



VANITY FAIR

W.M. THACKERAY

Vanity Fair

by
W. M. Thackeray

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INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY was born in Calcutta in 1811, and educated at Charterhouse School and the University of Cambridge. He gave up the study of law to become a writer. His works include essays, light verse, criticism and novels. He had a wide experience of life and a keen sense of human weaknesses. *Vanity Fair*, published in monthly parts in 1847-8, first brought him general fame. The title is taken from Bunyan's book, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the novel is a picture of the ups and downs of life, the good and the evil. The author died in 1863.

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MINERVA HOUSE

ONE sunny morning in June, about the year 1813, there drove up to the gates of Miss Pinkerton's school for young ladies, a large family coach, with two fat horses, driven by a fat coachman. As a servant got down and rang the bell, at least twenty young heads were seen gazing out of the narrow windows of the old brick house.

"It is Mrs. Sedley's coach, sister," said gentle Miss Jemima, in the headmistress's room.

"Have you completed all the necessary preparations for Miss Sedley's departure?" asked the great Miss Pinkerton herself.

"The girls were up at four this morning, packing her trunks, sister," replied Miss Jemima.

"And I trust you have made a copy of Miss Sedley's account. Ninety-three pounds, four shillings. Be kind enough to address it to John Sedley, Esquire, and to seal this letter that I have written to his lady."

The letter was as follows:—

Minerva House,
June 15th.

Madam¹,

After her six years' stay under my care, I have the honour and happiness of presenting Miss Amelia Sedley to her parents as a young lady worthy of occupying a position in well-bred society.

Her good work and obedience have pleased her teachers, and her delightful sweetness of temper has charmed all her companions.

¹ madam, ma'am — a respectful way of addressing a lady.

In music, dancing, spelling, and every kind of needlework she has made excellent progress. In geography there is still much to be desired. In the principles of religion and right conduct, Miss Sedley will be found worthy of the good name of Minerva House.

In leaving Minerva House, Miss Amelia carries with her the hearts of her companions and the affectionate wishes of her headmistress, who has the honour to sign herself,

Yours faithfully,

Barbara Pinkerton.

P.S.¹ Miss Sharp accompanies Miss Sedley. It is particularly requested that Miss Sharp's stay may not exceed ten days. The family of noble rank which is employing her desires to make use of her services as soon as possible.
B.P.

This letter completed, Miss Pinkerton began to write her own name and Miss Sedley's on the first page of a Johnson's Dictionary—the interesting work which she always presented to her pupils on their departure.

Miss Jemima, with a timid, hesitating look, handed her sister a second copy of the book.

"For whom is this?" said Miss Pinkerton, with awful coldness.

"For Becky Sharp," answered Jemima, trembling very much, and blushing, "for Becky Sharp: she's going too."

"Miss Jemima!" exclaimed Miss Pinkerton, "are you in your senses? Replace the dictionary in the cupboard, and send Miss Sedley to me."

Miss Sedley's father was a merchant in London, and a man of some wealth, while Miss Sharp was a student-teacher, for whom Miss Pinkerton thought she had done enough, without honouring her with the gift of the dictionary.

¹ P.S., Postscript = writing added to a letter after it has been signed.

GOODBYE TO SCHOOL

MISS SEDLEY was a charming young lady, who deserved all that the headmistress had written in her praise. She had such a kind, generous heart, that she won the love of everyone who came near her, and she had half the school as her particular friends. Her face blushed with rosy health, and her lips had the freshest of smiles, and her eyes sparkled with bright good-nature, except when they were filled with tears, for she would cry over a dead bird, or over a mouse that the cat had seized, and as for saying an unkind word to her—why, even Miss Pinkerton had given the teachers particular orders to treat her with the greatest gentleness, as severity was harmful to her.

When the day of departure came, between her two customs of laughing and crying, Miss Sedley was greatly puzzled how to act. She was glad to go home, and yet dreadfully sad at leaving school. But now the flowers and the presents and the trunks had all been arranged in the carriage, and a very small old box with Miss Sharp's card nailed neatly on it, had been added to the pile. The farewell visit to the headmistress's room having been paid, Miss Sedley was at liberty to leave.

"You'll go in and say goodbye, Becky?" said Miss Jemima to a young lady of whom nobody took any notice.

"I suppose I must," said Miss Sharp calmly, and after knocking and receiving permission to enter, she advanced and said in French, with perfect pronunciation, "Madam, I have come to wish you goodbye."

Miss Pinkerton did not understand French; she only directed those who did, but biting her lips and throwing up her head, she said, "Miss Sharp, I wish you good morning."

and she waved her hand to give Miss Sharp a chance of shaking one of her fingers.

Miss Sharp only folded her own hands with a very cold smile and bow.

"Come away, Becky," said Miss Jemima, pulling the young woman out in great alarm, and the door closed on her for ever.

Then came the parting below. All the servants were there in the hall¹—all the dear friends—all the young ladies; and there was such a kissing and crying as cannot be described. It was over—that is, Miss Sedley parted from her friends. Miss Sharp had quietly entered the carriage some minutes before. Nobody cried because *she* was leaving.

The servant shut the carriage door.

"Stop!" cried Miss Jemima, rushing to the gate with a parcel. "Becky, Becky Sharp, here's a book for you that my sister—that is, that I—Johnson's Dictionary, my dear, you mustn't leave without it. Goodbye. Drive on, coachman! God bless you!"

And the kind creature retreated into the garden.

But just as the coach drove off, Miss Sharp put her pale face out of the window, and actually threw the book back into the garden.

3

A BIRD IN A CAGE

WHEN Miss Sharp had performed this act of daring, she sank back in the carriage, saying, "So much for the dictionary, and thank God, I'm out of that school!"

Miss Sedley was almost as upset as poor Miss Jemima. "How could you do such a thing, Rebecca?" she said.

"I hate the whole house," said Miss Sharp, in a fury.

¹ hall — a room or passage at the entrance of a house.



Miss Sharp threw the book back into the garden

"I hope I never set eyes on it again. As for Miss Pinkerton, for two years I have had only insults from her. I have been treated worse than any servant in the kitchen. I have never had a friend or a kind word, except from you. I have been made to look after the little girls, and talk French to the misses, until I grew sick of my own language. But talking French to Miss Pinkerton was fun, wasn't it? She was too proud to confess that she doesn't understand a word of it."

"Oh, Rebecca, how can you, for shame!" cried Miss Sedley. "How dare you have such wicked, revengeful thoughts!"

"Revenge may be wicked, but it's natural," answered Miss Sharp. "I'm no angel!"¹ And, to tell the truth, she certainly was not.

Miss Sharp's father was an artist, and had given lessons in drawing at Miss Pinkerton's school. He was a clever man, a pleasant companion, but with a habit of getting into debt, and drinking too much. He married a young Frenchwoman, by profession an opera² dancer. When both her parents died, Rebecca was seventeen, and came to Miss Pinkerton's school as a student-teacher, her duties being to talk French, and her payment being a few pounds a year, and the right to free food and lodging, and to study a little with the masters who attended the school.

She was small and thin; pale, sandy-haired, and with eyes habitually cast down, though when they looked up they were very large, odd and attractive. By the side of so many tall, well-grown young ladies, she looked like a child. But she had had the sad experience of poverty, and she had sat a great deal with her father and heard the talk of his wild companions—often unsuitable for a girl to hear. She had never been a girl, she said, she had been a woman since she was eight years old. Oh, why did Miss Pinkerton let such a dangerous bird into her cage!

¹ angel = a being from Heaven; a pure, innocent person.

² opera = a play which is sung instead of spoken.

The fact is, the old lady thought Rebecca the mildest creature in the world, so admirably did she perform the part of a modest, innocent little child on the few occasions when she came with her father to the school.

When she finally came to live there, the stiff formality of the place, the prayers and the meals, the lessons and the walks, were hard for her to bear, and she looked back with bitter regret to the freedom and beggary of her life with her clever father. She had never been in the society of women. The cold good manners of the teachers and the chatter of the elder girls both annoyed her, and she had no soft motherly heart to be interested in the talk of the younger ones. She lived among them for two years, and no one was sorry when she went away. The gentle, tender-hearted Amelia was the only person with whom she could form any kind of friendship.

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PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

THE happiness, the superior advantages of the young women around her, gave Rebecca a terrible feeling of envy. "I am a thousand times cleverer and more charming than most of these girls, for all their wealth," she thought. "I am as well-bred, yet everyone ignores me." She determined at any rate to get free from the prison in which she found herself, and she began to make plans for the future.

So she seized the chance of studying that was offered her, and soon went through the little course of education considered necessary for young ladies in those days. Her music she practised continually, and one day she was heard to play a piece so well that Miss Pinkerton thought she could spare herself the expense of a master for

the juniors, and told Miss Sharp that she was to instruct them in music.

To the astonishment of the headmistress, the girl refused. "I am here to speak French with the children," Rebecca said, "not to teach them music, and save money for you. Give me money, and I will teach them."

The lady was obliged to yield, though she spoke of having sheltered a snake in her house.

"There is no question of gratitude between us," was Rebecca's answer. "You took me because I was useful. I hate this place and want to leave it. I will do nothing but what I am obliged to do by our agreement."

It was in vain that the old lady asked her if she was aware that she was speaking to Miss Pinkerton. Rebecca laughed in her face.

"Give me money and get rid of me," said the girl, "or, if you like, get me a good place as governess¹ in a nobleman's family." For Miss Pinkerton could not break her contract without making some payment.

And at last, hearing that Sir Pitt Crawley's family were in need of a governess, Miss Pinkerton actually recommended Miss Sharp for the post, snake though she was. Miss Sedley being now seventeen, was about to leave school at this time, and invited her friend to pass a week with her at home, before she entered on her new duties.

Thus the world began for these two young ladies. For Amelia it was a new, fresh, exciting world, with happy parents and a smiling welcome from all the servants as she entered her home in Russell Square²; and if Rebecca was not beginning the world, she was at least beginning it over again.

You may be sure that Amelia showed Rebecca over every room in the house, and all her books, and her piano, and her dresses, and all her bits of jewellery. She insisted on

¹ governess = a lady who looks after and teaches children in a private family.

² Square = an open space in a city with houses on four sides of it.

giving her two rings and a summer dress that was now too small for her own use.

When Rebecca saw the two beautiful shawls¹ that Joseph Sedley had brought home for his sister from India, she said, with perfect truth, that it must be delightful to have a brother, and easily got the pity of the tender-hearted Amelia.

"You are not alone," said Amelia, "I shall always be your friend, and love you as a sister, Rebecca."

"Ah, but to have parents, who give you everything you ask for! and then, to have a brother! Oh, how you must love him! He's very rich, isn't he?"

"I believe he has a very large income."

"And is your sister-in-law a nice, pretty woman?"

Amelia laughed. "Joseph is not married," she replied.

Rebecca seemed quite disappointed about this last fact, but the truth of the matter is, that she was thinking to herself, "If Mr. Joseph Sedley is rich and unmarried, why should I not marry him? I have only a few days, it is true, but there is no harm in trying."

5

HANDSOME BUT SHY²

WITH this new aim in mind, Rebecca was loud in her expressions of affection for Amelia. When the dinner bell rang, she went downstairs with her arm round her friend's waist. She was so nervous, she said, at the drawing-room³ door, that she could hardly find courage to enter.

¹ shawl = a loose, large square of cloth, worn over the shoulders by women.

² shy = easily frightened, not sure of oneself in the company of others.

³ drawing-room = a sitting-room where guests are received in a home.

"Feel my heart, how it beats, dear," she said to her friend.

"No, it doesn't," said Amelia. "Come in, don't be frightened."

A very stout man in tall boots, with several immense neckcloths that rose almost to his nose, with a red striped waistcoat, and an apple-green coat with huge buttons, was reading the paper by the fire when the girls entered. He jumped up from his armchair and blushed exceedingly, and hid his entire face almost in his neckcloths at the sight.

"It's only your sister, Joseph," said Amelia, laughing. "I've come home for always, you know; and this is my friend, Miss Sharp."

"Very cold weather, miss," said the head under the neckcloth, shaking very much, and its owner began to stir up the fire, although it was the middle of June.

"He's very handsome," whispered Rebecca to Amelia, rather loud.

"Do you think so?" said the latter. "I'll tell him."

"Darling! Not for anything," said Miss Sharp, starting back in fear. She had first made him a respectful, modest bow, and cast down her eyes.

"Thank you for the beautiful shawls, brother," said Amelia. "I can't make you such handsome presents, but while I was at school, I sewed you a fine shirt."

"Goodness! What do you mean, Amelia?" cried the brother in serious alarm, pulling with all his strength at the bell-rope, so that the latter broke and came away in his hand, increasing his confusion. "See if my carriage is at the door. I can't wait. I must go."

At this moment the father of the family walked in.

"What's the matter, Emmy?" he asked.

"Joseph wants to go out, Papa."

"This young lady is your friend? Miss Sharp, I am very happy to see you. Have you and Emmy been quarrelling with Joseph already, that he wants to be off?"

"I promised to dine with a friend, sir," said Joseph.

"Oh, didn't you tell your mother you would dine here?"

"But in these clothes it's impossible."

"Look at him, isn't he handsome enough to dine anywhere, Miss Sharp? Did you ever see a pair of boots like those, at Miss Pinkerton's?"

At which, of course, the two girls burst out laughing.

"Please, Father!" cried Joseph, as Mrs. Sedley entered.

"There, I have hurt his feelings. I have mentioned his boots. Come, Joseph, be friends with Miss Sharp, and let us all go in to dinner."

"There's your favourite curry,¹ Joseph," said his mother.

"Walk downstairs with Miss Sharp, and I will follow with these two ladies," said the father, and he took an arm of wife and daughter, and walked merrily off.

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CURRY FOR DINNER

I DON'T think we can blame Miss Rebecca Sharp if she had determined to conquer Mr. Joseph. After all, she had no kind parent to arrange these delicate matters for her, and if she did not get a husband for herself, there was no one in the wide world who would take the trouble to do so.

Joseph Sedley was twelve years older than his sister. He was in the East India Company's Civil Service as tax collector in a very lonely, wet district, among forests famous for their tigers. The nearest town was forty miles off, and he had lived for about eight years quite alone, scarcely seeing an English face, except twice a year, when someone arrived to receive the taxes.

At this time, he had become ill with a disease of the liver,² for the cure of which he had returned to Europe.

¹ curry — an Indian food with a very hot flavour.

² liver — a large organ of the body which takes poisons out of the blood and stores up sugar.

He did not live with his family in London, but had lodgings of his own, where he enjoyed the pleasures of town life. He drove his horses in the park, he dined at the fashionable hotels, he went frequently to the theatres.

In spite of all this, he was lonely. He was lazy, easily upset, and very fond of his food, and the appearance of a lady frightened him above all things. His great size caused him much anxious thought and alarm, and now and then he would try to eat less, but his love of good living soon defeated these attempts at improvement.

He was never well dressed, but he took the greatest trouble to ornament his form, and passed many hours daily in that occupation. He tried to give himself a waist, and like most fat men, he had his clothes made too tight and too brightly coloured. He was as vain as a girl, and perhaps his extreme shyness was the result of this.

If Miss Rebecca can manage to win *him*, at her first entrance into life, she is a young person of unusual cleverness.

Her first act showed some skill. When Miss Sharp told her friend that her brother was handsome, he *did* hear, and it gave him immense pleasure, for he thought in his heart that he was a very fine man. But then came a disturbing thought. Was the girl laughing at him? And so he tried to leave the house, but was persuaded to stay.

Downstairs they went, Joseph very red and blushing, Rebecca very modest, and holding her green eyes downwards. She was dressed in white, a picture of youth, unprotected innocence, and humble girlish simplicity.

"I must be very quiet," she thought, "and very much interested in India."

Now we have heard that Mrs. Sedley had prepared a fine curry for her son. In the course of the dinner this dish was offered to Rebecca.

"What is it?" said she, turning a look at Mr. Joseph.

"It's splendid," said he. His mouth was full of it.