

31

Ogdensburg and the Florentine Fancy

THE STORY THAT THE PEOPLE OF THE NORTH COUNTRY still tell about the house at Ogdensburg begins over a hundred years ago in the Italian city of Florence with the meeting of a boy and girl at a ball. That she was Ameriga, lineal descendant of Amerigo Vespucci, or that he was Ferdinand, Duc d'Orléans, son of King Louis-Philippe of France, meant little to either of them. But that they loved each other at first sight meant a great deal. A balcony, a garden, the silvered Arno slowly rolling into shadow as the moon dropped behind the hills, filled their hearts, as they have filled other hearts, and the daughter of the great house of the explorer escaped one night from her disapproving family and joyfully went to live in Paris with the son of the King.

Ferdinand had meant to marry Ameriga but the intervention of his father prohibited that. He had promised to

Ogdensburg and the Florentine Fancy

love her always but it was not long before he had tired of her. When their love was at an end Ameriga could not bear the thought of a return to the place of its beginning. And so, with the courage of her exploring ancestor, she set out for the country which had honored him by taking his name. The settlement Duke Ferdinand had given her at their parting was almost gone; at home in Florence her family lived meagerly on a pension granted by Italy out of reverence for Amerigo; only the United States, land of opportunity, offered her hope of a happy existence.

At first the country proved itself worthy of her trust. After the social crudities of the administration of Andrew Jackson, Washingtonians were engrossed in creating a Capital society. Ameriga Vespucci lent it élan. She had moved in the company of princes and the country's snobs took her to their cold hearts. The courtly little Dutch President, Van Buren, found such obvious joy in her company that some even suspected his widower's heart had at last been touched. Daniel Webster, the senator of the Jovian brow and golden voice, found her charming. And Nathaniel Parker Willis, Beau Brummell of the Knickerbocker poets, darling of the nation's literary world, wrote:

TO AMERIGA VESPUCCI:

Blest was thy ancestor with a deathless fame
 When to this western world he gave his name;
 But far more blessed, methinks, that man would be,
 Fair scion! who might give his name to thee.

The life of a society belle in Washington was not inexpensive, however, and Ameriga knew that she must soon turn her popularity to some account. And so with infinite pains she drew up in her own handwriting and her own

Listen for a Lonesome Drum

quaint expression a petition to the United States Senate that it allow her to become a citizen and, in recognition of the deeds of her illustrious forefather after whom its country had been named, that it grant her lands on which she might live.

Senator Benton, of New York presented the bill to the Senate and it was at once referred to the Committee on Public Lands. And then, though the senators looked with kindled gallantry on the petite, olive face with its imploring dark eyes gazing down on them from the balcony, the Committee found no precedent for granting the request and refused to recommend it.

The lovely Florentine was heartbroken. The friendly senators, looking on her tears with guilty embarrassment, dug into their pockets and made up a goodly sum which they tactfully presented not as charity but as their contribution to the memory of one of the world's great explorers. Ameriga gratefully received it and returned to Paris where she lived with her sister, the Vicomtesse Solen.

But her Washington friends did not forget her. The next two years saw great changes in American political life. Van Buren was defeated. Harrison was elected, only to die, and Tyler had become President. Letters came to Ameriga saying that with the new administration there was a chance that her hopes might be realized. Hastily she packed and took ship.

Her new campaign could not have begun more auspiciously nor ended more disastrously. For on the evening of the very day of her arrival in Boston the city celebrated with a gorgeous ball the visit of the Prince de Joinville, younger brother of the Duc d'Orléans. Clad in a gown the color of pomegranates, its long train sweeping stately behind her,

Ogdensburg and the Florentine Fancy

her black hair falling in two long braids from under her red, gold-embroidered Greek toque, a heavy gold cord about her waist, Ameriga Vespucci entered the ballroom at Faneuil Hall on the arm of the Prince himself. Boston saw and worshiped, and all might have gone well with her and her plans had not a guest recognized her as the former mistress of the Prince's brother.

The next morning Ameriga was friendless, penniless, hopeless. There could be no grant from the Senate now, no generous collection in the name of her ancestor. America had turned from her in the name of righteousness and virtue. Of her old friends who had sought her society as a priceless favor only one came to her—John Van Buren, lovable, spendthrift, hard-drinking "Prince John," son of the former President of the United States—and he came to bargain.

Ameriga was too weary, too broken to haggle long. Soon she was once more a mistress—this time of an American prince who had outgrown his princehood and did not know it. Helplessly she traveled about with her restless lover, watching over him while he drank himself into insensibility, putting him to bed afterwards.

And now at long last the house at Ogdensburg shadows this story. For on a winter journey above Albany into Jefferson County, John Van Buren and Ameriga met George Parish, rich merchant of the north country. In the Brick Hotel at Evans Mills, popular legend goes, John, a little drunk, challenged Mr. Parish to a game of poker. When John's gold was gone he put up for a final hand his last possession against all that he had lost—and lost her, too.

And so George Parish drove his sleigh north to Ogdens-

Listen for a Lonesome Drum

burg and the fur robes that covered him covered Ameriga Vespucci.

The house to which he brought her had been for years the wonder of the St. Lawrence region. It was three stories high, its red brick walls towering above the humbler dwellings of the town, and it stood in the center of an estate that was enclosed by a stone wall, eight feet high. George Parish's uncle, David Parish, a Belgian banker, had had it built soon after the end of the eighteenth century. He had ordered the woodwork made in Rouen in France and had sent the artisans who created it to Ogdensburg to install it. Joseph Rosseel, his agent, had helped plan and execute the house, the stables, the courts paved with cobblestones, the gardens and the gardener's lodge, the circular tanbark track on which grooms exercised the horses.

The people of Ogdensburg soon heard the whispers that went around. And they proved themselves no less respectable and cruel than the Bostonians. A "fancy lady" could not come to live among them with impunity, they said. But Ameriga was protected now—by the high fortress of the house and the eight-foot wall about it. She chose not to subject herself to the snubs of her neighbors but to live within the circumscribed world George Parish had provided for her. She sought no friends in the north country—but she lived happily on the big estate, surrounded by comforts few of her neighbors could afford. Parish ordered whatever adornment she desired from Albany, from New York, from Paris. Her horses and her coaches were all that a feminine heart could desire. The fare provided by her chef was a treat for an epicure, and male epicures were not long in seeking her table. Though the wives of the town sat at home in a mood of flinty resentment, their husbands must for

Ogdensburg and the Florentine Fancy

economic reasons if no other do business with Parish and be sufficiently "men of the world" to sup with him in his home. So eager gentlemen bent forward to catch the words of their clever, beautiful Italian hostess while George Parish smiled from his end of the long table.

Ameriga was living in a cosmopolitan world of gentlemen—she was the beloved of its richest and most distinguished citizen—and she was happier than she had been since those foolish days when, for a brief moment, she had believed she would be la Duchesse d'Orléans. Sitting in her sunny garden through whose gateway she could see the wide blue waters of the St. Lawrence, she could ignore ill-bred children running past and crying "fancy lady" with excitement and contempt in their shrill voices. Boats came into sight and vanished beyond far horizons, but the blood of the old explorer no longer complained within her. She was content, content for twenty years of living in her luxurious house with her kind, prospering lover.

It ended with merciful suddenness. She was getting to be an old lady, a little stout, a little wrinkled, but life was serene and secure. Then George Parish told her he must return to his lands in Europe, he was giving up his holdings in America—and her. She met his decision bravely, thanked him for his settlement of three thousand dollars a year, told him she would go again to live with her sister the Vicomtesse.

And after he had gone away she sent out the invitations for the only party the big house knew during the score of years she was its hostess. They went to the children of Ogdensburg and they were accepted—though many a serious conference preceded the parents' anxiously awaited decisions.

Listen for a Lonesome Drum

Children too old to need constant care found themselves unexpectedly accompanied on that sunlit day by mothers quite as excited as they at the opportunity of seeing what lay behind the eight-foot wall. Besides the wonder of the grounds themselves, there were floral arches, Japanese lanterns and, especially imported from New York, a magician. Most impressive of all were the oranges served among the refreshments—tropic fruit that most of the guests had never seen before. The prisoner of the Parish house was so happy in the joy of the children that the good people who had long been her jailers were at last moved to friendly tolerance. A kindly minister spoke their gratitude—and the party was over.

The next day Ameriga left Ogdensburg on her lonely journey back to France. In Paris she was welcomed by her sister and she lived peacefully there, though her letters show that her memories tortured her, until in a few years she died.

The Parish house, its interior remodeled elegantly in oak after the elaborate manner of the eighteen-nineties, still stands. It is known to Ogdensburg and visiting tourists as the Remington Art Memorial and it houses a collection of the paintings and sculpture of Western subjects by the late Frederic Remington, one of America's most popular artists at the turn of the century. Just a few of Ameriga's lovely possessions—her portable writing desk exquisite with inlay and some of the dainty articles of her toilet—are kept in the room that was hers. If in some ghostly state she has found a way to return across the ocean to her American home, I know she must be puzzled by all the rearing bronze bronchos, and the paintings of cowboys galloping over the endless yellow desert, but I am quite sure she is not afraid.