Vanity Fair

Compact Editions

William Makepeace Thackeray

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

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. A black servant, who reposed on the box beside the 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. The acute observer might have recognised 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 has just rung the bell.'

'Have you completed all the necessary preparations incident to Miss Sedley's departure?' asked Miss Pinkerton herself, that majestic lady; the Semiramis of Hammersmith, the friend of Doctor Johnson.

'The girls were up at four this morning, packing her trunks, sister,' replied Miss Jemima.

'And I trust you have made a copy of Miss Sedley's account. 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.

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 characterise the young English gentlewoman 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 companions.

In music, in dancing, in orthography, in every variety of embroidery and needlework, she will be found to have realised her friends' *fondest wishes*. 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*. 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.

Being commanded by her elder sister to get 'the Dictionary', Miss Jemima had extracted two copies of the book. When Miss Pinkerton had finished the inscription in the first, Jemima, with a timid air, handed her the second.

'For whom is this?' said Miss Pinkerton, with awful coldness.

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

'MISS JEMIMA!' exclaimed Miss Pinkerton, in the largest

capitals. 'Are you in your senses? Replace the Dixonary 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.'

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 quite enough, without conferring upon her the high honour of the Dixonary.

Although schoolmistresses' letters are to be trusted no more nor less than churchyard epitaphs; yet, it sometimes happens that a person departs this life who is really deserving of all the praises the stonecutter carves over his bones. 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 woman could not see.

For she could not only sing like a lark; 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. 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 sal volatile.

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 the end of a novel, were it ever so stupid. 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.

Well, then. The trunks and bonnet-boxes of Miss Sedley having been arranged 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 packed with a sneer, the hour for parting came.

'You'll go in and say good-bye 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 head, 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 which was left out for that purpose.

Miss Sharp only folded her own hands with a very frigid smile, and quite declined to accept the proffered honour. In fact, it was a little battle between the young lady and the old one, and the latter was worsted. 'Come away, Becky,' said Miss Jemima, pulling the young woman away in great alarm.

Then came the parting below. Words refuse to tell it. All the servants were there in the hall – all the dear friends – all the young ladies; and there was such a hugging, and kissing, and crying, with the hysterical *yoops* of Miss Swartz, from her room, as no pen can depict. 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 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. 'And Becky, here's a book for you that my sister – that is, I – *Johnson's Dixonary*, you know; you mustn't leave without that.' And the kind creature retreated into the garden, overcome with emotion.

But, lo! 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.