

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 41

"In Which Becky Revisits the Halls of Her Ancestors"

So the mourning being ready, and Sir Pitt Crawley warned of their arrival, Colonel Crawley and his wife took a couple of places in the same old High-flyer coach by which Rebecca had travelled in the defunct Baronet's company, on her first journey into the world some nine years before. How well she remembered the Inn Yard, and the ostler to whom she refused money, and the insinuating Cambridge lad who wrapped her in his coat on the journey! Rawdon took his place outside, and would have liked to drive, but his grief forbade him. He sat by the coachman and talked about horses and the road the whole way; and who kept the inns, and who horsed the coach by which he had travelled so many a time, when he and Pitt were boys going to Eton. At Mudbury a carriage and a pair of horses received them, with a coachman in black. "It's the old drag, Rawdon," Rebecca said as they got in. "The worms have eaten the cloth a good deal— there's the stain which Sir Pitt—ha! I see Dawson the Ironmonger has his shutters up—which Sir Pitt made such a noise about. It was a bottle of cherry brandy he broke which we went to fetch for your aunt from Southampton. How time flies, to be sure! That can't be Polly Talboys, that bouncing girl standing by her mother at the cottage there. I remember her a mangy little urchin picking weeds in the garden."

"Fine gal," said Rawdon, returning the salute which the cottage gave him, by two fingers applied to his crape hatband. Becky bowed and saluted, and recognized people here and there graciously. These recognitions were inexpressibly pleasant to her. It seemed as if she was not an imposter any more, and was coming to the home of her ancestors. Rawdon was rather abashed and cast down, on the other hand. What recollections of boyhood and innocence might have been flitting across his brain? What pangs of dim remorse and doubt and shame?

"Your sisters must be young women now," Rebecca said, thinking of those girls for the first time perhaps since she had left them.

"Don't know, I'm shaw," replied the Colonel. "Hullo! here's old Mother

Lock. How-dy-do, Mrs. Lock? Remember me, don't you? Master Rawdon, hey? Dammy how those old women last; she was a hundred when I was a boy."

They were going through the lodge-gates kept by old Mrs. Lock, whose hand Rebecca insisted upon shaking, as she flung open the creaking old iron gate, and the carriage passed between the two moss-grown pillars surmounted by the dove and serpent.

"The governor has cut into the timber," Rawdon said, looking about, and then was silent—so was Becky. Both of them were rather agitated, and thinking of old times. He about Eton, and his mother, whom he remembered, a frigid demure woman, and a sister who died, of whom he had been passionately fond; and how he used to thrash Pitt; and about little Rawdy at home. And Rebecca thought about her own youth and the dark secrets of those early tainted days; and of her entrance into life by yonder gates; and of Miss Pinkerton, and Joe, and Amelia.

The gravel walk and terrace had been scraped quite clean. A grand painted hatchment was already over the great entrance, and two very solemn and tall personages in black flung open each a leaf of the door as the carriage pulled up at the familiar steps. Rawdon turned red, and Becky somewhat pale, as they passed through the old hall, arm in arm. She pinched her husband's arm as they entered the oak parlour, where Sir Pitt and his wife were ready to receive them. Sir Pitt in black, Lady Jane in black, and my Lady Southdown with a large black head-piece of bugles and feathers, which waved on her Ladyship's head like an undertaker's tray.

Sir Pitt had judged correctly, that she would not quit the premises. She contented herself by preserving a solemn and stony silence, when in company of Pitt and his rebellious wife, and by frightening the children in the nursery by the ghastly gloom of her demeanour. Only a very faint bending of the head-dress and plumes welcomed Rawdon and his wife, as those prodigals returned to their family.

To say the truth, they were not affected very much one way or other by this coolness. Her Ladyship was a person only of secondary consideration in their minds just then—they were intent upon the reception which the reigning brother and sister would afford them.

Pitt, with rather a heightened colour, went up and shook his brother by the hand, and saluted Rebecca with a hand-shake and a very low bow. But Lady Jane took both the hands of her sister-in-law and kissed her affectionately. The embrace somehow brought tears into the eyes of the little adventuress—which ornaments, as we know, she wore very seldom. The artless mark of kindness and confidence touched and pleased her; and Rawdon, encouraged by this demonstration on his sister's part, twirled up his mustachios and took leave to salute Lady Jane with a kiss, which caused her Ladyship to blush exceedingly.

“Dev’lish nice little woman, Lady Jane,” was his verdict, when he and his wife were together again. “Pitt’s got fat, too, and is doing the thing handsomely.” “He can afford it,” said Rebecca and agreed in her husband’s farther opinion “that the mother-in-law was a tremendous old Guy—and that the sisters were rather well-looking young women.”

They, too, had been summoned from school to attend the funeral ceremonies. It seemed Sir Pitt Crawley, for the dignity of the house and family, had thought right to have about the place as many persons in black as could possibly be assembled. All the men and maids of the house, the old women of the Alms House, whom the elder Sir Pitt had cheated out of a great portion of their due, the parish clerk’s family, and the special retainers of both Hall and Rectory were habited in sable; added to these, the undertaker’s men, at least a score, with crapes and hatbands, and who made goodly show when the great burying show took place—but these are mute personages in our drama; and having nothing to do or say, need occupy a very little space here.

With regard to her sisters-in-law Rebecca did not attempt to forget her former position of Governess towards them, but recalled it frankly and kindly, and asked them about their studies with great gravity, and told them that she had thought of them many and many a day, and longed to know of their welfare. In fact you would have supposed that ever since she had left them she had not ceased to keep them uppermost in her thoughts and to take the tenderest interest in their welfare. So supposed Lady Crawley herself and her young sisters.

“She’s hardly changed since eight years,” said Miss Rosalind to Miss Violet, as they were preparing for dinner.

“Those red-haired women look wonderfully well,” replied the other.

“Hers is much darker than it was; I think she must dye it,” Miss Rosalind added. “She is stouter, too, and altogether improved,” continued Miss Rosalind, who was disposed to be very fat.

“At least she gives herself no airs and remembers that she was our Governess once,” Miss Violet said, intimating that it befitted all governesses to keep their proper place, and forgetting altogether that she was granddaughter not only of Sir Walpole Crawley, but of Mr. Dawson of Mudbury, and so had a coal-scuttle in her scutcheon. There are other very well-meaning people whom one meets every day in Vanity Fair who are surely equally oblivious.

“It can’t be true what the girls at the Rectory said, that her mother was an opera-dancer—”

“A person can’t help their birth,” Rosalind replied with great liberality. “And I agree with our brother, that as she is in the family, of course we are bound to notice her. I am sure Aunt Bute need not talk; she wants to marry Kate to young Hooper, the wine-merchant, and absolutely asked him to come to the Rectory for orders.”

“I wonder whether Lady Southdown will go away, she looked very glum upon Mrs. Rawdon,” the other said.

“I wish she would. I won’t read the Washerwoman of Finchley Common,” vowed Violet; and so saying, and avoiding a passage at the end of which a certain coffin was placed with a couple of watchers, and lights perpetually burning in the closed room, these young women came down to the family dinner, for which the bell rang as usual.

But before this, Lady Jane conducted Rebecca to the apartments prepared for her, which, with the rest of the house, had assumed a very much improved appearance of order and comfort during Pitt’s regency, and here beholding that Mrs. Rawdon’s modest little trunks had arrived, and were placed in the bedroom and dressing-room adjoining, helped her to take off her neat black bonnet and cloak, and asked her sister-in-law in what more she could be useful.

“What I should like best,” said Rebecca, “would be to go to the nursery and see your dear little children.” On which the two ladies looked very kindly at each other and went to that apartment hand in hand.

Becky admired little Matilda, who was not quite four years old, as the most charming little love in the world; and the boy, a little fellow of two years—pale, heavy-eyed, and large-headed—she pronounced to be a perfect prodigy in point of size, intelligence, and beauty.

“I wish Mamma would not insist on giving him so much medicine,” Lady Jane said with a sigh. “I often think we should all be better without it.” And then Lady Jane and her new-found friend had one of those confidential medical conversations about the children, which all mothers, and most women, as I am given to understand, delight in. Fifty years ago, and when the present writer, being an interesting little boy, was ordered out of the room with the ladies after dinner, I remember quite well that their talk was chiefly about their ailments; and putting this question directly to two or three since, I have always got from them the acknowledgement that times are not changed. Let my fair readers remark for themselves this very evening when they quit the dessert-table and assemble to celebrate the drawing-room mysteries. Well—in half an hour Becky and Lady Jane were close and intimate friends—and in the course of the evening her Ladyship informed Sir Pitt that she thought her new sister-in-law was a kind, frank, unaffected, and affectionate young woman.

And so having easily won the daughter’s good-will, the indefatigable little woman bent herself to conciliate the august Lady Southdown. As soon as she found her Ladyship alone, Rebecca attacked her on the nursery question at once and said that her own little boy was saved, actually saved, by calomel, freely administered, when all the physicians in Paris had given the dear child up. And then she mentioned how often she had heard of Lady Southdown from that excellent man the Reverend Lawrence Grills, Minister of the chapel in May Fair, which she frequented; and how her views were very much changed by circumstances and misfortunes; and how she hoped that a past life spent in worldliness and error might not incapacitate her from more serious thought for the future. She described how in former days she had been indebted to Mr. Crawley for religious instruction, touched upon the Washerwoman of Finchley Common, which she had read with the

greatest profit, and asked about Lady Emily, its gifted author, now Lady Emily Hornblower, at Cape Town, where her husband had strong hopes of becoming Bishop of Caffraria.

But she crowned all, and confirmed herself in Lady Southdown's favour, by feeling very much agitated and unwell after the funeral and requesting her Ladyship's medical advice, which the Dowager not only gave, but, wrapped up in a bed-gown and looking more like Lady Macbeth than ever, came privately in the night to Becky's room with a parcel of favourite tracts, and a medicine of her own composition, which she insisted that Mrs. Rawdon should take.

Becky first accepted the tracts and began to examine them with great interest, engaging the Dowager in a conversation concerning them and the welfare of her soul, by which means she hoped that her body might escape medication. But after the religious topics were exhausted, Lady Macbeth would not quit Becky's chamber until her cup of night-drink was emptied too; and poor Mrs. Rawdon was compelled actually to assume a look of gratitude, and to swallow the medicine under the unyielding old Dowager's nose, who left her victim finally with a benediction.

It did not much comfort Mrs. Rawdon; her countenance was very queer when Rawdon came in and heard what had happened; and, his explosions of laughter were as loud as usual, when Becky, with a fun which she could not disguise, even though it was at her own expense, described the occurrence and how she had been victimized by Lady Southdown. Lord Steyne, and her son in London, had many a laugh over the story when Rawdon and his wife returned to their quarters in May Fair. Becky acted the whole scene for them. She put on a night-cap and gown. She preached a great sermon in the true serious manner; she lectured on the virtue of the medicine which she pretended to administer, with a gravity of imitation so perfect that you would have thought it was the Countess's own Roman nose through which she snuffled. "Give us Lady Southdown and the black dose," was a constant cry amongst the folks in Becky's little drawing-room in May Fair. And for the first time in her life the Dowager Countess of Southdown was made amusing.

Sir Pitt remembered the testimonies of respect and veneration which Rebecca had paid personally to himself in early days, and was tolerably

well disposed towards her. The marriage, ill-advised as it was, had improved Rawdon very much—that was clear from the Colonel's altered habits and demeanour—and had it not been a lucky union as regarded Pitt himself? The cunning diplomatist smiled inwardly as he owned that he owed his fortune to it, and acknowledged that he at least ought not to cry out against it. His satisfaction was not removed by Rebecca's own statements, behaviour, and conversation.

She doubled the deference which before had charmed him, calling out his conversational powers in such a manner as quite to surprise Pitt himself, who, always inclined to respect his own talents, admired them the more when Rebecca pointed them out to him. With her sister-in-law, Rebecca was satisfactorily able to prove that it was Mrs. Bute Crawley who brought about the marriage which she afterwards so calumniated; that it was Mrs. Bute's avarice—who hoped to gain all Miss Crawley's fortune and deprive Rawdon of his aunt's favour—which caused and invented all the wicked reports against Rebecca. “She succeeded in making us poor,” Rebecca said with an air of angelical patience; “but how can I be angry with a woman who has given me one of the best husbands in the world? And has not her own avarice been sufficiently punished by the ruin of her own hopes and the loss of the property by which she set so much store? Poor!” she cried. “Dear Lady Jane, what care we for poverty? I am used to it from childhood, and I am often thankful that Miss Crawley's money has gone to restore the splendour of the noble old family of which I am so proud to be a member. I am sure Sir Pitt will make a much better use of it than Rawdon would.”

All these speeches were reported to Sir Pitt by the most faithful of wives, and increased the favourable impression which Rebecca made; so much so that when, on the third day after the funeral, the family party were at dinner, Sir Pitt Crawley, carving fowls at the head of the table, actually said to Mrs. Rawdon, “Ahem! Rebecca, may I give you a wing?”—a speech which made the little woman's eyes sparkle with pleasure.

While Rebecca was prosecuting the above schemes and hopes, and Pitt Crawley arranging the funeral ceremonial and other matters connected with his future progress and dignity, and Lady Jane busy with her nursery, as far as her mother would let her, and the sun rising and setting, and the clock-tower bell of the Hall ringing to dinner and to

prayers as usual, the body of the late owner of Queen's Crawley lay in the apartment which he had occupied, watched unceasingly by the professional attendants who were engaged for that rite. A woman or two, and three or four undertaker's men, the best whom Southampton could furnish, dressed in black, and of a proper stealthy and tragical demeanour, had charge of the remains which they watched turn about, having the housekeeper's room for their place of rendezvous when off duty, where they played at cards in privacy and drank their beer.

The members of the family and servants of the house kept away from the gloomy spot, where the bones of the descendant of an ancient line of knights and gentlemen lay, awaiting their final consignment to the family crypt. No regrets attended them, save those of the poor woman who had hoped to be Sir Pitt's wife and widow and who had fled in disgrace from the Hall over which she had so nearly been a ruler. Beyond her and a favourite old pointer he had, and between whom and himself an attachment subsisted during the period of his imbecility, the old man had not a single friend to mourn him, having indeed, during the whole course of his life, never taken the least pains to secure one. Could the best and kindest of us who depart from the earth have an opportunity of revisiting it, I suppose he or she (assuming that any Vanity Fair feelings subsist in the sphere whither we are bound) would have a pang of mortification at finding how soon our survivors were consoled. And so Sir Pitt was forgotten—like the kindest and best of us—only a few weeks sooner.

Those who will may follow his remains to the grave, whither they were borne on the appointed day, in the most becoming manner, the family in black coaches, with their handkerchiefs up to their noses, ready for the tears which did not come; the undertaker and his gentlemen in deep tribulation; the select tenantry mourning out of compliment to the new landlord; the neighbouring gentry's carriages at three miles an hour, empty, and in profound affliction; the parson speaking out the formula about "our dear brother departed." As long as we have a man's body, we play our Vanities upon it, surrounding it with humbug and ceremonies, laying it in state, and packing it up in gilt nails and velvet; and we finish our duty by placing over it a stone, written all over with lies. Bute's curate, a smart young fellow from Oxford, and Sir Pitt Crawley composed between them an appropriate Latin epitaph for the late lamented Baronet, and the former preached a classical sermon, exhorting

the survivors not to give way to grief and informing them in the most respectful terms that they also would be one day called upon to pass that gloomy and mysterious portal which had just closed upon the remains of their lamented brother. Then the tenantry mounted on horseback again, or stayed and refreshed themselves at the Crawley Arms. Then, after a lunch in the servants' hall at Queen's Crawley, the gentry's carriages wheeled off to their different destinations: then the undertaker's men, taking the ropes, palls, velvets, ostrich feathers, and other mortuary properties, clambered up on the roof of the hearse and rode off to Southampton. Their faces relapsed into a natural expression as the horses, clearing the lodge-gates, got into a brisker trot on the open road; and squads of them might have been seen, speckling with black the public-house entrances, with pewter-pots flashing in the sunshine. Sir Pitt's invalid chair was wheeled away into a tool-house in the garden; the old pointer used to howl sometimes at first, but these were the only accents of grief which were heard in the Hall of which Sir Pitt Crawley, Baronet, had been master for some threescore years.

As the birds were pretty plentiful, and partridge shooting is as it were the duty of an English gentleman of statesmanlike propensities, Sir Pitt Crawley, the first shock of grief over, went out a little and partook of that diversion in a white hat with crape round it. The sight of those fields of stubble and turnips, now his own, gave him many secret joys. Sometimes, and with an exquisite humility, he took no gun, but went out with a peaceful bamboo cane; Rawdon, his big brother, and the keepers blazing away at his side. Pitt's money and acres had a great effect upon his brother. The penniless Colonel became quite obsequious and respectful to the head of his house, and despised the milksop Pitt no longer. Rawdon listened with sympathy to his senior's prospects of planting and draining, gave his advice about the stables and cattle, rode over to Mudbury to look at a mare, which he thought would carry Lady Jane, and offered to break her, &c.: the rebellious dragoon was quite humbled and subdued, and became a most creditable younger brother. He had constant bulletins from Miss Briggs in London respecting little Rawdon, who was left behind there, who sent messages of his own. "I am very well," he wrote. "I hope you are very well. I hope Mamma is very well. The pony is very well. Grey takes me to ride in the park. I can canter. I met the little boy who rode before. He cried when he cantered. I do not cry." Rawdon read these letters to his brother and Lady Jane, who was delighted with them. The Baronet promised to take charge of the lad

at school, and his kind-hearted wife gave Rebecca a bank-note, begging her to buy a present with it for her little nephew.

One day followed another, and the ladies of the house passed their life in those calm pursuits and amusements which satisfy country ladies. Bells rang to meals and to prayers. The young ladies took exercise on the pianoforte every morning after breakfast, Rebecca giving them the benefit of her instruction. Then they put on thick shoes and walked in the park or shrubberies, or beyond the palings into the village, descending upon the cottages, with Lady Southdown's medicine and tracts for the sick people there. Lady Southdown drove out in a pony-chaise, when Rebecca would take her place by the Dowager's side and listen to her solemn talk with the utmost interest. She sang Handel and Haydn to the family of evenings, and engaged in a large piece of worsted work, as if she had been born to the business and as if this kind of life was to continue with her until she should sink to the grave in a polite old age, leaving regrets and a great quantity of consols behind her—as if there were not cares and duns, schemes, shifts, and poverty waiting outside the park gates, to pounce upon her when she issued into the world again.

“It isn't difficult to be a country gentleman's wife,” Rebecca thought. “I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year. I could dawdle about in the nursery and count the apricots on the wall. I could water plants in a green-house and pick off dead leaves from the geraniums. I could ask old women about their rheumatisms and order half-a-crown's worth of soup for the poor. I shouldn't miss it much, out of five thousand a year. I could even drive out ten miles to dine at a neighbour's, and dress in the fashions of the year before last. I could go to church and keep awake in the great family pew, or go to sleep behind the curtains, with my veil down, if I only had practice. I could pay everybody, if I had but the money. This is what the conjurors here pride themselves upon doing. They look down with pity upon us miserable sinners who have none. They think themselves generous if they give our children a five-pound note, and us contemptible if we are without one.” And who knows but Rebecca was right in her speculations—and that it was only a question of money and fortune which made the difference between her and an honest woman? If you take temptations into account, who is to say that he is better than his neighbour? A comfortable career of prosperity, if it does not make people honest, at least keeps them so.

An alderman coming from a turtle feast will not step out of his carnage to steal a leg of mutton; but put him to starve, and see if he will not purloin a loaf. Becky consoled herself by so balancing the chances and equalizing the distribution of good and evil in the world.

The old haunts, the old fields and woods, the copses, ponds, and gardens, the rooms of the old house where she had spent a couple of years seven years ago, were all carefully revisited by her. She had been young there, or comparatively so, for she forgot the time when she ever was young—but she remembered her thoughts and feelings seven years back and contrasted them with those which she had at present, now that she had seen the world, and lived with great people, and raised herself far beyond her original humble station.

“I have passed beyond it, because I have brains,” Becky thought, “and almost all the rest of the world are fools. I could not go back and consort with those people now, whom I used to meet in my father’s studio. Lords come up to my door with stars and garters, instead of poor artists with screws of tobacco in their pockets. I have a gentleman for my husband, and an Earl’s daughter for my sister, in the very house where I was little better than a servant a few years ago. But am I much better to do now in the world than I was when I was the poor painter’s daughter and wheedled the grocer round the corner for sugar and tea? Suppose I had married Francis who was so fond of me—I couldn’t have been much poorer than I am now. Heigho! I wish I could exchange my position in society, and all my relations for a snug sum in the Three Per Cent. Consols”; for so it was that Becky felt the Vanity of human affairs, and it was in those securities that she would have liked to cast anchor.

It may, perhaps, have struck her that to have been honest and humble, to have done her duty, and to have marched straightforward on her way, would have brought her as near happiness as that path by which she was striving to attain it. But—just as the children at Queen’s Crawley went round the room where the body of their father lay—if ever Becky had these thoughts, she was accustomed to walk round them and not look in. She eluded them and despised them—or at least she was committed to the other path from which retreat was now impossible. And for my part I believe that remorse is the least active of all a man’s moral senses—the very easiest to be deadened when wakened, and in some never wakened at all. We grieve at being found out and at the idea of shame or

punishment, but the mere sense of wrong makes very few people unhappy in Vanity Fair.

So Rebecca, during her stay at Queen's Crawley, made as many friends of the Mammon of Unrighteousness as she could possibly bring under control. Lady Jane and her husband bade her farewell with the warmest demonstrations of good-will. They looked forward with pleasure to the time when, the family house in Gaunt Street being repaired and beautified, they were to meet again in London. Lady Southdown made her up a packet of medicine and sent a letter by her to the Rev. Lawrence Grills, exhorting that gentleman to save the brand who "honoured" the letter from the burning. Pitt accompanied them with four horses in the carriage to Mudbury, having sent on their baggage in a cart previously, accompanied with loads of game.

"How happy you will be to see your darling little boy again!" Lady Crawley said, taking leave of her kinswoman.

"Oh so happy!" said Rebecca, throwing up the green eyes. She was immensely happy to be free of the place, and yet loath to go. Queen's Crawley was abominably stupid, and yet the air there was somehow purer than that which she had been accustomed to breathe. Everybody had been dull, but had been kind in their way. "It is all the influence of a long course of Three Per Cents," Becky said to herself, and was right very likely.

However, the London lamps flashed joyfully as the stage rolled into Piccadilly, and Briggs had made a beautiful fire in Curzon Street, and little Rawdon was up to welcome back his papa and mamma.