

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 28

"In Which Amelia Invades the Low Countries"

The regiment with its officers was to be transported in ships provided by His Majesty's government for the occasion: and in two days after the festive assembly at Mrs. O'Dowd's apartments, in the midst of cheering from all the East India ships in the river, and the military on shore, the band playing "God Save the King," the officers waving their hats, and the crews hurrahing gallantly, the transports went down the river and proceeded under convoy to Ostend. Meanwhile the gallant Jos had agreed to escort his sister and the Major's wife, the bulk of whose goods and chattels, including the famous bird of paradise and turban, were with the regimental baggage: so that our two heroines drove pretty much unencumbered to Ramsgate, where there were plenty of packets plying, in one of which they had a speedy passage to Ostend.

That period of Jos's life which now ensued was so full of incident, that it served him for conversation for many years after, and even the tiger-hunt story was put aside for more stirring narratives which he had to tell about the great campaign of Waterloo. As soon as he had agreed to escort his sister abroad, it was remarked that he ceased shaving his upper lip. At Chatham he followed the parades and drills with great assiduity. He listened with the utmost attention to the conversation of his brother officers (as he called them in after days sometimes), and learned as many military names as he could. In these studies the excellent Mrs. O'Dowd was of great assistance to him; and on the day finally when they embarked on board the *Lovely Rose*, which was to carry them to their destination, he made his appearance in a braided frock-coat and duck trousers, with a foraging cap ornamented with a smart gold band. Having his carriage with him, and informing everybody on board confidentially that he was going to join the Duke of Wellington's army, folks mistook him for a great personage, a commissary-general, or a government courier at the very least.

He suffered hugely on the voyage, during which the ladies were likewise prostrate; but Amelia was brought to life again as the packet made Ostend, by the sight of the transports conveying her regiment, which

entered the harbour almost at the same time with the Lovely Rose. Jos went in a collapsed state to an inn, while Captain Dobbin escorted the ladies, and then busied himself in freeing Jos's carriage and luggage from the ship and the custom-house, for Mr. Jos was at present without a servant, Osborne's man and his own pampered menial having conspired together at Chatham, and refused point-blank to cross the water. This revolt, which came very suddenly, and on the last day, so alarmed Mr. Sedley, junior, that he was on the point of giving up the expedition, but Captain Dobbin (who made himself immensely officious in the business, Jos said), rated him and laughed at him soundly: the mustachios were grown in advance, and Jos finally was persuaded to embark. In place of the well-bred and well-fed London domestics, who could only speak English, Dobbin procured for Jos's party a swarthy little Belgian servant who could speak no language at all; but who, by his bustling behaviour, and by invariably addressing Mr. Sedley as "My lord," speedily acquired that gentleman's favour. Times are altered at Ostend now; of the Britons who go thither, very few look like lords, or act like those members of our hereditary aristocracy. They seem for the most part shabby in attire, dingy of linen, lovers of billiards and brandy, and cigars and greasy ordinaries.

But it may be said as a rule, that every Englishman in the Duke of Wellington's army paid his way. The remembrance of such a fact surely becomes a nation of shopkeepers. It was a blessing for a commerce-loving country to be overrun by such an army of customers: and to have such creditable warriors to feed. And the country which they came to protect is not military. For a long period of history they have let other people fight there. When the present writer went to survey with eagle glance the field of Waterloo, we asked the conductor of the diligence, a portly warlike-looking veteran, whether he had been at the battle. "Pas si bete"—such an answer and sentiment as no Frenchman would own to—was his reply. But, on the other hand, the postilion who drove us was a Viscount, a son of some bankrupt Imperial General, who accepted a pennyworth of beer on the road. The moral is surely a good one.

This flat, flourishing, easy country never could have looked more rich and prosperous than in that opening summer of 1815, when its green fields and quiet cities were enlivened by multiplied red-coats: when its wide chaussees swarmed with brilliant English equipages: when its great canal-boats, gliding by rich pastures and pleasant quaint old villages, by

old chateaux lying amongst old trees, were all crowded with well-to-do English travellers: when the soldier who drank at the village inn, not only drank, but paid his score; and Donald, the Highlander, billeted in the Flemish farm-house, rocked the baby's cradle, while Jean and Jeannette were out getting in the hay. As our painters are bent on military subjects just now, I throw out this as a good subject for the pencil, to illustrate the principle of an honest English war. All looked as brilliant and harmless as a Hyde Park review. Meanwhile, Napoleon screened behind his curtain of frontier-fortresses, was preparing for the outbreak which was to drive all these orderly people into fury and blood; and lay so many of them low.

Everybody had such a perfect feeling of confidence in the leader (for the resolute faith which the Duke of Wellington had inspired in the whole English nation was as intense as that more frantic enthusiasm with which at one time the French regarded Napoleon), the country seemed in so perfect a state of orderly defence, and the help at hand in case of need so near and overwhelming, that alarm was unknown, and our travellers, among whom two were naturally of a very timid sort, were, like all the other multiplied English tourists, entirely at ease. The famous regiment, with so many of whose officers we have made acquaintance, was drafted in canal boats to Bruges and Ghent, thence to march to Brussels. Jos accompanied the ladies in the public boats; the which all old travellers in Flanders must remember for the luxury and accommodation they afforded. So prodigiously good was the eating and drinking on board these sluggish but most comfortable vessels, that there are legends extant of an English traveller, who, coming to Belgium for a week, and travelling in one of these boats, was so delighted with the fare there that he went backwards and forwards from Ghent to Bruges perpetually until the railroads were invented, when he drowned himself on the last trip of the passage-boat. Jos's death was not to be of this sort, but his comfort was exceeding, and Mrs. O'Dowd insisted that he only wanted her sister Glorvina to make his happiness complete. He sate on the roof of the cabin all day drinking Flemish beer, shouting for Isidor, his servant, and talking gallantly to the ladies.

His courage was prodigious. "Boney attack us!" he cried. "My dear creature, my poor Emmy, don't be frightened. There's no danger. The allies will be in Paris in two months, I tell you; when I'll take you to dine in the Palais Royal, by Jove! There are three hundred thousand

Rooshians, I tell you, now entering France by Mayence and the Rhine—three hundred thousand under Wittgenstein and Barclay de Tolly, my poor love. You don't know military affairs, my dear. I do, and I tell you there's no infantry in France can stand against Rooshian infantry, and no general of Boney's that's fit to hold a candle to Wittgenstein. Then there are the Austrians, they are five hundred thousand if a man, and they are within ten marches of the frontier by this time, under Schwartzberg and Prince Charles. Then there are the Prooshians under the gallant Prince Marshal. Show me a cavalry chief like him now that Murat is gone. Hey, Mrs. O'Dowd? Do you think our little girl here need be afraid? Is there any cause for fear, Isidor? Hey, sir? Get some more beer."

Mrs. O'Dowd said that her "Glorvina was not afraid of any man alive, let alone a Frenchman," and tossed off a glass of beer with a wink which expressed her liking for the beverage.

Having frequently been in presence of the enemy, or, in other words, faced the ladies at Cheltenham and Bath, our friend, the Collector, had lost a great deal of his pristine timidity, and was now, especially when fortified with liquor, as talkative as might be. He was rather a favourite with the regiment, treating the young officers with sumptuosity, and amusing them by his military airs. And as there is one well-known regiment of the army which travels with a goat heading the column, whilst another is led by a deer, George said with respect to his brother-in-law, that his regiment marched with an elephant.

Since Amelia's introduction to the regiment, George began to be rather ashamed of some of the company to which he had been forced to present her; and determined, as he told Dobbin (with what satisfaction to the latter it need not be said), to exchange into some better regiment soon, and to get his wife away from those damned vulgar women. But this vulgarity of being ashamed of one's society is much more common among men than women (except very great ladies of fashion, who, to be sure, indulge in it); and Mrs. Amelia, a natural and unaffected person, had none of that artificial shamefacedness which her husband mistook for delicacy on his own part. Thus Mrs. O'Dowd had a cock's plume in her hat, and a very large "repyther" on her stomach, which she used to ring on all occasions, narrating how it had been presented to her by her fawther, as she stipt into the car'ge after her mar'ge; and these

ornaments, with other outward peculiarities of the Major's wife, gave excruciating agonies to Captain Osborne, when his wife and the Major's came in contact; whereas Amelia was only amused by the honest lady's eccentricities, and not in the least ashamed of her company.

As they made that well-known journey, which almost every Englishman of middle rank has travelled since, there might have been more instructive, but few more entertaining, companions than Mrs. Major O'Dowd. "Talk about kenal boats; my dear! Ye should see the kenal boats between Dublin and Ballinasloe. It's there the rapid travelling is; and the beautiful cattle. Sure me fawther got a goold medal (and his Excellency himself eat a slice of it, and said never was finer mate in his loif) for a four-year-old heifer, the like of which ye never saw in this country any day." And Jos owned with a sigh, "that for good streaky beef, really mingled with fat and lean, there was no country like England."

"Except Ireland, where all your best mate comes from," said the Major's lady; proceeding, as is not unusual with patriots of her nation, to make comparisons greatly in favour of her own country. The idea of comparing the market at Bruges with those of Dublin, although she had suggested it herself, caused immense scorn and derision on her part. "I'll thank ye tell me what they mean by that old gazabo on the top of the market-place," said she, in a burst of ridicule fit to have brought the old tower down. The place was full of English soldiery as they passed. English bugles woke them in the morning; at nightfall they went to bed to the note of the British fife and drum: all the country and Europe was in arms, and the greatest event of history pending: and honest Peggy O'Dowd, whom it concerned as well as another, went on prattling about Ballinafad, and the horses in the stables at Glenmalony, and the clar't drunk there; and Jos Sedley interposed about curry and rice at Dumdum; and Amelia thought about her husband, and how best she should show her love for him; as if these were the great topics of the world.

Those who like to lay down the History-book, and to speculate upon what might have happened in the world, but for the fatal occurrence of what actually did take place (a most puzzling, amusing, ingenious, and profitable kind of meditation), have no doubt often thought to themselves what a specially bad time Napoleon took to come back from Elba, and to let loose his eagle from Gulf San Juan to Notre Dame. The

historians on our side tell us that the armies of the allied powers were all providentially on a war-footing, and ready to bear down at a moment's notice upon the Elban Emperor. The august jobbers assembled at Vienna, and carving out the kingdoms of Europe according to their wisdom, had such causes of quarrel among themselves as might have set the armies which had overcome Napoleon to fight against each other, but for the return of the object of unanimous hatred and fear. This monarch had an army in full force because he had jobbed to himself Poland, and was determined to keep it: another had robbed half Saxony, and was bent upon maintaining his acquisition: Italy was the object of a third's solicitude. Each was protesting against the rapacity of the other; and could the Corsican but have waited in prison until all these parties were by the ears, he might have returned and reigned unmolested. But what would have become of our story and all our friends, then? If all the drops in it were dried up, what would become of the sea?

In the meanwhile the business of life and living, and the pursuits of pleasure, especially, went on as if no end were to be expected to them, and no enemy in front. When our travellers arrived at Brussels, in which their regiment was quartered, a great piece of good fortune, as all said, they found themselves in one of the gayest and most brilliant little capitals in Europe, and where all the Vanity Fair booths were laid out with the most tempting liveliness and splendour. Gambling was here in profusion, and dancing in plenty: feasting was there to fill with delight that great gourmand of a Jos: there was a theatre where a miraculous Catalani was delighting all hearers: beautiful rides, all enlivened with martial splendour; a rare old city, with strange costumes and wonderful architecture, to delight the eyes of little Amelia, who had never before seen a foreign country, and fill her with charming surprises: so that now and for a few weeks' space in a fine handsome lodging, whereof the expenses were borne by Jos and Osborne, who was flush of money and full of kind attentions to his wife—for about a fortnight, I say, during which her honeymoon ended, Mrs. Amelia was as pleased and happy as any little bride out of England.

Every day during this happy time there was novelty and amusement for all parties. There was a church to see, or a picture-gallery—there was a ride, or an opera. The bands of the regiments were making music at all hours. The greatest folks of England walked in the Park—there was a perpetual military festival. George, taking out his wife to a new jaunt or

junket every night, was quite pleased with himself as usual, and swore he was becoming quite a domestic character. And a jaunt or a junket with him! Was it not enough to set this little heart beating with joy? Her letters home to her mother were filled with delight and gratitude at this season. Her husband bade her buy laces, millinery, jewels, and gimcracks of all sorts. Oh, he was the kindest, best, and most generous of men!

The sight of the very great company of lords and ladies and fashionable persons who thronged the town, and appeared in every public place, filled George's truly British soul with intense delight. They flung off that happy frigidity and insolence of demeanour which occasionally characterises the great at home, and appearing in numberless public places, condescended to mingle with the rest of the company whom they met there. One night at a party given by the general of the division to which George's regiment belonged, he had the honour of dancing with Lady Blanche Thistlewood, Lord Bareacres' daughter; he bustled for ices and refreshments for the two noble ladies; he pushed and squeezed for Lady Bareacres' carriage; he bragged about the Countess when he got home, in a way which his own father could not have surpassed. He called upon the ladies the next day; he rode by their side in the Park; he asked their party to a great dinner at a restaurateur's, and was quite wild with exultation when they agreed to come. Old Bareacres, who had not much pride and a large appetite, would go for a dinner anywhere.

"I hope there will be no women besides our own party," Lady Bareacres said, after reflecting upon the invitation which had been made, and accepted with too much precipitancy.

"Gracious Heaven, Mamma—you don't suppose the man would bring his wife," shrieked Lady Blanche, who had been languishing in George's arms in the newly imported waltz for hours the night before. "The men are bearable, but their women—"

"Wife, just married, dev'lish pretty woman, I hear," the old Earl said.

"Well, my dear Blanche," said the mother, "I suppose, as Papa wants to go, we must go; but we needn't know them in England, you know." And so, determined to cut their new acquaintance in Bond Street, these great folks went to eat his dinner at Brussels, and condescending to make him

pay for their pleasure, showed their dignity by making his wife uncomfortable, and carefully excluding her from the conversation. This is a species of dignity in which the high-bred British female reigns supreme. To watch the behaviour of a fine lady to other and humbler women, is a very good sport for a philosophical frequenter of Vanity Fair.

This festival, on which honest George spent a great deal of money, was the very dimmallest of all the entertainments which Amelia had in her honeymoon. She wrote the most piteous accounts of the feast home to her mamma: how the Countess of Bareacres would not answer when spoken to; how Lady Blanche stared at her with her eye-glass; and what a rage Captain Dobbin was in at their behaviour; and how my lord, as they came away from the feast, asked to see the bill, and pronounced it a d— bad dinner, and d— dear. But though Amelia told all these stories, and wrote home regarding her guests' rudeness, and her own discomfiture, old Mrs. Sedley was mightily pleased nevertheless, and talked about Emmy's friend, the Countess of Bareacres, with such assiduity that the news how his son was entertaining peers and peeresses actually came to Osborne's ears in the City.

Those who know the present Lieutenant-General Sir George Tufto, K.C.B., and have seen him, as they may on most days in the season, padded and in stays, strutting down Pall Mall with a rickety swagger on his high-heeled lacquered boots, leering under the bonnets of passers-by, or riding a showy chestnut, and ogling broughams in the Parks—those who know the present Sir George Tufto would hardly recognise the daring Peninsular and Waterloo officer. He has thick curling brown hair and black eyebrows now, and his whiskers are of the deepest purple. He was light-haired and bald in 1815, and stouter in the person and in the limbs, which especially have shrunk very much of late. When he was about seventy years of age (he is now nearly eighty), his hair, which was very scarce and quite white, suddenly grew thick, and brown, and curly, and his whiskers and eyebrows took their present colour. Ill-natured people say that his chest is all wool, and that his hair, because it never grows, is a wig. Tom Tufto, with whose father he quarrelled ever so many years ago, declares that Mademoiselle de Jaisey, of the French theatre, pulled his grandpapa's hair off in the green-room; but Tom is notoriously spiteful and jealous; and the General's wig has nothing to do with our story.

One day, as some of our friends of the –th were sauntering in the flower-market of Brussels, having been to see the Hotel de Ville, which Mrs. Major O’Dowd declared was not near so large or handsome as her fawther’s mansion of Glenmalony, an officer of rank, with an orderly behind him, rode up to the market, and descending from his horse, came amongst the flowers, and selected the very finest bouquet which money could buy. The beautiful bundle being tied up in a paper, the officer remounted, giving the nosegay into the charge of his military groom, who carried it with a grin, following his chief, who rode away in great state and self-satisfaction.

“You should see the flowers at Glenmalony,” Mrs. O’Dowd was remarking. “Me fawther has three Scotch garners with nine helpers. We have an acre of hot-houses, and pines as common as pays in the sayson. Our greeps weighs six pounds every bunch of ‘em, and upon me honour and conscience I think our magnolias is as big as taykettles.”

Dobbin, who never used to “draw out” Mrs. O’Dowd as that wicked Osborne delighted in doing (much to Amelia’s terror, who implored him to spare her), fell back in the crowd, crowing and sputtering until he reached a safe distance, when he exploded amongst the astonished market-people with shrieks of yelling laughter.

“Hwhat’s that gawky guggling about?” said Mrs. O’Dowd. “Is it his nose bleedn? He always used to say ‘twas his nose bleedn, till he must have pumped all the blood out of ‘um. An’t the magnolias at Glenmalony as big as taykettles, O’Dowd?”

”Deed then they are, and bigger, Peggy,” the Major said. When the conversation was interrupted in the manner stated by the arrival of the officer who purchased the bouquet.

“Devlish fine horse—who is it?” George asked.

“You should see me brother Molloy Malony’s horse, Molasses, that won the cop at the Curragh,” the Major’s wife was exclaiming, and was continuing the family history, when her husband interrupted her by saying—

“It’s General Tufto, who commands the — cavalry division”; adding

quietly, “he and I were both shot in the same leg at Talavera.”

“Where you got your step,” said George with a laugh. “General Tufto! Then, my dear, the Crawleys are come.”

Amelia’s heart fell—she knew not why. The sun did not seem to shine so bright. The tall old roofs and gables looked less picturesque all of a sudden, though it was a brilliant sunset, and one of the brightest and most beautiful days at the end of May.