

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 48

"In Which the Reader Is Introduced to the Very Best of Company"

At last Becky's kindness and attention to the chief of her husband's family were destined to meet with an exceeding great reward, a reward which, though certainly somewhat unsubstantial, the little woman coveted with greater eagerness than more positive benefits. If she did not wish to lead a virtuous life, at least she desired to enjoy a character for virtue, and we know that no lady in the genteel world can possess this desideratum, until she has put on a train and feathers and has been presented to her Sovereign at Court. From that august interview they come out stamped as honest women. The Lord Chamberlain gives them a certificate of virtue. And as dubious goods or letters are passed through an oven at quarantine, sprinkled with aromatic vinegar, and then pronounced clean, many a lady, whose reputation would be doubtful otherwise and liable to give infection, passes through the wholesome ordeal of the Royal presence and issues from it free from all taint.

It might be very well for my Lady Bareacres, my Lady Tufto, Mrs. Bute Crawley in the country, and other ladies who had come into contact with Mrs. Rawdon Crawley to cry fie at the idea of the odious little adventuress making her curtsy before the Sovereign, and to declare that, if dear good Queen Charlotte had been alive, she never would have admitted such an extremely ill-regulated personage into her chaste drawing-room. But when we consider that it was the First Gentleman in Europe in whose high presence Mrs. Rawdon passed her examination, and as it were, took her degree in reputation, it surely must be flat disloyalty to doubt any more about her virtue. I, for my part, look back with love and awe to that Great Character in history. Ah, what a high and noble appreciation of Gentlewomanhood there must have been in *Vanity Fair*, when that revered and august being was invested, by the universal acclaim of the refined and educated portion of this empire, with the title of Premier Gentilhomme of his Kingdom. Do you remember, dear M—, oh friend of my youth, how one blissful night five-and-twenty years since, the "Hypocrite" being acted, Elliston being manager, Downton and Liston performers, two boys had leave from their loyal masters to go out from Slaughter-House School where they were

educated and to appear on Drury Lane stage, amongst a crowd which assembled there to greet the king. The king? There he was. Beefeaters were before the august box; the Marquis of Steyne (Lord of the Powder Closet) and other great officers of state were behind the chair on which he sat, he sat—florid of face, portly of person, covered with orders, and in a rich curling head of hair—how we sang God save him! How the house rocked and shouted with that magnificent music. How they cheered, and cried, and waved handkerchiefs. Ladies wept; mothers clasped their children; some fainted with emotion. People were suffocated in the pit, shrieks and groans rising up amidst the writhing and shouting mass there of his people who were, and indeed showed themselves almost to be, ready to die for him. Yes, we saw him. Fate cannot deprive us of that. Others have seen Napoleon. Some few still exist who have beheld Frederick the Great, Doctor Johnson, Marie Antoinette, &c.—be it our reasonable boast to our children, that we saw George the Good, the Magnificent, the Great.

Well, there came a happy day in Mrs. Rawdon Crawley's existence when this angel was admitted into the paradise of a Court which she coveted, her sister-in-law acting as her godmother. On the appointed day, Sir Pitt and his lady, in their great family carriage (just newly built, and ready for the Baronet's assumption of the office of High Sheriff of his county), drove up to the little house in Curzon Street, to the edification of Raggles, who was watching from his greengrocer's shop, and saw fine plumes within, and enormous bunches of flowers in the breasts of the new livery-coats of the footmen.

Sir Pitt, in a glittering uniform, descended and went into Curzon Street, his sword between his legs. Little Rawdon stood with his face against the parlour window-panes, smiling and nodding with all his might to his aunt in the carriage within; and presently Sir Pitt issued forth from the house again, leading forth a lady with grand feathers, covered in a white shawl, and holding up daintily a train of magnificent brocade. She stepped into the vehicle as if she were a princess and accustomed all her life to go to Court, smiling graciously on the footman at the door and on Sir Pitt, who followed her into the carriage.

Then Rawdon followed in his old Guards' uniform, which had grown woefully shabby, and was much too tight. He was to have followed the procession and waited upon his sovereign in a cab, but that his good-

natured sister-in-law insisted that they should be a family party. The coach was large, the ladies not very big, they would hold their trains in their laps—finally, the four went fraternally together, and their carriage presently joined the line of royal equipages which was making its way down Piccadilly and St. James's Street, towards the old brick palace where the Star of Brunswick was in waiting to receive his nobles and gentlefolks.

Becky felt as if she could bless the people out of the carriage windows, so elated was she in spirit, and so strong a sense had she of the dignified position which she had at last attained in life. Even our Becky had her weaknesses, and as one often sees how men pride themselves upon excellences which others are slow to perceive: how, for instance, Comus firmly believes that he is the greatest tragic actor in England; how Brown, the famous novelist, longs to be considered, not a man of genius, but a man of fashion; while Robinson, the great lawyer, does not in the least care about his reputation in Westminster Hall, but believes himself incomparable across country and at a five-barred gate—so to be, and to be thought, a respectable woman was Becky's aim in life, and she got up the genteel with amazing assiduity, readiness, and success. We have said, there were times when she believed herself to be a fine lady and forgot that there was no money in the chest at home—duns round the gate, tradesmen to coax and wheedle—no ground to walk upon, in a word. And as she went to Court in the carriage, the family carriage, she adopted a demeanour so grand, self-satisfied, deliberate, and imposing that it made even Lady Jane laugh. She walked into the royal apartments with a toss of the head which would have befitted an empress, and I have no doubt had she been one, she would have become the character perfectly.

We are authorized to state that Mrs. Rawdon Crawley's costume de cour on the occasion of her presentation to the Sovereign was of the most elegant and brilliant description. Some ladies we may have seen—we who wear stars and cordons and attend the St. James's assemblies, or we, who, in muddy boots, dawdle up and down Pall Mall and peep into the coaches as they drive up with the great folks in their feathers—some ladies of fashion, I say, we may have seen, about two o'clock of the forenoon of a levee day, as the laced-jacketed band of the Life Guards are blowing triumphal marches seated on those prancing music-stools, their cream-coloured chargers—who are by no means lovely and enticing

objects at that early period of noon. A stout countess of sixty, décolletée, painted, wrinkled with rouge up to her drooping eyelids, and diamonds twinkling in her wig, is a wholesome and edifying, but not a pleasant sight. She has the faded look of a St. James's Street illumination, as it may be seen of an early morning, when half the lamps are out, and the others are blinking wanly, as if they were about to vanish like ghosts before the dawn. Such charms as those of which we catch glimpses while her ladyship's carriage passes should appear abroad at night alone. If even Cynthia looks haggard of an afternoon, as we may see her sometimes in the present winter season, with Phoebus staring her out of countenance from the opposite side of the heavens, how much more can old Lady Castlemouldy keep her head up when the sun is shining full upon it through the chariot windows, and showing all the chinks and crannies with which time has marked her face! No. Drawing-rooms should be announced for November, or the first foggy day, or the elderly sultanas of our Vanity Fair should drive up in closed litters, descend in a covered way, and make their curtsy to the Sovereign under the protection of lamplight.

Our beloved Rebecca had no need, however, of any such a friendly halo to set off her beauty. Her complexion could bear any sunshine as yet, and her dress, though if you were to see it now, any present lady of Vanity Fair would pronounce it to be the most foolish and preposterous attire ever worn, was as handsome in her eyes and those of the public, some five-and-twenty years since, as the most brilliant costume of the most famous beauty of the present season. A score of years hence that too, that milliner's wonder, will have passed into the domain of the absurd, along with all previous vanities. But we are wandering too much. Mrs. Rawdon's dress was pronounced to be charmante on the eventful day of her presentation. Even good little Lady Jane was forced to acknowledge this effect, as she looked at her kinswoman, and owned sorrowfully to herself that she was quite inferior in taste to Mrs. Becky.

She did not know how much care, thought, and genius Mrs. Rawdon had bestowed upon that garment. Rebecca had as good taste as any milliner in Europe, and such a clever way of doing things as Lady Jane little understood. The latter quickly spied out the magnificence of the brocade of Becky's train, and the splendour of the lace on her dress.

The brocade was an old remnant, Becky said; and as for the lace, it was

a great bargain. She had had it these hundred years.

“My dear Mrs. Crawley, it must have cost a little fortune,” Lady Jane said, looking down at her own lace, which was not nearly so good; and then examining the quality of the ancient brocade which formed the material of Mrs. Rawdon’s Court dress, she felt inclined to say that she could not afford such fine clothing, but checked that speech, with an effort, as one uncharitable to her kinswoman.

And yet, if Lady Jane had known all, I think even her kindly temper would have failed her. The fact is, when she was putting Sir Pitt’s house in order, Mrs. Rawdon had found the lace and the brocade in old wardrobes, the property of the former ladies of the house, and had quietly carried the goods home, and had suited them to her own little person. Briggs saw her take them, asked no questions, told no stories; but I believe quite sympathised with her on this matter, and so would many another honest woman.

And the diamonds—”Where the doose did you get the diamonds, Becky?” said her husband, admiring some jewels which he had never seen before and which sparkled in her ears and on her neck with brilliance and profusion.

Becky blushed a little and looked at him hard for a moment. Pitt Crawley blushed a little too, and looked out of window. The fact is, he had given her a very small portion of the brilliants; a pretty diamond clasp, which confined a pearl necklace which she wore—and the Baronet had omitted to mention the circumstance to his lady.

Becky looked at her husband, and then at Sir Pitt, with an air of saucy triumph—as much as to say, “Shall I betray you?”

“Guess!” she said to her husband. “Why, you silly man,” she continued, “where do you suppose I got them?—all except the little clasp, which a dear friend of mine gave me long ago. I hired them, to be sure. I hired them at Mr. Polonius’s, in Coventry Street. You don’t suppose that all the diamonds which go to Court belong to the wearers; like those beautiful stones which Lady Jane has, and which are much handsomer than any which I have, I am certain.”

“They are family jewels,” said Sir Pitt, again looking uneasy. And in this family conversation the carriage rolled down the street, until its cargo was finally discharged at the gates of the palace where the Sovereign was sitting in state.

The diamonds, which had created Rawdon’s admiration, never went back to Mr. Polonius, of Coventry Street, and that gentleman never applied for their restoration, but they retired into a little private repository, in an old desk, which Amelia Sedley had given her years and years ago, and in which Becky kept a number of useful and, perhaps, valuable things, about which her husband knew nothing. To know nothing, or little, is in the nature of some husbands. To hide, in the nature of how many women? Oh, ladies! how many of you have surreptitious milliners’ bills? How many of you have gowns and bracelets which you daren’t show, or which you wear trembling?—trembling, and coaxing with smiles the husband by your side, who does not know the new velvet gown from the old one, or the new bracelet from last year’s, or has any notion that the ragged-looking yellow lace scarf cost forty guineas and that Madame Bobinot is writing dunning letters every week for the money!

Thus Rawdon knew nothing about the brilliant diamond ear-rings, or the superb brilliant ornament which decorated the fair bosom of his lady; but Lord Steyne, who was in his place at Court, as Lord of the Powder Closet, and one of the great dignitaries and illustrious defences of the throne of England, and came up with all his stars, garters, collars, and cordons, and paid particular attention to the little woman, knew whence the jewels came and who paid for them.

As he bowed over her he smiled, and quoted the hackneyed and beautiful lines from *The Rape of the Lock* about Belinda’s diamonds, “which Jews might kiss and infidels adore.”

“But I hope your lordship is orthodox,” said the little lady with a toss of her head. And many ladies round about whispered and talked, and many gentlemen nodded and whispered, as they saw what marked attention the great nobleman was paying to the little adventuress.

What were the circumstances of the interview between Rebecca Crawley, nee Sharp, and her Imperial Master, it does not become such a

feeble and inexperienced pen as mine to attempt to relate. The dazzled eyes close before that Magnificent Idea. Loyal respect and decency tell even the imagination not to look too keenly and audaciously about the sacred audience-chamber, but to back away rapidly, silently, and respectfully, making profound bows out of the August Presence.

This may be said, that in all London there was no more loyal heart than Becky's after this interview. The name of her king was always on her lips, and he was proclaimed by her to be the most charming of men. She went to Colnaghi's and ordered the finest portrait of him that art had produced, and credit could supply. She chose that famous one in which the best of monarchs is represented in a frock-coat with a fur collar, and breeches and silk stockings, simpering on a sofa from under his curly brown wig. She had him painted in a brooch and wore it—indeed she amused and somewhat pestered her acquaintance with her perpetual talk about his urbanity and beauty. Who knows! Perhaps the little woman thought she might play the part of a Maintenon or a Pompadour.

But the finest sport of all after her presentation was to hear her talk virtuously. She had a few female acquaintances, not, it must be owned, of the very highest reputation in Vanity Fair. But being made an honest woman of, so to speak, Becky would not consort any longer with these dubious ones, and cut Lady Crackenbury when the latter nodded to her from her opera-box, and gave Mrs. Washington White the go-by in the Ring. "One must, my dear, show one is somebody," she said. "One mustn't be seen with doubtful people. I pity Lady Crackenbury from my heart, and Mrs. Washington White may be a very good-natured person. You may go and dine with them, as you like your rubber. But I mustn't, and won't; and you will have the goodness to tell Smith to say I am not at home when either of them calls."

The particulars of Becky's costume were in the newspapers—feathers, lappets, superb diamonds, and all the rest. Lady Crackenbury read the paragraph in bitterness of spirit and discoursed to her followers about the airs which that woman was giving herself. Mrs. Bute Crawley and her young ladies in the country had a copy of the Morning Post from town, and gave a vent to their honest indignation. "If you had been sandy-haired, green-eyed, and a French rope-dancer's daughter," Mrs. Bute said to her eldest girl (who, on the contrary, was a very swarthy, short, and snub-nosed young lady), "You might have had superb diamonds

forsooth, and have been presented at Court by your cousin, the Lady Jane. But you're only a gentlewoman, my poor dear child. You have only some of the best blood in England in your veins, and good principles and piety for your portion. I, myself, the wife of a Baronet's younger brother, too, never thought of such a thing as going to Court—nor would other people, if good Queen Charlotte had been alive.” In this way the worthy Rectoress consoled herself, and her daughters sighed and sat over the Peerage all night.

A few days after the famous presentation, another great and exceeding honour was vouchsafed to the virtuous Becky. Lady Steyne's carriage drove up to Mr. Rawdon Crawley's door, and the footman, instead of driving down the front of the house, as by his tremendous knocking he appeared to be inclined to do, relented and only delivered in a couple of cards, on which were engraven the names of the Marchioness of Steyne and the Countess of Gaunt. If these bits of pasteboard had been beautiful pictures, or had had a hundred yards of Malines lace rolled round them, worth twice the number of guineas, Becky could not have regarded them with more pleasure. You may be sure they occupied a conspicuous place in the china bowl on the drawing-room table, where Becky kept the cards of her visitors. Lord! lord! how poor Mrs. Washington White's card and Lady Crackenbury's card—which our little friend had been glad enough to get a few months back, and of which the silly little creature was rather proud once—Lord! lord! I say, how soon at the appearance of these grand court cards, did those poor little neglected deuces sink down to the bottom of the pack. Steyne! Bareacres, Johnes of Helvellyn! and Caerylon of Camelot! we may be sure that Becky and Briggs looked out those august names in the Peerage, and followed the noble races up through all the ramifications of the family tree.

My Lord Steyne coming to call a couple of hours afterwards, and looking about him, and observing everything as was his wont, found his ladies' cards already ranged as the trumps of Becky's hand, and grinned, as this old cynic always did at any naive display of human weakness. Becky came down to him presently; whenever the dear girl expected his lordship, her toilette was prepared, her hair in perfect order, her mouchoirs, aprons, scarfs, little morocco slippers, and other female gimcracks arranged, and she seated in some artless and agreeable posture ready to receive him—whenever she was surprised, of course, she had to fly to her apartment to take a rapid survey of matters in the glass,

and to trip down again to wait upon the great peer.

She found him grinning over the bowl. She was discovered, and she blushed a little. “Thank you, Monseigneur,” she said. “You see your ladies have been here. How good of you! I couldn’t come before—I was in the kitchen making a pudding.”

“I know you were, I saw you through the area-railings as I drove up,” replied the old gentleman.

“You see everything,” she replied.

“A few things, but not that, my pretty lady,” he said good-naturedly. “You silly little fibster! I heard you in the room overhead, where I have no doubt you were putting a little rouge on— you must give some of yours to my Lady Gaunt, whose complexion is quite preposterous—and I heard the bedroom door open, and then you came downstairs.”

“Is it a crime to try and look my best when you come here?” answered Mrs. Rawdon plaintively, and she rubbed her cheek with her handkerchief as if to show there was no rouge at all, only genuine blushes and modesty in her case. About this who can tell? I know there is some rouge that won’t come off on a pocket-handkerchief, and some so good that even tears will not disturb it.

“Well,” said the old gentleman, twiddling round his wife’s card, “you are bent on becoming a fine lady. You pester my poor old life out to get you into the world. You won’t be able to hold your own there, you silly little fool. You’ve got no money.”

“You will get us a place,” interposed Becky, “as quick as possible.”

“You’ve got no money, and you want to compete with those who have. You poor little earthenware pipkin, you want to swim down the stream along with the great copper kettles. All women are alike. Everybody is striving for what is not worth the having! Gad! I dined with the King yesterday, and we had neck of mutton and turnips. A dinner of herbs is better than a stalled ox very often. You will go to Gaunt House. You give an old fellow no rest until you get there. It’s not half so nice as here. You’ll be bored there. I am. My wife is as gay as Lady Macbeth,

and my daughters as cheerful as Regan and Goneril. I daren't sleep in what they call my bedroom. The bed is like the baldaquin of St. Peter's, and the pictures frighten me. I have a little brass bed in a dressing-room, and a little hair mattress like an anchorite. I am an anchorite. Ho! ho! You'll be asked to dinner next week. And gare aux femmes, look out and hold your own! How the women will bully you!" This was a very long speech for a man of few words like my Lord Steyne; nor was it the first which he uttered for Becky's benefit on that day.

Briggs looked up from the work-table at which she was seated in the farther room and gave a deep sigh as she heard the great Marquis speak so lightly of her sex.

"If you don't turn off that abominable sheep-dog," said Lord Steyne, with a savage look over his shoulder at her, "I will have her poisoned."

"I always give my dog dinner from my own plate," said Rebecca, laughing mischievously; and having enjoyed for some time the discomfiture of my lord, who hated poor Briggs for interrupting his tete-a-tete with the fair Colonel's wife, Mrs. Rawdon at length had pity upon her admirer, and calling to Briggs, praised the fineness of the weather to her and bade her to take out the child for a walk.

"I can't send her away," Becky said presently, after a pause, and in a very sad voice. Her eyes filled with tears as she spoke, and she turned away her head.

"You owe her her wages, I suppose?" said the Peer.

"Worse than that," said Becky, still casting down her eyes; "I have ruined her."

"Ruined her? Then why don't you turn her out?" the gentleman asked.

"Men do that," Becky answered bitterly. "Women are not so bad as you. Last year, when we were reduced to our last guinea, she gave us everything. She shall never leave me, until we are ruined utterly ourselves, which does not seem far off, or until I can pay her the utmost farthing."

”–it, how much is it?” said the Peer with an oath. And Becky, reflecting on the largeness of his means, mentioned not only the sum which she had borrowed from Miss Briggs, but one of nearly double the amount.

This caused the Lord Steyne to break out in another brief and energetic expression of anger, at which Rebecca held down her head the more and cried bitterly. “I could not help it. It was my only chance. I dare not tell my husband. He would kill me if I told him what I have done. I have kept it a secret from everybody but you– and you forced it from me. Ah, what shall I do, Lord Steyne? for I am very, very unhappy!”

Lord Steyne made no reply except by beating the devil’s tattoo and biting his nails. At last he clapped his hat on his head and flung out of the room. Rebecca did not rise from her attitude of misery until the door slammed upon him and his carriage whirled away. Then she rose up with the queerest expression of victorious mischief glittering in her green eyes. She burst out laughing once or twice to herself, as she sat at work, and sitting down to the piano, she rattled away a triumphant voluntary on the keys, which made the people pause under her window to listen to her brilliant music.

That night, there came two notes from Gaunt House for the little woman, the one containing a card of invitation from Lord and Lady Steyne to a dinner at Gaunt House next Friday, while the other enclosed a slip of gray paper bearing Lord Steyne’s signature and the address of Messrs. Jones, Brown, and Robinson, Lombard Street.

Rawdon heard Becky laughing in the night once or twice. It was only her delight at going to Gaunt House and facing the ladies there, she said, which amused her so. But the truth was that she was occupied with a great number of other thoughts. Should she pay off old Briggs and give her her conge? Should she astonish Raggles by settling his account? She turned over all these thoughts on her pillow, and on the next day, when Rawdon went out to pay his morning visit to the Club, Mrs. Crawley (in a modest dress with a veil on) whipped off in a hackney-coach to the City: and being landed at Messrs. Jones and Robinson’s bank, presented a document there to the authority at the desk, who, in reply, asked her “How she would take it?”

She gently said “she would take a hundred and fifty pounds in small

notes and the remainder in one note”: and passing through St. Paul’s Churchyard stopped there and bought the handsomest black silk gown for Briggs which money could buy; and which, with a kiss and the kindest speeches, she presented to the simple old spinster.

Then she walked to Mr. Raggles, inquired about his children affectionately, and gave him fifty pounds on account. Then she went to the livery-man from whom she jobbed her carriages and gratified him with a similar sum. “And I hope this will be a lesson to you, Spavin,” she said, “and that on the next drawing-room day my brother, Sir Pitt, will not be inconvenienced by being obliged to take four of us in his carriage to wait upon His Majesty, because my own carriage is not forthcoming.” It appears there had been a difference on the last drawing-room day. Hence the degradation which the Colonel had almost suffered, of being obliged to enter the presence of his Sovereign in a hack cab.

These arrangements concluded, Becky paid a visit upstairs to the before-mentioned desk, which Amelia Sedley had given her years and years ago, and which contained a number of useful and valuable little things—in which private museum she placed the one note which Messrs. Jones and Robinson’s cashier had given her.