

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 57

"Eothen"

It was one of the many causes for personal pride with which old Osborne chose to recreate himself that Sedley, his ancient rival, enemy, and benefactor, was in his last days so utterly defeated and humiliated as to be forced to accept pecuniary obligations at the hands of the man who had most injured and insulted him. The successful man of the world cursed the old pauper and relieved him from time to time. As he furnished George with money for his mother, he gave the boy to understand by hints, delivered in his brutal, coarse way, that George's maternal grandfather was but a wretched old bankrupt and dependant, and that John Sedley might thank the man to whom he already owed ever so much money for the aid which his generosity now chose to administer. George carried the pompous supplies to his mother and the shattered old widower whom it was now the main business of her life to tend and comfort. The little fellow patronized the feeble and disappointed old man.

It may have shown a want of "proper pride" in Amelia that she chose to accept these money benefits at the hands of her father's enemy. But proper pride and this poor lady had never had much acquaintance together. A disposition naturally simple and demanding protection; a long course of poverty and humility, of daily privations, and hard words, of kind offices and no returns, had been her lot ever since womanhood almost, or since her luckless marriage with George Osborne. You who see your betters bearing up under this shame every day, meekly suffering under the slights of fortune, gentle and unpitied, poor, and rather despised for their poverty, do you ever step down from your prosperity and wash the feet of these poor wearied beggars? The very thought of them is odious and low. "There must be classes—there must be rich and poor," Dives says, smacking his claret (it is well if he even sends the broken meat out to Lazarus sitting under the window). Very true; but think how mysterious and often unaccountable it is—that lottery of life which gives to this man the purple and fine linen and sends to the other rags for garments and dogs for comforters.

So I must own that, without much repining, on the contrary with something akin to gratitude, Amelia took the crumbs that her father-in-law let drop now and then, and with them fed her own parent. Directly she understood it to be her duty, it was this young woman's nature (ladies, she is but thirty still, and we choose to call her a young woman even at that age) it was, I say, her nature to sacrifice herself and to fling all that she had at the feet of the beloved object. During what long thankless nights had she worked out her fingers for little Georgy whilst at home with her; what buffets, scorns, privations, poverties had she endured for father and mother! And in the midst of all these solitary resignations and unseen sacrifices, she did not respect herself any more than the world respected her, but I believe thought in her heart that she was a poor-spirited, despicable little creature, whose luck in life was only too good for her merits. O you poor women! O you poor secret martyrs and victims, whose life is a torture, who are stretched on racks in your bedrooms, and who lay your heads down on the block daily at the drawing-room table; every man who watches your pains, or peers into those dark places where the torture is administered to you, must pity you—and—and thank God that he has a beard. I recollect seeing, years ago, at the prisons for idiots and madmen at Bicetre, near Paris, a poor wretch bent down under the bondage of his imprisonment and his personal infirmity, to whom one of our party gave a halfpenny worth of snuff in a cornet or "screw" of paper. The kindness was too much for the poor epileptic creature. He cried in an anguish of delight and gratitude: if anybody gave you and me a thousand a year, or saved our lives, we could not be so affected. And so, if you properly tyrannize over a woman, you will find a h'p'orth of kindness act upon her and bring tears into her eyes, as though you were an angel benefiting her.

Some such boons as these were the best which Fortune allotted to poor little Amelia. Her life, begun not unprosperously, had come down to this—to a mean prison and a long, ignoble bondage. Little George visited her captivity sometimes and consoled it with feeble gleams of encouragement. Russell Square was the boundary of her prison: she might walk thither occasionally, but was always back to sleep in her cell at night; to perform cheerless duties; to watch by thankless sick-beds; to suffer the harassment and tyranny of querulous disappointed old age. How many thousands of people are there, women for the most part, who are doomed to endure this long slavery?—who are hospital nurses without wages—sisters of Charity, if you like, without the romance and the

sentiment of sacrifice—who strive, fast, watch, and suffer, unpitied, and fade away ignobly and unknown.

The hidden and awful Wisdom which apportions the destinies of mankind is pleased so to humiliate and cast down the tender, good, and wise, and to set up the selfish, the foolish, or the wicked. Oh, be humble, my brother, in your prosperity! Be gentle with those who are less lucky, if not more deserving. Think, what right have you to be scornful, whose virtue is a deficiency of temptation, whose success may be a chance, whose rank may be an ancestor's accident, whose prosperity is very likely a satire.

They buried Amelia's mother in the churchyard at Brompton, upon just such a rainy, dark day as Amelia recollected when first she had been there to marry George. Her little boy sat by her side in pompous new sables. She remembered the old pew-woman and clerk. Her thoughts were away in other times as the parson read. But that she held George's hand in her own, perhaps she would have liked to change places with.... Then, as usual, she felt ashamed of her selfish thoughts and prayed inwardly to be strengthened to do her duty.

So she determined with all her might and strength to try and make her old father happy. She slaved, toiled, patched, and mended, sang and played backgammon, read out the newspaper, cooked dishes, for old Sedley, walked him out sedulously into Kensington Gardens or the Brompton Lanes, listened to his stories with untiring smiles and affectionate hypocrisy, or sat musing by his side and communing with her own thoughts and reminiscences, as the old man, feeble and querulous, sunned himself on the garden benches and prattled about his wrongs or his sorrows. What sad, unsatisfactory thoughts those of the widow were! The children running up and down the slopes and broad paths in the gardens reminded her of George, who was taken from her; the first George was taken from her; her selfish, guilty love, in both instances, had been rebuked and bitterly chastised. She strove to think it was right that she should be so punished. She was such a miserable wicked sinner. She was quite alone in the world.

I know that the account of this kind of solitary imprisonment is insufferably tedious, unless there is some cheerful or humorous incident to enliven it—a tender gaoler, for instance, or a waggish commandant of

the fortress, or a mouse to come out and play about Latude's beard and whiskers, or a subterranean passage under the castle, dug by Trenck with his nails and a toothpick: the historian has no such enlivening incident to relate in the narrative of Amelia's captivity. Fancy her, if you please, during this period, very sad, but always ready to smile when spoken to; in a very mean, poor, not to say vulgar position of life; singing songs, making puddings, playing cards, mending stockings, for her old father's benefit. So, never mind, whether she be a heroine or no; or you and I, however old, scolding, and bankrupt—may we have in our last days a kind soft shoulder on which to lean and a gentle hand to soothe our gouty old pillows.

Old Sedley grew very fond of his daughter after his wife's death, and Amelia had her consolation in doing her duty by the old man.

But we are not going to leave these two people long in such a low and ungentle station of life. Better days, as far as worldly prosperity went, were in store for both. Perhaps the ingenious reader has guessed who was the stout gentleman who called upon Georgy at his school in company with our old friend Major Dobbin. It was another old acquaintance returned to England, and at a time when his presence was likely to be of great comfort to his relatives there.

Major Dobbin having easily succeeded in getting leave from his good-natured commandant to proceed to Madras, and thence probably to Europe, on urgent private affairs, never ceased travelling night and day until he reached his journey's end, and had directed his march with such celerity that he arrived at Madras in a high fever. His servants who accompanied him brought him to the house of the friend with whom he had resolved to stay until his departure for Europe in a state of delirium; and it was thought for many, many days that he would never travel farther than the burying-ground of the church of St. George's, where the troops should fire a salvo over his grave, and where many a gallant officer lies far away from his home.

Here, as the poor fellow lay tossing in his fever, the people who watched him might have heard him raving about Amelia. The idea that he should never see her again depressed him in his lucid hours. He thought his last day was come, and he made his solemn preparations for departure, setting his affairs in this world in order and leaving the little property of

which he was possessed to those whom he most desired to benefit. The friend in whose house he was located witnessed his testament. He desired to be buried with a little brown hair-chain which he wore round his neck and which, if the truth must be known, he had got from Amelia's maid at Brussels, when the young widow's hair was cut off, during the fever which prostrated her after the death of George Osborne on the plateau at Mount St. John.

He recovered, rallied, relapsed again, having undergone such a process of blood-letting and calomel as showed the strength of his original constitution. He was almost a skeleton when they put him on board the *Ramchunder* East Indiaman, Captain Bragg, from Calcutta, touching at Madras, and so weak and prostrate that his friend who had tended him through his illness prophesied that the honest Major would never survive the voyage, and that he would pass some morning, shrouded in flag and hammock, over the ship's side, and carrying down to the sea with him the relic that he wore at his heart. But whether it was the sea air, or the hope which sprung up in him afresh, from the day that the ship spread her canvas and stood out of the roads towards home, our friend began to amend, and he was quite well (though as gaunt as a greyhound) before they reached the Cape. "Kirk will be disappointed of his majority this time," he said with a smile; "he will expect to find himself gazetted by the time the regiment reaches home." For it must be premised that while the Major was lying ill at Madras, having made such prodigious haste to go thither, the gallant-th, which had passed many years abroad, which after its return from the West Indies had been baulked of its stay at home by the Waterloo campaign, and had been ordered from Flanders to India, had received orders home; and the Major might have accompanied his comrades, had he chosen to wait for their arrival at Madras.

Perhaps he was not inclined to put himself in his exhausted state again under the guardianship of Glorvina. "I think Miss O'Dowd would have done for me," he said laughingly to a fellow-passenger, "if we had had her on board, and when she had sunk me, she would have fallen upon you, depend upon it, and carried you in as a prize to Southampton, Jos, my boy."

For indeed it was no other than our stout friend who was also a passenger on board the *Ramchunder*. He had passed ten years in Bengal. Constant dinners, tiffins, pale ale and claret, the prodigious labour of

cutcherry, and the refreshment of brandy-pawnee which he was forced to take there, had their effect upon Waterloo Sedley. A voyage to Europe was pronounced necessary for him—and having served his full time in India and had fine appointments which had enabled him to lay by a considerable sum of money, he was free to come home and stay with a good pension, or to return and resume that rank in the service to which his seniority and his vast talents entitled him.

He was rather thinner than when we last saw him, but had gained in majesty and solemnity of demeanour. He had resumed the mustachios to which his services at Waterloo entitled him, and swaggered about on deck in a magnificent velvet cap with a gold band and a profuse ornamentation of pins and jewellery about his person. He took breakfast in his cabin and dressed as solemnly to appear on the quarter-deck as if he were going to turn out for Bond Street, or the Course at Calcutta. He brought a native servant with him, who was his valet and pipe-bearer and who wore the Sedley crest in silver on his turban. That oriental menial had a wretched life under the tyranny of Jos Sedley. Jos was as vain of his person as a woman, and took as long a time at his toilette as any fading beauty. The youngsters among the passengers, Young Chaffers of the 150th, and poor little Ricketts, coming home after his third fever, used to draw out Sedley at the cuddy-table and make him tell prodigious stories about himself and his exploits against tigers and Napoleon. He was great when he visited the Emperor's tomb at Longwood, when to these gentlemen and the young officers of the ship, Major Dobbin not being by, he described the whole battle of Waterloo and all but announced that Napoleon never would have gone to Saint Helena at all but for him, Jos Sedley.

After leaving St. Helena he became very generous, disposing of a great quantity of ship stores, claret, preserved meats, and great casks packed with soda-water, brought out for his private delectation. There were no ladies on board; the Major gave the pas of precedence to the civilian, so that he was the first dignitary at table, and treated by Captain Bragg and the officers of the Ramchunder with the respect which his rank warranted. He disappeared rather in a panic during a two-days' gale, in which he had the portholes of his cabin battened down, and remained in his cot reading the Washerwoman of Finchley Common, left on board the Ramchunder by the Right Honourable the Lady Emily Hornblower, wife of the Rev. Silas Hornblower, when on their passage out to the

Cape, where the Reverend gentleman was a missionary; but, for common reading, he had brought a stock of novels and plays which he lent to the rest of the ship, and rendered himself agreeable to all by his kindness and condescension.

Many and many a night as the ship was cutting through the roaring dark sea, the moon and stars shining overhead and the bell singing out the watch, Mr. Sedley and the Major would sit on the quarter-deck of the vessel talking about home, as the Major smoked his cheroot and the civilian puffed at the hookah which his servant prepared for him.

In these conversations it was wonderful with what perseverance and ingenuity Major Dobbin would manage to bring the talk round to the subject of Amelia and her little boy. Jos, a little testy about his father's misfortunes and unceremonious applications to him, was soothed down by the Major, who pointed out the elder's ill fortunes and old age. He would not perhaps like to live with the old couple, whose ways and hours might not agree with those of a younger man, accustomed to different society (Jos bowed at this compliment); but, the Major pointed out, how advantageous it would be for Jos Sedley to have a house of his own in London, and not a mere bachelor's establishment as before; how his sister Amelia would be the very person to preside over it; how elegant, how gentle she was, and of what refined good manners. He recounted stories of the success which Mrs. George Osborne had had in former days at Brussels, and in London, where she was much admired by people of very great fashion; and he then hinted how becoming it would be for Jos to send Georgy to a good school and make a man of him, for his mother and her parents would be sure to spoil him. In a word, this artful Major made the civilian promise to take charge of Amelia and her unprotected child. He did not know as yet what events had happened in the little Sedley family, and how death had removed the mother, and riches had carried off George from Amelia. But the fact is that every day and always, this love-smitten and middle-aged gentleman was thinking about Mrs. Osborne, and his whole heart was bent upon doing her good. He coaxed, wheedled, cajoled, and complimented Jos Sedley with a perseverance and cordiality of which he was not aware himself, very likely; but some men who have unmarried sisters or daughters even, may remember how uncommonly agreeable gentlemen are to the male relations when they are courting the females; and perhaps this rogue of a Dobbin was urged by a similar hypocrisy.

The truth is, when Major Dobbin came on board the Ramchunder, very sick, and for the three days she lay in the Madras Roads, he did not begin to rally, nor did even the appearance and recognition of his old acquaintance, Mr. Sedley, on board much cheer him, until after a conversation which they had one day, as the Major was laid languidly on the deck. He said then he thought he was doomed; he had left a little something to his godson in his will, and he trusted Mrs. Osborne would remember him kindly and be happy in the marriage she was about to make. “Married? not the least,” Jos answered; “he had heard from her: she made no mention of the marriage, and by the way, it was curious, she wrote to say that Major Dobbin was going to be married, and hoped that he would be happy.” What were the dates of Sedley’s letters from Europe? The civilian fetched them. They were two months later than the Major’s; and the ship’s surgeon congratulated himself upon the treatment adopted by him towards his new patient, who had been consigned to shipboard by the Madras practitioner with very small hopes indeed; for, from that day, the very day that he changed the draught, Major Dobbin began to mend. And thus it was that deserving officer, Captain Kirk, was disappointed of his majority.

After they passed St. Helena, Major Dobbin’s gaiety and strength was such as to astonish all his fellow passengers. He larked with the midshipmen, played single-stick with the mates, ran up the shrouds like a boy, sang a comic song one night to the amusement of the whole party assembled over their grog after supper, and rendered himself so gay, lively, and amiable that even Captain Bragg, who thought there was nothing in his passenger, and considered he was a poor-spirited feller at first, was constrained to own that the Major was a reserved but well-informed and meritorious officer. “He ain’t got distangy manners, dammy,” Bragg observed to his first mate; “he wouldn’t do at Government House, Roper, where his Lordship and Lady William was as kind to me, and shook hands with me before the whole company, and asking me at dinner to take beer with him, before the Commander-in-Chief himself; he ain’t got manners, but there’s something about him—” And thus Captain Bragg showed that he possessed discrimination as a man, as well as ability as a commander.

But a calm taking place when the Ramchunder was within ten days’ sail of England, Dobbin became so impatient and ill-humoured as to surprise those comrades who had before admired his vivacity and good temper.

He did not recover until the breeze sprang up again, and was in a highly excited state when the pilot came on board. Good God, how his heart beat as the two friendly spires of Southampton came in sight.