

## Chapter XL - The Happy Pair

The day succeeding this remarkable Midsummer night, proved no common day. I do not mean that it brought signs in heaven above, or portents on the earth beneath; nor do I allude to meteorological phenomena, to storm, flood, or whirlwind. On the contrary: the sun rose jocund, with a July face. Morning decked her beauty with rubies, and so filled her lap with roses, that they fell from her in showers, making her path blush: the Hours woke fresh as nymphs, and emptying on the early hills their dew-vials, they stepped out dismantled of vapour: shadowless, azure, and glorious, they led the sun's steeds on a burning and unclouded course.

In short, it was as fine a day as the finest summer could boast; but I doubt whether I was not the sole inhabitant of the Rue Fossette, who cared or remembered to note this pleasant fact. Another thought busied all other heads; a thought, indeed, which had its share in my meditations; but this master consideration, not possessing for me so entire a novelty, so overwhelming a suddenness, especially so dense a mystery, as it offered to the majority of my co-speculators thereon, left me somewhat more open than the rest to any collateral observation or impression.

Still, while walking in the garden, feeling the sunshine, and marking the blooming and growing plants, I pondered the same subject the whole house discussed.

What subject?

Merely this. When matins came to be said, there was a place vacant in the first rank of boarders. When breakfast was served, there remained a coffee-cup unclaimed. When the housemaid made the beds, she found in one, a bolster laid lengthwise, clad in a cap and night-gown; and when Ginevra Fanshawe's music-mistress came early, as usual, to give the morning lesson, that accomplished and promising young person, her pupil, failed utterly to be forthcoming.

High and low was Miss Fanshawe sought; through length and breadth was the house ransacked; vainly; not a trace, not an indication, not so much as a scrap of a billet rewarded the search; the nymph was vanished, engulfed in the past night, like a shooting star swallowed up by darkness.

Deep was the dismay of surveillante teachers, deeper the horror of the defaulting directress. Never had I seen Madame Beck so pale or so appalled. Here was a blow struck at her tender part, her weak side; here was damage done to her interest. How, too, had the untoward event happened? By what outlet had the fugitive taken wing? Not a

casement was found unfastened, not a pane of glass broken; all the doors were bolted secure. Never to this day has Madame Beck obtained satisfaction on this point, nor indeed has anybody else concerned, save and excepting one, Lucy Snowe, who could not forget how, to facilitate a certain enterprise, a certain great door had been drawn softly to its lintel, closed, indeed, but neither bolted nor secure. The thundering carriage-and-pair encountered were now likewise recalled, as well as that puzzling signal, the waved handkerchief.

From these premises, and one or two others, inaccessible to any but myself, I could draw but one inference. It was a case of elopement. Morally certain on this head, and seeing Madame Beck's profound embarrassment, I at last communicated my conviction. Having alluded to M. de Hamal's suit, I found, as I expected, that Madame Beck was perfectly au fait to that affair. She had long since discussed it with Mrs Cholmondeley, and laid her own responsibility in the business on that lady's shoulders. To Mrs Cholmondeley and M. de Bassompierre she now had recourse.

We found that the Hotel Crecy was already alive to what had happened. Ginevra had written to her cousin Paulina, vaguely signifying hymeneal intentions; communications had been received from the family of de Hamal; M. de Bassompierre was on the track of the fugitives. He overtook them too late.

In the course of the week, the post brought me a note. I may as well transcribe it; it contains explanation on more than one point: -

'DEAR OLD TIM (short for Timon), - ' I am off you see - gone like a shot. Alfred and I intended to be married in this way almost from the first; we never meant to be spliced in the humdrum way of other people; Alfred has too much spirit for that, and so have I - Dieu merci! Do you know, Alfred, who used to call you 'the dragon,' has seen so much of you during the last few months, that he begins to feel quite friendly towards you. He hopes you won't miss him now that he has gone; he begs to apologize for any little trouble he may have given you. He is afraid he rather inconvenienced you once when he came upon you in the grenier, just as you were reading a letter seemingly of the most special interest; but he could not resist the temptation to give you a start, you appeared so wonderfully taken up with your correspondent. En revanche, he says you once frightened him by rushing in for a dress or a shawl, or some other chiffon, at the moment when he had struck a light, and was going to take a quiet whiff of his cigar, while waiting for me.

'Do you begin to comprehend by this time that M. le Comte de Hamal was the nun of the attic, and that he came to see your humble servant? I will tell you how he managed it. You know he has the entree

of the Athenee, where two or three of his nephews, the sons of his eldest sister, Madame de Melcy, are students. You know the court of the Athenee is on the other side of the high wall bounding your walk, the *allee defendue*. Alfred can climb as well as he can dance or fence: his amusement was to make the escalade of our pensionnat by mounting, first the wall; then - by the aid of that high tree overspreading the grand *berceau*, and resting some of its boughs on the roof of the lower buildings of our premises - he managed to scale the first *classe* and the grand *salle*. One night, by the way, he fell out of this tree, tore down some of the branches, nearly broke his own neck, and after all, in running away, got a terrible fright, and was nearly caught by two people, Madame Beck and M. Emanuel, he thinks, walking in the alley. From the grande *salle* the ascent is not difficult to the highest block of building, finishing in the great *garret*. The skylight, you know, is, day and night, left half open for air; by the skylight he entered. Nearly a year ago I chanced to tell him our legend of the nun; that suggested his romantic idea of the spectral disguise, which I think you must allow he has very cleverly carried out.

'But for the nun's black gown and white veil, he would have been caught again and again both by you and that tiger-Jesuit, M. Paul. He thinks you both capital ghost-seers, and very brave. What I wonder at is, rather your secretiveness than your courage. How could you endure the visitations of that long spectre, time after time, without crying out, telling everybody, and rousing the whole house and neighbourhood?

'Oh, and how did you like the nun as a bed-fellow? *I* dressed her up: didn't I do it well? Did you shriek when you saw her: I should have gone mad; but then you have such nerves! - real iron and bend-leather! I believe you feel nothing. You haven't the same sensitiveness that a person of my constitution has. You seem to me insensible both to pain and fear and grief. You are a real old Diogenes.

'Well, dear grandmother! and are you not mightily angry at my moonlight flitting and run away match? I assure you it is excellent fun, and I did it partly to spite that minx, Paulina, and that bear, Dr. John: to show them that, with all their airs, I could get married as well as they. M. de Bassompierre was at first in a strange fume with Alfred; he threatened a prosecution for '*detournement de mineur*,' and I know not what; he was so abominably in earnest, that I found myself forced to do a little bit of the melodramatic - go down on my knees, sob, cry, drench three pocket-handkerchiefs. Of course, '*mon oncle*' soon gave in; indeed, where was the use of making a fuss? I am married, and that's all about it. He still says our marriage is not legal, because I am not of age, forsooth! As if that made any difference! I am just as much married as if I were a hundred. However, we are to be married again, and I am to have a trousseau, and Mrs Cholmondeley

is going to superintend it; and there are some hopes that M. de Bassompierre will give me a decent portion, which will be very convenient, as dear Alfred has nothing but his nobility, native and hereditary, and his pay. I only wish uncle would do things unconditionally, in a generous, gentleman-like fashion; he is so disagreeable as to make the dowry depend on Alfred's giving his written promise that he will never touch cards or dice from the day it is paid down. They accuse my angel of a tendency to play: I don't know anything about that, but I *do* know he is a dear, adorable creature.

'I cannot sufficiently extol the genius with which de Hamal managed our flight. How clever in him to select the night of the fete, when Madame (for he knows her habits), as he said, would infallibly be absent at the concert in the park. I suppose *you* must have gone with her. I watched you rise and leave the dormitory about eleven o'clock. How you returned alone, and on foot, I cannot conjecture. That surely was *you* we met in the narrow old Rue St. Jean? Did you see me wave my handkerchief from the carriage window?

'Adieu! Rejoice in my good luck: congratulate me on my supreme happiness, and believe me, dear cynic and misanthrope, yours, in the best of health and spirits,

GINEVRA LAURA DE HAMAL, nee FANSHAWE.

'P.S. - Remember, I am a countess now. Papa, mamma, and the girls at home, will be delighted to hear that. 'My daughter the Countess!' 'My sister the Countess!' Bravo! Sounds rather better than Mrs John Bretton, hein?'

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In winding up Mistress Fanshawe's memoirs, the reader will no doubt expect to hear that she came finally to bitter expiation of her youthful levities. Of course, a large share of suffering lies in reserve for her future.

A few words will embody my farther knowledge respecting her.

I saw her towards the close of her honeymoon. She called on Madame Beck, and sent for me into the salon. She rushed into my arms laughing. She looked very blooming and beautiful: her curls were longer, her cheeks rosier than ever: her white bonnet and her Flanders veil, her orange-flowers and her bride's dress, became her mightily.

'I have got my portion!' she cried at once; (Ginevra ever stuck to the substantial; I always thought there was a good trading element in her composition, much as she scorned the 'bourgeoise;') 'and uncle de Bassompierre is quite reconciled. I don't mind his calling Alfred a 'nincompoop' - that's only his coarse Scotch breeding; and I believe Paulina envies me, and Dr. John is wild with jealousy - fit to blow his brains out - and I'm so happy! I really think I've hardly anything left to wish for - unless it be a carriage and an hotel, and, oh! I - must introduce you to 'mon mari.' Alfred, come here!'

And Alfred appeared from the inner salon, where he was talking to Madame Beck, receiving the blended felicitations and reprimands of that lady. I was presented under my various names: the Dragon, Diogenes, and Timon. The young Colonel was very polite. He made me a prettily-turned, neatly-worded apology, about the ghost-visits, &c., concluding with saying that 'the best excuse for all his iniquities stood there!' pointing to his bride.

And then the bride sent him back to Madame Beck, and she took me to herself, and proceeded literally to suffocate me with her unrestrained spirits, her girlish, giddy, wild nonsense. She showed her ring exultingly; she called herself Madame la Comtesse de Hamal, and asked how it sounded, a score of times. I said very little. I gave her only the crust and rind of my nature. No matter she expected of me nothing better - she knew me too well to look for compliments - my dry gibes pleased her well enough and the more impassible and prosaic my mien, the more merrily she laughed.

Soon after his marriage, M. de Hamal was persuaded to leave the army as the surest way of weaning him from certain unprofitable associates and habits; a post of attache was procured for him, and he and his young wife went abroad. I thought she would forget me now, but she did not. For many years, she kept up a capricious, fitful sort of correspondence. During the first year or two, it was only of herself and Alfred she wrote; then, Alfred faded in the background; herself and a certain, new comer prevailed; one Alfred Fanshawe de Bassompierre de Hamal began to reign in his father's stead. There were great boastings about this personage, extravagant amplifications upon miracles of precocity, mixed with vehement objurgations against the phlegmatic incredulity with which I received them. I didn't know 'what it was to be a mother;' 'unfeeling thing that I was, the sensibilities of the maternal heart were Greek and Hebrew to me,' and so on. In due course of nature this young gentleman took his degrees in teething, measles, hooping-cough: that was a terrible time for me - the mamma's letters became a perfect shout of affliction; never woman was so put upon by calamity: never human being stood in such need of sympathy. I was frightened at first, and wrote back pathetically; but I soon found out there was more cry than wool in the business, and

relapsed into my natural cruel insensibility. As to the youthful sufferer, he weathered each storm like a hero. Five times was that youth 'in articulo mortis,' and five times did he miraculously revive.

In the course of years there arose ominous murmurings against Alfred the First; M. de Bassompierre had to be appealed to, debts had to be paid, some of them of that dismal and dingy order called 'debts of honour;' ignoble complaints and difficulties became frequent. Under every cloud, no matter what its nature, Ginevra, as of old, called out lustily for sympathy and aid. She had no notion of meeting any distress single-handed. In some shape, from some quarter or other, she was pretty sure to obtain her will, and so she got on - fighting the battle of life by proxy, and, on the whole, suffering as little as any human being I have ever known.