

## CHAPTER 7

# IN WHICH THE MAJOR MAKES HIS APPEARANCE



ur acquaintance, Major Arthur Pendennis, arrived in due time at Fair Oaks, after a dreary night passed in the mail-coach, where a stout fellow-passenger, swelling preternaturally with great-coats, had crowded him into a corner, and kept him awake by snoring indecently; where a widow lady, opposite, had not only shut out the fresh air by closing all the windows of the vehicle, but had filled the interior with fumes of Jamaica rum and water, which she sucked perpetually from a bottle in her reticule; where, whenever he caught a brief moment of sleep, the twanging of the horn at the turnpike-gates, or the scuffling of his huge neighbour wedging him closer and closer, or the play of the widow's feet on his own tender toes, speedily woke up the poor gentleman to the horrors and realities of life – a life which has passed away now and become impossible, and only lives in fond memories. Eight miles an hour, for twenty or five-and-twenty hours, a tight mail-coach, a hard seat, a gouty tendency, a perpetual change of coachmen grumbling because you did not fee them enough, a fellow-passenger partial to spirits-and-water, – who has not borne with these evils in the jolly old times? and how could people travel under such difficulties? And yet they did. Night and morning passed, and the Major, with a yellow face, a bristly beard, a wig out of curl, and strong rheumatic griefs shooting through various limbs of his uneasy body, descended at the little lodge-gate at Fair Oaks, where the porteress and gardener's wife reverentially greeted him, and, still more respectfully, Mr. Morgan, his man.

Helen was on the look-out for this expected guest, and saw him from her window. But she did not come forward immediately to greet him. She knew the Major did not like to be seen at a surprise, and required a little preparation before he cared to be visible. Pen, when a boy, had incurred sad disgrace by carrying off from the Major's dressing-table a little morocco box, which it must be confessed contained the Major's

back teeth, which he naturally would leave out of his jaws in a jolting mail-coach, and without which he would not choose to appear. Morgan, his man, made a mystery of mystery of his wigs: curling them in private places: introducing them mysteriously to his master's room; – nor without his head of hair would the Major care to show himself to any member of his family, or any acquaintance. He went to his apartment then and supplied these deficiencies; he groaned, and moaned, and wheezed, and cursed Morgan through his toilet, as an old buck will, who has been up all night with a rheumatism, and has a long duty to perform. And finally being belted, curled, and set straight, he descended upon the drawing-room, with a grave majestic air, such as befitted one who was at once a man of business and a man of fashion.

Pen was not there, however; only Helen, and little Laura sewing at her knees; and to whom he never presented more than a forefinger, as he did on this occasion after saluting his sister-in-law. Laura took the finger trembling and dropped it – and then fled out of the room. Major Pendennis did not want to keep her, or indeed to have her in the house at all, and had his private reason for disapproving of her: which we may mention on some future occasion. Meanwhile Laura disappeared and wandered about the premises seeking for Pen: whom she presently found in the orchard, pacing up and down a walk there in earnest conversation with Mr. Smirke. He was so occupied that he did not hear Laura's clear voice singing out, until Smirke pulled him by the coat and pointed towards her as she came running.

She ran up and put her hand into his. 'Come in, Pen,' she said, 'there's somebody come; uncle Arthur's come.'

'He is, is he?' said Pen, and she felt him grasp her little hand. He looked round at Smirke with uncommon fierceness, as much as to say, I am ready for him or any man. – Mr. Smirke cast up his eyes as usual and heaved a gentle sigh.

'Lead on, Laura,' Pen said, with a half fierce, half comic air – 'Lead on, and say I wait upon my uncle.' But he was laughing in order to hide a great anxiety: and was screwing his courage inwardly to face the ordeal which he knew was now before him.

Pen had taken Smirke into his confidence in the last two days, and after the outbreak attendant on the discovery of Doctor Portman, and during every one of those forty-eight hours which he had passed in Mr. Smirke's society, had done nothing but talk to his tutor about Miss Fotheringay – Miss Emily Fotheringay – Emily, etc., to all which talk Smirke listened without difficulty, for he was in love himself, most anxious in all things to propitiate Pen, and indeed very

much himself enraptured by the personal charms of this goddess, whose like, never having been before at a theatrical representation, he had not beheld until now. Pen's fire and volubility, his hot eloquence and rich poetical tropes and figures, his manly heart, kind, ardent, and hopeful, refusing to see any defects in the person he loved, any difficulties in their position that he might not overcome, had half convinced Mr. Smirke that the arrangement proposed by Mr. Pen was a very feasible and prudent one, and that it would be a great comfort to have Emily settled at Fair Oaks, Captain Costigan in the yellow room, established for life there, and Pen married at eighteen.

And it is a fact that in these two days the boy had almost talked over his mother, too; had parried all her objections one after another with that indignant good sense which is often the perfection of absurdity; and had brought her almost to acquiesce in the belief that if the marriage was doomed in heaven, why doomed it was – that if the young woman was a good person, it was all that she for her part had to ask; and rather to dread the arrival of the guardian uncle who she foresaw would regard Mr. Pen's marriage in a manner very different to that simple, romantic, honest, and utterly absurd way in which the widow was already disposed to look at questions of this sort. Helen Pendennis was a country-bred woman, and the book of life, as she interpreted it, told her a different story to that page which is read in cities. It pleased her (with that dismal pleasure which the idea of sacrificing themselves gives to certain women) to think of the day when she would give up all to Pen, and he should bring his wife home, and she would surrender the keys and the best bedroom, and go and sit at the side of the table, and see him happy. What did she want in life, but to see the lad prosper? As an empress certainly was not too good for him, and would be honoured by becoming Mrs. Pen; so if he selected humble Esther instead of Queen Vashti, she would be content with his lordship's choice. Never mind how lowly or poor the person might be who was to enjoy that prodigious honour, Mrs. Pendennis was willing to bow before her and welcome her, and yield her up the first place. But an actress – a mature woman, who had long ceased blushing except with rouge, as she stood under the eager glances of thousands of eyes – an illiterate and ill-bred person, very likely, who must have lived with light associates, and have heard doubtful conversation – Oh! it was hard that such a one should be chosen, and that the matron should be deposed to give place to such a Sultana.

All these doubts the widow laid before Pen during the two days which had of necessity to elapse ere the uncle came down; but he met

them with that happy frankness and ease which a young gentleman exhibits at his time of life, and routed his mother's objections with infinite satisfaction to himself. Miss Costigan was a paragon of virtue and delicacy; she was as sensitive as the most timid maiden; she was as pure as the unsullied snow; she had the finest manners, the most graceful wit and genius, the most charming refinement and justness of appreciation in all matters of taste; she had the most admirable temper and devotion to her father, a good old gentleman of high family and fallen fortunes, who had lived, however, with the best society in Europe: he was in no hurry, and could afford to wait any time, – till he was one-and-twenty. But he felt (and here his face assumed an awful and harrowing solemnity) that he was engaged in the one only passion of his life, and that DEATH alone could close it.

Helen told him, with a sad smile and shake of the head, that people survived these passions, and as for long engagements contracted between very young men and old women – she knew an instance in her own family – Laura's poor father was an instance – how fatal they were.

Mr. Pen, however, was resolved that death must be his doom in case of disappointment, and rather than this – rather than baulk him, in fact – this lady would have submitted to any sacrifice or personal pain, and would have gone down on her knees and have kissed the feet of a Hottentot daughter-in-law.

Arthur knew his power over the widow, and the young tyrant was touched whilst he exercised it. In those two days he brought her almost into submission, and patronised her very kindly; and he passed one evening with the lovely pie-maker at Chatteris, in which he bragged of his influence over his mother; and he spent the other night in composing a most flaming and conceited copy of verses to his divinity, in which he vowed, like Montrose, that he would make her famous with his sword and glorious by his pen, and that he would love her as no mortal woman had been adored since the creation of womankind.

It was on that night, long after midnight, that wakeful Helen, passing stealthily by her son's door, saw a light streaming through the chink of the door into the dark passage, and heard Pen tossing and tumbling, and mumbling verses in his bed. She waited outside for a while, anxiously listening to him. In infantile fevers and early boyish illnesses, many a night before, the kind soul had so kept watch. She turned the lock very softly now, and went in so gently, that Pen for a moment did not see her. His face was turned from her. His papers on his desk were scattered about, and more were lying on the bed round

him. He was biting a pencil and thinking of rhymes and all sorts of follies and passions. He was Hamlet jumping into Ophelia's grave: he was the Stranger taking Mrs. Haller to his arms, beautiful Mrs. Haller, with the raven ringlets falling over her shoulders. Despair and Byron, Thomas Moore and all the Loves of the Angels, Waller and Herrick, Béranger and all the love-songs he had ever read, were working and seething in this young gentleman's mind, and he was at the very height and paroxysm of the imaginative frenzy when his mother found him.

'Arthur,' said the mother's soft silver voice: and he started up and turned round. He clutched some of the papers and pushed them under the pillow.

'Why don't you go to sleep, my dear?' she said, with a sweet tender smile, and sate down on the bed and took one of his hot hands.

Pen looked at her wildly for an instant – 'I couldn't sleep,' he said – 'I – I was – I was writing.' – And hereupon he flung his arms round her neck and said, 'O mother! I love her, I love her!' – How could such a kind soul as that help soothing and pitying him? The gentle creature did her best: and thought with a strange wonderment and tenderness that it was only yesterday that he was a child in that bed; and how she used to come and say her prayers over it before he woke upon holiday mornings.

They were very grand verses, no doubt, although Miss Fotheringay did not understand them; but old Cos, with a wink and a knowing finger on his nose, said, 'Put them up with th' hother letthers, Milly darling. Poldoody's pomes was nothing to this.' So Milly locked up the manuscripts.

When then the Major, being dressed and presentable, presented himself to Mrs. Pendennis, he found in the course of ten minutes' colloquy that the poor widow was not merely distressed at the idea of the marriage contemplated by Pen, but actually more distressed at thinking that the boy himself was unhappy about it, and that his uncle and he should have any violent altercation on the subject. She besought Major Pendennis to be very gentle with Arthur: 'He has a very high spirit, and will not brook unkind words,' she hinted. 'Dr. Portman spoke to him rather roughly – and I must own unjustly, the other night – for my dearest boy's honour is as high as any mother can desire – but Pen's answer quite frightened me, it was so indignant. Recollect he is a man now; and be very – very cautious,' said the widow, laying a fair long hand on the Major's sleeve.

He took it up, kissed it gallantly and looked in her alarmed face with

wonder, and a scorn which he was too polite to show. ‘*Bon Dieu!*’ thought the old negotiator, ‘the boy has actually talked the woman round, and she’d get him a wife as she would a toy if Master cried for it. Why are there no such things as *lettres-de-cachet* – and a Bastille for young fellows of family?’ The Major lived in such good company that he might be excused for feeling like an Earl. – He kissed the widow’s timid hand, pressed it in both his, and laid it down on the table with one of his own over it, as he smiled and looked her in the face.

‘Confess,’ said he, ‘now, that you are thinking how you possibly can make it up to your conscience to let the boy have his own way.’

She blushed and was moved in the usual manner of females. ‘I am thinking that he is very unhappy – and I am too –’

‘To contradict him or to let him have his own wish?’ asked the other; and added, with great comfort to his inward self, ‘I’m d—d if he shall.’

‘To think that he should have formed so foolish and cruel and fatal an attachment,’ the widow said, ‘which can but end in pain whatever be the issue.’

‘The issue shan’t be marriage, my dear sister,’ the Major said resolutely. ‘We’re not going to have a Pendennis, the head of the house, marry a strolling mountebank from a booth. No, no, we won’t marry into Greenwich Fair, ma’am.’

‘If the match is broken suddenly off,’ the widow interposed, ‘I don’t know what may be the consequence. I know Arthur’s ardent temper, the intensity of his affections, the agony of his pleasures and disappointments, and I tremble at this one if it must be. Indeed, indeed, it must not come on him too suddenly.’

‘My dear madam,’ the Major said, with an air of the deepest commiseration, ‘I’ve no doubt Arthur will have to suffer confoundedly before he gets over the little disappointment. But is he, think you, the only person who has been so rendered miserable?’

‘No, indeed,’ said Helen, holding down her eyes. She was thinking of her own case, and was at that moment seventeen again, and most miserable.

‘I, myself,’ whispered her brother-in-law, ‘have undergone a disappointment in early life. A young woman with fifteen thousand pounds, niece to an Earl – most accomplished creature – a third of her money would have run up my promotion in no time, and I should have been a lieutenant-colonel at thirty: but it might not be. I was but a penniless lieutenant: her parents interfered: and I embarked for India, where I had the honour of being secretary to Lord Buckley,

when Commander-in-Chief – without her. What happened? We returned our letters, sent back our locks of hair (the Major here passed his fingers through his wig), we suffered – but we recovered. She is now a baronet's wife with thirteen grown-up children; altered, it is true, in person; but her daughters remind me of what she was, and the third is to be presented early next week.'

Helen did not answer. She was still thinking of old times. I suppose if one lives to be a hundred: there are certain passages of one's early life whereof the recollection will always carry us back to youth again, and that Helen was thinking of one of these.

'Look at my own brother, my dear creature,' the Major continued gallantly: 'he himself, you know, had a little disappointment when he started in the – the medical profession – an eligible opportunity presented itself. Miss Balls, I remember the name, was daughter of an apoth – a practitioner in very large practice; my brother had very nearly succeeded in his suit. – But difficulties arose: disappointments supervened, and – and I am sure he had no reason to regret the disappointment, which gave him this hand,' said the Major, and he once more politely pressed Helen's fingers.

'Those marriages between people of such different rank and age,' said Helen, 'are sad things. I have known them produce a great deal of unhappiness. – Laura's father, my cousin, who – who was brought up with me' – she added, in a low voice, 'was an instance of that.'

'Most injudicious,' cut in the Major. 'I don't know anything more painful than for a man to marry his superior in age or his inferior in station. Fancy marrying a woman of low rank of life, and having your house filled with her confounded tag-rag-and-bobtail relations! Fancy your wife attached to a mother who dropped her *h*'s, or called Maria Marire! How are you to introduce her into society? My dear Mrs. Pendennis, I will name no names, but in the very best circles of London society I have seen men suffering the most excruciating agony, I have known them to be cut, to be lost utterly, from the vulgarity of their wives' connections. What did Lady Snapperton do last year at her *déjeuner dansant* after the Bohemian Ball? She told Lord Brouncker that he might bring his daughters or send them with a proper chaperon, but that she would not receive Lady Brouncker, who was a druggist's daughter, or some such thing, and as Tom Wagg remarked of her, never wanted medicine certainly, for she never had an *h* in her life. Good Ged, what would have been the trifling pang of a separation in the first instance to the enduring infliction of a constant misalliance and intercourse with low people?'

‘What, indeed!’ said Helen, dimly disposed towards laughter, but yet checking the inclination, because she remembered in what prodigious respect her deceased husband held Major Pendennis and his stories of the great world.

‘Then this fatal woman is ten years older than that silly young scapegrace of an Arthur. What happens in such cases, my dear creature? I don’t mind telling you, now we are alone, that in the highest state of society, misery, undeviating misery, is the result. Look at Lord Clodworthy come into a room with his wife – why, good Ged, she looks like Clodworthy’s mother. What’s the case between Lord and Lady Willowbank, whose love match was notorious? He has already cut her down twice when she has hanged herself out of jealousy for Mademoiselle de Sainte Cunegonde, the dancer; and mark my words, good Ged, one day he’ll *not* cut the old woman down. No, my dear madam, you are not in the world, but I am: you are a little romantic and sentimental (you know you are – women with those large beautiful eyes always are); you must leave this matter to my experience. Marry this woman! Marry at eighteen an actress of thirty – bah bah! – I would as soon he sent into the kitchen and married the cook.’

‘I know the evils of premature engagements,’ sighed out Helen: and as she has made this allusion no less than thrice in the course of the above conversation, and seems to be so oppressed with the notion of long engagements and unequal marriages, and as the circumstance we have to relate will explain what perhaps some persons are anxious to know, namely who little Laura is, who has appeared more than once before us, it will be as well to clear up these points in another chapter.