Vanity Fair

by

William Makepeace Thackeray

CHAPTER I

Chiswick Mall

While the present century was in its teens, and on one sunshiny morning

in June, there drove up to the great iron gate of Miss Pinkerton's

academy for young ladies, on Chiswick Mall, a large family coach, with

two fat horses in blazing harness, driven by a fat coachman in a

three-cornered hat and wig, at the rate of four miles an hour. A black

servant, who reposed on the box beside the fat coachman, uncurled his

bandy legs as soon as the equipage drew up opposite Miss Pinkerton's

shining brass plate, and as he pulled the bell at least a score of

young heads were seen peering out of the narrow windows of the stately

old brick house. Nay, the acute observer might have recognized the

little red nose of good-natured Miss Jemima Pinkerton herself, rising

over some geranium pots in the window of that lady's own drawing-room.

"It is Mrs. Sedley's coach, sister," said Miss Jemima. "Sambo, the

black servant, has just rung the bell; and the coachman has a new red

waistcoat."

"Have you completed all the necessary preparations incident to Miss

Sedley's departure, Miss Jemima?" asked Miss Pinkerton herself, that

majestic lady; the Semiramis of Hammersmith, the friend of Doctor

Johnson, the correspondent of Mrs. Chapone herself.

"The girls were up at four this morning, packing her trunks, sister,"

replied Miss Jemima; "we have made her a bow-pot."

"Say a bouquet, sister Jemima, 'tis more genteel."

"Well, a booky as big almost as a haystack; I have put up two bottles

of the gillyflower water for Mrs. Sedley, and the receipt for making

it, in Amelia's box."

"And I trust, Miss Jemima, you have made a copy of Miss Sedley's

account. This is it, is it? Very good - ninety-three pounds, four

shillings. Be kind enough to address it to John Sedley, Esquire, and

to seal this billet which I have written to his lady."

In Miss Jemima's eyes an autograph letter of her sister, Miss

Pinkerton, was an object of as deep veneration as would have been a

letter from a sovereign. Only when her pupils quitted the

establishment, or when they were about to be married, and once, when

poor Miss Birch died of the scarlet fever, was Miss Pinkerton known to

write personally to the parents of her pupils; and it was Jemima's

opinion that if anything could console Mrs. Birch for her daughter's

loss, it would be that pious and eloquent composition in which Miss

Pinkerton announced the event.

In the present instance Miss Pinkerton's "billet" was to the following

effect: -

The Mall, Chiswick, June 15, 18

MADAM, - After her six years' residence at the Mall, I have the honour

and happiness of presenting Miss Amelia Sedley to her parents, as a

young lady not unworthy to occupy a fitting position in their polished

and refined circle. Those virtues which characterize the young English

gentlewoman, those accomplishments which become her birth and station,

will not be found wanting in the amiable Miss Sedley, whose INDUSTRY

and OBEDIENCE have endeared her to her instructors, and whose

delightful sweetness of temper has charmed her AGED and her YOUTHFUL

companions.

In music, in dancing, in orthography, in every variety of embroidery

and needlework, she will be found to have realized her friends' fondest

wishes. In geography there is still much to be desired; and a careful

and undeviating use of the backboard, for four hours daily during the

next three years, is recommended as necessary to the acquirement of

that dignified DEPORTMENT AND CARRIAGE, so requisite for every young

lady of FASHION.

In the principles of religion and morality, Miss Sedley will be found

worthy of an establishment which has been honoured by the presence of

THE GREAT LEXICOGRAPHER, and the patronage of the admirable Mrs.

Chapone. In leaving the Mall, Miss Amelia carries with her the hearts

of her companions, and the affectionate regards of her mistress, who

has the honour to subscribe herself,

Madam, Your most obliged humble servant, BARBARA PINKERTON

P.S. - Miss Sharp accompanies Miss Sedley. It is particularly requested

that Miss Sharp's stay in Russell Square may not exceed ten days. The

family of distinction with whom she is engaged, desire to avail

themselves of her services as soon as possible.

This letter completed, Miss Pinkerton proceeded to write her own name,

and Miss Sedley's, in the fly-leaf of a Johnson's Dictionary - the

interesting work which she invariably presented to her scholars, on

their departure from the Mall. On the cover was inserted a copy of

"Lines addressed to a young lady on quitting Miss Pinkerton's school,

at the Mall; by the late revered Doctor Samuel Johnson." In fact, the

Lexicographer's name was always on the lips of this majestic woman, and

a visit he had paid to her was the cause of her reputation and her

fortune.

Being commanded by her elder sister to get "the Dictionary" from the

cupboard, Miss Jemima had extracted two copies of the book from the

receptacle in question. When Miss Pinkerton had finished the

inscription in the first, Jemima, with rather a dubious and timid air,

handed her the second.

"For whom is this, Miss Jemima?" said Miss Pinkerton, with awful

coldness.

"For Becky Sharp," answered Jemima, trembling very much, and blushing

over her withered face and neck, as she turned her back on her sister.

"For Becky Sharp: she's going too."

"MISS JEMIMA!" exclaimed Miss Pinkerton, in the largest capitals. "Are

you in your senses? Replace the Dixonary in the closet, and never

venture to take such a liberty in future."

"Well, sister, it's only two-and-ninepence, and poor Becky will be

miserable if she don't get one."

"Send Miss Sedley instantly to me," said Miss Pinkerton. And so

venturing not to say another word, poor Jemima trotted off, exceedingly

flurried and nervous.

Miss Sedley's papa was a merchant in London, and a man of some wealth;

whereas Miss Sharp was an articled pupil, for whom Miss Pinkerton had

done, as she thought, quite enough, without conferring upon her at

parting the high honour of the Dixonary.

Although schoolmistresses' letters are to be trusted no more nor less

than churchyard epitaphs; yet, as it sometimes happens that a person

departs this life who is really deserving of all the praises the stone

cutter carves over his bones; who IS a good Christian, a good parent,

child, wife, or husband; who actually DOES leave a disconsolate family

to mourn his loss; so in academies of the male and female sex it occurs

every now and then that the pupil is fully worthy of the praises

bestowed by the disinterested instructor. Now, Miss Amelia Sedley was a

young lady of this singular species; and deserved not only all that

Miss Pinkerton said in her praise, but had many charming qualities

which that pompous old Minerva of a woman could not see, from the

differences of rank and age between her pupil and herself.

For she could not only sing like a lark, or a Mrs. Billington, and

dance like Hillisberg or Parisot; and embroider beautifully; and spell

as well as a Dixonary itself; but she had such a kindly, smiling,

tender, gentle, generous heart of her own, as won the love of everybody

who came near her, from Minerva herself down to the poor girl in the

scullery, and the one-eyed tart-woman's daughter, who was permitted to

vend her wares once a week to the young ladies in the Mall. She had

twelve intimate and bosom friends out of the twenty-four young ladies.

Even envious Miss Briggs never spoke ill of her; high and mighty Miss

Saltire Lord Dexter's granddaughter allowed that her figure was

genteel; and as for Miss Swartz, the rich woolly-haired mulatto from

St. Kitt's, on the day Amelia went away, she was in such a passion of

tears that they were obliged to send for Dr. Floss, and half tipsify

her with salvolatile. Miss Pinkerton's attachment was, as may be

supposed from the high position and eminent virtues of that lady, calm

and dignified; but Miss Jemima had already whimpered several times at

the idea of Amelia's departure; and, but for fear of her sister, would

have gone off in downright hysterics, like the heiress who paid

double of St. Kitt's. Such luxury of grief, however, is only allowed

to parlour-boarders. Honest Jemima had all the bills, and the washing,

and the mending, and the puddings, and the plate and crockery, and the

servants to superintend. But why speak about her? It is probable that

we shall not hear of her again from this moment to the end of time, and

that when the great filigree iron gates are once closed on her, she and

her awful sister will never issue therefrom into this little world of

history.

But as we are to see a great deal of Amelia, there is no harm in

saying, at the outset of our acquaintance, that she was a dear little

creature; and a great mercy it is, both in life and in novels, which

 and the latter especially abound in villains of the most sombre sort,

that we are to have for a constant companion so guileless and

good-natured a person. As she is not a heroine, there is no need to

describe her person; indeed I am afraid that her nose was rather short

than otherwise, and her cheeks a great deal too round and red for a

heroine; but her face blushed with rosy health, and her lips with the

freshest of smiles, and she had a pair of eyes which sparkled with the

brightest and honestest good-humour, except indeed when they filled

with tears, and that was a great deal too often; for the silly thing

would cry over a dead canary-bird; or over a mouse, that the cat haply

had seized upon; or over the end of a novel, were it ever so stupid;

and as for saying an unkind word to her, were any persons hard-hearted

enough to do so - why, so much the worse for them. Even Miss Pinkerton,

that austere and godlike woman, ceased scolding her after the first

time, and though she no more comprehended sensibility than she did

Algebra, gave all masters and teachers particular orders to treat Miss

Sedley with the utmost gentleness, as harsh treatment was injurious to

her.

So that when the day of departure came, between her two customs of

laughing and crying, Miss Sedley was greatly puzzled how to act. She

was glad to go home, and yet most woefully sad at leaving school. For

three days before, little Laura Martin, the orphan, followed her about

like a little dog. She had to make and receive at least fourteen

presents - to make fourteen solemn promises of writing every week:

"Send my letters under cover to my grandpapa, the Earl of Dexter," said

Miss Saltire who, by the way, was rather shabby . "Never mind the

postage, but write every day, you dear darling," said the impetuous and

woolly-headed, but generous and affectionate Miss Swartz; and the

orphan little Laura Martin who was just in round-hand , took her

friend's hand and said, looking up in her face wistfully, "Amelia, when

I write to you I shall call you Mamma." All which details, I have no

doubt, JONES, who reads this book at his Club, will pronounce to be

excessively foolish, trivial, twaddling, and ultra-sentimental. Yes; I

can see Jones at this minute rather flushed with his joint of mutton

and half pint of wine , taking out his pencil and scoring under the

words "foolish, twaddling," c., and adding to them his own remark of

"QUITE TRUE." Well, he is a lofty man of genius, and admires the great

and heroic in life and novels; and so had better take warning and go

elsewhere.

Well, then. The flowers, and the presents, and the trunks, and

bonnet-boxes of Miss Sedley having been arranged by Mr. Sambo in the

carriage, together with a very small and weather-beaten old cow's-skin

trunk with Miss Sharp's card neatly nailed upon it, which was delivered

by Sambo with a grin, and packed by the coachman with a corresponding

sneer - the hour for parting came; and the grief of that moment was

considerably lessened by the admirable discourse which Miss Pinkerton

addressed to her pupil. Not that the parting speech caused Amelia to

philosophise, or that it armed her in any way with a calmness, the

result of argument; but it was intolerably dull, pompous, and tedious;

and having the fear of her schoolmistress greatly before her eyes, Miss

Sedley did not venture, in her presence, to give way to any ebullitions

of private grief. A seed-cake and a bottle of wine were produced in

the drawing-room, as on the solemn occasions of the visits of parents,

and these refreshments being partaken of, Miss Sedley was at liberty to

depart.

"You'll go in and say good-by to Miss Pinkerton, Becky!" said Miss

Jemima to a young lady of whom nobody took any notice, and who was

coming downstairs with her own bandbox.

"I suppose I must," said Miss Sharp calmly, and much to the wonder of

Miss Jemima; and the latter having knocked at the door, and receiving

permission to come in, Miss Sharp advanced in a very unconcerned

manner, and said in French, and with a perfect accent, "Mademoiselle,

je viens vous faire mes adieux."

Miss Pinkerton did not understand French; she only directed those who

did: but biting her lips and throwing up her venerable and Roman-nosed

head on the top of which figured a large and solemn turban , she said,

"Miss Sharp, I wish you a good morning." As the Hammersmith Semiramis

spoke, she waved one hand, both by way of adieu, and to give Miss Sharp

an opportunity of shaking one of the fingers of the hand which was left

out for that purpose.

Miss Sharp only folded her own hands with a very frigid smile and bow,

and quite declined to accept the proffered honour; on which Semiramis

tossed up her turban more indignantly than ever. In fact, it was a

little battle between the young lady and the old one, and the latter

was worsted. "Heaven bless you, my child," said she, embracing Amelia,

and scowling the while over the girl's shoulder at Miss Sharp. "Come

away, Becky," said Miss Jemima, pulling the young woman away in great

alarm, and the drawing-room door closed upon them for ever.

Then came the struggle and parting below. Words refuse to tell it. All

the servants were there in the hall - all the dear friend - all the young

ladies - the dancing-master who had just arrived; and there was such a

scuffling, and hugging, and kissing, and crying, with the hysterical

YOOPS of Miss Swartz, the parlour-boarder, from her room, as no pen can

depict, and as the tender heart would fain pass over. The embracing was

over; they parted - that is, Miss Sedley parted from her friends. Miss

Sharp had demurely entered the carriage some minutes before. Nobody

cried for leaving HER.

Sambo of the bandy legs slammed the carriage door on his young weeping

mistress. He sprang up behind the carriage. "Stop!" cried Miss

Jemima, rushing to the gate with a parcel.

"It's some sandwiches, my dear," said she to Amelia. "You may be

hungry, you know; and Becky, Becky Sharp, here's a book for you that my

sister - that is, I - Johnson's Dixonary, you know; you mustn't leave us

without that. Good-by. Drive on, coachman. God bless you!"

And the kind creature retreated into the garden, overcome with emotion.

But, lo! and just as the coach drove off, Miss Sharp put her pale face

out of the window and actually flung the book back into the garden.

This almost caused Jemima to faint with terror. "Well, I never" - said

she - "what an audacious" - Emotion prevented her from completing either

sentence. The carriage rolled away; the great gates were closed; the

bell rang for the dancing lesson. The world is before the two young

ladies; and so, farewell to Chiswick Mall.

CHAPTER II

In Which Miss Sharp and Miss Sedley Prepare to Open the Campaign

When Miss Sharp had performed the heroical act mentioned in the last

chapter, and had seen the Dixonary, flying over the pavement of the

little garden, fall at length at the feet of the astonished Miss

Jemima, the young lady's countenance, which had before worn an almost

livid look of hatred, assumed a smile that perhaps was scarcely more

agreeable, and she sank back in the carriage in an easy frame of mind,

saying - "So much for the Dixonary; and, thank God, I'm out of Chiswick."

Miss Sedley was almost as flurried at the act of defiance as Miss

Jemima had been; for, consider, it was but one minute that she had left

school, and the impressions of six years are not got over in that space

of time. Nay, with some persons those awes and terrors of youth last

for ever and ever. I know, for instance, an old gentleman of

sixty-eight, who said to me one morning at breakfast, with a very

agitated countenance, "I dreamed last night that I was flogged by Dr.

Raine." Fancy had carried him back five-and-fifty years in the course

of that evening. Dr. Raine and his rod were just as awful to him in

his heart, then, at sixty-eight, as they had been at thirteen. If the

Doctor, with a large birch, had appeared bodily to him, even at the age

of threescore and eight, and had said in awful voice, "Boy, take down

your pant - "? Well, well, Miss Sedley was exceedingly alarmed at this

act of insubordination.

"How could you do so, Rebecca?" at last she said, after a pause.

"Why, do you think Miss Pinkerton will come out and order me back to

the black-hole?" said Rebecca, laughing.

"No: but - "

"I hate the whole house," continued Miss Sharp in a fury. "I hope I

may never set eyes on it again. I wish it were in the bottom of the

Thames, I do; and if Miss Pinkerton were there, I wouldn't pick her

out, that I wouldn't . O how I should like to see her floating in the

water yonder, turban and all, with her train streaming after her, and

her nose like the beak of a wherry."

"Hush!" cried Miss Sedley.

"Why, will the black footman tell tales?" cried Miss Rebecca, laughing.

"He may go back and tell Miss Pinkerton that I hate her with all my

soul; and I wish he would; and I wish I had a means of proving it, too.

For two years I have only had insults and outrage from her. I have been

treated worse than any servant in the kitchen. I have never had a

friend or a kind word, except from you. I have been made to tend the

little girls in the lower schoolroom, and to talk French to the Misses,

until I grew sick of my mother tongue. But that talking French to Miss

Pinkerton was capital fun, wasn't it? She doesn't know a word of

French, and was too proud to confess it. I believe it was that which

made her part with me; and so thank Heaven for French. Vive la France!

Vive l'Empereur! Vive Bonaparte!"

"O Rebecca, Rebecca, for shame!" cried Miss Sedley; for this was the

greatest blasphemy Rebecca had as yet uttered; and in those days, in

England, to say, "Long live Bonaparte!" was as much as to say, "Long

live Lucifer!" "How can you - how dare you have such wicked, revengeful

thoughts?"

"Revenge may be wicked, but it's natural," answered Miss Rebecca. "I'm

no angel." And, to say the truth, she certainly was not.