

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 43

"In Which the Reader Has to Double the Cape"

The astonished reader must be called upon to transport himself ten thousand miles to the military station of Bundlegunge, in the Madras division of our Indian empire, where our gallant old friends of the—th regiment are quartered under the command of the brave Colonel, Sir Michael O’Dowd. Time has dealt kindly with that stout officer, as it does ordinarily with men who have good stomachs and good tempers and are not perplexed over much by fatigue of the brain. The Colonel plays a good knife and fork at tiffin and resumes those weapons with great success at dinner. He smokes his hookah after both meals and puffs as quietly while his wife scolds him as he did under the fire of the French at Waterloo. Age and heat have not diminished the activity or the eloquence of the descendant of the Malonys and the Molloyes. Her Ladyship, our old acquaintance, is as much at home at Madras as at Brussels in the cantonment as under the tents. On the march you saw her at the head of the regiment seated on a royal elephant, a noble sight. Mounted on that beast, she has been into action with tigers in the jungle, she has been received by native princes, who have welcomed her and Glorvina into the recesses of their zenanas and offered her shawls and jewels which it went to her heart to refuse. The sentries of all arms salute her wherever she makes her appearance, and she touches her hat gravely to their salutation. Lady O’Dowd is one of the greatest ladies in the Presidency of Madras—her quarrel with Lady Smith, wife of Sir Minos Smith the puisne judge, is still remembered by some at Madras, when the Colonel’s lady snapped her fingers in the Judge’s lady’s face and said she’d never walk behind ever a beggarly civilian. Even now, though it is five-and-twenty years ago, people remember Lady O’Dowd performing a jig at Government House, where she danced down two Aides-de-Camp, a Major of Madras cavalry, and two gentlemen of the Civil Service; and, persuaded by Major Dobbin, C.B., second in command of the —th, to retire to the supper-room, lassata nondum satiata recessit.

Peggy O’Dowd is indeed the same as ever, kind in act and thought; impetuous in temper; eager to command; a tyrant over her Michael; a

dragon amongst all the ladies of the regiment; a mother to all the young men, whom she tends in their sickness, defends in all their scrapes, and with whom Lady Peggy is immensely popular. But the Subalterns' and Captains' ladies (the Major is unmarried) cabal against her a good deal. They say that Glorvina gives herself airs and that Peggy herself is ill tolerably domineering. She interfered with a little congregation which Mrs. Kirk had got up and laughed the young men away from her sermons, stating that a soldier's wife had no business to be a parson—that Mrs. Kirk would be much better mending her husband's clothes; and, if the regiment wanted sermons, that she had the finest in the world, those of her uncle, the Dean. She abruptly put a termination to a flirtation which Lieutenant Stubble of the regiment had commenced with the Surgeon's wife, threatening to come down upon Stubble for the money which he had borrowed from her (for the young fellow was still of an extravagant turn) unless he broke off at once and went to the Cape on sick leave. On the other hand, she housed and sheltered Mrs. Posky, who fled from her bungalow one night, pursued by her infuriate husband, wielding his second brandy bottle, and actually carried Posky through the delirium tremens and broke him of the habit of drinking, which had grown upon that officer, as all evil habits will grow upon men. In a word, in adversity she was the best of comforters, in good fortune the most troublesome of friends, having a perfectly good opinion of herself always and an indomitable resolution to have her own way.

Among other points, she had made up her mind that Glorvina should marry our old friend Dobbin. Mrs. O'Dowd knew the Major's expectations and appreciated his good qualities and the high character which he enjoyed in his profession. Glorvina, a very handsome, fresh-coloured, black-haired, blue-eyed young lady, who could ride a horse, or play a sonata with any girl out of the County Cork, seemed to be the very person destined to insure Dobbin's happiness—much more than that poor good little weak-spur'ted Amelia, about whom he used to take on so.—"Look at Glorvina enter a room," Mrs. O'Dowd would say, "and compare her with that poor Mrs. Osborne, who couldn't say boo to a goose. She'd be worthy of you, Major—you're a quiet man yourself, and want some one to talk for ye. And though she does not come of such good blood as the Malonys or Molloys, let me tell ye, she's of an ancient family that any nobleman might be proud to marry into."

But before she had come to such a resolution and determined to

subjugate Major Dobbin by her endearments, it must be owned that Glorvina had practised them a good deal elsewhere. She had had a season in Dublin, and who knows how many in Cork, Killarney, and Mallow? She had flirted with all the marriageable officers whom the depots of her country afforded, and all the bachelor squires who seemed eligible. She had been engaged to be married a half-score times in Ireland, besides the clergyman at Bath who used her so ill. She had flirted all the way to Madras with the Captain and chief mate of the Ramchunder East Indiaman, and had a season at the Presidency with her brother and Mrs. O'Dowd, who was staying there, while the Major of the regiment was in command at the station. Everybody admired her there; everybody danced with her; but no one proposed who was worth the marrying—one or two exceedingly young subalterns sighed after her, and a beardless civilian or two, but she rejected these as beneath her pretensions—and other and younger virgins than Glorvina were married before her. There are women, and handsome women too, who have this fortune in life. They fall in love with the utmost generosity; they ride and walk with half the Army-list, though they draw near to forty, and yet the Misses O'Grady are the Misses O'Grady still: Glorvina persisted that but for Lady O'Dowd's unlucky quarrel with the Judge's lady, she would have made a good match at Madras, where old Mr. Chutney, who was at the head of the civil service (and who afterwards married Miss Dolby, a young lady only thirteen years of age who had just arrived from school in Europe), was just at the point of proposing to her.

Well, although Lady O'Dowd and Glorvina quarrelled a great number of times every day, and upon almost every conceivable subject—indeed, if Mick O'Dowd had not possessed the temper of an angel two such women constantly about his ears would have driven him out of his senses—yet they agreed between themselves on this point, that Glorvina should marry Major Dobbin, and were determined that the Major should have no rest until the arrangement was brought about. Undismayed by forty or fifty previous defeats, Glorvina laid siege to him. She sang Irish melodies at him unceasingly. She asked him so frequently and pathetically, Will ye come to the bower? that it is a wonder how any man of feeling could have resisted the invitation. She was never tired of inquiring, if Sorrow had his young days faded, and was ready to listen and weep like Desdemona at the stories of his dangers and his campaigns. It has been said that our honest and dear old friend used to perform on the flute in private; Glorvina insisted upon having duets with

him, and Lady O'Dowd would rise and artlessly quit the room when the young couple were so engaged. Glorvina forced the Major to ride with her of mornings. The whole cantonment saw them set out and return. She was constantly writing notes over to him at his house, borrowing his books, and scoring with her great pencil-marks such passages of sentiment or humour as awakened her sympathy. She borrowed his horses, his servants, his spoons, and palanquin—no wonder that public rumour assigned her to him, and that the Major's sisters in England should fancy they were about to have a sister-in-law.

Dobbin, who was thus vigorously besieged, was in the meanwhile in a state of the most odious tranquillity. He used to laugh when the young fellows of the regiment joked him about Glorvina's manifest attentions to him. "Bah!" said he, "she is only keeping her hand in—she practises upon me as she does upon Mrs. Tozer's piano, because it's the most handy instrument in the station. I am much too battered and old for such a fine young lady as Glorvina." And so he went on riding with her, and copying music and verses into her albums, and playing at chess with her very submissively; for it is with these simple amusements that some officers in India are accustomed to while away their leisure moments, while others of a less domestic turn hunt hogs, and shoot snipes, or gamble and smoke cheroots, and betake themselves to brandy-and-water. As for Sir Michael O'Dowd, though his lady and her sister both urged him to call upon the Major to explain himself and not keep on torturing a poor innocent girl in that shameful way, the old soldier refused point-blank to have anything to do with the conspiracy. "Faith, the Major's big enough to choose for himself," Sir Michael said; "he'll ask ye when he wants ye"; or else he would turn the matter off jocularly, declaring that "Dobbin was too young to keep house, and had written home to ask lave of his mamma." Nay, he went farther, and in private communications with his Major would caution and rally him, crying, "Mind your oi, Dob, my boy, them girls is bent on mischief—me Lady has just got a box of gowns from Europe, and there's a pink satin for Glorvina, which will finish ye, Dob, if it's in the power of woman or satin to move ye."

But the truth is, neither beauty nor fashion could conquer him. Our honest friend had but one idea of a woman in his head, and that one did not in the least resemble Miss Glorvina O'Dowd in pink satin. A gentle little woman in black, with large eyes and brown hair, seldom speaking,

save when spoken to, and then in a voice not the least resembling Miss Glorvina's—a soft young mother tending an infant and beckoning the Major up with a smile to look at him—a rosy-cheeked lass coming singing into the room in Russell Square or hanging on George Osborne's arm, happy and loving—there was but this image that filled our honest Major's mind, by day and by night, and reigned over it always. Very likely Amelia was not like the portrait the Major had formed of her: there was a figure in a book of fashions which his sisters had in England, and with which William had made away privately, pasting it into the lid of his desk, and fancying he saw some resemblance to Mrs. Osborne in the print, whereas I have seen it, and can vouch that it is but the picture of a high-waisted gown with an impossible doll's face simpering over it—and, perhaps, Mr. Dobbin's sentimental Amelia was no more like the real one than this absurd little print which he cherished. But what man in love, of us, is better informed?—or is he much happier when he sees and owns his delusion? Dobbin was under this spell. He did not bother his friends and the public much about his feelings, or indeed lose his natural rest or appetite on account of them. His head has grizzled since we saw him last, and a line or two of silver may be seen in the soft brown hair likewise. But his feelings are not in the least changed or oldened, and his love remains as fresh as a man's recollections of boyhood are.

We have said how the two Misses Dobbin and Amelia, the Major's correspondents in Europe, wrote him letters from England, Mrs. Osborne congratulating him with great candour and cordiality upon his approaching nuptials with Miss O'Dowd. “Your sister has just kindly visited me,” Amelia wrote in her letter, “and informed me of an interesting event, upon which I beg to offer my most sincere congratulations. I hope the young lady to whom I hear you are to be united will in every respect prove worthy of one who is himself all kindness and goodness. The poor widow has only her prayers to offer and her cordial cordial wishes for your prosperity! Georgy sends his love to his dear godpapa and hopes that you will not forget him. I tell him that you are about to form other ties, with one who I am sure merits all your affection, but that, although such ties must of course be the strongest and most sacred, and supersede all others, yet that I am sure the widow and the child whom you have ever protected and loved will always have a corner in your heart” The letter, which has been before alluded to, went on in this strain, protesting throughout as to the extreme satisfaction of the writer.

This letter, which arrived by the very same ship which brought out Lady O'Dowd's box of millinery from London (and which you may be sure Dobbin opened before any one of the other packets which the mail brought him), put the receiver into such a state of mind that Glorvina, and her pink satin, and everything belonging to her became perfectly odious to him. The Major cursed the talk of women, and the sex in general. Everything annoyed him that day—the parade was insufferably hot and wearisome. Good heavens! was a man of intellect to waste his life, day after day, inspecting cross-belts and putting fools through their manoeuvres? The senseless chatter of the young men at mess was more than ever jarring. What cared he, a man on the high road to forty, to know how many snipes Lieutenant Smith had shot, or what were the performances of Ensign Brown's mare? The jokes about the table filled him with shame. He was too old to listen to the banter of the assistant surgeon and the slang of the youngsters, at which old O'Dowd, with his bald head and red face, laughed quite easily. The old man had listened to those jokes any time these thirty years—Dobbin himself had been fifteen years hearing them. And after the boisterous dulness of the mess-table, the quarrels and scandal of the ladies of the regiment! It was unbearable, shameful. "O Amelia, Amelia," he thought, "you to whom I have been so faithful—you reproach me! It is because you cannot feel for me that I drag on this wearisome life. And you reward me after years of devotion by giving me your blessing upon my marriage, forsooth, with this flaunting Irish girl!" Sick and sorry felt poor William; more than ever wretched and lonely. He would like to have done with life and its vanity altogether—so bootless and unsatisfactory the struggle, so cheerless and dreary the prospect seemed to him. He lay all that night sleepless, and yearning to go home. Amelia's letter had fallen as a blank upon him. No fidelity, no constant truth and passion, could move her into warmth. She would not see that he loved her. Tossing in his bed, he spoke out to her. "Good God, Amelia!" he said, "don't you know that I only love you in the world—you, who are a stone to me—you, whom I tended through months and months of illness and grief, and who bade me farewell with a smile on your face, and forgot me before the door shut between us!" The native servants lying outside his verandas beheld with wonder the Major, so cold and quiet ordinarily, at present so passionately moved and cast down. Would she have pitied him had she seen him? He read over and over all the letters which he ever had from her—letters of business relative to the little property which he had made her believe her husband had left to her—brief notes of invitation—every scrap of writing

that she had ever sent to him—how cold, how kind, how hopeless, how selfish they were!

Had there been some kind gentle soul near at hand who could read and appreciate this silent generous heart, who knows but that the reign of Amelia might have been over, and that friend William's love might have flowed into a kinder channel? But there was only Glorvina of the jetty ringlets with whom his intercourse was familiar, and this dashing young woman was not bent upon loving the Major, but rather on making the Major admire her—a most vain and hopeless task, too, at least considering the means that the poor girl possessed to carry it out. She curled her hair and showed her shoulders at him, as much as to say, did ye ever see such jet ringlets and such a complexion? She grinned at him so that he might see that every tooth in her head was sound—and he never heeded all these charms. Very soon after the arrival of the box of millinery, and perhaps indeed in honour of it, Lady O'Dowd and the ladies of the King's Regiment gave a ball to the Company's Regiments and the civilians at the station. Glorvina sported the killing pink frock, and the Major, who attended the party and walked very ruefully up and down the rooms, never so much as perceived the pink garment. Glorvina danced past him in a fury with all the young subalterns of the station, and the Major was not in the least jealous of her performance, or angry because Captain Bangles of the Cavalry handed her to supper. It was not jealousy, or frocks, or shoulders that could move him, and Glorvina had nothing more.

So these two were each exemplifying the Vanity of this life, and each longing for what he or she could not get. Glorvina cried with rage at the failure. She had set her mind on the Major “more than on any of the others,” she owned, sobbing. “He'll break my heart, he will, Peggy,” she would whimper to her sister-in-law when they were good friends; “sure every one of me frocks must be taken in— it's such a skeleton I'm growing.” Fat or thin, laughing or melancholy, on horseback or the music-stool, it was all the same to the Major. And the Colonel, puffing his pipe and listening to these complaints, would suggest that Glory should have some black frocks out in the next box from London, and told a mysterious story of a lady in Ireland who died of grief for the loss of her husband before she got ere a one.

While the Major was going on in this tantalizing way, not proposing,

and declining to fall in love, there came another ship from Europe bringing letters on board, and amongst them some more for the heartless man. These were home letters bearing an earlier postmark than that of the former packets, and as Major Dobbin recognized among his the handwriting of his sister, who always crossed and recrossed her letters to her brother—gathered together all the possible bad news which she could collect, abused him and read him lectures with sisterly frankness, and always left him miserable for the day after “dearest William” had achieved the perusal of one of her epistles—the truth must be told that dearest William did not hurry himself to break the seal of Miss Dobbin’s letter, but waited for a particularly favourable day and mood for doing so. A fortnight before, moreover, he had written to scold her for telling those absurd stories to Mrs. Osborne, and had despatched a letter in reply to that lady, undeceiving her with respect to the reports concerning him and assuring her that “he had no sort of present intention of altering his condition.”

Two or three nights after the arrival of the second package of letters, the Major had passed the evening pretty cheerfully at Lady O’Dowd’s house, where Glorvina thought that he listened with rather more attention than usual to the Meeting of the Wathers, the Minsthrel Boy, and one or two other specimens of song with which she favoured him (the truth is, he was no more listening to Glorvina than to the howling of the jackals in the moonlight outside, and the delusion was hers as usual), and having played his game at chess with her (cribbage with the surgeon was Lady O’Dowd’s favourite evening pastime), Major Dobbin took leave of the Colonel’s family at his usual hour and retired to his own house.

There on his table, his sister’s letter lay reproaching him. He took it up, ashamed rather of his negligence regarding it, and prepared himself for a disagreeable hour’s communing with that crabbed-handed absent relative. . . . It may have been an hour after the Major’s departure from the Colonel’s house—Sir Michael was sleeping the sleep of the just; Glorvina had arranged her black ringlets in the innumerable little bits of paper, in which it was her habit to confine them; Lady O’Dowd, too, had gone to her bed in the nuptial chamber, on the ground-floor, and had tucked her mosquito curtains round her fair form, when the guard at the gates of the Commanding-Officer’s compound beheld Major Dobbin, in the moonlight, rushing towards the house with a swift step and a very

agitated countenance, and he passed the sentinel and went up to the windows of the Colonel's bedchamber.

“O'Dowd-Colonel!” said Dobbin and kept up a great shouting.

“Heavens, Meejor!” said Glorvina of the curl-papers, putting out her head too, from her window.

“What is it, Dob, me boy?” said the Colonel, expecting there was a fire in the station, or that the route had come from headquarters.

“I-I must have leave of absence. I must go to England—on the most urgent private affairs,” Dobbin said.

“Good heavens, what has happened!” thought Glorvina, trembling with all the papillotes.

“I want to be off—now—to-night,” Dobbin continued; and the Colonel getting up, came out to parley with him.

In the postscript of Miss Dobbin's cross-letter, the Major had just come upon a paragraph, to the following effect:—“I drove yesterday to see your old acquaintance, Mrs. Osborne. The wretched place they live at, since they were bankrupts, you know—Mr. S., to judge from a brass plate on the door of his hut (it is little better) is a coal-merchant. The little boy, your godson, is certainly a fine child, though forward, and inclined to be saucy and self-willed. But we have taken notice of him as you wish it, and have introduced him to his aunt, Miss O., who was rather pleased with him. Perhaps his grandpapa, not the bankrupt one, who is almost doting, but Mr. Osborne, of Russell Square, may be induced to relent towards the child of your friend, his ERRING and self-willed son. And Amelia will not be ill-disposed to give him up. The widow is consoled, and is about to marry a reverend gentleman, the Rev. Mr. Binny, one of the curates of Brompton. A poor match. But Mrs. O. is getting old, and I saw a great deal of grey in her hair—she was in very good spirits: and your little godson overate himself at our house. Mamma sends her love with that of your affectionate, Ann Dobbin.”