Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 45

"Between Hampshire and London"

Sir Pitt Crawley had done more than repair fences and restore dilapidated lodges on the Queen's Crawley estate. Like a wise man he had set to work to rebuild the injured popularity of his house and stop up the gaps and ruins in which his name had been left by his disreputable and thriftless old predecessor. He was elected for the borough speedily after his father's demise; a magistrate, a member of parliament, a county magnate and representative of an ancient family, he made it his duty to show himself before the Hampshire public, subscribed handsomely to the county charities, called assiduously upon all the county folk, and laid himself out in a word to take that position in Hampshire, and in the Empire afterwards, to which he thought his prodigious talents justly entitled him. Lady Jane was instructed to be friendly with the Fuddlestones, and the Wapshots, and the other famous baronets, their neighbours. Their carriages might frequently be seen in the Queen's Crawley avenue now; they dined pretty frequently at the Hall (where the cookery was so good that it was clear Lady Jane very seldom had a hand in it), and in return Pitt and his wife most energetically dined out in all sorts of weather and at all sorts of distances. For though Pitt did not care for joviality, being a frigid man of poor hearth and appetite, yet he considered that to be hospitable and condescending was quite incumbent on-his station, and every time that he got a headache from too long an after-dinner sitting, he felt that he was a martyr to duty. He talked about crops, corn-laws, politics, with the best country gentlemen. He (who had been formerly inclined to be a sad free-thinker on these points) entered into poaching and game preserving with ardour. He didn't hunt; he wasn't a hunting man; he was a man of books and peaceful habits; but he thought that the breed of horses must be kept up in the country, and that the breed of foxes must therefore be looked to, and for his part, if his friend, Sir Huddlestone Fuddlestone, liked to draw his country and meet as of old the F. hounds used to do at Queen's Crawley, he should be happy to see him there, and the gentlemen of the Fuddlestone hunt. And to Lady Southdown's dismay too he became more orthodox in his tendencies every day; gave up preaching in public and attending meeting-houses; went stoutly to church; called on the Bishop and all the

Clergy at Winchester; and made no objection when the Venerable Archdeacon Trumper asked for a game of whist. What pangs must have been those of Lady Southdown, and what an utter castaway she must have thought her son-in-law for permitting such a godless diversion! And when, on the return of the family from an oratorio at Winchester, the Baronet announced to the young ladies that he should next year very probably take them to the "county balls," they worshipped him for his kindness. Lady Jane was only too obedient, and perhaps glad herself to go. The Dowager wrote off the direst descriptions of her daughter's worldly behaviour to the authoress of the Washerwoman of Finchley Common at the Cape; and her house in Brighton being about this time unoccupied, returned to that watering-place, her absence being not very much deplored by her children. We may suppose, too, that Rebecca, on paying a second visit to Queen's Crawley, did not feel particularly grieved at the absence of the lady of the medicine chest; though she wrote a Christmas letter to her Ladyship, in which she respectfully recalled herself to Lady Southdown's recollection, spoke with gratitude of the delight which her Ladyship's conversation had given her on the former visit, dilated on the kindness with which her Ladyship had treated her in sickness, and declared that everything at Queen's Crawley reminded her of her absent friend.

A great part of the altered demeanour and popularity of Sir Pitt Crawley might have been traced to the counsels of that astute little lady of Curzon Street. "You remain a Baronet–you consent to be a mere country gentleman," she said to him, while he had been her guest in London. "No, Sir Pitt Crawley, I know you better. I know your talents and your ambition. You fancy you hide them both, but you can conceal neither from me. I showed Lord Steyne your pamphlet on malt. He was familiar with it, and said it was in the opinion of the whole Cabinet the most masterly thing that had appeared on the subject. The Ministry has its eye upon you, and I know what you want. You want to distinguish yourself in Parliament; every one says you are the finest speaker in England (for your speeches at Oxford are still remembered). You want to be Member for the County, where, with your own vote and your borough at your back, you can command anything. And you want to be Baron Crawley of Queen's Crawley, and will be before you die. I saw it all. I could read your heart, Sir Pitt. If I had a husband who possessed your intellect as he does your name, I sometimes think I should not be unworthy of him–but–but I am your kinswoman now," she added with a laugh. "Poor

little penniless, I have got a little interest–and who knows, perhaps the mouse may be able to aid the lion." Pitt Crawley was amazed and enraptured with her speech. "How that woman comprehends me!" he said. "I never could get Jane to read three pages of the malt pamphlet. She has no idea that I have commanding talents or secret ambition. So they remember my speaking at Oxford, do they? The rascals! Now that I represent my borough and may sit for the county, they begin to recollect me! Why, Lord Steyne cut me at the levee last year; they are beginning to find out that Pitt Crawley is some one at last. Yes, the man was always the same whom these people neglected: it was only the opportunity that was wanting, and I will show them now that I can speak and act as well as write. Achilles did not declare himself until they gave him the sword. I hold it now, and the world shall yet hear of Pitt Crawley."

Therefore it was that this roguish diplomatist has grown so hospitable; that he was so civil to oratorios and hospitals; so kind to Deans and Chapters; so generous in giving and accepting dinners; so uncommonly gracious to farmers on market-days; and so much interested about county business; and that the Christmas at the Hall was the gayest which had been known there for many a long day.

On Christmas Day a great family gathering took place. All the Crawleys from the Rectory came to dine. Rebecca was as frank and fond of Mrs. Bute as if the other had never been her enemy; she was affectionately interested in the dear girls, and surprised at the progress which they had made in music since her time, and insisted upon encoring one of the duets out of the great song-books which Jim, grumbling, had been forced to bring under his arm from the Rectory. Mrs. Bute, perforce, was obliged to adopt a decent demeanour towards the little adventuress–of course being free to discourse with her daughters afterwards about the absurd respect with which Sir Pitt treated his sister-in-law. But Jim, who had sat next to her at dinner, declared she was a trump, and one and all of the Rector's family agreed that the little Rawdon was a fine boy. They respected a possible baronet in the boy, between whom and the title there was only the little sickly pale Pitt Binkie.

The children were very good friends. Pitt Binkie was too little a dog for such a big dog as Rawdon to play with; and Matilda being only a girl, of course not fit companion for a young gentleman who was near eight

years old, and going into jackets very soon. He took the command of this small party at once–the little girl and the little boy following him about with great reverence at such times as he condescended to sport with them. His happiness and pleasure in the country were extreme. The kitchen garden pleased him hugely, the flowers moderately, but the pigeons and the poultry, and the stables when he was allowed to visit them, were delightful objects to him. He resisted being kissed by the Misses Crawley, but he allowed Lady Jane sometimes to embrace him, and it was by her side that he liked to sit when, the signal to retire to the drawing-room being given, the ladies left the gentlemen to their claret–by her side rather than by his mother. For Rebecca, seeing that tenderness was the fashion, called Rawdon to her one evening and stooped down and kissed him in the presence of all the ladies.

He looked her full in the face after the operation, trembling and turning very red, as his wont was when moved. "You never kiss me at home, Mamma," he said, at which there was a general silence and consternation and a by no means pleasant look in Becky's eyes.

Rawdon was fond of his sister-in-law, for her regard for his son. Lady Jane and Becky did not get on quite so well at this visit as on occasion of the former one, when the Colonel's wife was bent upon pleasing. Those two speeches of the child struck rather a chill. Perhaps Sir Pitt was rather too attentive to her.

But Rawdon, as became his age and size, was fonder of the society of the men than of the women, and never wearied of accompanying his sire to the stables, whither the Colonel retired to smoke his cigar–Jim, the Rector's son, sometimes joining his cousin in that and other amusements. He and the Baronet's keeper were very close friends, their mutual taste for "dawgs" bringing them much together. On one day, Mr. James, the Colonel, and Horn, the keeper, went and shot pheasants, taking little Rawdon with them. On another most blissful morning, these four gentlemen partook of the amusement of rat-hunting in a barn, than which sport Rawdon as yet had never seen anything more noble. They stopped up the ends of certain drains in the barn, into the other openings of which ferrets were inserted, and then stood silently aloof, with uplifted stakes in their hands, and an anxious little terrier (Mr. James's celebrated "dawg" Forceps, indeed) scarcely breathing from excitement, listening motionless on three legs, to the faint squeaking of the rats

below. Desperately bold at last, the persecuted animals bolted above-ground–the terrier accounted for one, the keeper for another; Rawdon, from flurry and excitement, missed his rat, but on the other hand he half-murdered a ferret.

But the greatest day of all was that on which Sir Huddlestone Fuddlestone's hounds met upon the lawn at Queen's Crawley.

That was a famous sight for little Rawdon. At half-past ten, Tom Moody, Sir Huddlestone Fuddlestone's huntsman, was seen trotting up the avenue, followed by the noble pack of hounds in a compact body–the rear being brought up by the two whips clad in stained scarlet frocks–light hard-featured lads on well-bred lean horses, possessing marvellous dexterity in casting the points of their long heavy whips at the thinnest part of any dog's skin who dares to straggle from the main body, or to take the slightest notice, or even so much as wink, at the hares and rabbits starting under their noses.

Next comes boy Jack, Tom Moody's son, who weighs five stone, measures eight-and-forty inches, and will never be any bigger. He is perched on a large raw-boned hunter, half-covered by a capacious saddle. This animal is Sir Huddlestone Fuddlestone's favourite horse the Nob. Other horses, ridden by other small boys, arrive from time to time, awaiting their masters, who will come cantering on anon.

Tom Moody rides up to the door of the Hall, where he is welcomed by the butler, who offers him drink, which he declines. He and his pack then draw off into a sheltered corner of the lawn, where the dogs roll on the grass, and play or growl angrily at one another, ever and anon breaking out into furious fight speedily to be quelled by Tom's voice, unmatched at rating, or the snaky thongs of the whips.

Many young gentlemen canter up on thoroughbred hacks, spatter-dashed to the knee, and enter the house to drink cherry-brandy and pay their respects to the ladies, or, more modest and sportsmanlike, divest themselves of their mud-boots, exchange their hacks for their hunters, and warm their blood by a preliminary gallop round the lawn. Then they collect round the pack in the corner and talk with Tom Moody of past sport, and the merits of Sniveller and Diamond, and of the state of the country and of the wretched breed of foxes.

Sir Huddlestone presently appears mounted on a clever cob and rides up to the Hall, where he enters and does the civil thing by the ladies, after which, being a man of few words, he proceeds to business. The hounds are drawn up to the hall-door, and little Rawdon descends amongst them, excited yet half-alarmed by the caresses which they bestow upon him, at the thumps he receives from their waving tails, and at their canine bickerings, scarcely restrained by Tom Moody's tongue and lash.

Meanwhile, Sir Huddlestone has hoisted himself unwieldily on the Nob: "Let's try Sowster's Spinney, Tom," says the Baronet, "Farmer Mangle tells me there are two foxes in it." Tom blows his horn and trots off, followed by the pack, by the whips, by the young gents from Winchester, by the farmers of the neighbourhood, by the labourers of the parish on foot, with whom the day is a great holiday, Sir Huddlestone bringing up the rear with Colonel Crawley, and the whole cortege disappears down the avenue.

The Reverend Bute Crawley (who has been too modest to appear at the public meet before his nephew's windows), whom Tom Moody remembers forty years back a slender divine riding the wildest horses, jumping the widest brooks, and larking over the newest gates in the country–his Reverence, we say, happens to trot out from the Rectory Lane on his powerful black horse just as Sir Huddlestone passes; he joins the worthy Baronet. Hounds and horsemen disappear, and little Rawdon remains on the doorsteps, wondering and happy.

During the progress of this memorable holiday, little Rawdon, if he had got no special liking for his uncle, always awful and cold and locked up in his study, plunged in justice-business and surrounded by bailiffs and farmers–has gained the good graces of his married and maiden aunts, of the two little folks of the Hall, and of Jim of the Rectory, whom Sir Pitt is encouraging to pay his addresses to one of the young ladies, with an understanding doubtless that he shall be presented to the living when it shall be vacated by his fox-hunting old sire. Jim has given up that sport himself and confines himself to a little harmless duck- or snipe-shooting, or a little quiet trifling with the rats during the Christmas holidays, after which he will return to the University and try and not be plucked, once more. He has already eschewed green coats, red neckcloths, and other worldly ornaments, and is preparing himself for a change in his condition. In this cheap and thrifty way Sir Pitt tries to pay off his debt

to his family.

Also before this merry Christmas was over, the Baronet had screwed up courage enough to give his brother another draft on his bankers, and for no less a sum than a hundred pounds, an act which caused Sir Pitt cruel pangs at first, but which made him glow afterwards to think himself one of the most generous of men. Rawdon and his son went away with the utmost heaviness of heart. Becky and the ladies parted with some alacrity, however, and our friend returned to London to commence those avocations with which we find her occupied when this chapter begins. Under her care the Crawley House in Great Gaunt Street was quite rejuvenescent and ready for the reception of Sir Pitt and his family, when the Baronet came to London to attend his duties in Parliament and to assume that position in the country for which his vast genius fitted him.

For the first session, this profound dissembler hid his projects and never opened his lips but to present a petition from Mudbury. But he attended assiduously in his place and learned thoroughly the routine and business of the House. At home he gave himself up to the perusal of Blue Books, to the alarm and wonder of Lady Jane, who thought he was killing himself by late hours and intense application. And he made acquaintance with the ministers, and the chiefs of his party, determining to rank as one of them before many years were over.

Lady Jane's sweetness and kindness had inspired Rebecca with such a contempt for her ladyship as the little woman found no small difficulty in concealing. That sort of goodness and simplicity which Lady Jane possessed annoyed our friend Becky, and it was impossible for her at times not to show, or to let the other divine, her scorn. Her presence, too, rendered Lady Jane uneasy. Her husband talked constantly with Becky. Signs of intelligence seemed to pass between them, and Pitt spoke with her on subjects on which he never thought of discoursing with Lady Jane. The latter did not understand them, to be sure, but it was mortifying to remain silent; still more mortifying to know that you had nothing to say, and hear that little audacious Mrs. Rawdon dashing on from subject to subject, with a word for every man, and a joke always pat; and to sit in one's own house alone, by the fireside, and watching all the men round your rival.

In the country, when Lady Jane was telling stories to the children, who clustered about her knees (little Rawdon into the bargain, who was very fond of her), and Becky came into the room, sneering with green scornful eyes, poor Lady Jane grew silent under those baleful glances. Her simple little fancies shrank away tremulously, as fairies in the story-books, before a superior bad angel. She could not go on, although Rebecca, with the smallest inflection of sarcasm in her voice, besought her to continue that charming story. And on her side gentle thoughts and simple pleasures were odious to Mrs. Becky; they discorded with her; she hated people for liking them; she spurned children and children-lovers. "I have no taste for bread and butter," she would say, when caricaturing Lady Jane and her ways to my Lord Steyne.

"No more has a certain person for holy water," his lordship replied with a bow and a grin and a great jarring laugh afterwards.

So these two ladies did not see much of each other except upon those occasions when the younger brother's wife, having an object to gain from the other, frequented her. They my-loved and my-deared each other assiduously, but kept apart generally, whereas Sir Pitt, in the midst of his multiplied avocations, found daily time to see his sister-in-law.

On the occasion of his first Speaker's dinner, Sir Pitt took the opportunity of appearing before his sister-in-law in his uniform– that old diplomatic suit which he had worn when attache to the Pumpernickel legation.

Becky complimented him upon that dress and admired him almost as much as his own wife and children, to whom he displayed himself before he set out. She said that it was only the thoroughbred gentleman who could wear the Court suit with advantage: it was only your men of ancient race whom the culotte courte became. Pitt looked down with complacency at his legs, which had not, in truth, much more symmetry or swell than the lean Court sword which dangled by his side–looked down at his legs, and thought in his heart that he was killing.

When he was gone, Mrs. Becky made a caricature of his figure, which she showed to Lord Steyne when he arrived. His lordship carried off the sketch, delighted with the accuracy of the resemblance. He had done Sir Pitt Crawley the honour to meet him at Mrs. Becky's house and had

been most gracious to the new Baronet and member. Pitt was struck too by the deference with which the great Peer treated his sister-in-law, by her ease and sprightliness in the conversation, and by the delight with which the other men of the party listened to her talk. Lord Steyne made no doubt but that the Baronet had only commenced his career in public life, and expected rather anxiously to hear him as an orator; as they were neighbours (for Great Gaunt Street leads into Gaunt Square, whereof Gaunt House, as everybody knows, forms one side) my lord hoped that as soon as Lady Steyne arrived in London she would have the honour of making the acquaintance of Lady Crawley. He left a card upon his neighbour in the course of a day or two, having never thought fit to notice his predecessor, though they had lived near each other for near a century past.

In the midst of these intrigues and fine parties and wise and brilliant personages Rawdon felt himself more and more isolated every day. He was allowed to go to the club more; to dine abroad with bachelor friends; to come and go when he liked, without any questions being asked. And he and Rawdon the younger many a time would walk to Gaunt Street and sit with the lady and the children there while Sir Pitt was closeted with Rebecca, on his way to the House, or on his return from it.

The ex-Colonel would sit for hours in his brother's house very silent, and thinking and doing as little as possible. He was glad to be employed of an errand; to go and make inquiries about a horse or a servant, or to carve the roast mutton for the dinner of the children. He was beat and cowed into laziness and submission. Delilah had imprisoned him and cut his hair off, too. The bold and reckless young blood of ten-years back was subjugated and was turned into a torpid, submissive, middle-aged, stout gentleman.

And poor Lady Jane was aware that Rebecca had captivated her husband, although she and Mrs. Rawdon my-deared and my-loved each other every day they met.