

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 30

“The Girl I Left Behind Me”

We do not claim to rank among the military novelists. Our place is with the non-combatants. When the decks are cleared for action we go below and wait meekly. We should only be in the way of the manoeuvres that the gallant fellows are performing overhead. We shall go no farther with the –th than to the city gate: and leaving Major O’Dowd to his duty, come back to the Major’s wife, and the ladies and the baggage.

Now the Major and his lady, who had not been invited to the ball at which in our last chapter other of our friends figured, had much more time to take their wholesome natural rest in bed, than was accorded to people who wished to enjoy pleasure as well as to do duty. “It’s my belief, Peggy, my dear,” said he, as he placidly pulled his nightcap over his ears, “that there will be such a ball danced in a day or two as some of ‘em has never heard the chune of”; and he was much more happy to retire to rest after partaking of a quiet tumbler, than to figure at any other sort of amusement. Peggy, for her part, would have liked to have shown her turban and bird of paradise at the ball, but for the information which her husband had given her, and which made her very grave.

“I’d like ye wake me about half an hour before the assembly beats,” the Major said to his lady. “Call me at half-past one, Peggy dear, and see me things is ready. May be I’ll not come back to breakfast, Mrs. O’D.” With which words, which signified his opinion that the regiment would march the next morning, the Major ceased talking, and fell asleep.

Mrs. O’Dowd, the good housewife, arrayed in curl papers and a camisole, felt that her duty was to act, and not to sleep, at this juncture. “Time enough for that,” she said, “when Mick’s gone”; and so she packed his travelling valise ready for the march, brushed his cloak, his cap, and other warlike habiliments, set them out in order for him; and stowed away in the cloak pockets a light package of portable refreshments, and a wicker-covered flask or pocket-pistol, containing near a pint of a remarkably sound Cognac brandy, of which she and the Major approved very much; and as soon as the hands of the “repayther”

pointed to half-past one, and its interior arrangements (it had a tone quite equal to a cathedral, its fair owner considered) knelled forth that fatal hour, Mrs. O'Dowd woke up her Major, and had as comfortable a cup of coffee prepared for him as any made that morning in Brussels. And who is there will deny that this worthy lady's preparations betokened affection as much as the fits of tears and hysterics by which more sensitive females exhibited their love, and that their partaking of this coffee, which they drank together while the bugles were sounding the turn-out and the drums beating in the various quarters of the town, was not more useful and to the purpose than the outpouring of any mere sentiment could be? The consequence was, that the Major appeared on parade quite trim, fresh, and alert, his well-shaved rosy countenance, as he sat on horseback, giving cheerfulness and confidence to the whole corps. All the officers saluted her when the regiment marched by the balcony on which this brave woman stood, and waved them a cheer as they passed; and I daresay it was not from want of courage, but from a sense of female delicacy and propriety, that she refrained from leading the gallant—th personally into action.

On Sundays, and at periods of a solemn nature, Mrs. O'Dowd used to read with great gravity out of a large volume of her uncle the Dean's sermons. It had been of great comfort to her on board the transport as they were coming home, and were very nearly wrecked, on their return from the West Indies. After the regiment's departure she betook herself to this volume for meditation; perhaps she did not understand much of what she was reading, and her thoughts were elsewhere: but the sleep project, with poor Mick's nightcap there on the pillow, was quite a vain one. So it is in the world. Jack or Donald marches away to glory with his knapsack on his shoulder, stepping out briskly to the tune of "The Girl I Left Behind Me." It is she who remains and suffers—and has the leisure to think, and brood, and remember.

Knowing how useless regrets are, and how the indulgence of sentiment only serves to make people more miserable, Mrs. Rebecca wisely determined to give way to no vain feelings of sorrow, and bore the parting from her husband with quite a Spartan equanimity. Indeed Captain Rawdon himself was much more affected at the leave-taking than the resolute little woman to whom he bade farewell. She had mastered this rude coarse nature; and he loved and worshipped her with all his faculties of regard and admiration. In all his life he had never

been so happy, as, during the past few months, his wife had made him. All former delights of turf, mess, hunting-field, and gambling-table; all previous loves and courtships of milliners, opera-dancers, and the like easy triumphs of the clumsy military Adonis, were quite insipid when compared to the lawful matrimonial pleasures which of late he had enjoyed. She had known perpetually how to divert him; and he had found his house and her society a thousand times more pleasant than any place or company which he had ever frequented from his childhood until now. And he cursed his past follies and extravagances, and bemoaned his vast outlying debts above all, which must remain for ever as obstacles to prevent his wife's advancement in the world. He had often groaned over these in midnight conversations with Rebecca, although as a bachelor they had never given him any disquiet. He himself was struck with this phenomenon. "Hang it," he would say (or perhaps use a still stronger expression out of his simple vocabulary), "before I was married I didn't care what bills I put my name to, and so long as Moses would wait or Levy would renew for three months, I kept on never minding. But since I'm married, except renewing, of course, I give you my honour I've not touched a bit of stamped paper."

Rebecca always knew how to conjure away these moods of melancholy. "Why, my stupid love," she would say, "we have not done with your aunt yet. If she fails us, isn't there what you call the Gazette? or, stop, when your uncle Bute's life drops, I have another scheme. The living has always belonged to the younger brother, and why shouldn't you sell out and go into the Church?" The idea of this conversion set Rawdon into roars of laughter: you might have heard the explosion through the hotel at midnight, and the haw-haws of the great dragoon's voice. General Tufto heard him from his quarters on the first floor above them; and Rebecca acted the scene with great spirit, and preached Rawdon's first sermon, to the immense delight of the General at breakfast.

But these were mere by-gone days and talk. When the final news arrived that the campaign was opened, and the troops were to march, Rawdon's gravity became such that Becky rallied him about it in a manner which rather hurt the feelings of the Guardsman. "You don't suppose I'm afraid, Becky, I should think," he said, with a tremor in his voice. "But I'm a pretty good mark for a shot, and you see if it brings me down, why I leave one and perhaps two behind me whom I should wish to provide for, as I brought 'em into the scrape. It is no laughing matter that, Mrs.

C., anyways.”

Rebecca by a hundred caresses and kind words tried to soothe the feelings of the wounded lover. It was only when her vivacity and sense of humour got the better of this sprightly creature (as they would do under most circumstances of life indeed) that she would break out with her satire, but she could soon put on a demure face. “Dearest love,” she said, “do you suppose I feel nothing?” and hastily dashing something from her eyes, she looked up in her husband’s face with a smile.

“Look here,” said he. “If I drop, let us see what there is for you. I have had a pretty good run of luck here, and here’s two hundred and thirty pounds. I have got ten Napoleons in my pocket. That is as much as I shall want; for the General pays everything like a prince; and if I’m hit, why you know I cost nothing. Don’t cry, little woman; I may live to vex you yet. Well, I shan’t take either of my horses, but shall ride the General’s grey charger: it’s cheaper, and I told him mine was lame. If I’m done, those two ought to fetch you something. Grigg offered ninety for the mare yesterday, before this confounded news came, and like a fool I wouldn’t let her go under the two o’s. Bullfinch will fetch his price any day, only you’d better sell him in this country, because the dealers have so many bills of mine, and so I’d rather he shouldn’t go back to England. Your little mare the General gave you will fetch something, and there’s no d–d livery stable bills here as there are in London,” Rawdon added, with a laugh. “There’s that dressing-case cost me two hundred—that is, I owe two for it; and the gold tops and bottles must be worth thirty or forty. Please to put that up the spout, ma’am, with my pins, and rings, and watch and chain, and things. They cost a precious lot of money. Miss Crawley, I know, paid a hundred down for the chain and ticker. Gold tops and bottles, indeed! dammy, I’m sorry I didn’t take more now. Edwards pressed on me a silver-gilt boot-jack, and I might have had a dressing-case fitted up with a silver warming-pan, and a service of plate. But we must make the best of what we’ve got, Becky, you know.”

And so, making his last dispositions, Captain Crawley, who had seldom thought about anything but himself, until the last few months of his life, when Love had obtained the mastery over the dragoon, went through the various items of his little catalogue of effects, striving to see how they might be turned into money for his wife’s benefit, in case any accident

should befall him. He pleased himself by noting down with a pencil, in his big schoolboy handwriting, the various items of his portable property which might be sold for his widow's advantage as, for example, "My double-barril by Manton, say 40 guineas; my driving cloak, lined with sable fur, 50 pounds; my duelling pistols in rosewood case (same which I shot Captain Marker), 20 pounds; my regulation saddle-holsters and housings; my Laurie ditto," and so forth, over all of which articles he made Rebecca the mistress.

Faithful to his plan of economy, the Captain dressed himself in his oldest and shabbiest uniform and epaulets, leaving the newest behind, under his wife's (or it might be his widow's) guardianship. And this famous dandy of Windsor and Hyde Park went off on his campaign with a kit as modest as that of a sergeant, and with something like a prayer on his lips for the woman he was leaving. He took her up from the ground, and held her in his arms for a minute, tight pressed against his strong-beating heart. His face was purple and his eyes dim, as he put her down and left her. He rode by his General's side, and smoked his cigar in silence as they hastened after the troops of the General's brigade, which preceded them; and it was not until they were some miles on their way that he left off twirling his moustache and broke silence.

And Rebecca, as we have said, wisely determined not to give way to unavailing sentimentality on her husband's departure. She waved him an adieu from the window, and stood there for a moment looking out after he was gone. The cathedral towers and the full gables of the quaint old houses were just beginning to blush in the sunrise. There had been no rest for her that night. She was still in her pretty ball-dress, her fair hair hanging somewhat out of curl on her neck, and the circles round her eyes dark with watching. "What a fright I seem," she said, examining herself in the glass, "and how pale this pink makes one look!" So she divested herself of this pink raiment; in doing which a note fell out from her corsage, which she picked up with a smile, and locked into her dressing-box. And then she put her bouquet of the ball into a glass of water, and went to bed, and slept very comfortably.

The town was quite quiet when she woke up at ten o'clock, and partook of coffee, very requisite and comforting after the exhaustion and grief of the morning's occurrences.

This meal over, she resumed honest Rawdon's calculations of the night previous, and surveyed her position. Should the worst befall, all things considered, she was pretty well to do. There were her own trinkets and trousseau, in addition to those which her husband had left behind. Rawdon's generosity, when they were first married, has already been described and lauded. Besides these, and the little mare, the General, her slave and worshipper, had made her many very handsome presents, in the shape of cashmere shawls bought at the auction of a bankrupt French general's lady, and numerous tributes from the jewellers' shops, all of which betokened her admirer's taste and wealth. As for "tickers," as poor Rawdon called watches, her apartments were alive with their clicking. For, happening to mention one night that hers, which Rawdon had given to her, was of English workmanship, and went ill, on the very next morning there came to her a little bijou marked Leroy, with a chain and cover charmingly set with turquoises, and another signed Brequet, which was covered with pearls, and yet scarcely bigger than a half-crown. General Tufto had bought one, and Captain Osborne had gallantly presented the other. Mrs. Osborne had no watch, though, to do George justice, she might have had one for the asking, and the Honourable Mrs. Tufto in England had an old instrument of her mother's that might have served for the plate-warming pan which Rawdon talked about. If Messrs. Howell and James were to publish a list of the purchasers of all the trinkets which they sell, how surprised would some families be: and if all these ornaments went to gentlemen's lawful wives and daughters, what a profusion of jewellery there would be exhibited in the genteelst homes of Vanity Fair!

Every calculation made of these valuables Mrs. Rebecca found, not without a pungent feeling of triumph and self-satisfaction, that should circumstances occur, she might reckon on six or seven hundred pounds at the very least, to begin the world with; and she passed the morning disposing, ordering, looking out, and locking up her properties in the most agreeable manner. Among the notes in Rawdon's pocket-book was a draft for twenty pounds on Osborne's banker. This made her think about Mrs. Osborne. "I will go and get the draft cashed," she said, "and pay a visit afterwards to poor little Emmy." If this is a novel without a hero, at least let us lay claim to a heroine. No man in the British army which has marched away, not the great Duke himself, could be more cool or collected in the presence of doubts and difficulties, than the indomitable little aide-de-camp's wife.

And there was another of our acquaintances who was also to be left behind, a non-combatant, and whose emotions and behaviour we have therefore a right to know. This was our friend the ex-collector of Boggley Wollah, whose rest was broken, like other people's, by the sounding of the bugles in the early morning. Being a great sleeper, and fond of his bed, it is possible he would have snoozed on until his usual hour of rising in the forenoon, in spite of all the drums, bugles, and bagpipes in the British army, but for an interruption, which did not come from George Osborne, who shared Jos's quarters with him, and was as usual occupied too much with his own affairs or with grief at parting with his wife, to think of taking leave of his slumbering brother-in-law—it was not George, we say, who interposed between Jos Sedley and sleep, but Captain Dobbin, who came and roused him up, insisting on shaking hands with him before his departure.

“Very kind of you,” said Jos, yawning, and wishing the Captain at the deuce.

“I—I didn't like to go off without saying good-bye, you know,” Dobbin said in a very incoherent manner; “because you know some of us mayn't come back again, and I like to see you all well, and—and that sort of thing, you know.”

“What do you mean?” Jos asked, rubbing his eyes. The Captain did not in the least hear him or look at the stout gentleman in the nightcap, about whom he professed to have such a tender interest. The hypocrite was looking and listening with all his might in the direction of George's apartments, striding about the room, upsetting the chairs, beating the tattoo, biting his nails, and showing other signs of great inward emotion.

Jos had always had rather a mean opinion of the Captain, and now began to think his courage was somewhat equivocal. “What is it I can do for you, Dobbin?” he said, in a sarcastic tone.

“I tell you what you can do,” the Captain replied, coming up to the bed; “we march in a quarter of an hour, Sedley, and neither George nor I may ever come back. Mind you, you are not to stir from this town until you ascertain how things go. You are to stay here and watch over your sister, and comfort her, and see that no harm comes to her. If anything happens to George, remember she has no one but you in the world to look to. If it

goes wrong with the army, you'll see her safe back to England; and you will promise me on your word that you will never desert her. I know you won't: as far as money goes, you were always free enough with that. Do you want any? I mean, have you enough gold to take you back to England in case of a misfortune?"

"Sir," said Jos, majestically, "when I want money, I know where to ask for it. And as for my sister, you needn't tell me how I ought to behave to her."

"You speak like a man of spirit, Jos," the other answered good-naturedly, "and I am glad that George can leave her in such good hands. So I may give him your word of honour, may I, that in case of extremity you will stand by her?"

"Of course, of course," answered Mr. Jos, whose generosity in money matters Dobbin estimated quite correctly.

"And you'll see her safe out of Brussels in the event of a defeat?"

"A defeat! D— it, sir, it's impossible. Don't try and frighten me," the hero cried from his bed; and Dobbin's mind was thus perfectly set at ease now that Jos had spoken out so resolutely respecting his conduct to his sister. "At least," thought the Captain, "there will be a retreat secured for her in case the worst should ensue."

If Captain Dobbin expected to get any personal comfort and satisfaction from having one more view of Amelia before the regiment marched away, his selfishness was punished just as such odious egotism deserved to be. The door of Jos's bedroom opened into the sitting-room which was common to the family party, and opposite this door was that of Amelia's chamber. The bugles had wakened everybody: there was no use in concealment now. George's servant was packing in this room: Osborne coming in and out of the contiguous bedroom, flinging to the man such articles as he thought fit to carry on the campaign. And presently Dobbin had the opportunity which his heart coveted, and he got sight of Amelia's face once more. But what a face it was! So white, so wild and despair-stricken, that the remembrance of it haunted him afterwards like a crime, and the sight smote him with inexpressible pangs of longing and pity.

She was wrapped in a white morning dress, her hair falling on her shoulders, and her large eyes fixed and without light. By way of helping on the preparations for the departure, and showing that she too could be useful at a moment so critical, this poor soul had taken up a sash of George's from the drawers whereon it lay, and followed him to and fro with the sash in her hand, looking on mutely as his packing proceeded. She came out and stood, leaning at the wall, holding this sash against her bosom, from which the heavy net of crimson dropped like a large stain of blood. Our gentle-hearted Captain felt a guilty shock as he looked at her. "Good God," thought he, "and is it grief like this I dared to pry into?" And there was no help: no means to soothe and comfort this helpless, speechless misery. He stood for a moment and looked at her, powerless and torn with pity, as a parent regards an infant in pain.

At last, George took Emmy's hand, and led her back into the bedroom, from whence he came out alone. The parting had taken place in that moment, and he was gone.

"Thank Heaven that is over," George thought, bounding down the stair, his sword under his arm, as he ran swiftly to the alarm ground, where the regiment was mustered, and whither trooped men and officers hurrying from their billets; his pulse was throbbing and his cheeks flushed: the great game of war was going to be played, and he one of the players. What a fierce excitement of doubt, hope, and pleasure! What tremendous hazards of loss or gain! What were all the games of chance he had ever played compared to this one? Into all contests requiring athletic skill and courage, the young man, from his boyhood upwards, had flung himself with all his might. The champion of his school and his regiment, the bravos of his companions had followed him everywhere; from the boys' cricket-match to the garrison-races, he had won a hundred of triumphs; and wherever he went women and men had admired and envied him. What qualities are there for which a man gets so speedy a return of applause, as those of bodily superiority, activity, and valour? Time out of mind strength and courage have been the theme of bards and romances; and from the story of Troy down to to-day, poetry has always chosen a soldier for a hero. I wonder is it because men are cowards in heart that they admire bravery so much, and place military valour so far beyond every other quality for reward and worship?

So, at the sound of that stirring call to battle, George jumped away from the gentle arms in which he had been dallying; not without a feeling of shame (although his wife's hold on him had been but feeble), that he should have been detained there so long. The same feeling of eagerness and excitement was amongst all those friends of his of whom we have had occasional glimpses, from the stout senior Major, who led the regiment into action, to little Stubble, the Ensign, who was to bear its colours on that day.

The sun was just rising as the march began—it was a gallant sight—the band led the column, playing the regimental march—then came the Major in command, riding upon Pyramus, his stout charger—then marched the grenadiers, their Captain at their head; in the centre were the colours, borne by the senior and junior Ensigns—then George came marching at the head of his company. He looked up, and smiled at Amelia, and passed on; and even the sound of the music died away.