

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 52

"In Which Lord Steyne Shows Himself in a Most Amiable Light"

When Lord Steyne was benevolently disposed, he did nothing by halves, and his kindness towards the Crawley family did the greatest honour to his benevolent discrimination. His lordship extended his good-will to little Rawdon: he pointed out to the boy's parents the necessity of sending him to a public school, that he was of an age now when emulation, the first principles of the Latin language, pugilistic exercises, and the society of his fellow-boys would be of the greatest benefit to the boy. His father objected that he was not rich enough to send the child to a good public school; his mother that Briggs was a capital mistress for him, and had brought him on (as indeed was the fact) famously in English, the Latin rudiments, and in general learning: but all these objections disappeared before the generous perseverance of the Marquis of Steyne. His lordship was one of the governors of that famous old collegiate institution called the Whitefriars. It had been a Cistercian Convent in old days, when the Smithfield, which is contiguous to it, was a tournament ground. Obstinate heretics used to be brought thither convenient for burning hard by. Henry VIII, the Defender of the Faith, seized upon the monastery and its possessions and hanged and tortured some of the monks who could not accommodate themselves to the pace of his reform. Finally, a great merchant bought the house and land adjoining, in which, and with the help of other wealthy endowments of land and money, he established a famous foundation hospital for old men and children. An extern school grew round the old almost monastic foundation, which subsists still with its middle-age costume and usages—and all Cistercians pray that it may long flourish.

Of this famous house, some of the greatest noblemen, prelates, and dignitaries in England are governors: and as the boys are very comfortably lodged, fed, and educated, and subsequently inducted to good scholarships at the University and livings in the Church, many little gentlemen are devoted to the ecclesiastical profession from their tenderest years, and there is considerable emulation to procure nominations for the foundation. It was originally intended for the sons of poor and deserving clerics and laics, but many of the noble governors of

the Institution, with an enlarged and rather capricious benevolence, selected all sorts of objects for their bounty. To get an education for nothing, and a future livelihood and profession assured, was so excellent a scheme that some of the richest people did not disdain it; and not only great men's relations, but great men themselves, sent their sons to profit by the chance—Right Rev. prelates sent their own kinsmen or the sons of their clergy, while, on the other hand, some great noblemen did not disdain to patronize the children of their confidential servants—so that a lad entering this establishment had every variety of youthful society wherewith to mingle.

Rawdon Crawley, though the only book which he studied was the Racing Calendar, and though his chief recollections of polite learning were connected with the floggings which he received at Eton in his early youth, had that decent and honest reverence for classical learning which all English gentlemen feel, and was glad to think that his son was to have a provision for life, perhaps, and a certain opportunity of becoming a scholar. And although his boy was his chief solace and companion, and endeared to him by a thousand small ties, about which he did not care to speak to his wife, who had all along shown the utmost indifference to their son, yet Rawdon agreed at once to part with him and to give up his own greatest comfort and benefit for the sake of the welfare of the little lad. He did not know how fond he was of the child until it became necessary to let him go away. When he was gone, he felt more sad and downcast than he cared to own—far sadder than the boy himself, who was happy enough to enter a new career and find companions of his own age. Becky burst out laughing once or twice when the Colonel, in his clumsy, incoherent way, tried to express his sentimental sorrows at the boy's departure. The poor fellow felt that his dearest pleasure and closest friend was taken from him. He looked often and wistfully at the little vacant bed in his dressing-room, where the child used to sleep. He missed him sadly of mornings and tried in vain to walk in the park without him. He did not know how solitary he was until little Rawdon was gone. He liked the people who were fond of him, and would go and sit for long hours with his good-natured sister Lady Jane, and talk to her about the virtues, and good looks, and hundred good qualities of the child.

Young Rawdon's aunt, we have said, was very fond of him, as was her little girl, who wept copiously when the time for her cousin's departure

came. The elder Rawdon was thankful for the fondness of mother and daughter. The very best and honestest feelings of the man came out in these artless outpourings of paternal feeling in which he indulged in their presence, and encouraged by their sympathy. He secured not only Lady Jane's kindness, but her sincere regard, by the feelings which he manifested, and which he could not show to his own wife. The two kinswomen met as seldom as possible. Becky laughed bitterly at Jane's feelings and softness; the other's kindly and gentle nature could not but revolt at her sister's callous behaviour.

It estranged Rawdon from his wife more than he knew or acknowledged to himself. She did not care for the estrangement. Indeed, she did not miss him or anybody. She looked upon him as her errand-man and humble slave. He might be ever so depressed or sulky, and she did not mark his demeanour, or only treated it with a sneer. She was busy thinking about her position, or her pleasures, or her advancement in society; she ought to have held a great place in it, that is certain.

It was honest Briggs who made up the little kit for the boy which he was to take to school. Molly, the housemaid, blubbered in the passage when he went away—Molly kind and faithful in spite of a long arrear of unpaid wages. Mrs. Becky could not let her husband have the carriage to take the boy to school. Take the horses into the City!—such a thing was never heard of. Let a cab be brought. She did not offer to kiss him when he went, nor did the child propose to embrace her; but gave a kiss to old Briggs (whom, in general, he was very shy of caressing), and consoled her by pointing out that he was to come home on Saturdays, when she would have the benefit of seeing him. As the cab rolled towards the City, Becky's carriage rattled off to the park. She was chattering and laughing with a score of young dandies by the Serpentine as the father and son entered at the old gates of the school—where Rawdon left the child and came away with a sadder purer feeling in his heart than perhaps that poor battered fellow had ever known since he himself came out of the nursery.

He walked all the way home very dismally, and dined alone with Briggs. He was very kind to her and grateful for her love and watchfulness over the boy. His conscience smote him that he had borrowed Briggs's money and aided in deceiving her. They talked about little Rawdon a long time, for Becky only came home to dress and go out to dinner—and

then he went off uneasily to drink tea with Lady Jane, and tell her of what had happened, and how little Rawdon went off like a trump, and how he was to wear a gown and little knee-breeches, and how young Blackball, Jack Blackball's son, of the old regiment, had taken him in charge and promised to be kind to him.

In the course of a week, young Blackball had constituted little Rawdon his fag, shoe-black, and breakfast toaster; initiated him into the mysteries of the Latin Grammar; and thrashed him three or four times, but not severely. The little chap's good-natured honest face won his way for him. He only got that degree of beating which was, no doubt, good for him; and as for blacking shoes, toasting bread, and fagging in general, were these offices not deemed to be necessary parts of every young English gentleman's education?

Our business does not lie with the second generation and Master Rawdon's life at school, otherwise the present tale might be carried to any indefinite length. The Colonel went to see his son a short time afterwards and found the lad sufficiently well and happy, grinning and laughing in his little black gown and little breeches.

His father sagaciously tipped Blackball, his master, a sovereign, and secured that young gentleman's good-will towards his fag. As a protege of the great Lord Steyne, the nephew of a County member, and son of a Colonel and C.B., whose name appeared in some of the most fashionable parties in the Morning Post, perhaps the school authorities were disposed not to look unkindly on the child. He had plenty of pocket-money, which he spent in treating his comrades royally to raspberry tarts, and he was often allowed to come home on Saturdays to his father, who always made a jubilee of that day. When free, Rawdon would take him to the play, or send him thither with the footman; and on Sundays he went to church with Briggs and Lady Jane and his cousins. Rawdon marvelled over his stories about school, and fights, and fagging. Before long, he knew the names of all the masters and the principal boys as well as little Rawdon himself. He invited little Rawdon's crony from school, and made both the children sick with pastry, and oysters, and porter after the play. He tried to look knowing over the Latin grammar when little Rawdon showed him what part of that work he was "in." "Stick to it, my boy," he said to him with much gravity, "there's nothing like a good classical education! Nothing!"

Becky's contempt for her husband grew greater every day. "Do what you like—dine where you please—go and have ginger-beer and sawdust at Astley's, or psalm-singing with Lady Jane—only don't expect me to busy myself with the boy. I have your interests to attend to, as you can't attend to them yourself. I should like to know where you would have been now, and in what sort of a position in society, if I had not looked after you." Indeed, nobody wanted poor old Rawdon at the parties whither Becky used to go. She was often asked without him now. She talked about great people as if she had the fee-simple of May Fair, and when the Court went into mourning, she always wore black.

Little Rawdon being disposed of, Lord Steyne, who took such a parental interest in the affairs of this amiable poor family, thought that their expenses might be very advantageously curtailed by the departure of Miss Briggs, and that Becky was quite clever enough to take the management of her own house. It has been narrated in a former chapter how the benevolent nobleman had given his protegee money to pay off her little debt to Miss Briggs, who however still remained behind with her friends; whence my lord came to the painful conclusion that Mrs. Crawley had made some other use of the money confided to her than that for which her generous patron had given the loan. However, Lord Steyne was not so rude as to impart his suspicions upon this head to Mrs. Becky, whose feelings might be hurt by any controversy on the money-question, and who might have a thousand painful reasons for disposing otherwise of his lordship's generous loan. But he determined to satisfy himself of the real state of the case, and instituted the necessary inquiries in a most cautious and delicate manner.

In the first place he took an early opportunity of pumping Miss Briggs. That was not a difficult operation. A very little encouragement would set that worthy woman to talk volubly and pour out all within her. And one day when Mrs. Rawdon had gone out to drive (as Mr. Fiche, his lordship's confidential servant, easily learned at the livery stables where the Crawleys kept their carriage and horses, or rather, where the livery-man kept a carriage and horses for Mr. and Mrs. Crawley)—my lord dropped in upon the Curzon Street house—asked Briggs for a cup of coffee—told her that he had good accounts of the little boy at school—and in five minutes found out from her that Mrs. Rawdon had given her nothing except a black silk gown, for which Miss Briggs was immensely grateful.

He laughed within himself at this artless story. For the truth is, our dear friend Rebecca had given him a most circumstantial narration of Briggs's delight at receiving her money—eleven hundred and twenty-five pounds—and in what securities she had invested it; and what a pang Becky herself felt in being obliged to pay away such a delightful sum of money. “Who knows,” the dear woman may have thought within herself, “perhaps he may give me a little more?” My lord, however, made no such proposal to the little schemer—very likely thinking that he had been sufficiently generous already.

He had the curiosity, then, to ask Miss Briggs about the state of her private affairs—and she told his lordship candidly what her position was—how Miss Crawley had left her a legacy—how her relatives had had part of it—how Colonel Crawley had put out another portion, for which she had the best security and interest— and how Mr. and Mrs. Rawdon had kindly busied themselves with Sir Pitt, who was to dispose of the remainder most advantageously for her, when he had time. My lord asked how much the Colonel had already invested for her, and Miss Briggs at once and truly told him that the sum was six hundred and odd pounds.

But as soon as she had told her story, the voluble Briggs repented of her frankness and besought my lord not to tell Mr. Crawley of the confessions which she had made. “The Colonel was so kind—Mr. Crawley might be offended and pay back the money, for which she could get no such good interest anywhere else.” Lord Steyne, laughing, promised he never would divulge their conversation, and when he and Miss Briggs parted he laughed still more.

“What an accomplished little devil it is!” thought he. “What a splendid actress and manager! She had almost got a second supply out of me the other day; with her coaxing ways. She beats all the women I have ever seen in the course of all my well-spent life. They are babies compared to her. I am a greenhorn myself, and a fool in her hands—an old fool. She is unsurpassable in lies.” His lordship's admiration for Becky rose immeasurably at this proof of her cleverness. Getting the money was nothing—but getting double the sum she wanted, and paying nobody—it was a magnificent stroke. And Crawley, my lord thought—Crawley is not such a fool as he looks and seems. He has managed the matter cleverly enough on his side. Nobody would ever have supposed from his face and

demeanour that he knew anything about this money business; and yet he put her up to it, and has spent the money, no doubt. In this opinion my lord, we know, was mistaken, but it influenced a good deal his behaviour towards Colonel Crawley, whom he began to treat with even less than that semblance of respect which he had formerly shown towards that gentleman. It never entered into the head of Mrs. Crawley's patron that the little lady might be making a purse for herself; and, perhaps, if the truth must be told, he judged of Colonel Crawley by his experience of other husbands, whom he had known in the course of the long and well-spent life which had made him acquainted with a great deal of the weakness of mankind. My lord had bought so many men during his life that he was surely to be pardoned for supposing that he had found the price of this one.

He taxed Becky upon the point on the very first occasion when he met her alone, and he complimented her, good-humouredly, on her cleverness in getting more than the money which she required. Becky was only a little taken aback. It was not the habit of this dear creature to tell falsehoods, except when necessity compelled, but in these great emergencies it was her practice to lie very freely; and in an instant she was ready with another neat plausible circumstantial story which she administered to her patron. The previous statement which she had made to him was a falsehood—a wicked falsehood—she owned it. But who had made her tell it? “Ah, my Lord,” she said, “you don't know all I have to suffer and bear in silence; you see me gay and happy before you—you little know what I have to endure when there is no protector near me. It was my husband, by threats and the most savage treatment, forced me to ask for that sum about which I deceived you. It was he who, foreseeing that questions might be asked regarding the disposal of the money, forced me to account for it as I did. He took the money. He told me he had paid Miss Briggs; I did not want, I did not dare to doubt him. Pardon the wrong which a desperate man is forced to commit, and pity a miserable, miserable woman.” She burst into tears as she spoke. Persecuted virtue never looked more bewitchingly wretched.

They had a long conversation, driving round and round the Regent's Park in Mrs. Crawley's carriage together, a conversation of which it is not necessary to repeat the details, but the upshot of it was that, when Becky came home, she flew to her dear Briggs with a smiling face and announced that she had some very good news for her. Lord Steyne had

acted in the noblest and most generous manner. He was always thinking how and when he could do good. Now that little Rawdon was gone to school, a dear companion and friend was no longer necessary to her. She was grieved beyond measure to part with Briggs, but her means required that she should practise every retrenchment, and her sorrow was mitigated by the idea that her dear Briggs would be far better provided for by her generous patron than in her humble home. Mrs. Pilkington, the housekeeper at Gauntly Hall, was growing exceedingly old, feeble, and rheumatic: she was not equal to the work of superintending that vast mansion, and must be on the look out for a successor. It was a splendid position. The family did not go to Gauntly once in two years. At other times the housekeeper was the mistress of the magnificent mansion—had four covers daily for her table; was visited by the clergy and the most respectable people of the county—was the lady of Gauntly, in fact; and the two last housekeepers before Mrs. Pilkington had married rectors of Gauntly—but Mrs. P. could not, being the aunt of the present Rector. The place was not to be hers yet, but she might go down on a visit to Mrs. Pilkington and see whether she would like to succeed her.

What words can paint the ecstatic gratitude of Briggs! All she stipulated for was that little Rawdon should be allowed to come down and see her at the Hall. Becky promised this—anything. She ran up to her husband when he came home and told him the joyful news. Rawdon was glad, deuced glad; the weight was off his conscience about poor Briggs's money. She was provided for, at any rate, but— but his mind was disquiet. He did not seem to be all right, somehow. He told little Southdown what Lord Steyne had done, and the young man eyed Crawley with an air which surprised the latter.

He told Lady Jane of this second proof of Steyne's bounty, and she, too, looked odd and alarmed; so did Sir Pitt. "She is too clever and—and gay to be allowed to go from party to party without a companion," both said. "You must go with her, Rawdon, wherever she goes, and you must have somebody with her—one of the girls from Queen's Crawley, perhaps, though they were rather giddy guardians for her."

Somebody Becky should have. But in the meantime it was clear that honest Briggs must not lose her chance of settlement for life, and so she and her bags were packed, and she set off on her journey. And so two of Rawdon's out-sentinels were in the hands of the enemy.

Sir Pitt went and expostulated with his sister-in-law upon the subject of the dismissal of Briggs and other matters of delicate family interest. In vain she pointed out to him how necessary was the protection of Lord Steyne for her poor husband; how cruel it would be on their part to deprive Briggs of the position offered to her. Cajolements, coaxings, smiles, tears could not satisfy Sir Pitt, and he had something very like a quarrel with his once admired Becky. He spoke of the honour of the family, the unsullied reputation of the Crawleys; expressed himself in indignant tones about her receiving those young Frenchmen—those wild young men of fashion, my Lord Steyne himself, whose carriage was always at her door, who passed hours daily in her company, and whose constant presence made the world talk about her. As the head of the house he implored her to be more prudent. Society was already speaking lightly of her. Lord Steyne, though a nobleman of the greatest station and talents, was a man whose attentions would compromise any woman; he besought, he implored, he commanded his sister-in-law to be watchful in her intercourse with that nobleman.

Becky promised anything and everything Pitt wanted; but Lord Steyne came to her house as often as ever, and Sir Pitt's anger increased. I wonder was Lady Jane angry or pleased that her husband at last found fault with his favourite Rebecca? Lord Steyne's visits continuing, his own ceased, and his wife was for refusing all further intercourse with that nobleman and declining the invitation to the charade-night which the marchioness sent to her; but Sir Pitt thought it was necessary to accept it, as his Royal Highness would be there.

Although he went to the party in question, Sir Pitt quitted it very early, and his wife, too, was very glad to come away. Becky hardly so much as spoke to him or noticed her sister-in-law. Pitt Crawley declared her behaviour was monstrously indecorous, reprobated in strong terms the habit of play-acting and fancy dressing as highly unbecoming a British female, and after the charades were over, took his brother Rawdon severely to task for appearing himself and allowing his wife to join in such improper exhibitions.

Rawdon said she should not join in any more such amusements—but indeed, and perhaps from hints from his elder brother and sister, he had already become a very watchful and exemplary domestic character. He left off his clubs and billiards. He never left home. He took Becky out to

drive; he went laboriously with her to all her parties. Whenever my Lord Steyne called, he was sure to find the Colonel. And when Becky proposed to go out without her husband, or received invitations for herself, he peremptorily ordered her to refuse them: and there was that in the gentleman's manner which enforced obedience. Little Becky, to do her justice, was charmed with Rawdon's gallantry. If he was surly, she never was. Whether friends were present or absent, she had always a kind smile for him and was attentive to his pleasure and comfort. It was the early days of their marriage over again: the same good humour, prevenances, merriment, and artless confidence and regard. "How much pleasanter it is," she would say, "to have you by my side in the carriage than that foolish old Briggs! Let us always go on so, dear Rawdon. How nice it would be, and how happy we should always be, if we had but the money!" He fell asleep after dinner in his chair; he did not see the face opposite to him, haggard, weary, and terrible; it lighted up with fresh candid smiles when he woke. It kissed him gaily. He wondered that he had ever had suspicions. No, he never had suspicions; all those dumb doubts and surly misgivings which had been gathering on his mind were mere idle jealousies. She was fond of him; she always had been. As for her shining in society, it was no fault of hers; she was formed to shine there. Was there any woman who could talk, or sing, or do anything like her? If she would but like the boy! Rawdon thought. But the mother and son never could be brought together.

And it was while Rawdon's mind was agitated with these doubts and perplexities that the incident occurred which was mentioned in the last chapter, and the unfortunate Colonel found himself a prisoner away from home.