

# *Vanity Fair* by William Makepeace Thackeray

## Chapter 58

### "Our Friend the Major"

Our Major had rendered himself so popular on board the *Ramchunder* that when he and Mr. Sedley descended into the welcome shore-boat which was to take them from the ship, the whole crew, men and officers, the great Captain Bragg himself leading off, gave three cheers for Major Dobbin, who blushed very much and ducked his head in token of thanks. Jos, who very likely thought the cheers were for himself, took off his gold-laced cap and waved it majestically to his friends, and they were pulled to shore and landed with great dignity at the pier, whence they proceeded to the Royal George Hotel.

Although the sight of that magnificent round of beef, and the silver tankard suggestive of real British home-brewed ale and porter, which perennially greet the eyes of the traveller returning from foreign parts who enters the coffee-room of the George, are so invigorating and delightful that a man entering such a comfortable snug homely English inn might well like to stop some days there, yet Dobbin began to talk about a post-chaise instantly, and was no sooner at Southampton than he wished to be on the road to London. Jos, however, would not hear of moving that evening. Why was he to pass a night in a post-chaise instead of a great large undulating downy feather-bed which was there ready to replace the horrid little narrow crib in which the portly Bengal gentleman had been confined during the voyage? He could not think of moving till his baggage was cleared, or of travelling until he could do so with his chillum. So the Major was forced to wait over that night, and dispatched a letter to his family announcing his arrival, entreating from Jos a promise to write to his own friends. Jos promised, but didn't keep his promise. The Captain, the surgeon, and one or two passengers came and dined with our two gentlemen at the inn, Jos exerting himself in a sumptuous way in ordering the dinner and promising to go to town the next day with the Major. The landlord said it did his eyes good to see Mr. Sedley take off his first pint of porter. If I had time and dared to enter into digressions, I would write a chapter about that first pint of porter drunk upon English ground. Ah, how good it is! It is worth-while to leave home for a year, just to enjoy that one draught.

Major Dobbin made his appearance the next morning very neatly shaved and dressed, according to his wont. Indeed, it was so early in the morning that nobody was up in the house except that wonderful Boots of an inn who never seems to want sleep; and the Major could hear the snores of the various inmates of the house roaring through the corridors as he creaked about in those dim passages. Then the sleepless Boots went shirking round from door to door, gathering up at each the Bluchers, Wellingtons, Oxonians, which stood outside. Then Jos's native servant arose and began to get ready his master's ponderous dressing apparatus and prepare his hookah; then the maidservants got up, and meeting the dark man in the passages, shrieked, and mistook him for the devil. He and Dobbin stumbled over their pails in the passages as they were scouring the decks of the Royal George. When the first unshorn waiter appeared and unbarred the door of the inn, the Major thought that the time for departure was arrived, and ordered a post-chaise to be fetched instantly, that they might set off.

He then directed his steps to Mr. Sedley's room and opened the curtains of the great large family bed wherein Mr. Jos was snoring. "Come, up! Sedley," the Major said, "it's time to be off; the chaise will be at the door in half an hour."

Jos growled from under the counterpane to know what the time was; but when he at last extorted from the blushing Major (who never told fibs, however they might be to his advantage) what was the real hour of the morning, he broke out into a volley of bad language, which we will not repeat here, but by which he gave Dobbin to understand that he would jeopardy his soul if he got up at that moment, that the Major might go and be hanged, that he would not travel with Dobbin, and that it was most unkind and ungentlemanlike to disturb a man out of his sleep in that way; on which the discomfited Major was obliged to retreat, leaving Jos to resume his interrupted slumbers.

The chaise came up presently, and the Major would wait no longer.

If he had been an English nobleman travelling on a pleasure tour, or a newspaper courier bearing dispatches (government messages are generally carried much more quietly), he could not have travelled more quickly. The post-boys wondered at the fees he flung amongst them. How happy and green the country looked as the chaise whirled rapidly

from mile-stone to mile-stone, through neat country towns where landlords came out to welcome him with smiles and bows; by pretty roadside inns, where the signs hung on the elms, and horses and waggoners were drinking under the chequered shadow of the trees; by old halls and parks; rustic hamlets clustered round ancient grey churches—and through the charming friendly English landscape. Is there any in the world like it? To a traveller returning home it looks so kind—it seems to shake hands with you as you pass through it. Well, Major Dobbin passed through all this from Southampton to London, and without noting much beyond the milestones along the road. You see he was so eager to see his parents at Camberwell.

He grudged the time lost between Piccadilly and his old haunt at the Slaughters', whither he drove faithfully. Long years had passed since he saw it last, since he and George, as young men, had enjoyed many a feast, and held many a revel there. He had now passed into the stage of old-fellow-hood. His hair was grizzled, and many a passion and feeling of his youth had grown grey in that interval. There, however, stood the old waiter at the door, in the same greasy black suit, with the same double chin and flaccid face, with the same huge bunch of seals at his fob, rattling his money in his pockets as before, and receiving the Major as if he had gone away only a week ago. "Put the Major's things in twenty-three, that's his room," John said, exhibiting not the least surprise. "Roast fowl for your dinner, I suppose. You ain't got married? They said you was married—the Scotch surgeon of yours was here. No, it was Captain Humby of the thirty-third, as was quartered with the –th in Injee. Like any warm water? What do you come in a chay for—ain't the coach good enough?" And with this, the faithful waiter, who knew and remembered every officer who used the house, and with whom ten years were but as yesterday, led the way up to Dobbin's old room, where stood the great moreen bed, and the shabby carpet, a thought more dingy, and all the old black furniture covered with faded chintz, just as the Major recollected them in his youth.

He remembered George pacing up and down the room, and biting his nails, and swearing that the Governor must come round, and that if he didn't, he didn't care a straw, on the day before he was married. He could fancy him walking in, banging the door of Dobbin's room, and his own hard by—

“You ain’t got young,” John said, calmly surveying his friend of former days.

Dobbin laughed. “Ten years and a fever don’t make a man young, John,” he said. “It is you that are always young—no, you are always old.”

“What became of Captain Osborne’s widow?” John said. “Fine young fellow that. Lord, how he used to spend his money. He never came back after that day he was marched from here. He owes me three pound at this minute. Look here, I have it in my book. ‘April 10, 1815, Captain Osborne: £3 pounds.’ I wonder whether his father would pay me,” and so saying, John of the Slaughters’ pulled out the very morocco pocket-book in which he had noted his loan to the Captain, upon a greasy faded page still extant, with many other scrawled memoranda regarding the bygone frequenters of the house.

Having inducted his customer into the room, John retired with perfect calmness; and Major Dobbin, not without a blush and a grin at his own absurdity, chose out of his kit the very smartest and most becoming civil costume he possessed, and laughed at his own tanned face and grey hair, as he surveyed them in the dreary little toilet-glass on the dressing-table.

“I’m glad old John didn’t forget me,” he thought. “She’ll know me, too, I hope.” And he sallied out of the inn, bending his steps once more in the direction of Brompton.

Every minute incident of his last meeting with Amelia was present to the constant man’s mind as he walked towards her house. The arch and the Achilles statue were up since he had last been in Piccadilly; a hundred changes had occurred which his eye and mind vaguely noted. He began to tremble as he walked up the lane from Brompton, that well-remembered lane leading to the street where she lived. Was she going to be married or not? If he were to meet her with the little boy—Good God, what should he do? He saw a woman coming to him with a child of five years old—was that she? He began to shake at the mere possibility. When he came up to the row of houses, at last, where she lived, and to the gate, he caught hold of it and paused. He might have heard the thumping of his own heart. “May God Almighty bless her, whatever has happened,” he thought to himself. “Psha! she may be gone from here,” he said and went in through the gate.

The window of the parlour which she used to occupy was open, and there were no inmates in the room. The Major thought he recognized the piano, though, with the picture over it, as it used to be in former days, and his perturbations were renewed. Mr. Clapp's brass plate was still on the door, at the knocker of which Dobbin performed a summons.

A buxom-looking lass of sixteen, with bright eyes and purple cheeks, came to answer the knock and looked hard at the Major as he leant back against the little porch.

He was as pale as a ghost and could hardly falter out the words— “Does Mrs. Osborne live here?”

She looked him hard in the face for a moment—and then turning white too—said, “Lord bless me—it's Major Dobbin.” She held out both her hands shaking—“Don't you remember me?” she said. “I used to call you Major Sugarplums.” On which, and I believe it was for the first time that he ever so conducted himself in his life, the Major took the girl in his arms and kissed her. She began to laugh and cry hysterically, and calling out “Ma, Pa!” with all her voice, brought up those worthy people, who had already been surveying the Major from the casement of the ornamental kitchen, and were astonished to find their daughter in the little passage in the embrace of a great tall man in a blue frock-coat and white duck trousers.

“I'm an old friend,” he said—not without blushing though. “Don't you remember me, Mrs. Clapp, and those good cakes you used to make for tea? Don't you recollect me, Clapp? I'm George's godfather, and just come back from India.” A great shaking of hands ensued—Mrs. Clapp was greatly affected and delighted; she called upon heaven to interpose a vast many times in that passage.

The landlord and landlady of the house led the worthy Major into the Sedleys' room (whereof he remembered every single article of furniture, from the old brass ornamented piano, once a natty little instrument, Stothard maker, to the screens and the alabaster miniature tombstone, in the midst of which ticked Mr. Sedley's gold watch), and there, as he sat down in the lodger's vacant arm-chair, the father, the mother, and the daughter, with a thousand ejaculatory breaks in the narrative, informed Major Dobbin of what we know already, but of particulars in Amelia's

history of which he was not aware—namely of Mrs. Sedley’s death, of George’s reconciliation with his grandfather Osborne, of the way in which the widow took on at leaving him, and of other particulars of her life. Twice or thrice he was going to ask about the marriage question, but his heart failed him. He did not care to lay it bare to these people. Finally, he was informed that Mrs. O. was gone to walk with her pa in Kensington Gardens, whither she always went with the old gentleman (who was very weak and peevish now, and led her a sad life, though she behaved to him like an angel, to be sure), of a fine afternoon, after dinner.

“I’m very much pressed for time,” the Major said, “and have business to-night of importance. I should like to see Mrs. Osborne tho’. Suppose Miss Polly would come with me and show me the way?”

Miss Polly was charmed and astonished at this proposal. She knew the way. She would show Major Dobbin. She had often been with Mr. Sedley when Mrs. O. was gone—was gone Russell Square way—and knew the bench where he liked to sit. She bounced away to her apartment and appeared presently in her best bonnet and her mamma’s yellow shawl and large pebble brooch, of which she assumed the loan in order to make herself a worthy companion for the Major.

That officer, then, in his blue frock-coat and buckskin gloves, gave the young lady his arm, and they walked away very gaily. He was glad to have a friend at hand for the scene which he dreaded somehow. He asked a thousand more questions from his companion about Amelia: his kind heart grieved to think that she should have had to part with her son. How did she bear it? Did she see him often? Was Mr. Sedley pretty comfortable now in a worldly point of view? Polly answered all these questions of Major Sugarplums to the very best of her power.

And in the midst of their walk an incident occurred which, though very simple in its nature, was productive of the greatest delight to Major Dobbin. A pale young man with feeble whiskers and a stiff white neckcloth came walking down the lane, en sandwich—having a lady, that is, on each arm. One was a tall and commanding middle-aged female, with features and a complexion similar to those of the clergyman of the Church of England by whose side she marched, and the other a stunted little woman with a dark face, ornamented by a fine new bonnet and

white ribbons, and in a smart pelisse, with a rich gold watch in the midst of her person. The gentleman, pinioned as he was by these two ladies, carried further a parasol, shawl, and basket, so that his arms were entirely engaged, and of course he was unable to touch his hat in acknowledgement of the curtsy with which Miss Mary Clapp greeted him.

He merely bowed his head in reply to her salutation, which the two ladies returned with a patronizing air, and at the same time looking severely at the individual in the blue coat and bamboo cane who accompanied Miss Polly.

“Who’s that?” asked the Major, amused by the group, and after he had made way for the three to pass up the lane. Mary looked at him rather roguishly.

“That is our curate, the Reverend Mr. Binny (a twitch from Major Dobbin), and his sister Miss B. Lord bless us, how she did use to worret us at Sunday-school; and the other lady, the little one with a cast in her eye and the handsome watch, is Mrs. Binny—Miss Grits that was; her pa was a grocer, and kept the Little Original Gold Tea Pot in Kensington Gravel Pits. They were married last month, and are just come back from Margate. She’s five thousand pound to her fortune; but her and Miss B., who made the match, have quarrelled already.”

If the Major had twitched before, he started now, and slapped the bamboo on the ground with an emphasis which made Miss Clapp cry, “Law,” and laugh too. He stood for a moment, silent, with open mouth, looking after the retreating young couple, while Miss Mary told their history; but he did not hear beyond the announcement of the reverend gentleman’s marriage; his head was swimming with felicity. After this rencontre he began to walk double quick towards the place of his destination—and yet they were too soon (for he was in a great tremor at the idea of a meeting for which he had been longing any time these ten years)—through the Brompton lanes, and entering at the little old portal in Kensington Garden wall.

“There they are,” said Miss Polly, and she felt him again start back on her arm. She was a confidante at once of the whole business. She knew the story as well as if she had read it in one of her favourite novel-

books—Fatherless Fanny, or the Scottish Chiefs.

“Suppose you were to run on and tell her,” the Major said. Polly ran forward, her yellow shawl streaming in the breeze.

Old Sedley was seated on a bench, his handkerchief placed over his knees, prattling away, according to his wont, with some old story about old times to which Amelia had listened and awarded a patient smile many a time before. She could not think of her own affairs, and smile or make other marks of recognition of her father’s stories, scarcely hearing a word of the old man’s tales. As Mary came bouncing along, and Amelia caught sight of her, she started up from her bench. Her first thought was that something had happened to Georgy, but the sight of the messenger’s eager and happy face dissipated that fear in the timorous mother’s bosom.

“News! News!” cried the emissary of Major Dobbin. “He’s come! He’s come!”

“Who is come?” said Emmy, still thinking of her son.

“Look there,” answered Miss Clapp, turning round and pointing; in which direction Amelia looking, saw Dobbin’s lean figure and long shadow stalking across the grass. Amelia started in her turn, blushed up, and, of course, began to cry. At all this simple little creature’s fetes, the grandes eaux were accustomed to play. He looked at her—oh, how fondly—as she came running towards him, her hands before her, ready to give them to him. She wasn’t changed. She was a little pale, a little stouter in figure. Her eyes were the same, the kind trustful eyes. There were scarce three lines of silver in her soft brown hair. She gave him both her hands as she looked up flushing and smiling through her tears into his honest homely face. He took the two little hands between his two and held them there. He was speechless for a moment. Why did he not take her in his arms and swear that he would never leave her? She must have yielded: she could not but have obeyed him.

“I—I’ve another arrival to announce,” he said after a pause.

“Mrs. Dobbin?” Amelia said, making a movement back—why didn’t he speak?

“No,” he said, letting her hands go: “Who has told you those lies? I mean, your brother Jos came in the same ship with me, and is come home to make you all happy.”

“Papa, Papa!” Emmy cried out, “here are news! My brother is in England. He is come to take care of you. Here is Major Dobbin.”

Mr. Sedley started up, shaking a great deal and gathering up his thoughts. Then he stepped forward and made an old-fashioned bow to the Major, whom he called Mr. Dobbin, and hoped his worthy father, Sir William, was quite well. He proposed to call upon Sir William, who had done him the honour of a visit a short time ago. Sir William had not called upon the old gentleman for eight years—it was that visit he was thinking of returning.

“He is very much shaken,” Emmy whispered as Dobbin went up and cordially shook hands with the old man.

Although he had such particular business in London that evening, the Major consented to forego it upon Mr. Sedley’s invitation to him to come home and partake of tea. Amelia put her arm under that of her young friend with the yellow shawl and headed the party on their return homewards, so that Mr. Sedley fell to Dobbin’s share. The old man walked very slowly and told a number of ancient histories about himself and his poor Bessy, his former prosperity, and his bankruptcy. His thoughts, as is usual with failing old men, were quite in former times. The present, with the exception of the one catastrophe which he felt, he knew little about. The Major was glad to let him talk on. His eyes were fixed upon the figure in front of him—the dear little figure always present to his imagination and in his prayers, and visiting his dreams wakeful or slumbering.

Amelia was very happy, smiling, and active all that evening, performing her duties as hostess of the little entertainment with the utmost grace and propriety, as Dobbin thought. His eyes followed her about as they sat in the twilight. How many a time had he longed for that moment and thought of her far away under hot winds and in weary marches, gentle and happy, kindly ministering to the wants of old age, and decorating poverty with sweet submission—as he saw her now. I do not say that his taste was the highest, or that it is the duty of great intellects to be content

with a bread-and-butter paradise, such as sufficed our simple old friend; but his desires were of this sort, whether for good or bad, and, with Amelia to help him, he was as ready to drink as many cups of tea as Doctor Johnson.

Amelia seeing this propensity, laughingly encouraged it and looked exceedingly roguish as she administered to him cup after cup. It is true she did not know that the Major had had no dinner and that the cloth was laid for him at the Slaughters', and a plate laid thereon to mark that the table was retained, in that very box in which the Major and George had sat many a time carousing, when she was a child just come home from Miss Pinkerton's school.

The first thing Mrs. Osborne showed the Major was Georgy's miniature, for which she ran upstairs on her arrival at home. It was not half handsome enough of course for the boy, but wasn't it noble of him to think of bringing it to his mother? Whilst her papa was awake she did not talk much about Georgy. To hear about Mr. Osborne and Russell Square was not agreeable to the old man, who very likely was unconscious that he had been living for some months past mainly on the bounty of his richer rival, and lost his temper if allusion was made to the other.

Dobbin told him all, and a little more perhaps than all, that had happened on board the Ramchunder, and exaggerated Jos's benevolent dispositions towards his father and resolution to make him comfortable in his old days. The truth is that during the voyage the Major had impressed this duty most strongly upon his fellow-passenger and extorted promises from him that he would take charge of his sister and her child. He soothed Jos's irritation with regard to the bills which the old gentleman had drawn upon him, gave a laughing account of his own sufferings on the same score and of the famous consignment of wine with which the old man had favoured him, and brought Mr. Jos, who was by no means an ill-natured person when well-pleased and moderately flattered, to a very good state of feeling regarding his relatives in Europe.

And in fine I am ashamed to say that the Major stretched the truth so far as to tell old Mr. Sedley that it was mainly a desire to see his parent which brought Jos once more to Europe.

At his accustomed hour Mr. Sedley began to doze in his chair, and then it was Amelia's opportunity to commence her conversation, which she did with great eagerness—it related exclusively to Georgy. She did not talk at all about her own sufferings at breaking from him, for indeed, this worthy woman, though she was half-killed by the separation from the child, yet thought it was very wicked in her to repine at losing him; but everything concerning him, his virtues, talents, and prospects, she poured out. She described his angelic beauty; narrated a hundred instances of his generosity and greatness of mind whilst living with her; how a Royal Duchess had stopped and admired him in Kensington Gardens; how splendidly he was cared for now, and how he had a groom and a pony; what quickness and cleverness he had, and what a prodigiously well-read and delightful person the Reverend Lawrence Veal was, George's master. "He knows everything," Amelia said. "He has the most delightful parties. You who are so learned yourself, and have read so much, and are so clever and accomplished—don't shake your head and say no—he always used to say you were—you will be charmed with Mr. Veal's parties. The last Tuesday in every month. He says there is no place in the bar or the senate that Georgy may not aspire to. Look here," and she went to the piano-drawer and drew out a theme of Georgy's composition. This great effort of genius, which is still in the possession of George's mother, is as follows:

On Selfishness—Of all the vices which degrade the human character, Selfishness is the most odious and contemptible. An undue love of Self leads to the most monstrous crimes and occasions the greatest misfortunes both in States and Families. As a selfish man will impoverish his family and often bring them to ruin, so a selfish king brings ruin on his people and often plunges them into war.

Example: The selfishness of Achilles, as remarked by the poet Homer, occasioned a thousand woes to the Greeks—*muri Achaiois alge etheke*—(Hom. Il. A. 2). The selfishness of the late Napoleon Bonaparte occasioned innumerable wars in Europe and caused him to perish, himself, in a miserable island—that of Saint Helena in the Atlantic Ocean.

We see by these examples that we are not to consult our own interest and ambition, but that we are to consider the interests of others as well as our own.

George S. Osborne Athene House, 24 April, 1827

“Think of him writing such a hand, and quoting Greek too, at his age,” the delighted mother said. “Oh, William,” she added, holding out her hand to the Major, “what a treasure Heaven has given me in that boy! He is the comfort of my life—and he is the image of—of him that’s gone!”

“Ought I to be angry with her for being faithful to him?” William thought. “Ought I to be jealous of my friend in the grave, or hurt that such a heart as Amelia’s can love only once and for ever? Oh, George, George, how little you knew the prize you had, though.” This sentiment passed rapidly through William’s mind as he was holding Amelia’s hand, whilst the handkerchief was veiling her eyes.

“Dear friend,” she said, pressing the hand which held hers, “how good, how kind you always have been to me! See! Papa is stirring. You will go and see Georgy tomorrow, won’t you?”

“Not to-morrow,” said poor old Dobbin. “I have business.” He did not like to own that he had not as yet been to his parents’ and his dear sister Anne—a remissness for which I am sure every well-regulated person will blame the Major. And presently he took his leave, leaving his address behind him for Jos, against the latter’s arrival. And so the first day was over, and he had seen her.

When he got back to the Slaughters’, the roast fowl was of course cold, in which condition he ate it for supper. And knowing what early hours his family kept, and that it would be needless to disturb their slumbers at so late an hour, it is on record, that Major Dobbin treated himself to half-price at the Haymarket Theatre that evening, where let us hope he enjoyed himself.