

THE HONEYMOONS

An Autumn Adventure

BY SIDNEY L. BLANCHARD

I.

Is it better to look more foolish than you are, or to be more foolish than you look? I have often heard the question asked, and have always been of the former opinion. And in this I have been especially confirmed by a certain experience at Boulogne-sur-Mer. I was very young at the time, and innocence was depicted on my countenance—not scribbled in pencil, but written in indelible ink, which the ways of the world have never erased. I have reason to believe that I was considered next door to an idiot in consequence, and believed to be on the best of terms with my neighbour. Nevertheless I have always cherished the weakness as a powerful weapon, and I know that it did me good service upon the occasion in question.

My cottage by the sea consisted of an apartment at an hotel, with the use of the *table-d'hôte* for such refreshments as cannot be supplied by blankets and bolsters. I was thus open to the acquaintance of all the world, and the second day of my sojourn found me swearing eternal friendship with some of the most charming people I had ever met. The Honeymoons were not difficult people to know. Their forte was frankness. They consisted of papa, mamma, and two daughters. Papa had a kind of "you-and-I" manner, and a style of address which, whether illustrated in that manner or not, always gave you the idea of a slap on the back. He had retired from something or other—I scarcely knew what at the time—and in personal appearance resembled a major of the old school, such as one seldom sees in these latter days except on the stage. He was bluff, and not only seemed a good fellow at bottom, but had the more practical advantage of being a good fellow at top. Mamma was more studiously pleasant in her manner, and with no approach to bluntness. Indeed, she made such pretty little ingratiating grimaces when she met you, and became so playful upon the smallest provocation, that ill-natured persons might have accused her of affectation. She was a few years younger than her husband, being probably not more than forty, if ladies ever reach such an age at all.

They were both very nice persons, as you see; but it is doubtful if I should ever have found myself an *ami* of their temporary *maison*—that is to say, their private apartments—but for their daughters;

and when I say daughters, I mean one daughter in particular. Their names respectively were Rose and Blanche. I never knew a Rose in a family without a Blanche to follow. Rose was the elder. They were particularly unlike in personal appearance, as well as in other things. If Rose's hair was of the agreeable carrot-colour then in the height of its popularity, the locks of Blanche had the advantage of a chestnut hue which can never go out of fashion. If Rose was *coiffée* after the manner of the beauties of the court of Charles II., chastened by that of the beauties of the court of Louis XV., Blanche had a style of her own which needed no models. If there was a fluttering fascination about one sister, there was something about the other more pleasantly to the point. If—but I need not go through a catalogue. The difference between the two girls may be summed up in the fact that while the one was very likely to take you by storm, the other was almost certain to undermine you. And I need scarcely say which is the more dangerous aggression of the two.

My preference was made from the first, and marked, I fear, in too conspicuous a manner, not only in private but in public society. The latter was of course supplied by the *Etablissement des Bains de Mer*. Very great persons do not go there habitually, but the Honeymoons did not mind. Mamma used to say in her favourite tone of lofty condescension, "O, it doesn't matter; nobody knows us *here*." And this was very true, though I am not inclined to think that in the other event any great catastrophe would have occurred. My favourite partner at the balls was Blanche; and when I say that Blanche was my favourite partner, I mean that I never danced with anybody else. Only once I gave Rose a waltz out of pique, Blanche having given herself up to a ridiculous *sous-officier*, with only half a pair of epaulettes and brains to match, before I could assert my usual claim.

All this looked very much like being in love, you will say. But I really had no definite idea on the subject, and if asked my intentions at the time, should scarcely have known how to answer. The major too (if he was not a major he ought to have been made one, as a living peer is said to have been created on account of his looks) never evinced any miserable curiosity on the subject, but gave me every opportunity of enjoying the society of the girls; and it cannot be denied that our intimate companionship, thus encouraged, drifted fast in the usual direction.

And very pleasant drifting it is, too, when you are quite unconscious of the port to which you are making, and, with no idea of your destination, can enjoy every inch of the journey. But my dream of bliss was destined to be broken in a rather abrupt manner.

II.

We had all returned one evening from the *Etablissement*, where dancing had been kept up until the late hour of half-past eleven o'clock.

I declined an invitation to give the Honeymoons another half-hour of my society, thinking that they might possibly have had enough of it already; and Blanche, poor thing, looked decidedly sleepy. So we all went at once to our rooms. But I was not quite ready for rest; so, throwing open my *jalousies*, I stepped upon the balcony which looked over the port, now lit by a full moon. I then did what most men would do under the circumstances—lit up a cigar.

I daresay I was half-an-hour or so thus engaged, for during the reverie into which I fell a large-sized regalia was burnt half-way to the end, and the accumulated ash dropped upon the rail against which I leant; when I became conscious of a tapping at my chamber-door. " 'Tis some visitor," I muttered; but, remembering the lateness of the hour, I concluded that the applicant was only some scamp of an Englishman who had forgotten his room, and was knocking anywhere on speculation. Satisfying myself with the belief that it was only this and nothing more, I was about to resume my reverie and my regalia, when the tapping was renewed.

I have already assured you that I am not so foolish as I look, so you will, I hope, believe me when I add that I am not a nervous man. That a curious vibration, suggestive of trembling, ran through me, I am free to confess; but remember, I was in a balcony, and the night-air was chill. I had even doubts about opening the door—a natural response to a knock in the daytime, but not so much a matter of course in the middle of the night, when one is alone, with a solitary taper, and so forth. But before I could quite make up my mind, the door opened, apparently by itself, but I have reason to believe impelled by somebody on the other side; for there immediately appeared a figure clothed in white, shrouded even to the face, which was almost hidden in drapery. It was a female figure, or at least gave you the idea of being such. The air must have been colder about this time, for I felt the vibration already alluded to stronger than before. I was about to exclaim, "Whence come you?" or to make some equally-natural address under such conditions, when the appearance itself spoke, saying: "Julius, follow me!" It then turned back towards the corridor, and I daresay I should have locked it out and myself in very effectively, but I knew the voice.

It was one of the Honeymoon girls—I could not say which, for voices run so in families—so I had no hesitation in obeying the behest. Approaching nearer, I recognised the dress she wore. It was a white opera-cloak, which I must frequently have seen before, for the two sisters were usually equipped in such a garment when out for the evening. But the hood being up, the identity of the wearer was not apparent.

However, we went into the corridor together, and I carefully closed the door of my room behind me. There was fortunately a window at one end of the gallery, through which the moonlight was streaming, so

that we were quite independent of my lamp, which I had neglected to bring with me. The lady spoke first, as ladies usually do.

"You must not think ill of me for visiting you in your room," she said hurriedly. "I knew you were up"—this was said with a pretty little air of confusion—"for my sister and I saw you from our window, smoking your cigar on the balcony; and as I have no secrets from her, I ventured, after a great deal of hesitation, to come down and see you. I have so little opportunity of telling you what I have to tell"—I thought this strange, as we were so continually together—"that I must make the best use of what time I can find."

An uneasy suspicion now crossed my mind. I said:

"But why do you hide your face from me, as if you were concealing yourself from a stranger?"

She answered by throwing back her hood, and looking into my face with a loving glance which made me start back in affright.

It was the wrong sister!

As she stood there, with her impetuous bearing and animated eyes, the ornaments of festivity in her hair, and her decidedly-becoming costume, I might have felt that she was a being to admire; but loving, that was quite a different matter. A lady must have very red hair, wreath it with very bright jewels, and get up very early in the morning besides, before she can hope to capture a heart given to another.

Fortunately I did not betray my astonishment in words, or I would not venture to say what the consequences might have been, beginning probably with the burning down of the hotel. One reason, perhaps, for my prudence was that words would not come. At any rate, I let her run on.

"Although our tongues have been silent, Julius," she said, "my eyes must have long since spoken to you as yours have to mine. Your studious attention to poor Blanche, painful as it may have been to me at times, has afforded me in my reasonable moments the greatest satisfaction. It has given me the strongest assurance of your strength of character, as evinced in your constancy and power of self-denial. Who but myself, among each giddy throng, could have guessed the noble self-devotion which animated you in averting the suspicion of the world from the secret of our souls; or, in other words, which impelled you always to dance with Blanche, in order to prevent people from observing our attachment?"

This was a discovery indeed. But what could I do? I was alone with her, and defenceless. I could only mutter a few words, which must have sounded very like acquiescence, for she went on.

"I come, then, not to reproach, but to explain. I am not offended with you, as you may suppose. I understand the signs by which you reciprocate my affection. So I say, go on as you are going" (that was pleasant, at any rate), "for it will disarm suspicion, which is the more

necessary, as papa and mamma declare that they will never consent to the match."

This seemed a comfortable way out of the difficulty, and I took advantage of it with my usual dexterity. I assured her that the state of things was most painful to me, but that I would bear up as well as I could, and wait for those contingent days of happiness when I trusted that every obstacle to our union might be removed.

I saw at once that her proud spirit was broken. She threw her arms round me, and wept upon my shoulder. The situation was embarrassing; and I never felt myself a greater impostor in my life than when I mustered up courage to give her a salute in return, telling her, however, at the same time, that she must retire to her room, unless she wished to compromise herself with the *garçon*, who would soon come to collect the boots. The practical picture which I suggested recalled her to herself. Snatching a ring from my finger, and pressing upon mine another in return, she rushed from my—or I should rather say *her*—embrace. The next instant her light foot was heard upon the staircase, and I was alone in the corridor—an engaged man.

III.

The meeting next day was embarrassing enough—at least, to me. Nobody besides seemed a bit disconcerted. The major and mamma were as usual. Not a word, not a sign, indicated the suspicion of a change from the easy *bonhomie* in the one case, or the laboured playfulness in the other. Blanche was frank and beaming as ever. Was she in her sister's secret? I could not believe it. Rose was outwardly the same; but she perplexed me awfully by the expression which she threw into her glances. And she had a talent for expression which I fancy nobody knew better than herself.

I managed for two or three days, however, to conduct myself as before in our little excursions and festive gatherings, continuing to appropriate one of the girls, and to receive glances of love from the other. These I occasionally returned; but in a manner which would, I suspect, have made any person with a respectable sense of the ludicrous simply laugh. It struck me, by the way, as somewhat remarkable, that the major, notwithstanding his insuperable objections to a marriage between myself and Rose, never made the smallest objection to my marked attentions to Blanche, but seemed to take them as a matter of course; and in this liberal view of the case he was apparently joined by his wife. You may guess, therefore, that Blanche being willing—though it must be said not very demonstrative, for there was nothing of the leading-up-to-a-declaration manner about her, even when we were alone—I found the temptation to go on as I was going, and let things take their course, too strong to be resisted; though I could not conceal from myself the fact that the more attention I paid to the one sister, the more I was compromising myself with the other.

When things come to the worst they begin to mend. I felt myself rapidly arriving at the first stage, which is always the easier of the two, for the "good time coming" has a way of being a good time before it comes. Another month was passed in the same manner; the season was drawing to a close; and I felt that a settlement of some kind must be come to before we all went away. How I should have emerged from my masterly inactivity policy I do not pretend to say, had not Rose brought matters to a crisis by grasping the nettle in a very determined way.

IV.

It was evening. I was alone on the sands. The sun was sinking in its usual manner, and my heart was bearing it company in *its* usual manner also, when I saw descending the steps by which the pier is approached at low water a female figure whose identity there was no mistaking. She alighted in safety, and bent her steps in my direction. It was Rose, of course. Blanche never ran after me. I only wished she would. I saw as she approached that she had come to make a communication. Business was unusually blended with affection in the expression of her face.

"My dear Rose," I murmured, "you here alone—"

She interrupted me hurriedly. "Yes, I saw no other opportunity to tell you what has happened, and I saw you from the pier, where I was waiting for my papa and mamma. He—my papa—is more than ever angry at what he knows to be your intentions towards me, and declares that to put an end to the possibility of us cheating him, he will leave for London the day after to-morrow, and take *all* of us with him!"

I felt considerably relieved by this announcement, though the idea of seeing no more of Blanche brought with it something like a pang.

"Yes," I said musingly, "it is very unfortunate; what is to be done? I suppose we must make up our minds to bear the trial with patience."

"Bear the trial with patience, indeed! that can never be. No, I have a better plan than that—we must elope. My father fixed the day after to-morrow. We must be in London a day before him. I am of age. There will be no difficulty about getting a special license. I have friends whom my father knows nothing about, with whom we could both stay—who would do the proper, you know," she added with a charming blush, "until the necessary time has elapsed. And when once we are married and it can't be helped, my family will forgive us as a matter of course."

Had there been a shadow of difficulty in the way, I should have had hope; but there was something horrible in the entire practicability of the proceeding. I clung to a straw.

"Yes, yes, of course we can do that; but suppose—suppose they stop us, and bring us back?"

My heart lightened at the idea, and I could feel that my eyes did the same.

There was Roman majesty in the manner of her response.

“Are we to be awed by a possibility such as that? What is our love made of if it will not make us dare all?”

I felt ashamed at the imputation upon my courage, which indeed was not deserved; for had it been with Blanche instead of Rose, I would have gone like a shot from a rifled gun with all the latest improvements. But Blanche had never told me that she loved me, and I was tired of hearing of my happiness from Rose. A sudden idea seized me—a simple but masterly policy suggested itself.

“Of course we will dare anything; but before we take this extreme course I will speak to your father. I will see him to-night, and—and—perhaps I can induce him to overcome his scruples, whatever they may be.”

I was not afraid of the major, nor of any man, but I trembled as I thought of the extent to which I was committing myself. She met my proposition with an expression of horror, and seizing my arm, exclaimed in agitated tones:

“As you love me, do nothing of the kind! You know not the man you have to deal with. When roused he is desperate. Cool and pleasant as is his manner, reasonable as he is upon general subjects, he is like a tiger when any man makes pretensions to the hand of either Blanche or myself; for he thinks nobody good enough for us.”

The latter words were said with modest reluctance, and ought to have extracted some sweet rejoinder on my part. But it did not. My ideas were bent upon business. I could do nothing, however, but faintly urge the expediency of the course that I had proposed, and, fairly beaten in argument, at last gave up the point. If I was afraid of anybody I was afraid of Rose. I could have sustained a pitched battle with the father; I surrendered to the daughter after a mere skirmish. In short, the only position I was capable of defending being thus abandoned, I had no choice but to capitulate altogether; so, after a little more persuasion of a kind which is a very good imitation of force, I agreed to the elopement arrangement, with a vague hope of something happening to prevent it.

So determined was Rose upon running away, that I found she had already taken two places in the Folkestone boat, which started at eight o'clock next morning; so that, adopting the precaution of getting her boxes conveyed on board the evening before, she could, under the pretence of going out to bathe, manage to get off before being missed. What can the mere will of man do against such feminine resources as these?

v.

The meeting with Rose almost put out of my head an engagement which I had made that morning to dine with an old acquaintance, who was passing through the place *en route* for Paris. I remembered it just in time, and made for his hotel at once. There was no occasion to

dress, as it was only a *table-d'hôte* dinner. There could not be a better man than Markwell, it suddenly occurred to me, to help me out of the difficulty. Markwell was a man of the world. He was still young—thirty, or thereabouts—but he had the experience of a patriarch in ways of life to which I was a stranger. He had served since the age of eighteen in a regiment of foot, from which he had just retired with the rank of captain, and in the course of the changes and chances of his profession had graduated in knowledge of men and things, and might have taken honours in many kinds of learning incidental to this sort of experience. As luck would have it, he knew the Honeymoons, and told me more about them than I had ever known before. “The major,” it seems, had never been in the army, but had held a post in the Ordnance, which gave him considerable knowledge of the service, and he was as well known at Malta as the Strada Reale. He had made a great deal of money in the course of his career, not out of his pay, but from commissions of all kinds which he executed for his military connections. He was always buying something, and had always something to sell. Nothing came amiss to him, from a horse to a walking-stick, and it was whispered—nay, it was almost proclaimed from the house-tops—that he did a great deal in the way of “accommodation” of a pecuniary kind. He had two great objects in life—one was to make money, and the other was to marry his daughters. In the latter he had hitherto been unsuccessful, notwithstanding the utmost determination and perseverance. There had been a great many nibbles, but never a decided bite. There had been “offers,” indeed, but the men whom he knew best, and who thought it worth while to visit at his house, were not, as a general rule, good matrimonial speculations. They were mostly in debt, and there was a tendency among them to sell their commissions, if not to get cashiered. Occasionally a susceptible ensign of a better class would be keen at the bait, but he was never safely landed, as I have said. Why in this state of desperation he should object to me was more than I could say. It was decidedly mysterious, and even Markwell could not make it out.

My friend, however, hit upon a notable way of getting me out of the difficulty. We discussed it well over our cigars; and after a great deal of reluctance I consented to carry it out. I returned home in a very nervous condition, knowing what was before me, but in better spirits than when I had sat down to dinner; for I had hope.

VI.

The next morning arrived with the usual punctuality of next mornings, and the course of true love (by courtesy so called) promised to run remarkably smooth. Of course I was a couple of hours or so too soon for my appointment; for a man does not elope every day, and the idea of doing so makes him restless and fluttery. Rose tempered her im-

patience with discretion. She was only half-an-hour too soon. We met on the deck of the steamer, and a most embarrassing meeting it was. Rose was radiant, but agitated, and hoped that she might not be carried away by her feelings; for my part, I should have been much obliged to her feelings for doing me such a service. Still, she did not forget business considerations, and was particularly anxious to make certain that I had not forgotten my baggage, which you may be sure I had not, for I had no immediate intention of returning to Boulogne.

I was always fond of the sea, but never regarded it with so much affection as I did that morning, for it was very rough, and by consigning Rose in a helpless state of prostration to the ladies' cabin, relieved me of a great deal of embarrassment during the journey. My soul is not in the habit of sickening o'er the heaving wave; but were such its weakness, I would willingly have braved the worst rather than have endured the pleasantest possible passage under the condition of billing and cooing with that determined young lady.

When we arrived at Folkestone our baggage—booked through, of course—was taken to the railway-station, and I, with the object of my alleged affections, now wonderfully recovered, and full of playful little ways, prepared to follow it. It is a mere step to the train; but we had barely reached the platform, when there came a catastrophe for which I was not unprepared. One of the railway policemen approached me, and putting his hand upon my shoulder said, "Sorry to interfere; but orders by submarine telegraph to detain you until party arrives to make a charge."

Rose did not faint, but relieved her feelings with a burst of indignation which could scarcely have been expected from her affectionate nature. For my part, I had the greatest difficulty in concealing my satisfaction, and protested in such an equivocal way against the proceeding as to draw from the lady a withering taunt on the ground of being mean-spirited, and not having the courage of a man. I bore her out, however, in her assertion that I was the wrong person, but without effect; for the description given by Markwell (need I say that it was Markwell?) agreed exactly with my appearance, and there was no doubt in the eyes of authority of my identity with a fraudulent cashier of an English bank, in search of whom the London detectives were at that time on a visit to Paris. Of course the honesty which I have already mentioned as inscribed upon my countenance was to the police-mind an additional ground of suspicion. It is a maxim, I believe, in the profession that the man they "want" is always the least likely, as far as appearance is concerned, of any number in a crowd, to have committed the offence. I could not help thinking, by the way, that it is very easy to arrest people upon false charges by electric telegraph; and such is indeed the fact.

Well, they kept me at the railway-station, which was a bore to be sure: but I was treated with all the distinction due to a wholesale

embezzler, and the hardship was not very great. I was relieved from one annoyance: Rose was not allowed to remain with me. They had nothing to do with the lady, they said, who was free to go where she pleased. Her disinterested desire to share my captivity was therefore disappointed, and her sorrow had to find consolation at the hotel. I must confess that I felt a sentiment of pity at this point, for I had no unfriendly feeling towards her. But a man is not bound to marry a lady merely to oblige her, and self-preservation is the first law of nature.

VII.

The night-boat brought matters to a crisis,—that is to say, it brought over Markwell, accompanied, as I expected, by Honeymoon. My friend, as we arranged beforehand, had gone to the major and told him what he had done, in the interest of the family, to stop the runaway pair; and that gentleman, as we expected, lost no time in appearing upon the scene. His object, as he told Markwell, was to take back his daughter from the heartless monster who had betrayed the confidence of friendship, and robbed him of the hope of his house. Markwell confessed afterwards that he was puzzled at this expressed determination, but accepted the position, as in consistency bound. The major, however, was too much for us,—I admit it in all humility. He had changed his mind during the passage, and so far from taking back his daughter, determined to leave her with me. After the way in which I had compromised her, said the outraged parent, there was but one atonement on my part; and on condition that I married her at once, he was ready to forget and forgive.

Markwell roared with laughter—it was a little too bad—when he heard this gracious announcement, revealing the nature of the plot of which I had been the victim. For it then became apparent, as was afterwards proved, that Rose's mysterious course of action had been dictated from the first by the family, and was intended, in the last resort, to bring matters to their present issue.

I was fairly at bay, but made a last effort to escape upon pleasant terms. Markwell, having explained to the police that he had lighted upon the wrong man, released me from my state of durance, without much fear of the action for false imprisonment which he was assured that I had a right to bring. He then took me apart as a free agent, and consulted upon the future course of action. *My* course was already decided. I would appease the major's wrath by marrying Blanche instead of her sister. Nothing could be more agreeable to my feelings, and Markwell decided that it was the best thing to be done. He was a little ashamed—a great deal more than myself—at the manner in which he had been outwitted, and was glad of a compromise of any kind. So we went to the major, who had retired, to await the result of his ultimatum, into the refreshment-room, and communicated our determination. But this was the occasion only for another disappoint-

ment. Blanche was already married. An ensign had put the seal upon his infatuation before leaving Malta, but family fears on his part had counselled concealment, and the match was not yet proclaimed. Hence the plot to transfer me to the sister, which had met with such signal success.

I should have married Rose out of hand but for Markwell. He made a great demonstration on my behalf, and defied the major to force me into the other alliance. So under cover of our joint protests we got safely to London. But we had not yet heard the last of the Honeymoons. I had not been a fortnight in town when I received notice of an action for breach of promise of marriage, to be tried at Westminster in the ensuing November. This meant business, and as the verdict would certainly have gone against me, I had to compromise for a good round sum. It was hard to pay five hundred pounds for my autumn adventure, but it was preferable to paying fifteen hundred and costs—the major's idea of the loss which his daughter had sustained being considerably assisted by his imagination. In this resolve at least I showed my cleverness, and Markwell agreed with me that it was a master-stroke of policy not to go into court. But I must confess that I was not pleased upon personal grounds. The pain of being deceived by Rose I could bear, but it was hard to believe that Blanche had connived at the deception, and I sincerely trust that she is happy by this time with her ensign. As for Rose, she eventually married an impecunious paymaster, who lost his commission, published pamphlets about his case, promoted public companies, founded associations for ameliorating most people's condition but his own, and ultimately retired to Australia, leaving his wife with no other resource—why is that always a last resource?—but to set up a school. When last I saw her she was at Southsea, walking in the rear, with her assistant, of some five-and-twenty pupils, whom I sincerely trust she is bringing up in the way they should go.

For myself, I have not lost my old belief that I am less of a fool than I look. But somehow when I go over to France I choose the route *viâ* Calais rather than that *viâ* Boulogne.
