing his daughter and throwing a glance at me, "time is up and we shall be making a move in a few minutes."

"I am glad to hear it," she remarked. Then she added, "Papa, may I introduce Mr. Gasson to you, as I see you do not remember him? He was poor Gasson's friend, and he is a very good fellow."

"Forgive me, sir," said the old gentleman, "for not recognizing you. It must be many years since we last met."

"I have been abroad, and only returned to England a week ago," I said by way of explanation.

"And you immediately pay us the compliment of hunting with us. Well, well, let us hope that we shall show you good sport in return."

"I have promised Mr. Gasson a good sport this morning," said Lady Olivia, with a smile. "I hope Reynard will not disappoint us."

"I don't think we need fear that," remarked the old gentleman. "By the way, Mr. Gasson, you must come up and dine with us one evening. The Duchess will be very glad to see you, I am sure."

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I could see that the compliment pleased her, for she smiled appreciatively as she stroked his glossy neck with her crop.

"Yes, I am very proud of him," she said. "He was a birthday present from my mother, and I am quite sure I never had a nicer. By the way, here is papa."

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"Well, my dear," he said, addressing his daughter and throwing a glance at me, "time is up and we shall be making a move in a few minutes."

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"Forgive me, sir," said the old gentleman, "for not recognizing you. It must be many years since we last met."

"I have been abroad, and only returned to England a week ago," I said by way of explanation.

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"I have promised Mr. Gasson a good sport this morning," said Lady Olivia, with a smile. "I hope Reynard will not disappoint us."

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