

19th-Century Transmen(?): Three Cases

What follow are three newspaper accounts from the latter half of 19th-century, all dealing with people who appear to have transformed from female to male identities. Each of these cases was widely reported in the press, and the particular accounts that I've chosen are not necessarily the best ones from the point of view of fact-finding. Indeed, there are aspects of these accounts that seem to draw on tropes from the literary reservoir of gender-shifting (which is ancient) rather than on the facts of the cases themselves.

I will keep my own comments rather brief for the moment, though I hope to refer back to these posts later.

It is striking that each of the authors, including the exceedingly prejudiced editor of the Salt Lake Herald, adopt the convention of using emic pronouns to denote the gender of the people in question. This has become a matter of some political importance in the last few decades, but it is interesting to see that as early as 1853, editors who were not at all sympathetic to people crossing the gender lines still abided by the same logic.

There is also a distinct contrast between the negative tone of the first two accounts and the very upbeat tone of the third (which, by implication, is written by Frank Dubois). The story of Charles Fear is one that we can today interpret (riskily) as a transman gaining acceptance by his community, while the other two might be interpreted (with equal or greater risk) as the persecution of transmen, or perhaps cross-dressing lesbians. If we accept these understandings, at least in their broad outline, two factors stand out that may have made Charles Fear less fearsome to contemporary gender roles. Firstly, he was not (at the time of the article) married; thus he was not bringing discredit on the institution of marriage, which was a major concern for the first two authors. Secondly, Charles Fear seems to have presented, perhaps with a doctor's assistance, a story that he "became male" due to some inexplicable medical condition. His male identity, then, was not a subterfuge but a catastrophe that he had to cope with as best he could.

For my own purposes, though, the important point here is that the late 19th-century understanding of the "female husband" hinged on deceit and subterfuge. We are told that the wives of Guelph and Dubois were unwitting victims of gender imposture. Maybe so; maybe not. But the irreducible point is that these gender dynamics, however we identify them today, were being described in terms of imposture. Guelph, Dubois, and Fear were not presenting themselves or understood as being biologically ("assigned") female persons who chose or felt it more natural to live as male. They were understood as, in the first two cases, women *pretending* to be men, and in the third case, a woman who had miraculously turned into a man.

These distinctions, I think, are relevant to further discussion.

Notes After the Move

When I originally published this, I received a single, perfunctory complaint about the pronouns it uses. I can only assume that my correspondent objected to pronouns in the reprinted articles themselves. It is my practice, however, to reproduce pre-existing texts faithfully, regardless of what offense their original wording might cause.

In separate news, I want to highlight the significance of the third piece below. If we accept, as I do, that it was written by Frank Dubois, it is apparently the first depiction of a transgender person by *another* transgender person, and thus has a certain place of pride in trans literature overall.

Daily Evening Star (Washington DC) Nov 15, 1853

A FEMALE HUSBAND.

A few days previous to the sailing of the last steamer, a quiet-looking elderly woman solicited the assistance of Mr. Broderip, one of the London police magistrates, under the following circumstances. She complained that her daughter, a girl of seventeen, had gone through the ceremony of marriage without being blessed with a husband. It was, of course, at the time of the nuptials, supposed that she was being united to one of the other sex, and they went to York to spend the honeymoon: but her daughter, to her great surprise, discovered that she had been married to a woman in male attire, and the mother of three children. Mr. Broderip, after stating that there were other cases of a similar character on record, and learning that the marriage was solemnized at Highgate church, referred the complainant to the magistrate of that district. Before leaving the court, however, the mother made the following extraordinary statement: She said that the pseudo-husband was first introduced to her in female attire, under the name of Mrs. Panton, but, after an intimacy of some months, suddenly appeared in the costume of a gentleman, announcing himself as Mr. Albert Guelph, and declaring that he was issue of George IV, and Queen Caroline, but that for certain reasons his existence had hitherto been kept a profound secret, but that his love for her fair daughter had wrung it from his heart, and induced him to appear in the becoming habiliments of his own sex, in lieu of the feminine attire he had been disguised in for years, by direction of a very benign old lady, who met him periodically in Park-lane, and supplied him with cash and [uniform?]. As he dressed very fashionably, and always had plenty of money, the mother believing the story, consented to their nuptials, particularly as the soi-disant Mrs. Panton and her daughter had upon the occasion of little visits slept together before; and so Miss Robins changed her name for Mrs. Guelph, on the 12th of September, 1852, by license, at Highgate church; but alas! soon discovered that Mrs. Panton was but a woman after all.

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SALT LAKE HERALD, NOV 23, 1883

(But see also the Worthington Advance, Nov 8, 1883, etc.)

The Female Husband

The state, and in fact the whole country, has been much interested for two weeks over a queer case of marriage at Waupun. A young man, or an alleged young man named Frank Dubois, wooed and won a girl and they were married. All moved along happily, to all outward appearances, until two weeks ago when, a man named Hudson appeared upon the scene and claimed that the "man" Dubois was his wife, Mrs. Hudson, who had deserted him, and who was the mother of his two children. The story was believed, and Dubois and the girl he had married, went away from Waupun to Brandon, Fond Du Lac, and finally to Chilton, followed by tireless newspaper reporters, until the couple were footsore and wished they were dead. It is said tat Dubois has confessed that he was a woman, and his wife has admitted as much. The wife was informed of the fact after they were married, and both agreed to keep it a secret, which they would have done very likely for all time, only for the appearance of Hudson. It is a queer freak, and the deceived wife has every reason to be offended at the deception that has been practiced upon her. It is bad enough for a girl to marry a man, but to marry what is supposed to be a man and then to find that the husband is a woman must be heart-rending. What the object of the female husband could have been the world will never know, but hereafter it will stand girls in hand to refer

suitors to their parents when they propose matrimony, or cause them to produce a certificate that they are what they seem. The marriage relation is an excellent thing for the world at large, but if it is tooled with in this way by amateurs, it will be brought into discredit and will become very unpopular. The idea of a woman playing husband, and trying to split wood or drive team, is absurd. The best woman in the world could not take the place of a man, and do chores around the house and go down town nights, and come home full of election whisky, without giving herself away. Such a husband would be of no account on earth, in case of burglars getting into the house. Imagine a burglar entering a bed room occupied by such a couple in the dead hour of night, to burgle. The spectacle of two heads going under the bedclothes at once, and two female screams, where there was one pair of pants on the floor, would mix up the most hardened burglar, and make him think he had struck a lunatic asylum. What would such a husband amount to if a neighbor should call to whip him because his children had been throwing oyster cans over the next fence? The female husband would get behind his wife and cry. Suppose the wife of a female husband should be taken sick in the night and want a female doctor? The feminine husband wouldn't dare get up and jump into a couple of pants and go down town on a run after a doctor. He would want the wife to get up and go with him. Suppose a cow should get into the garden and had to be driven out. All such a husband could do would be to pull up his vest and shake like an apron and say "shoo" and run into the house when the cow turned her head to nip a cabbage. What would such a husband amount to if an old lover of his wife should call and offer to kiss the wife for old acquaintance sake? All the female husband could do, would be to pull his hair and pout. Suppose the house caught fire in the night, such a husband couldn't grab pants in one hand and a pail of water in the other, and go out on the roof. The female husband would have to make an elaborate toilet, and go to the fire in a carriage. O, female husbands are never going to take the place of the old fashioned male article. A female husband could never go to a caucus and smoke election cigars, and come rolling home in the morning without somebody came home with him. Such a husband would make a nice appearance riding a horse as marshal of the day, on the 4th of July A female husband going to get measured for a new suit of clothes, would be a spectacle for gods and men. It is well that the female husband business in Wisconsin is thus early nipped in the bud, and it is hoped that an end has been put to it for all time. -
Peck's Sun

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THE SEDAILIA WEEKLY BAZOO, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11, 1883.

A STRANGE CASE RECALLED.

By a Wisconsin Female-Husband
Case-A Wonderful Metamorphosis.

Erie. Dec. 2. Remarkable as is the case of the Dubois female husband of which the papers have contained so much of late, the story is far from being as remarkable as that of Charles Fear, a young farmer residing at Ripley, about forty minutes journey from this city. At this moment all the parties in this most wonderful case are living and can be seen and questioned by interviewers. Farmer Charles Fear is a young man about 30 years old, and in addition to farming he follows the profession of school teacher. He is a handsome, manly-looking fellow, and is regarded as one of the best citizens in the township of Ripley. Twenty years ago Charles Fear was the brightest and prettiest little girl in the village school, and his name was then Rosa Fear. The child is well remembered by many citizens of this city who lived there and knew her, So apt a pupil was she that she carried off the bulk of the prizes at the village school examination, and her family thought of having her educated for a teacher; but family misfortunes occurred to prevent this, and at the age of 14 Rosa Fear entered the home of Farmer

William P. Baxter as a domestic. She proved to be as good at household duties as in her studies, and the Baxters treated her as one of their own family. At the age of eighteen the hand of Miss Rosa Fear was sought by a farmer from Westfield, but the young lady declined the offer, and gave no reason for her refusal beyond that she had no desire to leave the home of her kind friends.

During the succeeding year it was noticed that Rosa was growing morose, and that her features were losing their feminine softness. In time quite a masculine appearance was noticeable, and the girl became less sociable than ever. She refused to go out and no longer attended the village dances and parties, at which she had hitherto reigned as belle. One morning she was missing, and a letter in her bedroom threw the Baxter family into a state of the wildest excitement. Mrs Baxter was informed that the writer had fled forever. That she was the victim of some unnatural phenomenon, and that a physical metamorphosis made it necessary for her to change her home and raiment. They thought her mad and every effort was exerted to find Miss Fear, but to no purpose.

When Miss Rosa fled from the Baxter farm she went in male attire taken from the room of a physician, a friend of the family, who was visiting at that time. This was Dr. A. A. Freeman, now of Erie, and present alderman of the First ward, in the city of Erie. Two years later a sun-burned young man, with a silky moustache, and a flowing beard, presented himself at the Fear homestead and extended his arms to Miss Mary Fear, a younger sister of the Miss Rosa. Miss Mary resented his familiarity, but the young man bent over her and whispered something that caused the girl to draw back and regard him with amazement. It was Rosa Fear- I am no longer Rosa, said the young man after his explanation, but am Charles Fear, come home to work the farm.

The wonderful story was village gossip for the regulation nine days, and then Rosa Fear settled down as Charles Fear and went about the pursuits of life without obtrusive questioning. As Charles Fear the little Rose of the village school lives in Ripley, to-day, managing the farm with skill and industry, and possessing the esteem of his fellow citizens. Twice has he been appointed to teach by the local school board, and he has turned out some of the very best scholars in the village. Mr. Fear is a mystery. All the foregoing facts can be verified on the spot; the metamorphosis, the flight from home, return and recognition in society as a gentleman being well known to the citizens of Ripley. Dr. Stillman, one of the leading physicians of Erie, is also well acquainted with the remarkable history of Rosa, now Charley Fear.