

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 16

"The Letter on the Pincushion"

How they were married is not of the slightest consequence to anybody. What is to hinder a Captain who is a major, and a young lady who is of age, from purchasing a licence, and uniting themselves at any church in this town? Who needs to be told, that if a woman has a will she will assuredly find a way?—My belief is that one day, when Miss Sharp had gone to pass the forenoon with her dear friend Miss Amelia Sedley in Russell Square, a lady very like her might have been seen entering a church in the City, in company with a gentleman with dyed mustachios, who, after a quarter of an hour's interval, escorted her back to the hackney-coach in waiting, and that this was a quiet bridal party.

And who on earth, after the daily experience we have, can question the probability of a gentleman marrying anybody? How many of the wise and learned have married their cooks? Did not Lord Eldon himself, the most prudent of men, make a runaway match? Were not Achilles and Ajax both in love with their servant maids? And are we to expect a heavy dragoon with strong desires and small brains, who had never controlled a passion in his life, to become prudent all of a sudden, and to refuse to pay any price for an indulgence to which he had a mind? If people only made prudent marriages, what a stop to population there would be!

It seems to me, for my part, that Mr. Rawdon's marriage was one of the honestest actions which we shall have to record in any portion of that gentleman's biography which has to do with the present history. No one will say it is unmanly to be captivated by a woman, or, being captivated, to marry her; and the admiration, the delight, the passion, the wonder, the unbounded confidence, and frantic adoration with which, by degrees, this big warrior got to regard the little Rebecca, were feelings which the ladies at least will pronounce were not altogether discreditable to him. When she sang, every note thrilled in his dull soul, and tingled through his huge frame. When she spoke, he brought all the force of his brains to listen and wonder. If she was jocular, he used to revolve her jokes in his mind, and explode over them half an hour afterwards in the street, to the

surprise of the groom in the tilbury by his side, or the comrade riding with him in Rotten Row. Her words were oracles to him, her smallest actions marked by an infallible grace and wisdom. "How she sings,—how she paints," thought he. "How she rode that kicking mare at Queen's Crawley!" And he would say to her in confidential moments, "By Jove, Beck, you're fit to be Commander-in-Chief, or Archbishop of Canterbury, by Jove." Is his case a rare one? and don't we see every day in the world many an honest Hercules at the apron-strings of Omphale, and great whiskered Samsons prostrate in Delilah's lap?

When, then, Becky told him that the great crisis was near, and the time for action had arrived, Rawdon expressed himself as ready to act under her orders, as he would be to charge with his troop at the command of his colonel. There was no need for him to put his letter into the third volume of Porteus. Rebecca easily found a means to get rid of Briggs, her companion, and met her faithful friend in "the usual place" on the next day. She had thought over matters at night, and communicated to Rawdon the result of her determinations. He agreed, of course, to everything; was quite sure that it was all right: that what she proposed was best; that Miss Crawley would infallibly relent, or "come round," as he said, after a time. Had Rebecca's resolutions been entirely different, he would have followed them as implicitly. "You have head enough for both of us, Beck," said he. "You're sure to get us out of the scrape. I never saw your equal, and I've met with some clippers in my time too." And with this simple confession of faith, the love-stricken dragoon left her to execute his part of the project which she had formed for the pair.

It consisted simply in the hiring of quiet lodgings at Brompton, or in the neighbourhood of the barracks, for Captain and Mrs. Crawley. For Rebecca had determined, and very prudently, we think, to fly. Rawdon was only too happy at her resolve; he had been entreating her to take this measure any time for weeks past. He pranced off to engage the lodgings with all the impetuosity of love. He agreed to pay two guineas a week so readily, that the landlady regretted she had asked him so little. He ordered in a piano, and half a nursery-house full of flowers: and a heap of good things. As for shawls, kid gloves, silk stockings, gold French watches, bracelets and perfumery, he sent them in with the profusion of blind love and unbounded credit. And having relieved his mind by this outpouring of generosity, he went and dined nervously at the club, waiting until the great moment of his life should come.

The occurrences of the previous day; the admirable conduct of Rebecca in refusing an offer so advantageous to her, the secret unhappiness preying upon her, the sweetness and silence with which she bore her affliction, made Miss Crawley much more tender than usual. An event of this nature, a marriage, or a refusal, or a proposal, thrills through a whole household of women, and sets all their hysterical sympathies at work. As an observer of human nature, I regularly frequent St. George's, Hanover Square, during the genteel marriage season; and though I have never seen the bridegroom's male friends give way to tears, or the beadles and officiating clergy any way affected, yet it is not at all uncommon to see women who are not in the least concerned in the operations going on—old ladies who are long past marrying, stout middle-aged females with plenty of sons and daughters, let alone pretty young creatures in pink bonnets, who are on their promotion, and may naturally take an interest in the ceremony—I say it is quite common to see the women present piping, sobbing, sniffing; hiding their little faces in their little useless pocket-handkerchiefs; and heaving, old and young, with emotion. When my friend, the fashionable John Pimlico, married the lovely Lady Belgravia Green Parker, the excitement was so general that even the little snuffy old pew-opener who let me into the seat was in tears. And wherefore? I inquired of my own soul: she was not going to be married.

Miss Crawley and Briggs in a word, after the affair of Sir Pitt, indulged in the utmost luxury of sentiment, and Rebecca became an object of the most tender interest to them. In her absence Miss Crawley solaced herself with the most sentimental of the novels in her library. Little Sharp, with her secret griefs, was the heroine of the day.

That night Rebecca sang more sweetly and talked more pleasantly than she had ever been heard to do in Park Lane. She twined herself round the heart of Miss Crawley. She spoke lightly and laughingly of Sir Pitt's proposal, ridiculed it as the foolish fancy of an old man; and her eyes filled with tears, and Briggs's heart with unutterable pangs of defeat, as she said she desired no other lot than to remain for ever with her dear benefactress. "My dear little creature," the old lady said, "I don't intend to let you stir for years, that you may depend upon it. As for going back to that odious brother of mine after what has passed, it is out of the question. Here you stay with me and Briggs. Briggs wants to go to see her relations very often. Briggs, you may go when you like. But as for

you, my dear, you must stay and take care of the old woman.”

If Rawdon Crawley had been then and there present, instead of being at the club nervously drinking claret, the pair might have gone down on their knees before the old spinster, avowed all, and been forgiven in a twinkling. But that good chance was denied to the young couple, doubtless in order that this story might be written, in which numbers of their wonderful adventures are narrated— adventures which could never have occurred to them if they had been housed and sheltered under the comfortable uninteresting forgiveness of Miss Crawley.

Under Mrs. Firkin’s orders, in the Park Lane establishment, was a young woman from Hampshire, whose business it was, among other duties, to knock at Miss Sharp’s door with that jug of hot water which Firkin would rather have perished than have presented to the intruder. This girl, bred on the family estate, had a brother in Captain Crawley’s troop, and if the truth were known, I daresay it would come out that she was aware of certain arrangements, which have a great deal to do with this history. At any rate she purchased a yellow shawl, a pair of green boots, and a light blue hat with a red feather with three guineas which Rebecca gave her, and as little Sharp was by no means too liberal with her money, no doubt it was for services rendered that Betty Martin was so bribed.

On the second day after Sir Pitt Crawley’s offer to Miss Sharp, the sun rose as usual, and at the usual hour Betty Martin, the upstairs maid, knocked at the door of the governess’s bedchamber.

No answer was returned, and she knocked again. Silence was still uninterrupted; and Betty, with the hot water, opened the door and entered the chamber.

The little white dimity bed was as smooth and trim as on the day previous, when Betty’s own hands had helped to make it. Two little trunks were corded in one end of the room; and on the table before the window—on the pincushion the great fat pincushion lined with pink inside, and twilled like a lady’s nightcap—lay a letter. It had been reposing there probably all night.

Betty advanced towards it on tiptoe, as if she were afraid to awake it—looked at it, and round the room, with an air of great wonder and

satisfaction; took up the letter, and grinned intensely as she turned it round and over, and finally carried it into Miss Briggs's room below.

How could Betty tell that the letter was for Miss Briggs, I should like to know? All the schooling Betty had had was at Mrs. Bute Crawley's Sunday school, and she could no more read writing than Hebrew.

"La, Miss Briggs," the girl exclaimed, "O, Miss, something must have happened—there's nobody in Miss Sharp's room; the bed ain't been slept in, and she've run away, and left this letter for you, Miss."

"What!" cries Briggs, dropping her comb, the thin wisp of faded hair falling over her shoulders; "an elopement! Miss Sharp a fugitive! What, what is this?" and she eagerly broke the neat seal, and, as they say, "devoured the contents" of the letter addressed to her.

Dear Miss Briggs [the refugee wrote], the kindest heart in the world, as yours is, will pity and sympathise with me and excuse me. With tears, and prayers, and blessings, I leave the home where the poor orphan has ever met with kindness and affection. Claims even superior to those of my benefactress call me hence. I go to my duty—to my husband. Yes, I am married. My husband commands me to seek the humble home which we call ours. Dearest Miss Briggs, break the news as your delicate sympathy will know how to do it—to my dear, my beloved friend and benefactress. Tell her, ere I went, I shed tears on her dear pillow—that pillow that I have so often soothed in sickness—that I long again to watch—Oh, with what joy shall I return to dear Park Lane! How I tremble for the answer which is to seal my fate! When Sir Pitt deigned to offer me his hand, an honour of which my beloved Miss Crawley said I was deserving (my blessings go with her for judging the poor orphan worthy to be her sister!) I told Sir Pitt that I was already A wife. Even he forgave me. But my courage failed me, when I should have told him all—that I could not be his wife, for I was his daughter! I am wedded to the best and most generous of men—Miss Crawley's Rawdon is my Rawdon. At his command I open my lips, and follow him to our humble home, as I would through the world. O, my excellent and kind friend, intercede with my Rawdon's beloved aunt for him and the poor girl to whom all his noble race have shown such UNPARALLELED affection. Ask Miss Crawley to receive her children. I can say no more, but blessings, blessings on all in the dear house I leave, prays

Your affectionate and grateful Rebecca Crawley. Midnight.

Just as Briggs had finished reading this affecting and interesting document, which reinstated her in her position as first confidante of Miss Crawley, Mrs. Firkin entered the room. "Here's Mrs. Bute Crawley just arrived by the mail from Hampshire, and wants some tea; will you come down and make breakfast, Miss?"

And to the surprise of Firkin, clasping her dressing-gown around her, the wisp of hair floating dishevelled behind her, the little curl-papers still sticking in bunches round her forehead, Briggs sailed down to Mrs. Bute with the letter in her hand containing the wonderful news.

"Oh, Mrs. Firkin," gasped Betty, "sech a business. Miss Sharp have a gone and run away with the Captin, and they're off to Gretney Green!" We would devote a chapter to describe the emotions of Mrs. Firkin, did not the passions of her mistresses occupy our genteeler muse.

When Mrs. Bute Crawley, numbed with midnight travelling, and warming herself at the newly crackling parlour fire, heard from Miss Briggs the intelligence of the clandestine marriage, she declared it was quite providential that she should have arrived at such a time to assist poor dear Miss Crawley in supporting the shock—that Rebecca was an artful little hussy of whom she had always had her suspicions; and that as for Rawdon Crawley, she never could account for his aunt's infatuation regarding him, and had long considered him a profligate, lost, and abandoned being. And this awful conduct, Mrs. Bute said, will have at least this good effect, it will open poor dear Miss Crawley's eyes to the real character of this wicked man. Then Mrs. Bute had a comfortable hot toast and tea; and as there was a vacant room in the house now, there was no need for her to remain at the Gloster Coffee House where the Portsmouth mail had set her down, and whence she ordered Mr. Bowls's aide-de-camp the footman to bring away her trunks.

Miss Crawley, be it known, did not leave her room until near noon—taking chocolate in bed in the morning, while Becky Sharp read the Morning Post to her, or otherwise amusing herself or dawdling. The conspirators below agreed that they would spare the dear lady's feelings until she appeared in her drawing-room: meanwhile it was announced to

her that Mrs. Bute Crawley had come up from Hampshire by the mail, was staying at the Gloster, sent her love to Miss Crawley, and asked for breakfast with Miss Briggs. The arrival of Mrs. Bute, which would not have caused any extreme delight at another period, was hailed with pleasure now; Miss Crawley being pleased at the notion of a gossip with her sister-in-law regarding the late Lady Crawley, the funeral arrangements pending, and Sir Pitt's abrupt proposal to Rebecca.

It was not until the old lady was fairly ensconced in her usual arm-chair in the drawing-room, and the preliminary embraces and inquiries had taken place between the ladies, that the conspirators thought it advisable to submit her to the operation. Who has not admired the artifices and delicate approaches with which women "prepare" their friends for bad news? Miss Crawley's two friends made such an apparatus of mystery before they broke the intelligence to her, that they worked her up to the necessary degree of doubt and alarm.

"And she refused Sir Pitt, my dear, dear Miss Crawley, prepare yourself for it," Mrs. Bute said, "because—because she couldn't help herself."

"Of course there was a reason," Miss Crawley answered. "She liked somebody else. I told Briggs so yesterday."

"LIKES somebody else!" Briggs gasped. "O my dear friend, she is married already."

"Married already," Mrs. Bute chimed in; and both sate with clasped hands looking from each other at their victim.

"Send her to me, the instant she comes in. The little sly wretch: how dared she not tell me?" cried out Miss Crawley.

"She won't come in soon. Prepare yourself, dear friend—she's gone out for a long time—she's—she's gone altogether."

"Gracious goodness, and who's to make my chocolate? Send for her and have her back; I desire that she come back," the old lady said.

"She decamped last night, Ma'am," cried Mrs. Bute.

“She left a letter for me,” Briggs exclaimed. “She’s married to—”

“Prepare her, for heaven’s sake. Don’t torture her, my dear Miss Briggs.”

“She’s married to whom?” cries the spinster in a nervous fury.

“To—to a relation of—”

“She refused Sir Pitt,” cried the victim. “Speak at once. Don’t drive me mad.”

“O Ma’am—prepare her, Miss Briggs—she’s married to Rawdon Crawley.”

“Rawdon married Rebecca—governess—nobod—Get out of my house, you fool, you idiot—you stupid old Briggs how dare you? You’re in the plot—you made him marry, thinking that I’d leave my money from him—you did, Martha,” the poor old lady screamed in hysteric sentences.

“I, Ma’am, ask a member of this family to marry a drawing-master’s daughter?”

“Her mother was a Montmorency,” cried out the old lady, pulling at the bell with all her might.

“Her mother was an opera girl, and she has been on the stage or worse herself,” said Mrs. Bute.

Miss Crawley gave a final scream, and fell back in a faint. They were forced to take her back to the room which she had just quitted. One fit of hysterics succeeded another. The doctor was sent for—the apothecary arrived. Mrs. Bute took up the post of nurse by her bedside. “Her relations ought to be round about her,” that amiable woman said.

She had scarcely been carried up to her room, when a new person arrived to whom it was also necessary to break the news. This was Sir Pitt. “Where’s Becky?” he said, coming in. “Where’s her traps? She’s coming with me to Queen’s Crawley.”

“Have you not heard the astonishing intelligence regarding her surreptitious union?” Briggs asked.

“What’s that to me?” Sir Pitt asked. “I know she’s married. That makes no odds. Tell her to come down at once, and not keep me.”

“Are you not aware, sir,” Miss Briggs asked, “that she has left our roof, to the dismay of Miss Crawley, who is nearly killed by the intelligence of Captain Rawdon’s union with her?”

When Sir Pitt Crawley heard that Rebecca was married to his son, he broke out into a fury of language, which it would do no good to repeat in this place, as indeed it sent poor Briggs shuddering out of the room; and with her we will shut the door upon the figure of the frenzied old man, wild with hatred and insane with baffled desire.

One day after he went to Queen’s Crawley, he burst like a madman into the room she had used when there—dashed open her boxes with his foot, and flung about her papers, clothes, and other relics. Miss Horrocks, the butler’s daughter, took some of them. The children dressed themselves and acted plays in the others. It was but a few days after the poor mother had gone to her lonely burying-place; and was laid, unwept and disregarded, in a vault full of strangers.

“Suppose the old lady doesn’t come to,” Rawdon said to his little wife, as they sate together in the snug little Brompton lodgings. She had been trying the new piano all the morning. The new gloves fitted her to a nicety; the new shawls became her wonderfully; the new rings glittered on her little hands, and the new watch ticked at her waist; “suppose she don’t come round, eh, Becky?”

“I’ll make your fortune,” she said; and Delilah patted Samson’s cheek.

“You can do anything,” he said, kissing the little hand. “By Jove you can; and we’ll drive down to the Star and Garter, and dine, by Jove.”