

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 27

"In Which Amelia Joins Her Regiment"

When Jos's fine carriage drove up to the inn door at Chatham, the first face which Amelia recognized was the friendly countenance of Captain Dobbin, who had been pacing the street for an hour past in expectation of his friends' arrival. The Captain, with shells on his frockcoat, and a crimson sash and sabre, presented a military appearance, which made Jos quite proud to be able to claim such an acquaintance, and the stout civilian hailed him with a cordiality very different from the reception which Jos vouchsafed to his friend in Brighton and Bond Street.

Along with the Captain was Ensign Stubble; who, as the barouche neared the inn, burst out with an exclamation of "By Jove! what a pretty girl"; highly applauding Osborne's choice. Indeed, Amelia dressed in her wedding-pelisse and pink ribbons, with a flush in her face, occasioned by rapid travel through the open air, looked so fresh and pretty, as fully to justify the Ensign's compliment. Dobbin liked him for making it. As he stepped forward to help the lady out of the carriage, Stubble saw what a pretty little hand she gave him, and what a sweet pretty little foot came tripping down the step. He blushed profusely, and made the very best bow of which he was capable; to which Amelia, seeing the number of the the regiment embroidered on the Ensign's cap, replied with a blushing smile, and a curtsey on her part; which finished the young Ensign on the spot. Dobbin took most kindly to Mr. Stubble from that day, and encouraged him to talk about Amelia in their private walks, and at each other's quarters. It became the fashion, indeed, among all the honest young fellows of the –th to adore and admire Mrs. Osborne. Her simple artless behaviour, and modest kindness of demeanour, won all their unsophisticated hearts; all which simplicity and sweetness are quite impossible to describe in print. But who has not beheld these among women, and recognised the presence of all sorts of qualities in them, even though they say no more to you than that they are engaged to dance the next quadrille, or that it is very hot weather? George, always the champion of his regiment, rose immensely in the opinion of the youth of the corps, by his gallantry in marrying this portionless young creature, and by his choice of such a pretty kind

partner.

In the sitting-room which was awaiting the travellers, Amelia, to her surprise, found a letter addressed to Mrs. Captain Osborne. It was a triangular billet, on pink paper, and sealed with a dove and an olive branch, and a profusion of light blue sealing wax, and it was written in a very large, though undecided female hand.

“It’s Peggy O’Dowd’s fist,” said George, laughing. “I know it by the kisses on the seal.” And in fact, it was a note from Mrs. Major O’Dowd, requesting the pleasure of Mrs. Osborne’s company that very evening to a small friendly party. “You must go,” George said. “You will make acquaintance with the regiment there. O’Dowd goes in command of the regiment, and Peggy goes in command.”

But they had not been for many minutes in the enjoyment of Mrs. O’Dowd’s letter, when the door was flung open, and a stout jolly lady, in a riding-habit, followed by a couple of officers of Ours, entered the room.

“Sure, I couldn’t stop till tay-time. Present me, Garge, my dear fellow, to your lady. Madam, I’m deloighted to see ye; and to present to you me husband, Meejor O’Dowd”; and with this, the jolly lady in the riding-habit grasped Amelia’s hand very warmly, and the latter knew at once that the lady was before her whom her husband had so often laughed at. “You’ve often heard of me from that husband of yours,” said the lady, with great vivacity.

“You’ve often heard of her,” echoed her husband, the Major.

Amelia answered, smiling, “that she had.”

“And small good he’s told you of me,” Mrs. O’Dowd replied; adding that “George was a wicked divvle.”

“That I’ll go bail for,” said the Major, trying to look knowing, at which George laughed; and Mrs. O’Dowd, with a tap of her whip, told the Major to be quiet; and then requested to be presented in form to Mrs. Captain Osborne.

“This, my dear,” said George with great gravity, “is my very good, kind, and excellent friend, Auralia Margareta, otherwise called Peggy.”

“Faith, you’re right,” interposed the Major.

“Otherwise called Peggy, lady of Major Michael O’Dowd, of our regiment, and daughter of Fitzjurd Ber’sford de Burgo Malony of Glenmalony, County Kildare.”

“And Muryan Squeer, Doblin,” said the lady with calm superiority.

“And Muryan Square, sure enough,” the Major whispered.

”’Twas there ye coorted me, Meejor dear,” the lady said; and the Major assented to this as to every other proposition which was made generally in company.

Major O’Dowd, who had served his sovereign in every quarter of the world, and had paid for every step in his profession by some more than equivalent act of daring and gallantry, was the most modest, silent, sheep-faced and meek of little men, and as obedient to his wife as if he had been her tay-boy. At the mess-table he sat silently, and drank a great deal. When full of liquor, he reeled silently home. When he spoke, it was to agree with everybody on every conceivable point; and he passed through life in perfect ease and good-humour. The hottest suns of India never heated his temper; and the Walcheren ague never shook it. He walked up to a battery with just as much indifference as to a dinner-table; had dined on horse-flesh and turtle with equal relish and appetite; and had an old mother, Mrs. O’Dowd of O’Dowdstown indeed, whom he had never disobeyed but when he ran away and enlisted, and when he persisted in marrying that odious Peggy Malony.

Peggy was one of five sisters, and eleven children of the noble house of Glenmalony; but her husband, though her own cousin, was of the mother’s side, and so had not the inestimable advantage of being allied to the Malonys, whom she believed to be the most famous family in the world. Having tried nine seasons at Dublin and two at Bath and Cheltenham, and not finding a partner for life, Miss Malony ordered her cousin Mick to marry her when she was about thirty-three years of age; and the honest fellow obeying, carried her off to the West Indies, to

preside over the ladies of the –th regiment, into which he had just exchanged.

Before Mrs. O’Dowd was half an hour in Amelia’s (or indeed in anybody else’s) company, this amiable lady told all her birth and pedigree to her new friend. “My dear,” said she, good-naturedly, “it was my intention that Garge should be a brother of my own, and my sister Glorvina would have suited him entirely. But as bygones are bygones, and he was engaged to yourself, why, I’m determined to take you as a sister instead, and to look upon you as such, and to love you as one of the family. Faith, you’ve got such a nice good-natured face and way widg you, that I’m sure we’ll agree; and that you’ll be an addition to our family anyway.”

”Deed and she will,” said O’Dowd, with an approving air, and Amelia felt herself not a little amused and grateful to be thus suddenly introduced to so large a party of relations.

“We’re all good fellows here,” the Major’s lady continued. “There’s not a regiment in the service where you’ll find a more united society nor a more agreeable mess-room. There’s no quarrelling, bickering, slandthering, nor small talk amongst us. We all love each other.”

“Especially Mrs. Magenis,” said George, laughing.

“Mrs. Captain Magenis and me has made up, though her treatment of me would bring me gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.”

“And you with such a beautiful front of black, Peggy, my dear,” the Major cried.

“Hould your tongue, Mick, you booby. Them husbands are always in the way, Mrs. Osborne, my dear; and as for my Mick, I often tell him he should never open his mouth but to give the word of command, or to put meat and drink into it. I’ll tell you about the regiment, and warn you when we’re alone. Introduce me to your brother now; sure he’s a mighty fine man, and reminds me of me cousin, Dan Malony (Malony of Ballymalony, my dear, you know who mar’ied Ophalia Scully, of Oysterstown, own cousin to Lord Poldoody). Mr. Sedley, sir, I’m deloighted to be made known te ye. I suppose you’ll dine at the mess to-

day. (Mind that divvle of a docther, Mick, and whatever ye du, keep yourself sober for me party this evening.)”

“It’s the 150th gives us a farewell dinner, my love,” interposed the Major, “but we’ll easy get a card for Mr. Sedley.”

“Run Simple (Ensign Simple, of Ours, my dear Amelia. I forgot to introjuice him to ye). Run in a hurry, with Mrs. Major O’Dowd’s compliments to Colonel Tavish, and Captain Osborne has brought his brothernlaw down, and will bring him to the 150th mess at five o’clock sharp—when you and I, my dear, will take a snack here, if you like.” Before Mrs. O’Dowd’s speech was concluded, the young Ensign was trotting downstairs on his commission.

“Obedience is the soul of the army. We will go to our duty while Mrs. O’Dowd will stay and enlighten you, Emmy,” Captain Osborne said; and the two gentlemen, taking each a wing of the Major, walked out with that officer, grinning at each other over his head.

And, now having her new friend to herself, the impetuous Mrs: O’Dowd proceeded to pour out such a quantity of information as no poor little woman’s memory could ever tax itself to bear. She told Amelia a thousand particulars relative to the very numerous family of which the amazed young lady found herself a member. “Mrs. Heavytop, the Colonel’s wife, died in Jamaica of the yellow faver and a broken heart comboined, for the horrud old Colonel, with a head as bald as a cannon-ball, was making sheep’s eyes at a half-caste girl there. Mrs. Magenis, though without education, was a good woman, but she had the divvle’s tongue, and would cheat her own mother at whist. Mrs. Captain Kirk must turn up her lobster eyes forsooth at the idea of an honest round game (wherein me fawther, as pious a man as ever went to church, me uncle Dane Malony, and our cousin the Bishop, took a hand at loo, or whist, every night of their lives). Nayther of â€˜em’s goin’ with the regiment this time,” Mrs. O’Dowd added. “Fanny Magenis stops with her mother, who sells small coal and potatoes, most likely, in Islington-town, hard by London, though she’s always bragging of her father’s ships, and pointing them out to us as they go up the river: and Mrs. Kirk and her children will stop here in Bethesda Place, to be nigh to her favourite preacher, Dr. Ramshorn. Mrs. Bunny’s in an interesting situation—faith, and she always is, then—and has given the Lieutenant

seven already. And Ensign Posky's wife, who joined two months before you, my dear, has quarl'd with Tom Posky a score of times, till you can hear'm all over the bar'ck (they say they're come to broken pleets, and Tom never accounted for his black oi), and she'll go back to her mother, who keeps a ladies' siminary at Richmond—bad luck to her for running away from it! Where did ye get your finishing, my dear? I had moin, and no expince spared, at Madame Flanahan's, at Ilyssus Grove, Booterstown, near Dublin, wid a Marchioness to teach us the true Parisian pronounciation, and a retired Mejor-General of the French service to put us through the exercise.”

Of this incongruous family our astonished Amelia found herself all of a sudden a member: with Mrs. O'Dowd as an elder sister. She was presented to her other female relations at tea-time, on whom, as she was quiet, good-natured, and not too handsome, she made rather an agreeable impression until the arrival of the gentlemen from the mess of the 150th, who all admired her so, that her sisters began, of course, to find fault with her.

“I hope Osborne has sown his wild oats,” said Mrs. Magenis to Mrs. Bunny. “If a reformed rake makes a good husband, sure it's she will have the fine chance with Garge,” Mrs. O'Dowd remarked to Posky, who had lost her position as bride in the regiment, and was quite angry with the usurper. And as for Mrs. Kirk: that disciple of Dr. Ramshorn put one or two leading professional questions to Amelia, to see whether she was awakened, whether she was a professing Christian and so forth, and finding from the simplicity of Mrs. Osborne's replies that she was yet in utter darkness, put into her hands three little penny books with pictures, viz., the “Howling Wilderness,” the “Washerwoman of Wandsworth Common,” and the “British Soldier's best Bayonet,” which, bent upon awakening her before she slept, Mrs. Kirk begged Amelia to read that night ere she went to bed.

But all the men, like good fellows as they were, rallied round their comrade's pretty wife, and paid her their court with soldierly gallantry. She had a little triumph, which flushed her spirits and made her eyes sparkle. George was proud of her popularity, and pleased with the manner (which was very gay and graceful, though naive and a little timid) with which she received the gentlemen's attentions, and answered their compliments. And he in his uniform— how much handsomer he was

than any man in the room! She felt that he was affectionately watching her, and glowed with pleasure at his kindness. "I will make all his friends welcome," she resolved in her heart. "I will love all as I love him. I will always try and be gay and good-humoured and make his home happy."

The regiment indeed adopted her with acclamation. The Captains approved, the Lieutenants applauded, the Ensigns admired. Old Cutler, the Doctor, made one or two jokes, which, being professional, need not be repeated; and Cackle, the Assistant M.D. of Edinburgh, condescended to examine her upon leeterature, and tried her with his three best French quotations. Young Stubble went about from man to man whispering, "Jove, isn't she a pretty gal?" and never took his eyes off her except when the negus came in.

As for Captain Dobbin, he never so much as spoke to her during the whole evening. But he and Captain Porter of the 150th took home Jos to the hotel, who was in a very maudlin state, and had told his tiger-hunt story with great effect, both at the mess-table and at the soiree, to Mrs. O'Dowd in her turban and bird of paradise. Having put the Collector into the hands of his servant, Dobbin loitered about, smoking his cigar before the inn door. George had meanwhile very carefully shawled his wife, and brought her away from Mrs. O'Dowd's after a general handshaking from the young officers, who accompanied her to the fly, and cheered that vehicle as it drove off. So Amelia gave Dobbin her little hand as she got out of the carriage, and rebuked him smilingly for not having taken any notice of her all night.

The Captain continued that deleterious amusement of smoking, long after the inn and the street were gone to bed. He watched the lights vanish from George's sitting-room windows, and shine out in the bedroom close at hand. It was almost morning when he returned to his own quarters. He could hear the cheering from the ships in the river, where the transports were already taking in their cargoes preparatory to dropping down the Thames.