

## CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

Notes of a meeting held chez Pauline held on 11th May 2022

1. PRESENT: Pauline, Judith, Georges, Brian - and, after a gentlemanly pause, Peter
2. APOLOGIES: Viv Caroline, Rosemary, Gill, Neil, Biddy, Deborah, Diana, Margaret, Jennifer
3. BOOK: "Vanity Fair" - Thackeray. The name comes from Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress and refers to the place of idle frivolity where Pilgrim is mocked, but for Thackeray it becomes British society of the time for which he writes - beginning with the lead up to the Waterloo campaign of 1815. Thackeray was writing in the early 1850s, so was describing an era before he was born, but he puts before us a huge cast of characters who reflect the callousness and sometimes kindness of their day with much that is hugely comic.

The story begins at Miss Pinkerton's academy for young ladies in Chiswick Mall, where friends Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley are about to leave the school. Becky has been educated there "free" after her clever drunkard father 'descended into the grave following his third attack of delirium tremens, leaving only bailiffs fighting over his corpse' - but we soon learn that Becky has fully earned her keep - apart from anything else by being able to speak and teach perfect French, unlike anyone else in the establishment. . It is the practice for departing pupils to be given a bible - and Amelia duly receives her award. Not so Becky, due to her station, but Miss Pinkerton's kindly but down trodden sister smuggles one to her - which Becky promptly flings through the window as the coach turns a corner

We proceeded to a very lively and enjoyable conversation which was impossible to take down word for word. . Pauline thought all characters were monied people - but Becky and her husband Rawdon discuss not paying an innkeeper.. Judith raised Thackeray's attitude to women which Georges thought misogynistic - Becky was clever but unscrupulous, but Amelia never really says or does anything

Becky stays for a while with Amelia and Mr & Mrs Sedley in Russell square and there meets Jos Sedley, Amelia's elder brother who is a tax collector for an Indian district. The book only hints, but he would have had a sinecure from the East India Company. The younger people go off with Capt Dobbin to Vauxhall Gardens, where Jos gets drunk on champagne and disgraces himself after Becky thinks she has tricked him into proposing. Georges thought Jos's problems sexual - he cannot meet the eyes of women and gets embarrassed, causing people to think him gay perhaps. He is also very fat and there are references comparing him with Daniel Lambert - 52 stone at death and the fattest man in England

The love of Amelia's life is George Osborne, an army captain whose parents are neighbours of the Sedleys. Mr Osborne is a terrible man who had whipped George in the presence of his mother who did nothing to intervene. The conversation moved to the violence of men towards their children and ? Judith compared "The Soldier's return" by Melvyn Bragg where a soldier returned from WW1 used to knock his children about

Becky gets a job as governess to the young children of Sir Pitt Crawley who has "won and lost more legal cases than any other man in England" and whose sickly younger wife (how many have there been?) never says a word. There is a wonderful description of his London house with everything swathed up to save heating when she arrives and is offered supper of tripe and onions. Pauline told us how she hated tripe as a girl, but enjoyed it in Provence with herbs and tomatoes. There was then a general conversation about eating offal of which Peter as a child had a lot. He regaled us in a story of how his ex-wife's sister's husband died of a heart attack and stuffed heart was served at the wake, prompting Pauline to tell us how much she liked pig's trotters - delicious with the jelly - , reminding Peter how he couldn't eat sweetbreads ("a little too close to home:")

Judith compared Sir Pitt with Jarndyce v Jarndyce -p but Thackeray was more light-hearted than Dickens. She found the book easy to read and enjoyed it. Georges found similarities with War and Peace - success is really a matter of luck

We all enjoyed the journey Becky took with Sir Pitt to his country house at Queens Crawley where they changed carriages to something more imposing for their arrival at the village. Becky quickly becomes in control of the household, and the confidante of old Miss Crawley, reputedly very wealthy and fawned on by all as she is also an invalid. However, Sir Pitt's sickly wife dies, and before the funeral he proposes to Becky, whose line of escape is to tell him she cannot marry him as she is already married. . . This leads her to a marriage with the disreputable Rawdon Crawley, and that leads to Becky and Rawdon being out of favour with Miss Crawley. To try to remedy that situation, Becky goes to Brighton where Miss Crawley's gullible companion, Miss Briggs, is indulging in sea bathing from one of a hundred bathing machines. And there is a lovely picture of Miss Briggs in her flanelette bathing costume being propositioned by Becky, who planned to dive beneath her and come up under her, but lacked the bravado at the last moment.

We read this book only to the end of ChXXV,. It reveals the weakness of the Army, where positions were bought and sold (the government eventually had to buy out the system) leading to the CIO of George, Dobbin and Rawdon being too old and feeble to give orders so his wife had to do it for him- as well as many other scandalous situations. All in all we greatly enjoyed the book, and some were threatening to carry on reading.

4. OTHER READS: Georges - A biography of Chas Darwin by his son and a huge recent biography of him written by an Edinburgh lecturer who was paid by the number of students he attracted = leading to great demand for corpses. This all led Georges to realise that biographies were influenced by where the author was living when he wrote. Judith - "The Great Level" - Stella Tillyard - bit like Becky Sharpe Lawrence Durrell - non fiction - "The Bitter Lemons of Cyprus", , Rose Tremain "Islands of Mercy- about a woman who finds she has nothing save a necklace but uses it to start a tea room in Bath" Notes of an exhibition - Patrick Gale. Me "A Prince and a Spy" - .Rory Clements - allegedly based on the disappearance of the Duke of Kent in 1942 - too far fetched

5. ACTIVITIES: Rotary visit to the National Fruit Collection - organised by Les and Judith - excellent; Peter - Ramblers 16 mile walk to 5 churches. Judith - trip to see the Mousetrap

6. DONM: Thurs 30th June 4.0pm chez Pauline . Book Rose Tremain "Trespass" "