

## 15 Surprise

"I say agin, I want you," Sir Pitt said, thumping the table. "I can't git on without you. I didn't see what it was till you went away. The house all goes wrong. It's not the same place. All my accounts has got muddled agin. You *must* come back. Do come back. Dear Becky, do come."

"Come - as what, sir?" Rebecca gasped out.

"Come as Lady Crawley, if you like," the Baronet said, grasping his crape hat. "There! will that zatusfy you? Come back and be my wife. Your vit vor't. Birth be hanged. You're as good a lady as ever I see. You've got more brains in your little vinger than any baronet's wife in the county. Will you come? Yes or no?"

"Oh, Sir Pitt!" Rebecca said, very much moved.

"Say yes, Becky," Sir Pitt continued. "I'm an old man, but a good'n. I'm good for twenty years. I'll make you happy, zee if I don't. You shall do what you like; spend what you like; and 'av it all your own way. I'll make you a zettlement. I'll do everything reg'lar. Look year!" and the old man fell down on his knees and leered at her like a satyr.

Rebecca started back a picture of consternation. In the course of this history we have never seen her lose her presence of mind; but she did now, and wept some of the most genuine tears that ever fell from her eyes.

"Oh, Sir Pitt!" she said. "Oh, sir - I - I'm *married already*."

WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY *Vanity Fair* (1848)

## SURPRISE

MOST NARRATIVES contain an element of surprise. If we can predict every twist in a plot, we are unlikely to be gripped by it. But the twists must be convincing as well as unexpected. Aristotle called this effect *peripetia*, or reversal, the sudden shift from one state of affairs to its opposite, often combined with "discovery", the transformation of a character's ignorance into knowledge. Aristotle's example was the scene in *Oedipus Rex* when the messenger who has come to reassure the hero about his origins in fact reveals to him that he has killed his father and married his mother.

In the retelling of a well-known story like that of Oedipus, the surprise is experienced by the characters rather than the audience, for whom the primary effect is one of irony (see Section 39, below). The novel, however, differs from all previous narrative forms in undertaking (or pretending) to tell wholly new stories. On a first reading, therefore, most novels are likely to provide surprises, though some contain more than others.

Thackeray managed to pack several into this scene in *Vanity Fair*. Becky Sharp, a penniless and orphaned governess, is surprised to be offered marriage by a baronet; Sir Pitt Crawley and the reader are surprised to discover that she is married already. Thackeray gets still more mileage out of the situation. As Kathleen Tillotson observed in her *Novels of the 1840s*, this passage, which concludes Chapter XIV of the novel, also came at the end of the fourth number of the original serial publication. The first readers would therefore have been left in suspense for some time (rather like viewers of a modern TV soap) about the identity of Becky's husband. An analogy that might have occurred to Thackeray's contemporaries would be the end of an Act in a play. The tableau of the old roué on his knees before the beautiful and distraught young woman is inherently theatrical, and Becky's "Oh, sir - I - I'm *married already*" is a classic curtain-line, guaranteed to keep an audience buzzing through the interval.

The next chapter takes up the question of whom Becky has married without answering it immediately. Sir Pitt's half-sister, Miss Crawley, bursts into the room to find her brother on his knees before Becky, and *she* is surprised, especially to learn that the proposal had been declined. Not till the end of the chapter

is over-optimistic, and certainly the least of his attractions for Becky). The scene gains enormously from the comic characterization of Sir Pitt, of whom the narrator says earlier, "the whole baronetage, peerage, commonage of England did not contain a more cunning, mean, selfish, foolish, disreputable old man." In the image of his leering at Becky like a satyr, Thackeray goes as far as Victorian reticence would allow in hinting that Sir Pitt is not beyond taking a crude sexual interest in Becky. That she should weep at the loss of such a husband is a devastating comment not only on her but on the whole milieu of *Vanity Fair*.

does Thackeray reveal that Becky is secretly married to Miss Crawley's nephew, the spendthrift cavalry officer, Rawdon Crawley.

An effect like this needs careful preparation. As in a pyrotechnic set-piece, a slow-burning fuse eventually ignites a quick succession of spectacular explosions. Enough information must be fed to the reader to make the revelation convincing when it comes, but not so much that the reader will easily anticipate it. Thackeray withholds information, but he doesn't cheat. He uses letters a good deal in this part of his narrative to make his uncharacteristic reticence as narrator seem more natural.

Having been foiled in an attempt to catch the brother of her friend Amelia as a husband earlier in the story, the penniless Becky was obliged to take the position of governess to Sir Pitt's two daughters by his ailing second wife. She sets about making herself invaluable to the miserly and uncouth old baronet at his country seat, Queen's Crawley, and also to his rich spinster half-sister. Miss Crawley takes such a fancy to Becky that she insists on being nursed by her while indisposed at her London home. Sir Pitt reluctantly agrees to release Becky because he doesn't want to jeopardize his daughters' expectations of a bequest from Miss Crawley; but when his wife dies (an event to which all the characters are callously indifferent) he is impelled to get Becky back to Queen's Crawley at any price, even marriage. Miss Crawley has already spotted this danger — much as she enjoys Becky's company, she has no wish to welcome her into the family — and has tacitly encouraged her nephew to seduce Becky, to render her ineligible as the third Lady Crawley. In marrying her instead, Rawdon at least acts honourably, if recklessly. The rest of the characters act wholly out of calculation and self-interest, love and death being mere counters in the pursuit of wealth and status.

Thackeray's irony is remorseless. Becky is "very much moved", her tears are, for once, genuine — but why? She has married the stupid Rawdon hoping that he will inherit his aunt's wealth, only to find that she has missed a much bigger and more certain prize: to be the wife of a baronet and, in the nature of things, a rich dowager before long (his claim that he is "good for twenty years"