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VANITY FAIR

by

W. M. Thackeray

I

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VANITY FAIR

A NOVEL WITHOUT A HERO

By

William Makepeace Thackeray

Edited, with an Introduction by

George Saintsbury

With illustrations

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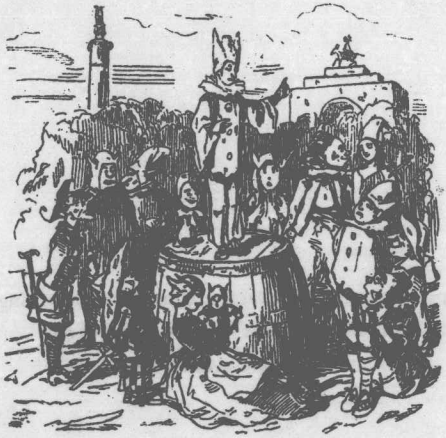

VANITY FAIR:

PEN AND PENCIL SKETCHES OF ENGLISH SOCIETY.

BY W. M. THACKERAY,

Author of "The Irish Sketch Book:" "Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo:" of "Jeames's Diary" and the "Snob Papers" in Punch: &c. &c.

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INTRODUCTION

In this and the following Introductions we have no longer to arrange, and comment upon, a mosaic of productions smaller and larger, better or worse, but heterogeneous, except as pervaded by the spirit of their author. Nor have we to contemplate any longer the spectacle of that good man struggling with adversity—a spectacle which may be legitimately attractive to gods, but which has very little legitimate attraction for fellow men. Each volume will now contain either, as in the case of most, a single and substantial masterpiece, or, as in one or two, a group of pieces the worst of which could not have been written except by a master. And although *Vanity Fair*, the first of them, did not immediately receive the welcome it deserved—though it needed (or is said to have needed) a friendly shove from Hayward to clear it of the launching-ways, a sisterly haul from the 'little tug' *Mrs. Perkins's Ball* to get it out of the shallows—yet before long it had its share at last of triumph and of gale.

There are some odd chronological coincidences about it. Not only was Thackeray just at 'the middle of the career of our life' when the first number appeared on New Year's Day, 1847, but, still more curiously, he had reached almost the exact centre of his own much shorter career of literature. Between the *Snob* and *Vanity Fair* almost exactly the same space of years passed as between *Vanity Fair* and the last *Roundabout* or chapter of *Denis Duval*. His experiences were to be happier in the second period than in the first. The gods showed themselves at last *not* helpless in the fight with stupidity. But that fight never entirely

ceased: and it was waged pretty sharply (and for some time, as has been noticed, even dubiously) in reference to *Vanity Fair* itself.

Stupidity was still not entirely without excuse, though certainly without justification. There is perhaps no book of Thackeray's which gains more than *Vanity Fair*, in respect of intelligent enjoyment, by being read in its proper chronological order. The later books gain in this way because there is a certain chronological order in their actual *matter*—if you read, for the first time, the *Esmond-Virginians* pair, or the *Pendennis-Newcomes-Philip* trio, out of order, you lose a good deal of appreciation of plot and character, and may even, at times, be somewhat puzzled materially. But in manner, though there is some development, there is little real difference between *Pendennis* and *Denis Duval*. The author is in almost every sense of the phrase 'at home'—he has conquered his own house and is living at ease in it. With *Vanity Fair* this is not quite the case—reasons and details may be given presently.

But the advances and advantages in respect of all his former work are immense and unmistakable. In the first place he has at last given himself—or has been given—proper scope and scale. In the second, he has at last discarded the conditioning limitations which (one hardly knows whether by choice or chance or compulsion) have affected his earlier work. The suspicious reader is no longer approached with a 'mere burlesque' as in *Yellowplush* and *Gahagan* and so many of their successors; with enigmatic transformations of the historical novel like *Catherine* and *Barry Lyndon*; with apparently wilful preference of more or less 'low' life as in the *Shabby Genteel Story* and *The Hoggarty Diamond*. Misspelling and other devices of the kind, if they do not disappear, are 'put in their proper place'. And instead of all this miscellaneous and incomplete work which, instinct with genius as much if not all

of it was, presented itself with all the disadvantages of ephemeral and apparently hand-to-mouth circumstance, people had put before them almost exactly the Aristotelian prescription—a work 'serious, entire, and of a certain magnitude', dealing, if not with their own time and society, with a time and society which were hardly of yesterday to many of them—telling a connected and dramatically arranged story—vivid in manners and character—with incident moreover both of the lighter and the graver kind—distinguished too from the merely usual novel to the requirements of which it had so far condescended, by a coherent satiric purpose, of the fulfilment of which the author had already given proofs of being a master. 'The brew may have been too bitter' (as he said afterwards in his own way) for some: but none could call it mawkish, or merely sour, or merely 'small'. As for construction, *Vanity Fair* is nearly the best of all its author's works—in fact it is almost the only one in which any attention is paid to construction at all. In scheme, as apart from details, it is difficult to remember any other author, except perhaps Defoe, who, having written so long and so much, suddenly made such a new and such an ambitious 'entry' in literary competition, and not merely in the particular department of novel-writing.

In that department, however, the novelty, if not so absolute as that of *Robinson Crusoe*, was of a higher strain. A succession of great novelists from Richardson onwards had been endeavouring to bring the novel proper—the prose fiction which depends upon ordinary life and character only—into complete being. Fielding had very nearly done it: but what was ordinary life in his time had ceased to be ordinary. Miss Austen had quite done it: but she had deliberately restricted her plan. In the thirty years between her death and the appearance of *Vanity Fair* attempts at it had multiplied enormously in number: but the magnificent success of Scott in another line had drawn off the

main body of attention and attempt—to no great profit. The really distinguished novels since Scott had been sports of eccentric talent like Peacock's; specialist studies like Marryat's; medleys of genius and failure of genius like Bulwer's and Disraeli's; brilliant but fantastic, and not poetically fantastic, nondescripts like the work of Dickens.

After, or rather amid all this chase of rather wandering fires, there came forward once more, 'the proper study of mankind,' unerringly conducted as such, but also serving as occasion for consummate work in art. The old, old contrast of substance and shadow is almost the only one for Thackeray's figures and those of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries. In comparison (though by no means always positively) they walk and act while the others flit and gesticulate; they speak with the voice *μερόπων ἀνθρώπων* while the others squeak and gibber; they live and move and have being while the others dance the dance of puppets and execute the manœuvres of *ombres chinoises*. It is almost impossible to estimate the solidity and reality of Thackeray's characters in the stage he had now reached, except by careful observation of chronology. As always—because a writer of this kind is rather the first articulate prophet of a new revelation than its monopolist—something of the same quality was soon diffused. But he was the first prophet: and to this day he is the greatest.

The book indeed is not faultless. It is said to have been begun as early as 1841: but it was interrupted, probably, by the trouble of his wife's illness. The interruption may have something to do with a certain drag at one place of the story: but it is pretty certain that Thackeray had not, five years earlier, attained to the art and craft he possessed in 1846. Of the spirit in which he wrote it we have a frank and informing confession to his mother. 'Don't you see how odious all the people are in the book with the exception of Dobbin? . . . What I want is to make a set of people living without God in the world (only that

is a cant phrase).' Now this confession—as probably most confessions are unintentionally as well as intentionally—is a self-accusation. No set of people—probably no person, though certainly there are some who give us pause—is wholly 'odious'. You can't 'leave out the sunshine'—fortunately—without making your world untrue. And *Vanity Fair* is (without any contradiction to what has been said above) a little untrue in places. Even Dobbin and Briggs (whom he elsewhere adds to this exception) are only allowed not to be odious at the price of being more than a little idiotic. Moreover Thackeray here fell into a mistake which only Shakespeare has avoided wholly—but which Fielding, who fell into it sometimes as in the case of Blifil, has avoided in that of Jonathan Wild and others. He took sides against his characters—and especially against Becky. Whether Becky really poisoned Jos (as is suggested more than once and almost affirmed in the grim and dreadful picture of her as 'Clytemnestra again', which is one of his best compositions in line) is not certain: and his explanatory letter to the Duke of Devonshire is rather against it.[1] One's impression is that Becky knew tricks a good deal better than that, and less dangerous. But putting this aside, he is certainly not fair on Becky—he does not even try to be fair as he did, later, on Barnes Newcome. Becky is very great, but she is ill-treated: the potter has made the pot too clearly to dishonour. Yet how great she is! Compare her with Valérie Marneffe, her sister certainly in a sense, her mother perhaps—and her true greatness will be seen. Valérie is not, and never could have been, anything but a courtesan of the worst but not the most distinguished kind—Becky has in her the makings not only, as she pathetically observes, of a quite respectable person—but of all manner of persons,

[1] One story is that somebody once asked him the question, and received after an interval the natural answer, given with a laugh and a puff of smoke, 'I don't know.'

bad and good. *Mulier est—nihil muliebre ab illa alienum est:* though her cruel creator has chosen to show her only, or mainly, in unpleasant relations. Even he has made one fond of her in certain situations—in her partial victory over the green chili, in her breaking-down after the failure with Jos and the too late offer of Sir Pitt, in her general way of being *bonne diablesse*, and even *bonne princesse*, so far as she has the chance. If Sultan Mourad after all his impalings, &c., was saved by the *écorché* pig which he moved into the shade, may not the communication of George Osborne's letter to Amelia and the making of two fools happy, outweigh some at least of Becky's little weaknesses? Say she did it partly from vanity: perhaps the Sultan saved himself partly from whim. Anyhow she is great and of the greatest—except her other sister Beatrix, there is no woman so great in English literature out of Shakespeare. And her creator *is* hard on her.

Whether he is also hard on Amelia is less easy to say. Amelia is a fool by the law of her nature: and a fool is capable of anything. But Dobbin need not have been made such a fool as he is. Parson Adams is as simple: but *he* is not a fool at all. It is evident that at this time Thackeray had not finally got rid of the habit of *charge*—of exaggeration and caricature—which he had cherished so long. It appears least in Rawdon Crawley who, if not respectable, is *verisimilar* from beginning to end—a perfectly marvellous piece of verisimilitude, neither rouged nor blackened. Of the famous studies, or supposed studies, of real life in public or private characters one must say a little more. Of late the tendency has been rather to exaggerate their coincidence with their originals. One of the first published stories on the subject—and the first that the present writer ever read—a story adopted by Lady Ritchie—is Kingsley's in *Yeast* (published 1849). It asserts that Thackeray (who is not mentioned by name) being reproached with having made 'the baronet'

(Sir Pitt Crawley) unnatural, laughed and said that he was 'almost the only exact portrait in the whole book'. (The original is sometimes said to have been Lord Rolle, the owner of Stevenstone and Bicton in Devonshire, of whose eccentricities Thackeray may have heard in his Larkbeare days.[1]) It will be observed that the limitation has an important bearing on the much more common identifications of Lord Steyne with Lord Hertford, of Wenham with Croker, &c., though no doubt there was a certain indebtedness, as in the case of Wagg to Theodore Hook. The model of Dobbin referred to is given as Archdeacon Allen, Thackeray's schoolfellow, while he himself assigned portions of Amelia to his mother, his wife and Mrs. Brookfield. The foolishest parts certainly did not belong to the third lady: let us hope they did not to the two others. But it is well to say at once, in reference both to this and to all the other books, that it is a great mistake to lay too much stress on these things. Sir Leslie Stephen has already given a caution on the subject: but it needs emphasizing, for the writer has read a German monograph on Thackeray in which almost the entire biography is laboriously, and with the utmost seriousness, built up out of the details of his novels. Now not merely is this unwarranted and unwarrantable, but it involves a complete and disastrous misapprehension of Thackeray's art and genius.[2] Only perhaps in his very earliest period and in his immature

[1] Becky herself appears to have had a prosperous prototype. Lady Ritchie saw her once alive, fascinating, and, as one would expect, apparently not in the least angry with the author of her second being.

[2] He, who knew his *Spectator* by heart, must have read, and might have taken for motto, Addison's statement of his own practice in No. 262. 'When I draw any faulty character . . . I take care to dash it with such particular circumstances as may prevent all ill-natured applications.' Only he would have known very well, as doubtless did Addison, that you cannot 'prevent' them. You can only make them unjustifiable.

work is he guilty—if even there—of this 'lowest imitation', —this mere carrying off of whole figures from the pageant of life, and botching them into the tapestry of literature. That a very large number of his traits, incidents, individual details are taken from, or suggested by, actuality, there need be no doubt—it is in fact the secret and reason of his unsurpassed truth to life itself. But these things are all passed through the alembic or the loom of art—redistilled or rewoven into original and independent composition. The mere fact—if in any case it be a fact—that this or that point in the behaviour or history of a personage may have, as the children say, 'really happened' will suffice to suggest, in intelligent minds, a strong suspicion that the next did *not* happen. There are, let it be laid down, two classes of books that can be brought under this category. There are the books which depend for their interest on the fact that their characters *have been* live men and women; and those which depend for it on the fact that they *are* live men and women. Thackeray's books belong to the second.

Those other vivifying arts of his which have been many times sketched in general, appear to the full in *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray does not 'set' his scenes and situations with the minute touches of detail as to furniture and the like, which Dickens borrowed from Smollett and from Scott, and made more specially his province. But he has a setting of his own which places things and persons quite firmly in the reader's conception: and he employs it here from the Academy for young ladies in Chiswick Mall to his final (or almost final) scenes at Pumpernickel. It is, however, perhaps not in actual description of any kind that his life-giving and individualizing touch most fully consists. It is in queer nondescript devices—though 'device' is a bad word for things that come so naturally—tricks of names, humorous or fantastic asides—indescribable confidences as it were between himself and his reader, which establish intimate relations. In particular his

extraordinary 'science of names' has rightly attracted attention. Take for instance the quaint whimsy (arising probably from the old slang of 'quite the *cheese*') of the catalogue of Becky's guests 'the Duchess Dowager of Stilton, Duc de la Gruyère, Marchioness of Cheshire, Marchese Alessandro Strachino, Comte de Brie, Baron Schapsuger and [most whimsical of all] Chevalier *Tosti*'. And it is very important to notice that this is not done in burlesque fashion—even to the extent in which he himself would have done it earlier. There is no head-over-heels—no tongue-in-cheek even. The passage—or rather the clause—forms part of a perfectly serious paragraph; the author takes not the slightest trouble to draw attention to it; in fact he glides off into more quietly humorous nomenclature of the same kind, leaving this also unadvertised—unheralded by so much as a 'hem' or a wink to invite admiration. Moreover these names (compare the grimmer list of the Marquis of Steyne's titles) are in no respect grotesque or impossible. 'Baron Pitchley and Grillsby' Why not? Why not 'Pitchley' if 'Pytchley'? Why not 'Grillsby' if 'Grimsby'?

It is with these subtle condiments of humour and suggestion that the author seasons his whole book. Whether it has—or has not, 'the best story' as he himself thought—he was quite right as to the excellence of the title. In the steady maintenance of the point of view of that title—so admirably defined and described in the Preface—its greatest merit as a book, from the severe old critical standpoint, perhaps consists. Its greatest claim to admiration, with some at least, is in the lavish and masterly presentation of character—too uniformly sombre-tinted it may be, but faultlessly drawn—from the triumph of Becky downwards. But its greatest attraction of all is in the constant procession-pageant of scenes and incidents which serve to bring out these characters, and in the wonderful dexterity and variety of presentation and style—

one or two only of the devices of which have just been pointed out. From the older review-point, perhaps, one objection, and not a light or easily removed one, may be brought against a certain stagnation in the narrative between Waterloo and Becky's last stage of triumph and fall. The author does not quite take the gap flying (as his business would have allowed him to do), nor does he fill it sufficiently: and though Becky's career is of the highest interest, its stages are neither very probably nor at all fully made out: while the sordid sufferings of the Sedleys and the dreary prosperity of the Osbornes are rather too like the class of situations which Mr. Arnold stigmatized, in a famous passage, at the expense of his own work. ¿But even here the *manner* is great. So also the Devil's Advocate may say, with some truth, that in the opening or ante-Waterloo part, which occupies half the book, the action somewhat drags, and that, though the Amelia and Becky stories are ingeniously enough intertwisted, the transitions from one to the other, and even some of the scenes themselves, do not 'go off trippingly' as Captain Clutterbuck says. Still, once more, the manner saves everything: and so it does in the latest division of the book which succeeds the discovery of Becky's misdoings.

But there is another part where, though the manner is more triumphant than ever, the matter partakes the triumph and is fully worthy of its less unequal partner. From the beginning of Chapter xliv, when Sir Pitt *fils* comes to stay in Curzon Street, to the great catastrophe itself, the artist is thoroughly inspired, the rider has settled to the race, and is getting every possible effort out of the horse. Not merely is it all good, but there is in it that steady *crescendo* of expectation and satisfaction which only occurs at the supreme moments of life and of literature. The catastrophe itself is simply beyond praise—it is one of the greatest things in English: but it is perfectly led up to. For, as in other uncertain and accidental matri-

monies, when matter and manner do go thoroughly together, then all is indeed well. In these hundred pages—they come to about that in closely printed editions—there is not a line, not a phrase that is weak or wrong. There is nothing like them anywhere—one may know one's Balzac pretty well and look in vain for their equal in him, while anywhere else it is simply vain even to look. The variety, the intensity, the cool equal command, are not only unmatched, they are unmatchable in novel-literature: and the circumstances preclude their being matched in any other. Most novelists stray into fields where they are strangers, and get hedged or ditched: some keep to known but limited ground and are monotonous. Thackeray here is κύδεϊ γαίων. He cannot go wrong. The very Sedley-Osborne scenes throw up what is now the main plot—the 'splendour and misery' of Becky—like the Porter scene in *Macbeth* or the Fool and Edgar in *Lear*. The visit to Queen's Crawley; the irruption of Becky into the 'highest circles'; her double management of Sir Pitt and Lord Steyne; the charade; the plot; its defeat by Lady Jane's innocent agency; the great catastrophe itself; the almost greater negotiations about the duel; the comic justice of the Coventry Island appointment—all these with minor things hardly less wonderful in their way, do the part of the matter. And the manner plays up in unfailing provision of style and atmosphere, of satire, and pathos, and humour, and 'criticism of life'.

Not that one would attempt to belittle a hundred things before—the departure from Minerva House[1]; Becky's residence with the Sedleys and the minor catastrophes (warnings too unheeded) of the curry and the Vauxhall punch; the mighty combat of Figs and Cuff; the intro-

[1] Anthony Trollope surely made an amazing blunder when he objected to Becky's return of the 'Dixonary' as unnatural. She would not have done it later: as she was then it is one of the most 'inevitable' touches in all fiction.

duction of Becky to Sir Pitt and the half chance, half machination, which leads to her union with Rawdon; the plots for Miss Crawley's inheritance; parts (though they are not so thoroughly *concocted*) of the Osborne and Sedley business; the Waterloo scenes. And the Hundred Pages are not ill followed. The restoration of Jos—too little satisfied with his felicity—to English society; the great opening of Chapter lxi which some new and more intelligent Drelincourt will some day insert in a cento-book on Death; the Pumpernickel scenes—others might be mentioned. But the magnificence of the Hundred Pages rather puts out these lesser lights.

Vanity Fair then, is not perhaps Thackeray's best book: but it can hardly be denied that it contains his best long passage. And this is almost a book in itself in quantity as well as in quality, for you might print it so as to fill, and fill handsomely, one of the usual French volumes in yellow paper covers. When he had finished it, he had not finished his work or taken possession of all his property: but he had lodged his 'proofs'; his titles, his diploma-piece—once for all.

NOTE.—In printing the novels the plan here adopted has been to give in the text the latest form printed in Thackeray's own life, and to add the important omitted passages of the original versions at the end of each volume. Some of these, as for instance in *Pendennis*, are too long for footnotes, and awkward in that and other respects for mere bracketing. On the present scheme the reader will not be interrupted in reading, but will have all important matter to turn to if he wants it. By this and the system of bracketing adopted earlier the nearest possible approach is, it is believed, made to that ideally perfect plan of presenting all variants on the page, which is rather suitable for literature that is primarily to be studied than for such as is primarily to be read. It has not been thought necessary to encumber the appendices with insignificant alterations, such as 'a' for 'the', 'the' for 'this', or plural for singular when no grammatical point is involved; or to explain, for instance, that Thackeray in one place wrote 'Sir Peter' for 'Sir Pitt', seduced by the well-known snare of 'Peter' in the line just above, and how he vacillated between 'Johnson' and 'Minerva' as a name for the seminary.

TO

B. W. PROCTER

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