



BY GUY DE MAUPASSANT

*Letter from Doctor Henri Fontal to Monsieur l'Abbé Louis d'Emumare à Soissons.*

MY DEAR ABBÉ:

Here is my engagement with your cousin broken, in the most exasperating manner, for an unlucky joke that I played, almost involuntarily, on my fiancée. I turn to you, my old comrade, in this my extremity, because you alone can extricate me from my difficulty. I shall be grateful to you till the day of my death.

You know Gilberte, or rather you think you know her; but does one ever know a woman? Their opinions, their beliefs, their ideas, are all unaccountable. Their minds are full of devious wanderings, unexpected conclusions, unreasonable reasonings, wrong logic, prejudices, apparently strong as the laws of the Medes and Persians, but which they abandon if a bird flies against the window.

I need not tell you that your cousin is extremely devout, having been educated by the white (or black, I forget which) Sisters of Notre Dame.

You know all that better than I do; but know also that she is as exaggerated in everything else as she is in religion. Her little head flies away like a leaf whirling in the wind; and she is full of swift angers—swifter relentings. She rushes full gallop toward love or hate, and comes back at the same pace—pretty, as you know; more charming than I can tell you, more bewitching than I intend you shall know.

\*Translated by Elise F. Hinman, from the French, for Short Stories.

Well, we were engaged. I adored her, as I do yet—she seemed to love me.

One evening I received a telegram calling me to Cologne for a consultation, to be followed perhaps by a serious and difficult operation. As I had to go the next day I rushed to bid adieu to Gilberte, and to tell her that I would have to dine with my future parents-in-law on Friday instead of Wednesday.

Oh! beware of Friday! I assure you it is a very unlucky day.

When I told her of my departure I saw a tear in her sweet eyes; but when she found I would return so speedily she clapped her hands and cried:

“How nice! You must bring me something—nothing much—a simple remembrance, but chosen specially for me. You must find out what will give me the most pleasure—do you hear? I shall see if you have any imagination!”

She reflected a few seconds, then added: “I forbid you to spend more than twenty francs. I shall be touched by the thought, the consideration, not by the price!”

Then, after another pause, she said in a low voice, her eyes cast down:

“If it costs you nothing in money, if it is very ingenious, very original, I will—I will give you a kiss.”

. . . I was in Cologne the following day. I had been sent for on account of a dreadful accident which threw a whole family into mourning and despair. A speedy amputation was necessary. They made me stay in their house, they almost locked me in. I saw only people in tears. I was deafened by groans. My patient almost died under my hands. I stayed two nights by his side, then, seeing a chance for his recovery, I escaped, and started for the railway station. But I was a little early—I had an hour to waste. I wandered along the streets, thinking of my poor patient, when a man accosted me. I knew no German, he knew no French; but at last I understood that he was offering me some relics.

Gilberte’s souvenir at once occurred to me. I knew her almost fanatical devotion. Here was just the present for her. I followed the man into a shop and bought a “little piece of a bone of the 11,000 virgins of Cologne.” This tempting morsel was enclosed in a very pretty antique silver box, which decided my choice. I put it in my pocket and rushed to catch my train. When I got home I took out my purchase. The

box was open, the relic was lost! I rummaged my pocket, I turned it inside out—the little bone, hardly bigger than a pin-head, had disappeared.

As you know, my dear Abbé, I have only a moderate amount of faith—you have the greatness of soul, the friendship to put up with my lukewarmness, and to leave me free, to await the unknown, as you say. But I am absolutely incredulous about these relics, peddled on the streets, and you share my doubts in that direction. Therefore, the loss of that particle of bone did not trouble me at all. I procured, with very little trouble, a similar fragment, which I placed carefully in my silver box. Then I started for my fiancée. When she saw me she ran toward me, smiling expectantly:

“What have you brought me?”

I pretended I had forgotten it. She did not believe me. I made her beg and implore, and when her curiosity was sufficiently aroused, I gave her the blessed box. She was carried away with joy.

“A relic! oh, a relic!”

And she kissed the box reverently. I was ashamed of my fraud. But she began to show signs of uneasiness. Evidently an awful uncertainty assailed her mind, and looking me straight in the eyes, she said:

“Are you sure that it is genuine?”

“Absolutely certain.”

“But how can that be?”

I was caught! To acknowledge that I had bought that bone of a street peddler would be fatal. What should I do? A wild idea jumped into my mind. I answered, in a low, mysterious voice:

“I stole it—for you!”

She looked at me with her big eyes full of wonder and admiration.

“Oh! you stole it! Where? From the Cathedral—from the tomb of the 11,000 virgins?”

Her heart beat fast—she was faint with happiness. She murmured:

“Oh! you did that for me—tell me all about it!”

It was done, I could not retreat now. I invented a fantastic story, with exact and surprising details. I had given one hundred francs to the guardian of the edifice, so that I could go in alone. The shrine was being repaired; but I happened to

go just as the workmen and the priests went to dinner. Raising a panel I had been able to seize a little bone—oh, so little!—from among a quantity of others. (I said a quantity, thinking of the amount of débris there must be from 11,000 virgin skeletons.) Then I had hied me to a goldsmith and bought a case worthy of the relic. I was not sorry to let her know that the box had cost me five hundred francs. But she hardly noticed that. She listened, trembling with ecstasy, murmuring:

“How I love you!” and threw herself in my arms.

Observe that! For her sake I had committed a sacrilege—I had stolen—I had violated a church and a holy shrine; I had laid violent hands on sacred relics. Yet she was ready to fall at my feet. She found me adorable—perfect, divine! Such is a woman, my dear Abbé—such is every woman!

For two months I was a model fiancé. She had arranged in her room a sort of elaborate shrine, in which reposed that morsel of a rib which had made me commit a crime, as she believed, for her sake. And she worshiped before it, morning and evening. I had begged her to keep it a secret, if she did not wish to see me arrested, condemned and dragged back to Germany to be executed. She kept her promise.

But, early in the summer, a mad desire seized her to behold the scene of my exploit. She besought her father, without telling him the true reason, to take her to Cologne—without my knowledge. I need not tell you that I have never seen the inside of the Cathedral—I don't even know where the tomb is (is it a tomb?) of the 11,000 virgins. It seems that the sepulchre is wholly inaccessible, alas!

I received, eight days later, ten lines releasing me from my engagement, and an explanatory letter from her father. One glance at the shrine had shown her my treachery and falsehood (and at the same time my real innocence). When she asked the guardian of the relics if any theft had been committed lately the man laughed, and showed her the impossibility of such a deed. But the moment it was proven that I had not broken into a church and plunged my profane hands among sacred and venerable remains, I was no longer worthy of my blonde and exquisite fiancée.

I was forbidden to enter the house. I begged, I implored—nothing could soften the lovely devotée. I was fairly sick with chagrin.

Finally her cousin, Madame de Belleville, sent for me. Behold the conditions of my pardon!

I must get a relic—a true, authentic relic of some virgin martyr, certified by our Holy Father, the Pope.

This completes my state of mind. I will go to Rome, if I must. But I cannot present myself to the Pope and tell him my absurd experience. And then I doubt whether they entrust real relics to private individuals like me.

Could you not recommend me to some cardinal or archbishop, who is the proprietor of the fragments of some saint? You yourself, would you not, have in your collection this precious and sorely needed object? Save me, my dear Abbé, and I swear you shall convert me ten years sooner.

Madame de Belleville, who takes the matter very seriously, said to me:

“If you do not succeed, poor Gilberte will never marry!”

My good fellow, will you leave your sweet cousin to die, the victim of a silly imposture?

I beg of you, do not let there be 11,001 virgins!

Forgive my persistency; but you are my only hope, and I implore you not to fail me.

Yours, in sackcloth and ashes,

HENRI FONTAL.

