ON THACKERAY. CUT FROM MACMILLAN'S MAGAZINE, FEB. 1864. PP. 356-368

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HENRY KINGSLEY

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THACKERAY.

"COME CHILDREN, LET US SHUT UP THE BOX AND THE PUPPETS, FOR OUR PLAY IS PLAYED OUT."

Does any one remember the words which form the title to this article? They are the concluding words of "Vanity Fair." Beneath them is a vignette as suggestive and as pathetic as the best of Bewick's. A boy and a girl are looking into a box of puppets, which one knows are the puppets which formed the characters of "Vanity Fair." Dobbin and Amelia are standing up wishing us "Good-bye;" Lord Steyne has tumbled out on the floor; and the boy has his hand on the lid, on which is inscribed "Finis," ready to shut it down. Now it is shut down for ever: And, alas! the master is shut in with his puppets.

How was it that we first came to know him? In recalling a lost friend to our memory, what is the first thing we think of? Almost always we try to bring back our first interview with him. How naturally it comes to our tongue to say, "Well, I remember the day I first saw him." Let us try to do this with the great one who is gone.

Does any one remember the time when one began to hear such sentences as these flying from mouth to mouth—"It is wonderfully clever." "It is so very strange." "One don't know whether to laugh or cry at it." "Is his name really Titmarsh?" "No, his real name is Thackeray, and he wrote 'Cornhill to Grand Cairo!' Not a very young man either, you say; how strange it is his bursting on us with such stuff as this. He *frightens* one at times."

And so on. If you find in some long neglected Barathrum of waste paper a yellow-coloured pamphlet, on the tattered covers of which is printed "Vanity Fair; or, Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society," you may remember that these were the sort of remarks which went about among non-literary men when the educated world was taken by storm with the most remarkable novel in the English language; coming from the pen of a man, known certainly to some extent, but who was thought to have had sufficient trial, and to have found his *métier* as a clever magazine writer.

Some knew better, but the general world did not. "Vanity Fair" took the world by surprise. Its appearance was a kind of era in the lives of men whose ages were at that time within four or five years of twenty; and, for aught we know, in the lives of men older and wiser.

One's most intimate and dearest friends before this era were probably Hamlet, Don Quixote, Robinson Crusoe, My Uncle Toby, or, probably, for tastes vary, Mr. Tom Jones, or Mr. Peregrine Pickle. Latterly, also, we had got to love Mr. Pickwick, the Brothers Cheeryble, and dear old Tom Pinch; and were conceiving an affectionate admiration of Eldard Cuttle, mariner; but when these wonderful yellow numbers were handed eagerly from hand to hand, to be borrowed, read, re-read, and discussed, it became evident that the circle of our acquaintances had been suddenly and singularly enlarged; that we were becoming acquainted with people—strange people, indeed!—who forced themselves on our notice, and engaged our attention, to a degree which none of our former acquaintances had ever succeeded in doing.

These wonderful new people, too, were so amazingly common-place. They were like ourselves in detail. There was nothing whatever about them except that we could not get them out of our heads; that we discussed their proceedings as we would those of the real people our neighbours; that we were amused with their foolishness, and intensely angry at some of their proceedings. Any fool

could have written about such people as these: there was nothing worthy of notice in the book at all, except that it had taken entire possession of us, and of the world. Through the exquisite perfection of the art, the art itself was not only ignored, but indignantly denied.

How melancholy it is to look back at the long line of our sweethearts, loved so dearly for a time, then neglected, then cast off, and only remembered by their names, and by a dull regretful wonder at *that* having been so dear to us at any time. Were we ever so silly as to have wept over the death of Virginia, our first lady-love, when she was shipwrecked in the Mauritius? and how soon after were we furiously indignant at the treatment of Rosamund by her papa about the purple jar and the new shoes? Then it was that impertinent *espiègle* little thing, Julia Mannering; then Flora M'Ivor, and, then by a natural reaction from such overstrained sentimentalism, Evelina Burney. And so we went on from one imaginary young lady to another, until we became so *blasé*, so used to the storms of the great passion, that we could love no more, at least, not in the old degree. We understood women. We had been through too much: when at last that queer old-fashioned, dear little body, Jane Eyre, married Fairfax Rochester, we merely said that the girl was a fool, and lit our cigar. We could love no more.

Fools that we were! we were just on the eve of a crisis in our lives, of the greatest passion of all (for an unworthy object certainly) — a passion different from, and more profound than, all which had gone before. At the time that these yellow numbers began to appear, we made acquaintance with one, Miss Rebecca Sharp, and from the moment she threw her "dixonary" out of the window, we loved as we had never loved before. We were fully alive to that young lady's faults; indeed she did not take any vast trouble to conceal them; but in spite of this she simply gave a whisk of her yellow hair, and an ogle with her green eyes, took us by the nose, and led us whithersoever she would.

And did ever woman lead man such a dance as she led us? Never, since Petronius wrote the first novel eighteen hundred years ago. There was one Ulysses, and there is one Becky Sharp, the woman of many experiences and many counsels, the most of them far from satisfactory. There is no killing or shelving her; she always rises to the occasion, save once, and that one time is the only time on which she was really guilty. Then she is prostrated for a period, and shows you accidentally what you were hardly inclined to believe, that she had some sort of a heart.

Is there anything like the rise, the fall, and the rise of this woman, in literature? It is hard to say where. Many other characters in prose fiction, and often, though far less often, in poetry, grow and develop; but we know of none which enlarges and decreases again, like that of Becky Sharp—which alters in quantity and degree, but never in quality, by the breadth of a hair. False, clever, shifty, and passionately fond of admiration in her father's studio, she carries those qualities and no others with her, using them in greater or less degree, according to her opportunities, through her life. One finds her sipping gin and water in her father's studio, and imitating Miss Pinkerton; one finds her entertaining a select audience of Lord Steyne and Lord Southdown, with a wonderful imitation of the Dowager Lady Southdown; and one finds her at last with the plate of sausages and the brandy bottle, entertaining two German students with an imitation of Jos. Sedley, in the later and not so prosperous times when she lived at Numero Kattervang doose. But it is Becky Sharp still. Her mind, her tact, her power, enlarge according to her circumstances, but her character never develops; the pupils of her green cat's-eyes may expand and contract according to the light, but they are cat's-eyes still. Becky Sharp was crystallized and made perfect by her drunken disreputable father and mother in early years; and whether you find her among drunken art-students, talking *their* slang, or among the

dwellers in the gardens of the west, where the golden apples grow, talking *their* slang—whether she does battle with a footman or a marquis—she is still the same dexterous, unprincipled, brilliant, and thoroughly worthless Becky Sharp of old. Any apprentice can make a more or less successful attempt to *develop* a character by circumstances; to make it "grow under his hand," as the slang goes. It required the hand of an almost perfect master to draw a character which politely declined to develop on any terms whatever. A sort of Lot's wife of a character, who, though changed into a pillar of salt, persisted in looking back to Sodom, and, what is more, succeeded in the end in getting back there—if not to the old place itself, at least to the most fashionable quarter of Zoar.

Yes, Rebecca Sharp, although she pitched one overboard for the next man she came across, although she debauched one's moral sense, and played the deuce with one's property, still holds the first place among one's ideal lady-loves. Competing even with the last and noblest of them all, with Maggie Tulliver: the girl who wore dark night on her head for a diadem.

And while one made acquaintance with this woman, one began to make acquaintance with other people quite as remarkable as she; with people of whom one had never seen the like exactly, and yet people who were evidently real, and yet could not be sketched from life—with Lord Steyne, for instance.

Some said that Lord Steyne was a sketch from life of Lord A, others of Lord B; the character suited neither. Lord A was accused of being the wicked nobleman, because his house was in a certain square, and Lord B, goodness only knows why. The fact was that Lord Steyne was a result of English History. He may have been as infinitely better than Lord A, as he was infinitely worse than Lord B. But he was the result of ever increasing wealth which passed without disturbance from generation to generation; of five or six centuries of family tradition—tradition which said that the human race was divided into men, women, and the British Peerage. It is perfectly impossible that Lord Steyne could ever have existed; absolutely perfect characters do not exist. Mr. Pitt must have had his failings (one says nothing of the port wine and water; that was a necessity), but they have not come down to us. Marat must have had his virtues, though we have not heard of them. There are no perfect characters in the world. Lord Steyne is a masterly creation, but he is too perfect a character ever to have existed; he is so perfect, that we have to argue ourselves out of the belief that he is drawn from life. The details are too probable—the bow legs, the red hair, the buck teeth; all telling of latent scrofula; his snarling godless scorn, telling of his familiarity with the delightfully choice spirits of the aristocratic revolutionary party of France—of the men who encouraged the revolution, *pour s'amuser*, and perished in it, with a smile of cynical good humour on their faces, as if their own ruin was the best joke of all; his intense admiration for Becky's lying, even when it was directed against himself. All these things, and many others, mark Lord Steyne as the imaginary representative of all the vices which proceed from irresponsible wealth, without one of the virtues which come from the desire to keep a great name spotless; able, sensual, witty, and heartless, without God in this world, not even dreading the Devil in the next. People have tried to represent the wicked nobleman often enough. Let them try the more. Lord Steyne is in the field.

If Rebecca Sharp is a perfectly original character, and if Lord Steyne has been often tried, but only now accomplished, we wish to ask you whether there is not another character in the book as wonderful in its way as either of the two others. We allude to the Dowager Lady Southdown.

There never was anything like this old lady. Every one appreciated her; to those who were indignant that such

people as our dear Becky Sharp, and Lord Steyne, should ever be mentioned, Lady Southdown appeared respectable, inimitably ridiculous, and, on the whole, good: those enjoyed the fun of Lady Southdown who had never spoken to a Countess in their lives. Some might fancy that one-half of the amusement one gets out of her proceeds from her pompous "façons de parler;" but it is not so. People recognised Lady Southdown, who couldn't in the least appreciate such sentences as "Jane, I forbid you to put pen to paper;" "I will have my horses to-morrow morning;" they delighted in Lady Southdown on her own merits entirely. Other men might have known the habits of the British aristocracy as well as Thackeray, who was brought up among them, but it is Thackeray only who has taken one of the most peculiarly aristocratic of them—one of them whose every word and every thought was exclusive—and made her a character to be understood by every class and for all time.

And, besides the originality of these three great characters, any one of which would form the nucleus of a successful novel, there was another fact about this most wonderful story, which no man of humour can ever forget—we mean the names which the author gives his characters. There was an infinite field of fun and suggestive humour opened to us by those wonderful names. Each name in Vanity Fair suggests a history.

Marquis of Steyne, for instance. Not Earl of Steyne—that would be too Saxon; not Duke—that would be too personal, for, although there are more Dukes than Marquises, yet they are better known. Marquis, a title like Viscount, with a slight French smack about it, corresponding to his amateur rose-water whiggery; and then Steyne, a name which rings on the ear as true as Buckingham or Bedford, and yet one which instantly suggests to one Brighton, the Pavilion, George the Fourth and all his set. Then Lord Southdown, gentlest of beings, brought into the world to be shorn; second title Lord Wolsey; family name Sheepshanks; seats, Southdown, and Trottermore. Again, that gaunt and dreadful person, Lady Grizzle Macbeth, daughter of Lord Grey of Glowry; and the wonderful German dancer whom Becky dances off his legs, the Count Springbok von Hauhen-laufen. If one began to point out the fun of the names in "Vanity Fair," one could write a book as big as "Vanity Fair" itself. Take the names of the exceedingly doubtful ladies, with whom Becky has to make it up in her fall, after having cut them in her prosperity, when she was attempting the to her impossible task of being good without three thousand a year. Here they are—the Marquise de la Cruche-cassée, Lady Crackenbury, and Mrs. Washington White. Were there ever three such names for slightly unfortunate ladies?

To follow him through the wild jungle of fun into which he gets when he takes us to the German Court of Pumpernickel, with all the infinitely suggestive absurdity of the names which it pleases him to use, would be impossible. The crowning point of this unequalled nonsensical wisdom, is the triumph of British diplomacy, in arranging the marriage between the Prince of Pumpernickel with the Princess Amelia von Humburg Schlippen-Schloppen — the French candidate Princess Potztausend Donnerwetter having been pitched triumphantly overboard, to the confusion of M. de Macabau the French minister. Schlippen-Schloppen must have been sister, one would think, to our own poor dirty, down-at-heels, Queen Caroline; and Princess Potztausend Donnerwetter (Deviltakeyou Thunder-and-lightning, it might be very loosely rendered), what sort of a lady was she?

Another point about this wonderful book—a point which we cannot pass over—is the way in which the author has illustrated it. For the first time we found a novelist illustrating his own books well. At times, nay very often, we could see that the great brain which guided the hand, in its eagerness to fix the images on the paper, made that hand unsteady; that, in seeking after the end also, there had been some impa-