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WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY

VANITY FAIR

Introduction by Mary M. Threapleton

Complete and Unabridged

VANITY FAIR

WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY

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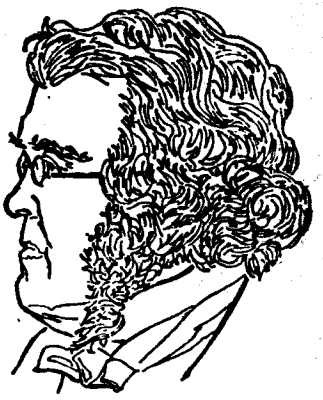

WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY

Introduction

William Makepeace Thackeray

William Makepeace Thackeray was born in India in 1811, the son of the Collector of Calcutta, who died when Thackeray was four. As was the custom, his mother sent him home to England to school. At the age of six, the large-headed, scrawny, intelligent little boy was enrolled in a dismal boarding school at Southampton, where his health broke down under a regime of dampness and poor food. His relatives in England transferred him to a school in London, and later he was enrolled at Charterhouse. Although he was hopelessly inadequate at games, and preferred novel-reading to his lessons, he gained considerable popularity among his schoolmates for his ability to caricature the masters. He left Charterhouse in 1828, and, after a severe illness, went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he found the freedom and good company much more to his taste. He met Tennyson there, and Edward Fitzgerald, who became a lifelong friend. Thackeray's extravagance led him to run up frightening bills for furnishings and parties, and a taste for gambling first acquired on a Paris holiday finally brought disaster when he lost 1500 £ to card sharks at Cambridge, and had to sign away part of his patrimony to satisfy them. His creditors closed in, and he was forced to appeal to his mother and stepfather to save him from disgrace.

By this time, he had decided not to take his degree, and went for eight months to Weimar, where he studied German and entered into the social life of the little principality. When he returned to England, he had fixed upon law as a career, and enrolled in the Middle Temple. But perching on a high stool with his nose in thick lawbooks was far less to his taste than watching his friend Macready rehearse Shakespeare, or translating poetry with "Fitz," or sitting at the feet of the lovely actress Fanny Kemble. His law studies dwindled even further when he became fascinated with the world of journalism. He began by writing book reviews for the *National Standard*, and, when he came into his inheritance, purchased the failing paper in 1833. Thinking that direct foreign news would improve circulation, he appointed himself Paris correspondent, and contributed a weekly column from that city, as well as his editorials, articles, and an occasional poem. He also took some art lessons, did some sketching, and joined in the gaiety of the Latin Quarter. But the newspaper did not prosper, and Thackeray went home, finally to disband it in 1834. An East Indian bank failure reduced his income severely, and he found himself a poor man.

Thackeray returned to Paris as an art student, and there met the beautiful Isabella Shawe at a friend's boardinghouse. Despite the opposition and interference of her dragon of a mother, who wanted a better catch for her daughter, the two fell deeply in love. Back in England, Thackeray's stepfather formed a stock company to buy a collapsing political newspaper, in order to put forward his ultra-liberal views—and to give his stepson a position that would enable him to marry. After several stormy months, Mrs. Shawe gave in, and Thackeray and Isabella were married in Paris in 1836. When the newspaper could no longer afford a foreign correspondent, he returned to England and worked furiously to save it, but it collapsed. With a wife and baby daughter to support, Thackeray wrote articles and reviews for *Fraser's* and the *London Times*, and worked on *The Paris Sketch Book*. This was very well received, as were his satirical articles for the new magazine, *Punch*. But just as Thackeray, under his pseudonym of Michelangelo Titmarsh, was becoming popular with English readers, his wife suffered a complete mental collapse. Thackeray pushed himself harder and harder, to

give Isabella the best of specialists and nursing care. He went to Turkey and Egypt as a correspondent for *Fraser's*, and worked on his first novel, *Pen and Rencil Sketches of English Society*, which was first published in installments. Isabella was not improving, and Thackeray had to acknowledge her case as hopeless. He settled her in the care of a nurse and old family friend, sent for his two daughters, who were with his mother in Paris, and made a home in London.

Pen and Pencil Sketches was published in book form in 1848, under the less cumbersome title of *Vanity Fair*. It was slow to gain acceptance at first, but after Charlotte Brontë dedicated the second edition of her best-seller *Jane Eyre* to "that little known master of English literature, William Makepeace Thackeray," the sales of *Vanity Fair* rose steadily, and Thackeray became a social lion in his own right. His second novel, *Pendennis*, in which he used settings from his own youth, had good reviews, and his lectures on English humorists at Cambridge, Oxford, and Edinburgh in 1851 were so successful that he was invited to repeat the series on a tour of the United States, where his novels were well-known in pirated editions. He had resigned from *Punch* to research a historical novel, *Henry Esmond*, which was a speedier success than the earlier two. On a holiday trip in Europe, he worked on *The Newcomes*, and his fairy tale, *The Rose and the Ring*, written to amuse his daughters when they came down with scarlatina in Rome. It was published as a Christmas book in 1854, and *The Newcomes* followed. He gave another lecture series, this one on the four King Georges, and repeated it in America. *The Virginians*, a sequel to *Henry Esmond*, was his next novel. He accepted the editorship of *Cornhill Magazine*, which prospered with him, unlike his earlier journalistic ventures, to an extent that it became too much for him to handle. However, he continued as a contributor after his resignation.

In the midst of a busy social life, and hard at work on *Dennis Duval*, Thackeray died suddenly at the age of fifty-two, on Christmas Eve, 1863.

Vanity Fair

Vanity Fair takes its title from an episode in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the pilgrims Christian and Faithful come upon a center of worldly trade, set up by Apollyon and Beëlzebub, where property and honor are bartered all year round. When Bunyan's pilgrims are asked, "What will ye buy?" they answer, "We buy the truth." But Thackeray's characters, like the inhabitants of the original Vanity Fair, are not interested in truth. They sacrifice themselves for unworthy objects, deceiving themselves that these are worth the effort. Amelia cannot admit that her image of George is brighter than the weak man she married, and wastes her youth and Dobbin's devotion in polishing the image. Dobbin adores Amelia for years, and yet, just before he wins her, he sees that she has not been worthy of his love. Becky uses Rawdon on her way to high society, and is bored when she gets there. She does not admire her husband until she has lost him. Everyone loses; everyone is self-deceived. This is a novel without a hero; this is Vanity Fair.

There are so many characters, settings, and incidents in *Vanity Fair* that it is often called a "panoramic novel." With all this variety, and without the usual central heroic figure to unify it, it is important that this novel is so well designed. The design depends on contrasting pairs of characters, particularly Amelia Sedley and Becky Sharp. When the novel begins, the girls are leaving school, the one for the shelter of a comfortable home with a suitable young man on the horizon, the other to make her own way in the world. Thackeray draws the parallel, and the contrast, when he tells us, "Thus the world began for these two young ladies. For Amelia it was quite a new, fresh, brilliant world, with all the bloom upon it. It was not quite a new one for Rebecca . . . At all events, if Rebecca was not beginning the world, she was beginning it over again." As Becky rises into the world of the Crawleys, the Sedleys fall into bankruptcy and disgrace. The girls come together again after both make runaway marriages with army officers, and both are financially insecure. But again the contrast is drawn between Amelia the adoring and Becky the adored. Becky's fortunes continue to rise, and Amelia's to fall, until Becky overplays her hand

and loses husband, child, patron, and respectability, all at once. Amelia now gains, and when they meet again in Europe, she is a wealthy widow with a son and a devoted admirer, while Becky is a lonely, rather sordid figure on the fringes of society. At the end of the novel, the odds are almost even again. But, as Thackeray points out, "Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?"

Becky Sharp is one of the great creations of English literature. Witty, ambitious, good-natured, unscrupulous, the sandy-haired green-eyed social climber lives vividly for us from the moment she hurls the dictionary out the carriage window. Some critics feel that Thackeray betrays Becky, under the pressure of Victorian morality. His attitude to her is certainly ambivalent—he both admires and condemns her. In the second half of the book he does his best to reduce her attractiveness, showing her boxing her child's ears, bringing about the ruin of the Raggles family, victimizing poor, stupid Rawdon, moving about Europe with riffraff, and even causing the death of Jos Sedley for the sake of his insurance. In the last instance, many feel that he overdoes the melodrama, and that the suggestion is altogether ludicrous and out of character. The Becky who remains in the reader's mind is not Jos Sedley's "terrible woman," but the cheerful little schemer of the earlier pages. That Thackeray prefers Amelia seems obvious from his sentimental outbursts about her, but he is honest about her blindness and weakness. The balance is nicely kept between Amelia's virtue and Becky's spirit. Other pairs of characters balance and contrast as well, such as Amelia and Lady Jane. Both are good women, but one remains a "tender little parasite," and the other grows in strength until she is able to stand up to Becky and demonstrate that goodness can be effective. Other pairs are Rawdon and George, George and Dobbin, Osborne and Sedley, and the two Pitt Crawleys.

The unity of *Vanity Fair* comes partly from these contrasts, partly from Becky's linking role—she binds together the Sedleys, the Osbornes, the Crawleys, and the Steynes—and partly from the narrative technique. Thackeray is in constant and direct communication with his reader, and his own mocking tone lies over the whole novel. Unlike Fielding, who

separated his moralizing from the story itself, Thackeray comments on the actions as they happen—or as he recalls them for us—establishing himself as our guide through Vanity Fair, pointing out for us the snobbery, the folly, the greed, and the selfishness that abound there. In his preface to *Pendennis*, he describes a novel as "a sort of confidential chat between writer and reader." The tone of his chat varies—sometimes ironic, sometimes sentimental, and frequently ironic about his own sentimentality. He is the "perpetual speaker," who imposes his own values on his subject, and leaves a strong flavor of his own personality with the reader. Thackeray is disliked for this by critics who place a high value on objectivity in fiction, and who consider it a betrayal of the novelist's art to draw attention to himself. Thackeray goes further: he announces himself frankly as a puppet-master who has manipulated his characters to demonstrate for us the folly and self-seeking of society. But the inhabitants of Vanity Fair *are* puppets of their own desires, not just of their "historian."

Vanity Fair is a brilliant novel—brilliant in its handling of time, in its satiric sketches, in its dramatic scenes, in its wonderful diversity of characters. It is the first English novel to voice a conscious, coherent, and thematic criticism of society, although that criticism is narrow and omits much of human nature. Thackeray tells us again and again that England is peopled with snobs and social climbers, with dupes and schemers, with self-deceived deceivers. It is a philosophy of world weariness, but presented so brilliantly that we may become weary of the world but not of *Vanity Fair*.

Mary M. Threapleton
Memorial University of Newfoundland

BEFORE THE CURTAIN

As the manager of the Performance sits before the curtain on the boards and looks into the Fair, a feeling of profound melancholy comes over him in his survey of the bustling place. There is a great quantity of eating and drinking, making love and jilting, laughing and the contrary, smoking, cheating, fighting, dancing and fiddling; there are bullies pushing about, bucks ogling the women, knaves picking pockets, policemen on the look-out, quacks (*other* quacks, plague take them!) bawling in front of their booths, and yokels looking up at the tinselled dancers and poor old rouged tumblers, while the light-fingered folk are operating upon their pockets behind. Yes, this is VANITY FAIR; not a moral place certainly; nor a merry one, though very noisy. Look at the faces of the actors and buffoons when they come off from their business; and Tom Fool washing the paint off his cheeks before he sits down to dinner with his wife and the little Jack Puddings behind the canvas. The curtain will be up presently, and he will be turning over head and heels, and crying, "How are you?"

A man with a reflective turn of mind, walking through an exhibition of this sort, will not be oppressed, I take it, by his own or other people's hilarity. An episode of humour or kindness touches and amuses him here and there—a pretty child looking at a gingerbread stall; a pretty girl blushing whilst her lover talks to her and chooses her fairing; poor Tom Fool, yonder behind the waggon, mumbling his bone with the honest family which lives by his tumbling; but the general impression is one more melancholy than mirthful. When you come home you sit down in a sober, contemplative, not uncharitable frame of mind, and apply yourself to your books or your business.

I have no other moral than this to tag to the present story of "Vanity Fair." Some people consider Fairs immoral altogether, and eschew such, with their servants and families:

very likely they are right. But persons who think otherwise, and are of a lazy, or a benevolent, or a sarcastic mood, may perhaps like to step in for half an hour, and look at the performances. There are scenes of all sorts; some dreadful combats, some grand and lofty horse-riding, some scenes of high life, and some of very middling indeed; some love-making for the sentimental, and some light comic business; the whole accompanied by appropriate scenery and brilliantly illuminated with the Author's own candles.

What more has the Manager of the Performance to say?—To acknowledge the kindness with which it has been received in all the principal towns of England through which the Show has passed, and where it has been most favourably noticed by the respected conductors of the public Press, and by the Nobility and Gentry. He is proud to think that his Puppets have given satisfaction to the very best company in this empire. The famous little Becky Puppet has been pronounced to be uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire; the Amelia Doll, though it has had a smaller circle of admirers, has yet been carved and dressed with the greatest care by the artist; the Dobbin Figure, though apparently clumsy, yet dances in a very amusing and natural manner; the Little Boys' Dance has been liked by some; and please to remark the richly dressed figure of the Wicked Nobleman, on which no expense has been spared, and which Old Nick will fetch away at the end of this singular performance.

And with this, and a profound bow to his patrons, the Manager retires and the curtain rises.

LONDON, June 28, 1848

Chapter 1 CHISWICK MALL

While the present century was in its teens, and on one sunshiny morning in June, there drove up to the great iron gate of Miss Pinkerton's academy for young ladies, on Chiswick Mall, a large family coach, with two fat horses in blazing harness, driven by a fat coachman in a three-cornered hat and wig, at the rate of four miles an hour. A black servant, who reposed on the box beside the fat coachman, uncurled his bandy legs as soon as the equipage drew up opposite Miss Pinkerton's shining brass plate, and as he pulled the bell at least a score of young heads were seen peering out of the narrow windows of the stately old brick house. Nay, the acute observer might have recognized the little red nose of good-natured Miss Jemima Pinkerton herself, rising over some geranium pots in the window of that lady's own drawing-room.

"It is Mrs. Sedley's coach, sister," said Miss Jemima. "Sambo, the black servant, has just rung the bell; and the coachman has a new red waistcoat."

"Have you completed all the necessary preparations incident to Miss Sedley's departure, Miss Jemima?" asked Miss Pinkerton herself, that majestic lady; the Semiramis of Hammersmith, the friend of Doctor Johnson, the correspondent of Mrs. Chapone herself.

"The girls were up at four this morning, packing her trunks, sister," replied Miss Jemima; "we have made her a bow-pot."

"Say a bouquet, sister Jemima, 'tis more genteel."

"Well, a booky as big almost as a haystack; I have put up two bottles of the gillyflower water for Mrs. Sedley, and the receipt for making it, in Amelia's box."

"And I trust, Miss Jemima, you have made a copy of Miss Sedley's account. This is it, is it? Very good—ninety-three pounds, four shillings. Be kind enough to address it to John Sedley, Esquire, and to seal this billet which I have written to his lady."

In Miss Jemima's eyes an autograph letter of her sister, Miss Pinkerton, was an object of as deep veneration as would have been a letter from a sovereign. Only when her pupils quitted the establishment, or when they were about to be married, and once, when poor Miss Birch died of the scarlet fever, was

Miss Pinkerton known to write personally to the parents of her pupils; and it was Jemima's opinion that if anything *could* console Mrs. Birch for her daughter's loss, it would be that pious and eloquent composition in which Miss Pinkerton announced the event.

In the present instance Miss Pinkerton's "billet" was to the following effect:—

The Mall, Chiswick, June 15, 18—

MADAM,—After her six years' residence at the Mall, I have the honour and happiness of presenting Miss Amelia Sedley to her parents, as a young lady not unworthy to occupy a fitting position in their polished and refined circle. Those virtues which characterize the young English gentlewoman, those accomplishments which become her birth and station, will not be found wanting in the amiable Miss Sedley, whose *industry* and *obedience* have endeared her to her instructors, and whose delightful sweetness of temper has charmed her *aged* and her *youthful* companions.

In music, in dancing, in orthography, in every variety of embroidery and needlework, she will be found to have realized her friends' *fondest wishes*. In geography there is still much to be desired; and a careful and undeviating use of the backboard, for four hours daily during the next three years, is recommended as necessary to the acquirement of that dignified *deportment and carriage*, so requisite for every young lady of *fashion*.

In the principles of religion and morality, Miss Sedley will be found worthy of an establishment which has been honoured by the presence of *The Great Lexicographer*, and the patronage of the admirable Mrs. Chapone. In leaving the Mall, Miss Amelia carries with her the hearts of her companions, and the affectionate regards of her mistress, who has the honour to subscribe herself,

Madam,
Your most obliged humble servant,
BARBARA PINKERTON

P.S.—Miss Sharp accompanies Miss Sedley. It is particularly requested that Miss Sharp's stay in Russell Square may not exceed ten days. The family of distinction with whom she is engaged, desire to avail themselves of her services as soon as possible.

This letter completed, Miss Pinkerton proceeded to write her own name, and Miss Sedley's, in the fly-leaf of a Johnson's Dictionary—the interesting work which she invariably pres-