

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 8

"Private and Confidential"

Miss Rebecca Sharp to Miss Amelia Sedley, Russell Square, London.
(Free.—Pitt Crawley.)

My dearest, sweetest Amelia,

With what mingled joy and sorrow do I take up the pen to write to my dearest friend! Oh, what a change between to-day and yesterday! Now I am friendless and alone; yesterday I was at home, in the sweet company of a sister, whom I shall ever, ever cherish!

I will not tell you in what tears and sadness I passed the fatal night in which I separated from you. You went on Tuesday to joy and happiness, with your mother and your devoted young soldier by your side; and I thought of you all night, dancing at the Perkins's, the prettiest, I am sure, of all the young ladies at the Ball. I was brought by the groom in the old carriage to Sir Pitt Crawley's town house, where, after John the groom had behaved most rudely and insolently to me (alas! 'twas safe to insult poverty and misfortune!), I was given over to Sir P.'s care, and made to pass the night in an old gloomy bed, and by the side of a horrid gloomy old charwoman, who keeps the house. I did not sleep one single wink the whole night.

Sir Pitt is not what we silly girls, when we used to read Cecilia at Chiswick, imagined a baronet must have been. Anything, indeed, less like Lord Orville cannot be imagined. Fancy an old, stumpy, short, vulgar, and very dirty man, in old clothes and shabby old gaiters, who smokes a horrid pipe, and cooks his own horrid supper in a saucepan. He speaks with a country accent, and swore a great deal at the old charwoman, at the hackney coachman who drove us to the inn where the coach went from, and on which I made the journey outside for the greater part of the way.

I was awakened at daybreak by the charwoman, and having arrived at the inn, was at first placed inside the coach. But, when we got to a place

called Leakington, where the rain began to fall very heavily—will you believe it?—I was forced to come outside; for Sir Pitt is a proprietor of the coach, and as a passenger came at Mudbury, who wanted an inside place, I was obliged to go outside in the rain, where, however, a young gentleman from Cambridge College sheltered me very kindly in one of his several great coats.

This gentleman and the guard seemed to know Sir Pitt very well, and laughed at him a great deal. They both agreed in calling him an old screw; which means a very stingy, avaricious person. He never gives any money to anybody, they said (and this meanness I hate); and the young gentleman made me remark that we drove very slow for the last two stages on the road, because Sir Pitt was on the box, and because he is proprietor of the horses for this part of the journey. “But won’t I flog ‘em on to Squashmore, when I take the ribbons?” said the young Cantab. “And sarve ‘em right, Master Jack,” said the guard. When I comprehended the meaning of this phrase, and that Master Jack intended to drive the rest of the way, and revenge himself on Sir Pitt’s horses, of course I laughed too.

A carriage and four splendid horses, covered with armorial bearings, however, awaited us at Mudbury, four miles from Queen’s Crawley, and we made our entrance to the baronet’s park in state. There is a fine avenue of a mile long leading to the house, and the woman at the lodge-gate (over the pillars of which are a serpent and a dove, the supporters of the Crawley arms), made us a number of curtsies as she flung open the old iron carved doors, which are something like those at odious Chiswick.

“There’s an avenue,” said Sir Pitt, “a mile long. There’s six thousand pound of timber in them there trees. Do you call that nothing?” He pronounced avenue—EVENUE, and nothing—nothink, so droll; and he had a Mr. Hodson, his hind from Mudbury, into the carriage with him, and they talked about distraining, and selling up, and draining and subsoiling, and a great deal about tenants and farming—much more than I could understand. Sam Miles had been caught poaching, and Peter Bailey had gone to the workhouse at last. “Serve him right,” said Sir Pitt; “him and his family has been cheating me on that farm these hundred and fifty years.” Some old tenant, I suppose, who could not pay his rent. Sir Pitt might have said “he and his family,” to be sure; but rich

baronets do not need to be careful about grammar, as poor governesses must be.

As we passed, I remarked a beautiful church-spire rising above some old elms in the park; and before them, in the midst of a lawn, and some outhouses, an old red house with tall chimneys covered with ivy, and the windows shining in the sun. “Is that your church, sir?” I said.

“Yes, hang it,” (said Sir Pitt, only he used, dear, A much WICKEDER word); “how’s Buty, Hodson? Buty’s my brother Bute, my dear—my brother the parson. Buty and the Beast I call him, ha, ha!”

Hodson laughed too, and then looking more grave and nodding his head, said, “I’m afraid he’s better, Sir Pitt. He was out on his pony yesterday, looking at our corn.”

“Looking after his tithes, hang’un (only he used the same wicked word). Will brandy and water never kill him? He’s as tough as old whatdyecallum—old Methusalem.”

Mr. Hodson laughed again. “The young men is home from college. They’ve whopped John Scroggins till he’s well nigh dead.”

“Whop my second keeper!” roared out Sir Pitt.

“He was on the parson’s ground, sir,” replied Mr. Hodson; and Sir Pitt in a fury swore that if he ever caught ‘em poaching on his ground, he’d transport ‘em, by the lord he would. However, he said, “I’ve sold the presentation of the living, Hodson; none of that breed shall get it, I war’nt”; and Mr. Hodson said he was quite right: and I have no doubt from this that the two brothers are at variance—as brothers often are, and sisters too. Don’t you remember the two Miss Scratchleys at Chiswick, how they used always to fight and quarrel—and Mary Box, how she was always thumping Louisa?

Presently, seeing two little boys gathering sticks in the wood, Mr. Hodson jumped out of the carriage, at Sir Pitt’s order, and rushed upon them with his whip. “Pitch into ‘em, Hodson,” roared the baronet; “flog their little souls out, and bring ‘em up to the house, the vagabonds; I’ll commit ‘em as sure as my name’s Pitt.” And presently we heard Mr.

Hodson's whip cracking on the shoulders of the poor little blubbering wretches, and Sir Pitt, seeing that the malefactors were in custody, drove on to the hall.

All the servants were ready to meet us, and ...

Here, my dear, I was interrupted last night by a dreadful thumping at my door: and who do you think it was? Sir Pitt Crawley in his night-cap and dressing-gown, such a figure! As I shrank away from such a visitor, he came forward and seized my candle. "No candles after eleven o'clock, Miss Becky," said he. "Go to bed in the dark, you pretty little hussy" (that is what he called me), "and unless you wish me to come for the candle every night, mind and be in bed at eleven." And with this, he and Mr. Horrocks the butler went off laughing. You may be sure I shall not encourage any more of their visits. They let loose two immense bloodhounds at night, which all last night were yelling and howling at the moon. "I call the dog Gorer," said Sir Pitt; "he's killed a man that dog has, and is master of a bull, and the mother I used to call Flora; but now I calls her Aroarer, for she's too old to bite. Haw, haw!"

Before the house of Queen's Crawley, which is an odious old-fashioned red brick mansion, with tall chimneys and gables of the style of Queen Bess, there is a terrace flanked by the family dove and serpent, and on which the great hall-door opens. And oh, my dear, the great hall I am sure is as big and as glum as the great hall in the dear castle of Udolpho. It has a large fireplace, in which we might put half Miss Pinkerton's school, and the grate is big enough to roast an ox at the very least. Round the room hang I don't know how many generations of Crawleys, some with beards and ruffs, some with huge wigs and toes turned out, some dressed in long straight stays and gowns that look as stiff as towers, and some with long ringlets, and oh, my dear! scarcely any stays at all. At one end of the hall is the great staircase all in black oak, as dismal as may be, and on either side are tall doors with stags' heads over them, leading to the billiard-room and the library, and the great yellow saloon and the morning-rooms. I think there are at least twenty bedrooms on the first floor; one of them has the bed in which Queen Elizabeth slept; and I have been taken by my new pupils through all these fine apartments this morning. They are not rendered less gloomy, I promise you, by having the shutters always shut; and there is scarce one of the apartments, but when the light was let into it, I expected to see a

ghost in the room. We have a schoolroom on the second floor, with my bedroom leading into it on one side, and that of the young ladies on the other. Then there are Mr. Pitt's apartments—Mr. Crawley, he is called—the eldest son, and Mr. Rawdon Crawley's rooms—he is an officer like somebody, and away with his regiment. There is no want of room I assure you. You might lodge all the people in Russell Square in the house, I think, and have space to spare.

Half an hour after our arrival, the great dinner-bell was rung, and I came down with my two pupils (they are very thin insignificant little chits of ten and eight years old). I came down in your dear muslin gown (about which that odious Mrs. Pinner was so rude, because you gave it me); for I am to be treated as one of the family, except on company days, when the young ladies and I are to dine upstairs.

Well, the great dinner-bell rang, and we all assembled in the little drawing-room where my Lady Crawley sits. She is the second Lady Crawley, and mother of the young ladies. She was an ironmonger's daughter, and her marriage was thought a great match. She looks as if she had been handsome once, and her eyes are always weeping for the loss of her beauty. She is pale and meagre and high-shouldered, and has not a word to say for herself, evidently. Her stepson Mr. Crawley, was likewise in the room. He was in full dress, as pompous as an undertaker. He is pale, thin, ugly, silent; he has thin legs, no chest, hay-coloured whiskers, and straw-coloured hair. He is the very picture of his sainted mother over the mantelpiece—Griselda of the noble house of Binkie.

“This is the new governess, Mr. Crawley,” said Lady Crawley, coming forward and taking my hand. “Miss Sharp.”

“O!” said Mr. Crawley, and pushed his head once forward and began again to read a great pamphlet with which he was busy.

“I hope you will be kind to my girls,” said Lady Crawley, with her pink eyes always full of tears.

“Law, Ma, of course she will,” said the eldest: and I saw at a glance that I need not be afraid of that woman. “My lady is served,” says the butler in black, in an immense white shirt-frill, that looked as if it had been one of the Queen Elizabeth's ruffs depicted in the hall; and so, taking Mr.

Crawley's arm, she led the way to the dining-room, whither I followed with my little pupils in each hand.

Sir Pitt was already in the room with a silver jug. He had just been to the cellar, and was in full dress too; that is, he had taken his gaiters off, and showed his little dumpy legs in black worsted stockings. The sideboard was covered with glistening old plate—old cups, both gold and silver; old salvers and cruet-stands, like Rundell and Bridge's shop. Everything on the table was in silver too, and two footmen, with red hair and canary-coloured liveries, stood on either side of the sideboard.

Mr. Crawley said a long grace, and Sir Pitt said amen, and the great silver dish-covers were removed.

“What have we for dinner, Betsy?” said the Baronet.

“Mutton broth, I believe, Sir Pitt,” answered Lady Crawley.

“Mouton aux navets,” added the butler gravely (pronounce, if you please, moutongonavvy); “and the soup is potage de mouton a l'Ecoissaise. The side-dishes contain pommes de terre au naturel, and choufleur a l'eau.”

“Mutton's mutton,” said the Baronet, “and a devilish good thing. What ship was it, Horrocks, and when did you kill?” “One of the black-faced Scotch, Sir Pitt: we killed on Thursday.

“Who took any?”

“Steel, of Mudbury, took the saddle and two legs, Sir Pitt; but he says the last was too young and confounded woolly, Sir Pitt.”

“Will you take some potage, Miss ah—Miss Blunt? said Mr. Crawley.

“Capital Scotch broth, my dear,” said Sir Pitt, “though they call it by a French name.”

“I believe it is the custom, sir, in decent society,” said Mr. Crawley, haughtily, “to call the dish as I have called it”; and it was served to us on silver soup plates by the footmen in the canary coats, with the mouton

aux navets. Then “ale and water” were brought, and served to us young ladies in wine-glasses. I am not a judge of ale, but I can say with a clear conscience I prefer water.

While we were enjoying our repast, Sir Pitt took occasion to ask what had become of the shoulders of the mutton.

“I believe they were eaten in the servants’ hall,” said my lady, humbly.

“They was, my lady,” said Horrocks, “and precious little else we get there neither.”

Sir Pitt burst into a horse-laugh, and continued his conversation with Mr. Horrocks. “That there little black pig of the Kent sow’s breed must be uncommon fat now.”

“It’s not quite busting, Sir Pitt,” said the butler with the gravest air, at which Sir Pitt, and with him the young ladies, this time, began to laugh violently.

“Miss Crawley, Miss Rose Crawley,” said Mr. Crawley, “your laughter strikes me as being exceedingly out of place.”

“Never mind, my lord,” said the Baronet, “we’ll try the porker on Saturday. Kill un on Saturday morning, John Horrocks. Miss Sharp adores pork, don’t you, Miss Sharp?”

And I think this is all the conversation that I remember at dinner. When the repast was concluded a jug of hot water was placed before Sir Pitt, with a case-bottle containing, I believe, rum. Mr. Horrocks served myself and my pupils with three little glasses of wine, and a bumper was poured out for my lady. When we retired, she took from her work-drawer an enormous interminable piece of knitting; the young ladies began to play at cribbage with a dirty pack of cards. We had but one candle lighted, but it was in a magnificent old silver candlestick, and after a very few questions from my lady, I had my choice of amusement between a volume of sermons, and a pamphlet on the corn-laws, which Mr. Crawley had been reading before dinner.

So we sat for an hour until steps were heard.

“Put away the cards, girls,” cried my lady, in a great tremor; “put down Mr. Crawley’s books, Miss Sharp”; and these orders had been scarcely obeyed, when Mr. Crawley entered the room.

“We will resume yesterday’s discourse, young ladies,” said he, “and you shall each read a page by turns; so that Miss a–Miss Short may have an opportunity of hearing you”; and the poor girls began to spell a long dismal sermon delivered at Bethesda Chapel, Liverpool, on behalf of the mission for the Chickasaw Indians. Was it not a charming evening?

At ten the servants were told to call Sir Pitt and the household to prayers. Sir Pitt came in first, very much flushed, and rather unsteady in his gait; and after him the butler, the canaries, Mr. Crawley’s man, three other men, smelling very much of the stable, and four women, one of whom, I remarked, was very much overdressed, and who flung me a look of great scorn as she plumped down on her knees.

After Mr. Crawley had done haranguing and expounding, we received our candles, and then we went to bed; and then I was disturbed in my writing, as I have described to my dearest sweetest Amelia.

Good night. A thousand, thousand, thousand kisses!

Saturday.—This morning, at five, I heard the shrieking of the little black pig. Rose and Violet introduced me to it yesterday; and to the stables, and to the kennel, and to the gardener, who was picking fruit to send to market, and from whom they begged hard a bunch of hot-house grapes; but he said that Sir Pitt had numbered every “Man Jack” of them, and it would be as much as his place was worth to give any away. The darling girls caught a colt in a paddock, and asked me if I would ride, and began to ride themselves, when the groom, coming with horrid oaths, drove them away.

Lady Crawley is always knitting the worsted. Sir Pitt is always tipsy, every night; and, I believe, sits with Horrocks, the butler. Mr. Crawley always reads sermons in the evening, and in the morning is locked up in his study, or else rides to Mudbury, on county business, or to Squashmore, where he preaches, on Wednesdays and Fridays, to the tenants there.

A hundred thousand grateful loves to your dear papa and mamma. Is your poor brother recovered of his rack-punch? Oh, dear! Oh, dear! How men should beware of wicked punch!

Ever and ever thine own Rebecca

Everything considered, I think it is quite as well for our dear Amelia Sedley, in Russell Square, that Miss Sharp and she are parted. Rebecca is a droll funny creature, to be sure; and those descriptions of the poor lady weeping for the loss of her beauty, and the gentleman “with hay-coloured whiskers and straw-coloured hair,” are very smart, doubtless, and show a great knowledge of the world. That she might, when on her knees, have been thinking of something better than Miss Horrocks’s ribbons, has possibly struck both of us. But my kind reader will please to remember that this history has “Vanity Fair” for a title, and that Vanity Fair is a very vain, wicked, foolish place, full of all sorts of humbugs and falsenesses and pretensions. And while the moralist, who is holding forth on the cover (an accurate portrait of your humble servant), professes to wear neither gown nor bands, but only the very same long-eared livery in which his congregation is arrayed: yet, look you, one is bound to speak the truth as far as one knows it, whether one mounts a cap and bells or a shovel hat; and a deal of disagreeable matter must come out in the course of such an undertaking.

I have heard a brother of the story-telling trade, at Naples, preaching to a pack of good-for-nothing honest lazy fellows by the sea-shore, work himself up into such a rage and passion with some of the villains whose wicked deeds he was describing and inventing, that the audience could not resist it; and they and the poet together would burst out into a roar of oaths and execrations against the fictitious monster of the tale, so that the hat went round, and the bajocchi tumbled into it, in the midst of a perfect storm of sympathy.

At the little Paris theatres, on the other hand, you will not only hear the people yelling out “Ah gredin! Ah monstre:” and cursing the tyrant of the play from the boxes; but the actors themselves positively refuse to play the wicked parts, such as those of infames Anglais, brutal Cossacks, and what not, and prefer to appear at a smaller salary, in their real characters as loyal Frenchmen. I set the two stories one against the other, so that you may see that it is not from mere mercenary motives that the

present performer is desirous to show up and trounce his villains; but because he has a sincere hatred of them, which he cannot keep down, and which must find a vent in suitable abuse and bad language.

I warn my “kyind friends,” then, that I am going to tell a story of harrowing villainy and complicated—but, as I trust, intensely interesting—crime. My rascals are no milk-and-water rascals, I promise you. When we come to the proper places we won’t spare fine language—No, no! But when we are going over the quiet country we must perforce be calm. A tempest in a slop-basin is absurd. We will reserve that sort of thing for the mighty ocean and the lonely midnight. The present Chapter is very mild. Others—But we will not anticipate those.

And, as we bring our characters forward, I will ask leave, as a man and a brother, not only to introduce them, but occasionally to step down from the platform, and talk about them: if they are good and kindly, to love them and shake them by the hand: if they are silly, to laugh at them confidentially in the reader’s sleeve: if they are wicked and heartless, to abuse them in the strongest terms which politeness admits of.

Otherwise you might fancy it was I who was sneering at the practice of devotion, which Miss Sharp finds so ridiculous; that it was I who laughed good-humouredly at the reeling old Silenus of a baronet—whereas the laughter comes from one who has no reverence except for prosperity, and no eye for anything beyond success. Such people there are living and flourishing in the world—Faithless, Hopeless, Charityless: let us have at them, dear friends, with might and main. Some there are, and very successful too, mere quacks and fools: and it was to combat and expose such as those, no doubt, that Laughter was made.