

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 15

"In Which Rebecca's Husband Appears for a Short Time"

Every reader of a sentimental turn (and we desire no other) must have been pleased with the tableau with which the last act of our little drama concluded; for what can be prettier than an image of Love on his knees before Beauty?

But when Love heard that awful confession from Beauty that she was married already, he bounced up from his attitude of humility on the carpet, uttering exclamations which caused poor little Beauty to be more frightened than she was when she made her avowal. "Married; you're joking," the Baronet cried, after the first explosion of rage and wonder. "You're making fun of me, Becky. Who'd ever go to marry you without a shilling to your fortune?"

"Married! married!" Rebecca said, in an agony of tears—her voice choking with emotion, her handkerchief up to her ready eyes, fainting against the mantelpiece a figure of woe fit to melt the most obdurate heart. "O Sir Pitt, dear Sir Pitt, do not think me ungrateful for all your goodness to me. It is only your generosity that has extorted my secret."

"Generosity be hanged!" Sir Pitt roared out. "Who is it tu, then, you're married? Where was it?"

"Let me come back with you to the country, sir! Let me watch over you as faithfully as ever! Don't, don't separate me from dear Queen's Crawley!"

"The feller has left you, has he?" the Baronet said, beginning, as he fancied, to comprehend. "Well, Becky—come back if you like. You can't eat your cake and have it. Any ways I made you a fair offer. Come back as governess—you shall have it all your own way." She held out one hand. She cried fit to break her heart; her ringlets fell over her face, and over the marble mantelpiece where she laid it.

"So the rascal ran off, eh?" Sir Pitt said, with a hideous attempt at

consolation. “Never mind, Becky, I’ll take care of ‘ee.”

“Oh, sir! it would be the pride of my life to go back to Queen’s Crawley, and take care of the children, and of you as formerly, when you said you were pleased with the services of your little Rebecca. When I think of what you have just offered me, my heart fills with gratitude indeed it does. I can’t be your wife, sir; let me—let me be your daughter.” Saying which, Rebecca went down on her knees in a most tragical way, and, taking Sir Pitt’s horny black hand between her own two (which were very pretty and white, and as soft as satin), looked up in his face with an expression of exquisite pathos and confidence, when—when the door opened, and Miss Crawley sailed in.

Mrs. Firkin and Miss Briggs, who happened by chance to be at the parlour door soon after the Baronet and Rebecca entered the apartment, had also seen accidentally, through the keyhole, the old gentleman prostrate before the governess, and had heard the generous proposal which he made her. It was scarcely out of his mouth when Mrs. Firkin and Miss Briggs had streamed up the stairs, had rushed into the drawing-room where Miss Crawley was reading the French novel, and had given that old lady the astounding intelligence that Sir Pitt was on his knees, proposing to Miss Sharp. And if you calculate the time for the above dialogue to take place—the time for Briggs and Firkin to fly to the drawing-room—the time for Miss Crawley to be astonished, and to drop her volume of Pigault le Brun—and the time for her to come downstairs—you will see how exactly accurate this history is, and how Miss Crawley must have appeared at the very instant when Rebecca had assumed the attitude of humility.

“It is the lady on the ground, and not the gentleman,” Miss Crawley said, with a look and voice of great scorn. “They told me that you were on your knees, Sir Pitt: do kneel once more, and let me see this pretty couple!”

“I have thanked Sir Pitt Crawley, Ma’am,” Rebecca said, rising, “and have told him that—that I never can become Lady Crawley.”

“Refused him!” Miss Crawley said, more bewildered than ever. Briggs and Firkin at the door opened the eyes of astonishment and the lips of wonder.

“Yes—refused,” Rebecca continued, with a sad, tearful voice.

“And am I to credit my ears that you absolutely proposed to her, Sir Pitt?” the old lady asked.

“Ees,” said the Baronet, “I did.”

“And she refused you as she says?”

“Ees,” Sir Pitt said, his features on a broad grin.

“It does not seem to break your heart at any rate,” Miss Crawley remarked.

“Nawt a bit,” answered Sir Pitt, with a coolness and good-humour which set Miss Crawley almost mad with bewilderment. That an old gentleman of station should fall on his knees to a penniless governess, and burst out laughing because she refused to marry him— that a penniless governess should refuse a Baronet with four thousand a year—these were mysteries which Miss Crawley could never comprehend. It surpassed any complications of intrigue in her favourite Pigault le Brun.

“I’m glad you think it good sport, brother,” she continued, groping wildly through this amazement.

“Vamous,” said Sir Pitt. “Who’d ha’ thought it! what a sly little devil! what a little fox it waws!” he muttered to himself, chuckling with pleasure.

“Who’d have thought what?” cries Miss Crawley, stamping with her foot. “Pray, Miss Sharp, are you waiting for the Prince Regent’s divorce, that you don’t think our family good enough for you?”

“My attitude,” Rebecca said, “when you came in, ma’am, did not look as if I despised such an honour as this good—this noble man has deigned to offer me. Do you think I have no heart? Have you all loved me, and been so kind to the poor orphan—deserted—girl, and am I to feel nothing? O my friends! O my benefactors! may not my love, my life, my duty, try to repay the confidence you have shown me? Do you grudge me even gratitude, Miss Crawley? It is too much—my heart is too full”; and she

sank down in a chair so pathetically, that most of the audience present were perfectly melted with her sadness.

“Whether you marry me or not, you’re a good little girl, Becky, and I’m your friend, mind,” said Sir Pitt, and putting on his crape-bound hat, he walked away—greatly to Rebecca’s relief; for it was evident that her secret was unrevealed to Miss Crawley, and she had the advantage of a brief reprieve.

Putting her handkerchief to her eyes, and nodding away honest Briggs, who would have followed her upstairs, she went up to her apartment; while Briggs and Miss Crawley, in a high state of excitement, remained to discuss the strange event, and Firkin, not less moved, dived down into the kitchen regions, and talked of it with all the male and female company there. And so impressed was Mrs. Firkin with the news, that she thought proper to write off by that very night’s post, “with her humble duty to Mrs. Bute Crawley and the family at the Rectory, and Sir Pitt has been and proposed for to marry Miss Sharp, wherein she has refused him, to the wonder of all.”

The two ladies in the dining-room (where worthy Miss Briggs was delighted to be admitted once more to confidential conversation with her patroness) wondered to their hearts’ content at Sir Pitt’s offer, and Rebecca’s refusal; Briggs very acutely suggesting that there must have been some obstacle in the shape of a previous attachment, otherwise no young woman in her senses would ever have refused so advantageous a proposal.

“You would have accepted it yourself, wouldn’t you, Briggs?” Miss Crawley said, kindly.

“Would it not be a privilege to be Miss Crawley’s sister?” Briggs replied, with meek evasion.

“Well, Becky would have made a good Lady Crawley, after all,” Miss Crawley remarked (who was mollified by the girl’s refusal, and very liberal and generous now there was no call for her sacrifices). “She has brains in plenty (much more wit in her little finger than you have, my poor dear Briggs, in all your head). Her manners are excellent, now I have formed her. She is a Montmorency, Briggs, and blood is

something, though I despise it for my part; and she would have held her own amongst those pompous stupid Hampshire people much better than that unfortunate ironmonger's daughter."

Briggs coincided as usual, and the "previous attachment" was then discussed in conjectures. "You poor friendless creatures are always having some foolish tendre," Miss Crawley said. "You yourself, you know, were in love with a writing-master (don't cry, Briggs—you're always crying, and it won't bring him to life again), and I suppose this unfortunate Becky has been silly and sentimental too—some apothecary, or house-steward, or painter, or young curate, or something of that sort."

"Poor thing! poor thing!" says Briggs (who was thinking of twenty-four years back, and that hectic young writing-master whose lock of yellow hair, and whose letters, beautiful in their illegibility, she cherished in her old desk upstairs). "Poor thing, poor thing!" says Briggs. Once more she was a fresh-cheeked lass of eighteen; she was at evening church, and the hectic writing-master and she were quavering out of the same psalm-book.

"After such conduct on Rebecca's part," Miss Crawley said enthusiastically, "our family should do something. Find out who is the objet, Briggs. I'll set him up in a shop; or order my portrait of him, you know; or speak to my cousin, the Bishop and I'll dote Becky, and we'll have a wedding, Briggs, and you shall make the breakfast, and be a bridesmaid."

Briggs declared that it would be delightful, and vowed that her dear Miss Crawley was always kind and generous, and went up to Rebecca's bedroom to console her and prattle about the offer, and the refusal, and the cause thereof; and to hint at the generous intentions of Miss Crawley, and to find out who was the gentleman that had the mastery of Miss Sharp's heart.

Rebecca was very kind, very affectionate and affected—responded to Briggs's offer of tenderness with grateful fervour—owned there was a secret attachment—a delicious mystery—what a pity Miss Briggs had not remained half a minute longer at the keyhole! Rebecca might, perhaps, have told more: but five minutes after Miss Briggs's arrival in Rebecca's apartment, Miss Crawley actually made her appearance there—an

unheard-of honour—her impatience had overcome her; she could not wait for the tardy operations of her ambassadress: so she came in person, and ordered Briggs out of the room. And expressing her approval of Rebecca's conduct, she asked particulars of the interview, and the previous transactions which had brought about the astonishing offer of Sir Pitt.

Rebecca said she had long had some notion of the partiality with which Sir Pitt honoured her (for he was in the habit of making his feelings known in a very frank and unreserved manner) but, not to mention private reasons with which she would not for the present trouble Miss Crawley, Sir Pitt's age, station, and habits were such as to render a marriage quite impossible; and could a woman with any feeling of self-respect and any decency listen to proposals at such a moment, when the funeral of the lover's deceased wife had not actually taken place?

“Nonsense, my dear, you would never have refused him had there not been some one else in the case,” Miss Crawley said, coming to her point at once. “Tell me the private reasons; what are the private reasons? There is some one; who is it that has touched your heart?”

Rebecca cast down her eyes, and owned there was. “You have guessed right, dear lady,” she said, with a sweet simple faltering voice. “You wonder at one so poor and friendless having an attachment, don't you? I have never heard that poverty was any safeguard against it. I wish it were.”

“My poor dear child,” cried Miss Crawley, who was always quite ready to be sentimental, “is our passion unrequited, then? Are we pining in secret? Tell me all, and let me console you.”

“I wish you could, dear Madam,” Rebecca said in the same tearful tone. “Indeed, indeed, I need it.” And she laid her head upon Miss Crawley's shoulder and wept there so naturally that the old lady, surprised into sympathy, embraced her with an almost maternal kindness, uttered many soothing protests of regard and affection for her, vowed that she loved her as a daughter, and would do everything in her power to serve her. “And now who is it, my dear? Is it that pretty Miss Sedley's brother? You said something about an affair with him. I'll ask him here, my dear. And you shall have him: indeed you shall.”

“Don’t ask me now,” Rebecca said. “You shall know all soon. Indeed you shall. Dear kind Miss Crawley—dear friend, may I say so?”

“That you may, my child,” the old lady replied, kissing her.

“I can’t tell you now,” sobbed out Rebecca, “I am very miserable. But O! love me always—promise you will love me always.” And in the midst of mutual tears—for the emotions of the younger woman had awakened the sympathies of the elder—this promise was solemnly given by Miss Crawley, who left her little protegee, blessing and admiring her as a dear, artless, tender-hearted, affectionate, incomprehensible creature.

And now she was left alone to think over the sudden and wonderful events of the day, and of what had been and what might have been. What think you were the private feelings of Miss, no (begging her pardon) of Mrs. Rebecca? If, a few pages back, the present writer claimed the privilege of peeping into Miss Amelia Sedley’s bedroom, and understanding with the omniscience of the novelist all the gentle pains and passions which were tossing upon that innocent pillow, why should he not declare himself to be Rebecca’s confidante too, master of her secrets, and seal-keeper of that young woman’s conscience?

Well, then, in the first place, Rebecca gave way to some very sincere and touching regrets that a piece of marvellous good fortune should have been so near her, and she actually obliged to decline it. In this natural emotion every properly regulated mind will certainly share. What good mother is there that would not commiserate a penniless spinster, who might have been my lady, and have shared four thousand a year? What well-bred young person is there in all Vanity Fair, who will not feel for a hard-working, ingenious, meritorious girl, who gets such an honourable, advantageous, provoking offer, just at the very moment when it is out of her power to accept it? I am sure our friend Becky’s disappointment deserves and will command every sympathy.

I remember one night being in the Fair myself, at an evening party. I observed old Miss Toady there also present, single out for her special attentions and flattery little Mrs. Briefless, the barrister’s wife, who is of a good family certainly, but, as we all know, is as poor as poor can be.

What, I asked in my own mind, can cause this obsequiousness on the

part of Miss Toady; has Briefless got a county court, or has his wife had a fortune left her? Miss Toady explained presently, with that simplicity which distinguishes all her conduct. "You know," she said, "Mrs Briefless is granddaughter of Sir John Redhand, who is so ill at Cheltenham that he can't last six months. Mrs. Briefless's papa succeeds; so you see she will be a baronet's daughter." And Toady asked Briefless and his wife to dinner the very next week.

If the mere chance of becoming a baronet's daughter can procure a lady such homage in the world, surely, surely we may respect the agonies of a young woman who has lost the opportunity of becoming a baronet's wife. Who would have dreamed of Lady Crawley dying so soon? She was one of those sickly women that might have lasted these ten years—Rebecca thought to herself, in all the woes of repentance—and I might have been my lady! I might have led that old man whither I would. I might have thanked Mrs. Bute for her patronage, and Mr. Pitt for his insufferable condescension. I would have had the town-house newly furnished and decorated. I would have had the handsomest carriage in London, and a box at the opera; and I would have been presented next season. All this might have been; and now—now all was doubt and mystery.

But Rebecca was a young lady of too much resolution and energy of character to permit herself much useless and unseemly sorrow for the irrevocable past; so, having devoted only the proper portion of regret to it, she wisely turned her whole attention towards the future, which was now vastly more important to her. And she surveyed her position, and its hopes, doubts, and chances.

In the first place, she was married—that was a great fact. Sir Pitt knew it. She was not so much surprised into the avowal, as induced to make it by a sudden calculation. It must have come some day: and why not now as at a later period? He who would have married her himself must at least be silent with regard to her marriage. How Miss Crawley would bear the news—was the great question. Misgivings Rebecca had; but she remembered all Miss Crawley had said; the old lady's avowed contempt for birth; her daring liberal opinions; her general romantic propensities; her almost doting attachment to her nephew, and her repeatedly expressed fondness for Rebecca herself. She is so fond of him, Rebecca thought, that she will forgive him anything: she is so used to me that I

don't think she could be comfortable without me: when the eclaircissement comes there will be a scene, and hysterics, and a great quarrel, and then a great reconciliation. At all events, what use was there in delaying? the die was thrown, and now or to-morrow the issue must be the same. And so, resolved that Miss Crawley should have the news, the young person debated in her mind as to the best means of conveying it to her; and whether she should face the storm that must come, or fly and avoid it until its first fury was blown over. In this state of meditation she wrote the following letter:

Dearest Friend,

The great crisis which we have debated about so often is come. Half of my secret is known, and I have thought and thought, until I am quite sure that now is the time to reveal the whole of the mystery. Sir Pitt came to me this morning, and made—what do you think?—A declaration in form. Think of that! Poor little me. I might have been Lady Crawley. How pleased Mrs. Bute would have been: and ma tante if I had taken precedence of her! I might have been somebody's mamma, instead of—O, I tremble, I tremble, when I think how soon we must tell all!

Sir Pitt knows I am married, and not knowing to whom, is not very much displeased as yet. Ma tante is actually angry that I should have refused him. But she is all kindness and graciousness. She condescends to say I would have made him a good wife; and vows that she will be a mother to your little Rebecca. She will be shaken when she first hears the news. But need we fear anything beyond a momentary anger? I think not: I am sure not. She dotes upon you so (you naughty, good-for-nothing man), that she would pardon you anything: and, indeed, I believe, the next place in her heart is mine: and that she would be miserable without me. Dearest! something tells me we shall conquer. You shall leave that odious regiment: quit gaming, racing, and be A good boy; and we shall all live in Park Lane, and ma tante shall leave us all her money.

I shall try and walk to-morrow at 3 in the usual place. If Miss B. accompanies me, you must come to dinner, and bring an answer, and put it in the third volume of Porteus's Sermons. But, at all events, come to your own

R.

To Miss Eliza Styles, At Mr. Barnet's, Saddler, Knightsbridge.

And I trust there is no reader of this little story who has not discernment enough to perceive that the Miss Eliza Styles (an old schoolfellow, Rebecca said, with whom she had resumed an active correspondence of late, and who used to fetch these letters from the saddler's), wore brass spurs, and large curling mustachios, and was indeed no other than Captain Rawdon Crawley.