

One

SCENES OF ALL SORTS (1798-1839)

There are scenes of all sorts: some dreadful combats, some grand and lofty horse-riding, some scenes of high life, and some of very middling indeed; some love-making for the sentimental, and some light comic business; the whole accompanied by appropriate scenery and brilliantly illuminated with the Author's own candles.

‘Before the Curtain’, *Vanity Fair*

A boy of sixteen prepares for a journey. On the last day of May in 1798, accompanied by his father, he travels to Portsmouth from his birthplace in Hadley, Middlesex. He is to board the *Thetis*, the ship that will soon start on the 5,000-mile voyage to Calcutta, where a job in the great East India Company awaits him. In his luggage is a large notebook in which he has promised to keep a record of his journey for his mother. Such a long voyage is not an unfamiliar one in his family. His father had gone out more than thirty years earlier; a brother has already preceded him, and four more brothers will later make the same passage to India.

Father and son arrive in Portsmouth with some days to spare, and there is an opportunity to explore the town before it is time for farewells, for the boy will sail alone. He will never return to England, nor see his parents again.

Not until some weeks into the voyage does he reach for the notebook and start to honour his promise.

My Dear Mater

You desired me to keep and at the end of this Long voyage to send you a journal of all the Little occurrences which may happen on Board: my dear Father gave me a

small book in which I write the Heads and afterwards enter them in this. R:T

Imp: you know on the 31st of May (98.) I left you and the family & with my father set out for Portsmouth. on the 1st of June we arrived there. we saw every thing of note. we staid there till the 7. when I left my very excellent father and sailed to S^t Helens where we arrived that afternoon & on the following day we left it & sailed slowly on. On the 10th we were off Plymouth & on the 11th lost sight of old England. the 12th our Convoy chased some unknown Ship also entered the Bay of Biscay so famous for storms the ship rocks very much. there has been very little or no sea sickness none but the Ladies complaining. the 14th we passed the Bay of Biscay a little rain & squally. real[ly] the Journal of a sea voyage cannot possibly be entertaining & very often I think of leaving it off & if you had not desired particularly I certainly should.¹

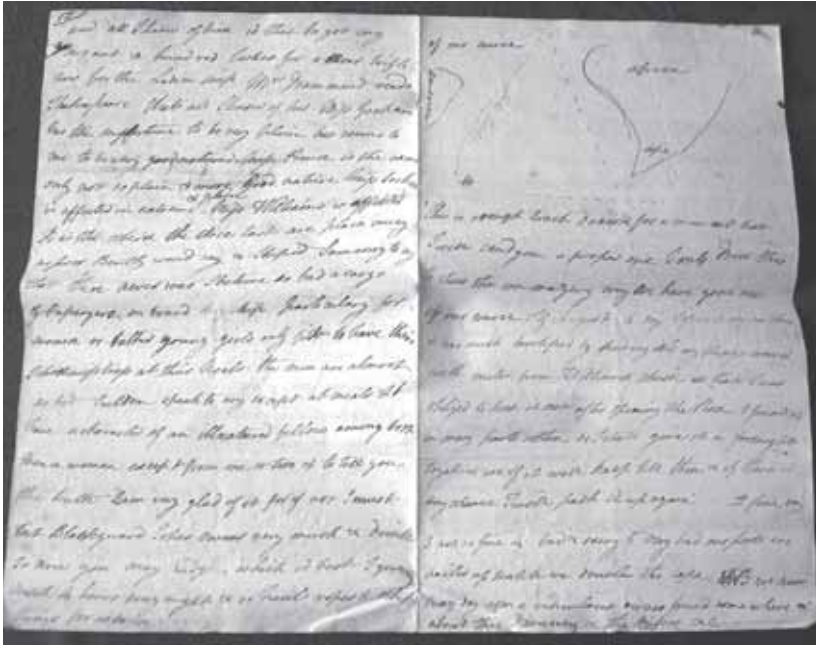
The great adventure is being undertaken by Richmond Thackeray, father of the future novelist, and his rediscovered journal, incomplete as it is, is the earliest of the few surviving examples of his writing. He had been sent to school at Eton, but after securing a training position as a ‘writer’ or clerk for the East India Company he left to learn book-keeping skills, just as his father, the first William Makepeace Thackeray, had done before him.

His journal gives an engaging sketch of life on board the *Thetis* and its leading role in the small convoy that set out together for mutual protection, and he is full of admiration for Captain Henry Bullock, ‘a very great man’. He is sanguine about the hardships and dangers of such a voyage; early in July two deaths are noted in the convoy, one on them on the *Thetis*. Resilience and good humour see him through the rough treatment of the traditional rites to Neptune as the ship crosses the line, and the sore throat which follows, but his mother must have read these details with alarm.

23 [June] out of the Lat of Madeira.... We have seen great plenty of flying fish & Porpoises. 26 was a remarkable fine day indeed we have had very fine weather upon the whole ... on the 2^d [July] Cap^t Makintosh a Passenger in the Osterly died & in the afternoon was buried (that is launched to the deep) with Military Honors & minute guns for Half an Hour. the sea is quite calm ... 4 we made a great many signals this morning particularly to the Osterly & Berington who would

not answer & we fired a gun. it was so dark in the Cabin that we could not write. at 12 oclock my servant who is a soldier was tried & flog[g]ed by a court Martial so that I am deprived of his services.... On the 7 a poor man died that is the first in our ship. 9th we expect to Cut the Line in about 4 days.... On 12th we passed the Line so celebrated for the Rites of Neptune. there were about 60 victims I among the number & immediately after the Procession which I suppose you must have seen we were dragged out by Constable & shaved & ducked. the Lather was made of Tar Pitch Oil of Old Lamps Grease & other various dirty Articles after which we had about 40 Pails of Water thrown over each of us not to forget the razor [which] was made out of an old Iron Hoop which made holes in my face. I caught a bad sore throat by the ducking which was the Greatest inconvenience of any & all the Cloathes I had on were total[l]y spoilt. 13th (still a sore throat) the Girls all went into fits at least pretended to be so & a great noise was made about it Note not on account of my ill health.... 17: throat Better but not well. we were very near sunk this afternoon by the Helm being left to go round before the wind which made us turn our side before the head of the Rockingham (she going at 7 miles per hour) being in Close order of sailing & in passing it was a miracle her bowsprit had not entangled us & she run over us for I might have thrown a biscuit on her Forcastle. 18 throat most well very fine wind. I never care what weather it is so as we go fast therefore of course I hate a calm.

The ship's company consisted of 'the wife of a captain in the Bengal Artillery; five young ladies; some thirty officers, writers, cadets, and surgeons; and eighty odd recruits to the Indian army',² a typical cargo of civil and military personnel required to sustain the needs of a burgeoning Empire. Once they had crossed the equator there was dancing, but Richmond shyly sat this out, 'for I did not nor do I intend to dance once during the whole voyage tho I hear it is to be evry night'. He did not take long to identify the personalities on board, discovering in himself the natural gift for caricature which his son would one day make his own. His awkwardness makes him dismiss most of the girls as plain or stupid, judging them with all the wisdom of his sixteen years as still in need of their schoolmistress. But the 'saucy' ones probably had the measure of him.



Pages from Richmond Thackeray's 1798 Journal

I wish I had some anecdotes to send you but really never was such a ship so crowded & at the same time so few Gentlemen really. I take my list & look over their characters & cannot find one I like at all. my dear father saw M^r Brisco and Blunt at Portsmouth and I am sure was much mistaken in them for Brisco is a complete wine drinker & card player & Blunt immitates [*sic*] him. the first mate M^r Jenkins took in every body for he has all the smiles & duplicity of a scotchman. he pretended to be so polite but now he is known throughout the Ship in fact I seldom or ever speak to him or indeed very few on board. I sometimes amuse myself with drawing caracatures [*sic*] & letting them come out without being known to be the drawer: but they never are offensive.... I have said little or nothing of the Ladies: by & by for them...

the second mate of this ship is a very gentlelike man & much liked by every one on board ev'n M^r. Bathurst the Cynic likes him. When he arrives in England shew him any little civility for my sake. I intend god be willing to send by him some trifle or another by him [*sic*] & Perhaps this invaluable manuscript... now for the Ladies.... M^{rs}

Drummond reads Shakespeare that's all I know of her. Miss Graham has the misfortune to be very plain but seems to me to be very goodnature[d]: Miss Prince is the same only not so plain & more Good nature[d]. Miss Jackson is affected in extreme & plain. Miss Williams is affected as is the other & the three last are plain saucy as poor Bently would say & Stupid. I am sorry to say that there never was I believe so bad a cargo of Passengers on board any ship, particularly for women or rather young girls only fit to have their Schoolmistress at their heels. the men are almost as bad, [I] seldom speak to any except at meals & I have a character of an illnature[d] fellow among both Men & women except from one or two & to tell you the truth I am very glad of it for if not I must cut Blackguard Jokes swear very much & drink so now you may judge – which is best.

On 17 August Richmond recorded being off the Cape, believing that 'the Greater Part of our long voyage is over'; they were more than two months from their destination and some difficult conditions lay ahead. About a month later the vessel sprang 'a very dreadful leak' with all male passengers involved in pumping out the water, the women transferring to the companion ship, the *Osterly*. There was a threatened mutiny, the captain logging the harsh measures taken to enforce discipline and ensure the safety of the vessel, which was at last secured. 'The passengers exert themselves in an uncommon degree,' Bullock recorded. 'I am confident without their aid and example we shou'd not succeed in keeping her afloat.'³ Richmond did not shrink from playing his part here, 'indeed it is very hard work', the captain having won his admiration from the start. 'Cap^t. Bullock seems very low. I now am glad I can swim for I am afraid there will be occasion.' Emergency repairs were made at Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and the *Thetis* continued north. Having set sail in early June, the ship at last anchored at the mouth of the Hooghly river off Calcutta on 23 October after a journey of more than five months.

The most engaging journal entry was made soon after the travellers had experienced heavy weather, in early September. So far from home and family, with the dangers attendant on such a long sea-voyage much in his mind, he thinks fondly ahead to his eventual meeting with William, the brother who has preceded him to India, but he is already contemplating the idea of return.

1st Sept^r a day well remembered by my dear Fathers being taken so ill. you my dear Mater will never forget it. God grant that he may never more feel the effects of it. I remember it

as well as if it happened yesterday indeed it is the greatest [aid] to melancholy pleasure to think of past times. I read the notes you have written in the books you gave me over & over & the letters my dear Pater gave & sent me from Port & if there is any time Youngs night thoughts are to be read none can be so good as the present separated from all we love by an immense space. however I have two things to look forward to returning & finding you all well & seeing dear William. I often figure to myself the family at home. my place is vacant no more I have your conversation after dinner no more Emily plays. Francis never smiles I never hear the rough stamp of S^t John. when I return or they come out the difference will be wonderful.

But for Richmond Thackeray there was a career to be forged, and he never would make that return passage and breach the ‘immense space’.

Eleven years after Richmond’s arrival in Calcutta, the girl whom he would marry made the same hard voyage out, but with ambitions very different from his own. Her family hoped that India would help to put aside troubling memories. In fact, the past eventually caught up with her, but not before she had married Richmond and given birth to a future novelist. Anne Becher’s family had roots in India at least as strong as those of the Thackerays. John Harman Becher had also been a writer in the East India Company, and had married Harriet Cowper in Calcutta where Anne was born in 1792. Like most Anglo-India children she was sent home to England during her early years, so for her this passage was itself a return trip. For someone usually characterised by a set of inflexible religious convictions in later life, against which her son and her granddaughters were to come into conflict, Anne Becher’s family circumstances were far from conventional, and her own wilful temperament seems to have been inherited through the female line.

John Becher died in Calcutta in 1800, but his widow, Harriet, is nowhere mentioned in his will, family tradition holding that she had already left him by then.⁴ In his last years, Becher lost his job and became a bankrupt, although whether this was brought on by or caused his wife’s departure is unknown. In 1802, just two years after Becher’s death, Harriet is named in the will of Captain Charles Christie as his wife, although they may never have married. She might even have been living with Christie whilst Becher was still alive, the relationship never having subsequently been formalised. After Christie’s own death

in 1805, Harriet moved to Barrackpore and in October 1806 married for a third (or second) time another military man, Captain Edward Butler of the Bengal Artillery. That she was a woman of determination would be borne out when as a frail old lady she lived for a time in Kensington with Thackeray, her grandson, his daughters Annie and Minny being urged by his mother to 'take care of poor GM'.⁵ Fifty years earlier, it appears that she had been more than capable of taking care of herself.

When Anne Becher and her sisters had been sent from India to be looked after by their grandmother and aunt at Fareham, near Portsmouth, they were leaving behind their mother's eventful first marriage. In England they encountered a rather severe household in which their grandmother called her own daughter Miss Becher and addressed each of them in like manner – Anne was 'Miss Nancy'. Miss Becher, Anne's aunt (also an Anne), was the real force for good in this female household, as Thackeray later acknowledged. 'This good old lady was a mother to my mother in her youth.'⁶ During the winter of 1807-8 the young Anne, now aged fifteen, accompanied her grandmother to Bath, and in circumstances reminiscent of a Jane Austen novel became a centre of attention. She met the twenty-seven-year-old Lieutenant Henry Carmichael-Smyth of the Bengal Engineers, whose ancient Scottish lineage and recent distinguished record of Indian service lent him glamour. His was a charming personality, and therefore considered dangerous by Anne's grandmother; she took her duties *in loco parentis* seriously and disapproved of a man who, as a younger son, had uncertain prospects. Lieutenant Carmichael-Smyth pursued Anne to Fareham, and although Mrs Becher forbade an engagement they met in secret, until Anne was confined to her locked room. A sympathetic maid smuggled letters between the lovers.

It is very likely that some of the details of the complete story, repeated and embroidered as part of Thackeray family tradition, are apocryphal. Its themes of deception, an invented death and a denouement reached by means of chance encounters in foreign parts, make for a scarcely creditable sequence of events. Even the detail of love notes being passed through the convenient agency of a maid suggest the clichés of sensational fiction and drama. The old lady's role as dispenser of fate is played to perfection, and with an unhesitating ruthlessness, as Thackeray's granddaughter, Hester Ritchie, recounted more than a century later when she repeated (and perhaps reworked) the memories passed on to her. She told how those secret letters suddenly ceased: 'one day old Mrs. Becher hobbled into her granddaughter's room and told her to muster all her courage to bear a great blow; the

Ensign had died of a sudden fever and on his death-bed had sent her messages of his undying love. Anne pined and mourned in silence. After a time a family council decided that the broken-hearted young woman should be sent out to India as soon as possible to stay with her Becher relations.⁷

And so in April 1809, Captain and Mrs Butler started out on their return journey to Calcutta after a long leave, accompanied by Anne, a sister, and her new step-sister. This passage took even longer than Richmond Thackeray's eleven years before, and they did not disembark until 24 October.

In the years since his arrival in India Richmond had done well and was now working for the Board of Revenue in Calcutta. His sisters Emily and Augusta had come out from England to join him, in the hope that they would find marriage opportunities in India – a conventional pattern for its time. He seems to have developed from a shy but optimistic boy into a rather priggish young man, fearing for Augusta's prospects as she was less good-looking than her sisters, 'whom nature has been kinder in forming'.⁸ In due course, Emily married John Shakespear; Augusta continued to live with him, passed over as her brother had confidently expected, though she was eventually twice married.

A year younger than Henry Carmichael-Smyth, in 1809 Richmond was himself still unmarried, though not childless. As was common and acceptable in Anglo-Indian society, with its shortage of European women – a fact which made Augusta's apparent difficulties in winning a husband the more humiliating – he had taken an Indian mistress. Strictly speaking, she was probably of mixed race. Charlotte Sophia Judd, by whom Richmond had a daughter, Sarah, would subsequently marry James Blechynden.⁹ Richmond acknowledged his daughter, and made provision for her in his will. In later years his son would also be meticulous in observing the rights of his half-sister, exhibiting the scrupulous fairness which characterised all his money dealings with other people, even though he tended towards extravagance and to spend beyond his income.

Richmond met Anne, now aged seventeen, during the winter of 1809, cutting a dash as he visited on his white horse. He must have found her as attractive as Lieutenant Carmichael-Smyth had done. On the rebound, and willing herself to put unhappiness behind her, she accepted his marriage proposal. Within a year of her return to India, on 13 October 1810, they married in St John's Church, Calcutta. Her only child was born prematurely, after just seven months, on 18 July 1811, and they called him William Makepeace after his grandfather, the



Portrait of Anne Becher, artist unknown

first of the Thackerays in India. It had been a difficult birth. Anne was told that further pregnancies could not be contemplated, and that had William been a full-term baby she might not have survived. Scarcely anything is known of his infant years, though there is a charming family portrait by George Chinnery executed about 1813-14, reproduced on the present book's cover. The scene hints at more than it can show, and probably more than the artist himself realised. Richmond sits sideways,

distracted, his long legs casually crossed, whilst Anne, standing and supporting her son who leans against her, looks dreamily upwards and out of the left of the picture, a dark-haired and strikingly handsome rather than a conventionally beautiful woman. Only the boy, perched on a pile of improbably big books, looks out of the picture and fixes the viewer in a clear unbroken gaze from his 'large-large eyes',¹⁰ with something like a quizzical smile. The child is alert and, somehow, knowing.

Since his marriage, Richmond's status and income had both increased. Once he had completed twelve years in the service of the East India Company, at the end of 1811 he became eligible for positions attracting an annual income of over £4,000. By 1813 he was simultaneously Collector of the Twenty-four Pergunnahs (a large district south of Calcutta) and Collector of the House Tax at Calcutta. He probably commissioned the Chinnery watercolour as being something appropriate for a man of his position in Calcutta society. But by then an unsettling incident had disturbed the tranquillity of his home life, with a theme invoking little less than death and resurrection: Anne's former dead suitor was not only returned to life, but was coming to dinner. Henry Carmichael-Smyth, now a Captain, had returned to India, and in fact had been in the country since December 1810. The romance of their former history made somehow inevitable the irony not only that he and Anne should meet again, but that the innocent agent for their meeting would be Richmond. In her telling of the story Thackeray's granddaughter manages to translate the moment into an operatic *scena*.

Returning from his club in Calcutta one day, Richmond Thackeray said to his wife: 'I have just made the acquaintance of a most delightful and interesting Engineer officer; he only arrived yesterday morning, knows no one, and I have invited him to dine with us to-night so that we can introduce him to our friends.'

The hour of the dinner party arrived, the guests assembled, and the last to come was the stranger. The servant announce in a loud voice, 'Captain Carmichael-Smyth,' and in walked Anne's long-lost lover!

What that dinner was like no words can describe. After what seemed an eternity, Anne and Captain Carmichael-Smyth had a moment to themselves, and in a low trembling voice she exclaimed: 'I was told you had died of a sudden fever.' And with bitter reproach he replied, 'I was informed

by your grandmother that you no longer cared for me and had broken our engagement. As a proof, all my letters to you were returned unopened. And when in despair I wrote again and again begging for an interview, you never gave me an answer or a sign.'

After a while the situation became so impossible that Richmond Thackeray had to be told; he listened gravely, said little, but was never the same to Anne again.¹¹

If Chinnery's portrait makes husband and wife seem detached and lost in their separate thoughts, there was much to ponder. Carmichael-Smyth returned to Agra where he was based, and the marriage was not threatened, but in 1815 Richmond succumbed to fever. It was impossible to escape from the baking Calcutta heat, so he was transferred to a ship on the Ganges in search of cooling breezes, dying on 13 September, aged thirty-four. Many years later, Thackeray attended his aunt Augusta's final days in Paris. As she drifted in and out of consciousness, she imagined herself at her brother's death scene, 'fancying she was in the boat with my father dying – it affected me'.¹²

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The young man's life is just beginning: the boy's leading-strings are cut, and he has all the novel delights and dignities of freedom. He has no ideas of cares yet, or of bad health, or of roguery, or poverty, or to-morrow's disappointment. The play has not been acted so often as to make him tired.

Pendennis

The time was approaching when Richmond's boy needed to be sent for schooling in England. As she mourned her husband's loss, his mother could also entertain the prospect of an ultimate reunion with her first love: she promised to marry Henry Carmichael-Smyth after an eighteen-month period of mourning. It prevented her returning to England with her son, but his journey at least could not be delayed. She managed to book William a passage at the end of 1816 in the company of a former colleague of Richmond's who was returning on leave. With them went Thackeray's cousin, Richmond Shakespeare, a year his junior. As the *Prince Regent* set sail, the five-year-old child left behind everything that was familiar. His father was dead, his mother

would soon be taking a new name, and a stepfather was standing in the wings.

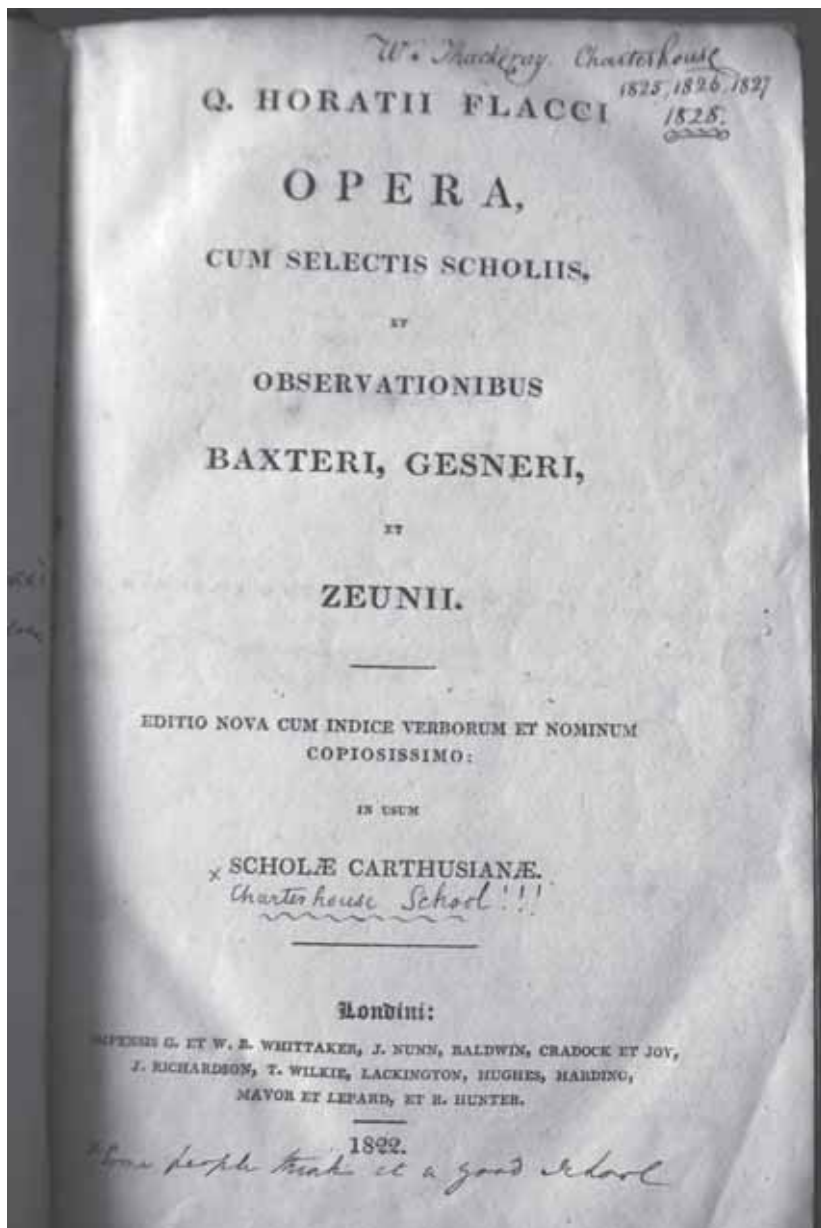
This was a final farewell to the country of his birth, for just as his father had never returned to England, on 17 December William Makepeace Thackeray left India behind for ever. It is scarcely surprising that with such painful and persistent memories of separation and loss, in circumstances barely understandable for a child of five, the adult Thackeray would devise strategies to avoid formal partings at the outset of long journeys. He was likely to slip away without warning, in an attempt to suppress the trauma of separation from loved ones and from an environment where he felt comfortable – ‘the pain of parting is much greater than the pleasure of meeting – at least to my ill-regulated mind’.¹³ For a child who had lost one parent, to be sent away from the other may well have carried with it a burden of guilt. Once in England, at first living with relatives and then at school, it was his absent mother he longed for. It explains the close bond he forged with her for the remainder of his life, and may also help account for the exceptional frankness with which he discussed intimate details of his interior life with her. It was the key relationship of his life, but also the most complex, informing the way in which as a single parent he chose to bring up his own children.

Under the charge of his Becher great-grandmother and great-aunt at Fareham, he was put into a small school at Southampton, and then, a year later, transferred to another at Chiswick, some of the details of which re-surface in the opening chapters of *Vanity Fair*. He was miserable in the first school, remembering later ‘kneeling by my little bed of a night, and saying, “Pray God, I may dream of my mother!”’¹⁴ His Chiswick experience was not much better, but he survived it, and his lot was probably no different from the many who endured the casual brutalities and deprivations of a pre-Victorian education. The main hardship was separation from his mother, but in that too his was not a unique plight, for most sons of the British administrators in India were sent home to be schooled, enduring sustained periods without seeing their families. Holidays were spent at Fareham. ‘I have lost my Cough and am quite well, strong, saucy, & hearty; & can eat Granmamas Goosberry pyes famously after which I drink yours & my Papa’s Good health & a speedy return.’¹⁵ The tone of those first childish letters to his mother are affectionate and longing, but also faintly accusatory in dwelling on her absence. He would not see her again for more than three years, when the Carmichael-Smyths returned to England on what was intended to be a long leave, but which turned out to be their own final departure from India. Mrs Carmichael-Smyth reported on the eventual reunion – ‘dear soul he has a perfect recollection of me he

could not speak but kissed me & looked at me again & again, I could almost have said “Lord now let thou they servant depart in peace for mine eyes have seen thy salvation””.¹⁶

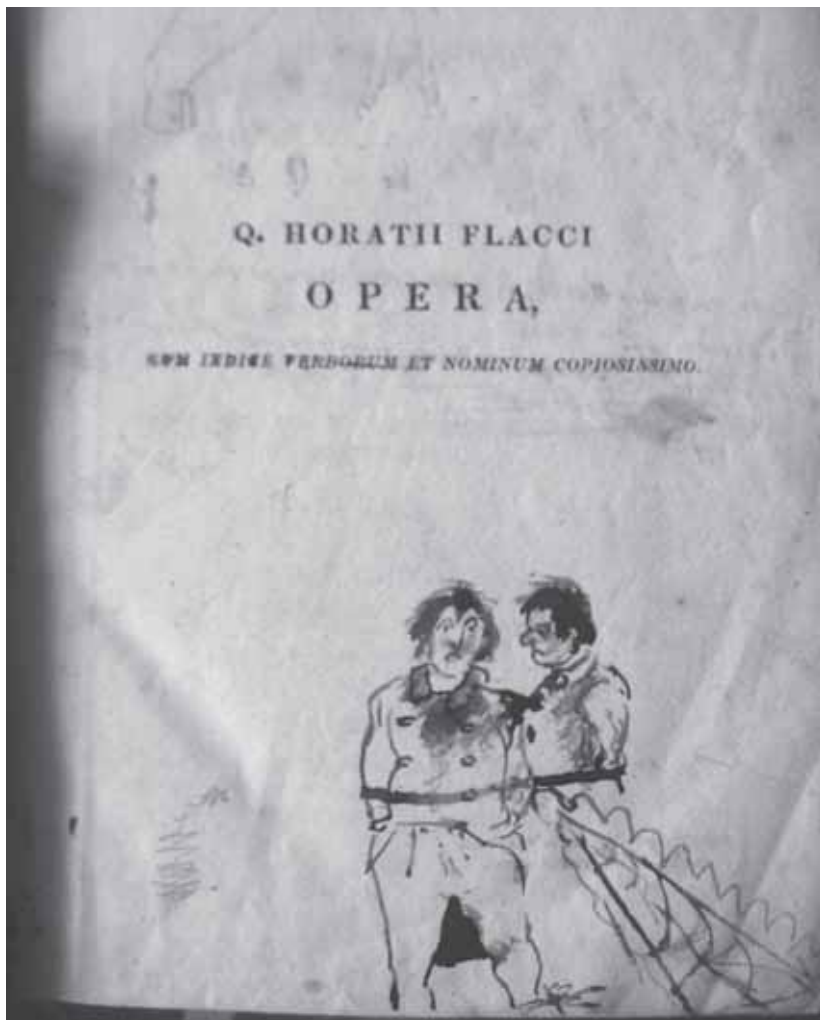
From January 1822 until he entered Trinity College, Cambridge seven years later, Thackeray was a pupil at Charterhouse, Henry Carmichael-Smyth’s old school. Charterhouse would take on a fictional life as Greyfriars, the institution which frames Colonel Newcome’s life, and in whose care he dies as a resident pensioner. The experience of an English schooling had endearing manifestations through Thackeray’s later life. He would not argue for fundamental changes in the public schools, nor even for reform in the manifestly unsatisfactory standards of the small preparatory schools which fed them. His sympathy for the hopes and anxieties of small boys emerged instead in modest practical gestures, as he introduced moments of unsolicited pleasure into their humdrum lives. In short, he liked to treat them by injecting a moment of colour into the dull routine of a ‘Greyfriars’ day. Unknown boys would be taken into shops to be bought jam tarts by the tall, amusing stranger who delighted in their simple enjoyment, and then passed on his way. He never forgot what it felt like to be a schoolboy – often unhappy, lonely, and not in control of one’s life.

Thackeray’s time at Charterhouse coincided with an eccentric teaching system introduced by its then headmaster, Dr John Russell, who contrived to expand student rather than teacher numbers by requiring selected boys in the higher forms to act as instructors for the lower ones. Perhaps there were boys with sufficient instinctive authority to impart something to their younger fellows, but these must have been rare. Discipline was maintained by flogging, Dr Russell’s favoured implement being a bunch of birch, and the institutionalised fagging system of the English public school system, whereby a junior acted as a kind of unpaid servant to a senior boy, survived attempts to abolish it. Thackeray’s introduction to a classical education came at the feet of the headmaster himself, whose teaching was remembered by a fellow pupil, George Venables, as ‘vigorous, unsympathetic, and stern’, while another, Martin Tupper, had only contempt for the regime of bullying. ‘What should we think nowadays, of an irate schoolmaster smashing a child’s head between two books in his shoulder-of-mutton hands till his nose bled?’¹⁷ In Thackeray, we probably have a classic instance of someone able to learn far more outside the classroom than within it, and of forming his values accordingly. What he learned of human character and of the values of self-sufficiency would not be forgotten. But he left Charterhouse with only a shaky academic grounding, inadequately prepared for life as an undergraduate.



Above: Title page from Thackeray's school copy of Horace

Opposite: Doodle from Thackeray's school copy of Horace



Once they had given up thoughts of returning to India, the Carmichael-Smyths settled first in Addiscombe, near Croydon, where Major Carmichael-Smyth was appointed the acting warden of the East India Company's military academy. The schoolboy Thackeray nagged his mother to communicate more regularly. 'I hope you will write to me soon at least oftener than you did last quarter & tell me all about Addiscombe.... Write again as quick as you can.'¹⁸ She was a striking woman, tall – as was her son, who reached the height of six feet three by the time he left school – somewhat imperious, and with a strong religious conviction. Life in India had helped shape her attitudes, and now she began to move in English county society 'fascinating everyone

who came her way'.¹⁹ Her granddaughter and others remembered her as beautiful even in old age, and a dominant personality within her rather narrow world. She was not arrogant, but she could be autocratic and quick to judge. After Addiscombe, she and Henry moved to Ottery St Mary in Devon, where they planned to retire. This became home for the young Thackeray, and it was from here that he travelled by coach to Cambridge for the first time, Major Carmichael-Smyth accompanying him, a journey later reworked for *Pendennis* in which memories of undergraduate life in no way glamorise the reality of the life of the future writer.

Thackeray enrolled at Trinity College in February 1829, at once beginning an epistolary journal of this new life for his mother, just as his father a quarter of a century earlier had recorded the trivial incidents of his voyage to India. 'I am now about to begin my first journal, my dearest Mother, which will I hope be always sent, with the regularity with which it is now my full purpose to give to it.' Unsurprisingly, he seems to have known that that these good intentions would not last. Yet from the end of February until early June 1829, and perhaps for longer, he sent off every few days a candid account of his experiences. He tells of his readings in Greek and of struggles with mathematics for which he had been ill-prepared by Charterhouse – 'I have been working the Algebra today, but have lost all my chance even of mediocrity' – but such academic challenges were only to be expected. His mother must have felt more worried about the dinners, the wine parties, and the company that he was keeping. If she suppressed her anxieties during term time, they surfaced during the vacation. He spent the summer of 1829 in Paris, and his first letter home on 18 July must have alarmed her. 'We went last night to the Opera, and saw the Comte Ory, & a ballet the name of w^h. I forget – They have a certain dancing damsel yclept Taglioni who hath the most superb pair of pins, & maketh the most superb use of them that ever I saw dancer do before.... They are most inordinate card players here, & I am told play rather high.' And then on 6 August he declares that he has learnt a hard lesson at a fashionable gambling house on the Rue de Richelieu. 'The interest in the game Rouge et Noir is so powerful that I could not tear myself away until I lost my last piece – I dreamed of it all night – & thought of nothing else for several days, but thank God I did not return. The excitement has passed away now, but I hope I shall never be thrown in the way of the thing again, for I fear I could not resist.'

He probably thought that in adopting this tone of wide-eyed honesty he had disarmed his mother, which makes the ruffled dignity with which he met her subsequent reproof the more endearing. She

knew him too well to think that in recognising his weaknesses he was somehow guarded against succumbing to them.

I have this moment read your letter, my dear Mother, w^h. surprised me, and I confess hurt me, for I did not think I deserved those strong terms of reproof in which it was couched – I mentioned that I had been to Frascati’s – but for what went I? to gain? No – It was a sight w^h. I perhaps might never have another opportunity of seeing, it was a curious chapter in the book of life, the perusal of w^h. has done me the greatest good – it has taught me not to trust so much in myself as before my pride or ignorance would have led me to do; it has shewn me that I could not, (as few could) resist the temptation of gambling, & it therefore has taught me – to keep away from it – The same motive which would have led me to a Theatre led me to Frascati’s – I was obliged if I went to stake my ten francs at the table instead of paying at the door – If I had not done so I should never have arrived at a piece of self knowledge, which I can conscientiously thank God for giving me.... I have learnt the full extent of the evil. I have discovered my temperament & inclination with regard to it, and the necessity w^h. I did not then know of avoiding it – In what then am I blameable? I went with no bad desire, no desire for gain....

Good bye till tonight my dearest Mother; & may God grant that you never again call me avaricious and mean when I am but curious, that you never again think because I before was ignorant that therefore I was good; or that because I am now aware of my own weakness I must be wicked.²⁰

We know much less about his second year at Cambridge, as he kept no journal, or at least none has survived, and only a couple of letters to his mother are preserved. The scarcity of evidence is possibly significant, for in later years his daughter Anne destroyed letters and other papers touching on sensitive matters. Perhaps his mother, for similar reasons, did not keep everything that her son wrote to her. So we learn nothing at the time of the clandestine visit Thackeray paid to Paris during the Easter vacation in 1830 with Edward FitzGerald (the Cambridge contemporary to whom he felt closest), himself a future writer whose fame would rest on his translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayám*. The exotic allure of Paris was too great to resist, and some years later in a piece written for the *Britannia* Thackeray tells of an encounter with a woman of about thirty-five who claimed to

have met him when she worked as a governess in England. 'In her private capacity she was a workwoman; she lived in the Rue Neuve St. Augustin, and I found her a few days afterwards eating garlic soup in a foul porter's lodge, from which she conducted me up a damp, mouldy staircase to her own apartment, on the seventh floor, with the air and politeness of a duchess.'²¹ However unattractively Thackeray paints her, there is no doubt that he was intrigued.

All such Parisian temptations must have been hard to resist. Even before this Easter trip he had again been gambling at Cambridge despite the fulsome promises made just weeks earlier, falling easy prey to professionals who fleeced him of the enormous sum of £1,500 which he only finally settled when he came into his father's money in 1832. At the end of the academic year he was placed in the second class, with most of his friends ranked above him, and his academic ambitions ended with his decision not to return. He faced a difficult visit to Devon to offer explanations and to face recriminations or, perhaps worse, the silent disappointment of his mother. It is true that he had succeeded in having a few verses and brief articles published in the student newspaper *The Snob* and its successor, *The Gownsmen*, hints of what was to follow. But Cambridge and its distractions lay behind him.

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When I said you were frivolous I meant no harm, all women are so I think from their education, and I want my wife to be better than all women.

To Isabella, 5 July 1836

It was not in William Thackeray's nature to sit around and mope. Resolved not to return to Cambridge, he persuaded his mother and Major Carmichael-Smyth to let him have some months on the continent, and began planning a visit to Dresden by gathering letters of introduction. It was agreed that after a period abroad he should return and commit himself to a profession, preferably the law. Travelling via Rotterdam and Frankfurt, he visited the University of Bonn and sampled student life before deciding to base himself in Weimar rather than Dresden. His mother's letters were delayed, so some weeks passed before he celebrated at having at last seen 'the old handwriting'.

He told her of meeting the greatest German of the age. 'I saw for the first time old Goethe today, he treated me very kindly & rather in



Pastel illustrations in a letter from Thackeray to his mother, Weimar 1830

a more distingué manner than he used the other Englishmen here ... he sent me a summons this morning to come to him at 12, I sat with him for half an hour.' This was flattering attention, but he probably invested rather more energy in a flirtation whose history runs through a number of letters. Had it not been entirely innocent in nature, he is unlikely to have mentioned it to his ever alert mother, though she probably continued to worry anyway. 'The prettiest woman I ever saw in my life is here & I have within the last two days fallen in love with her; I trust I shall continue so for I find the sensation novel & pleasing – her name is – but I wont say what her name is – but if ever she becomes M^{rs}. Thackeray it will be well for her and myself.' This was

Melanie von Spiegel. By contrast, he found ‘Madame de Goethe very kind but withal a great bore’.²²

A month later his affections had been transferred. ‘I am still violently in love but it is with another person; Tho’ as there are only two young ladies at the Court of Weimar with whom one can fall in love, I don’t know what I shall do at the end of another fortnight, about which time I expect again to be free.’²³ The object of his attention this time was Jenny von Pappenheim. She would recollect Thackeray as a particularly popular Englishman in Weimar, humorous, tall, and (as his father had been) skilful at entertaining the company with his lightning caricatures. But he lost the affections of both women once they recognised that he was not a serious player in the marriage market. Probably he had been put on his guard when he realised with what determination the game was played in Weimar. ‘The old ladies here seem to be bent on marrying their daughters, two have told me that they did not wish much money for their Melanies or their Eugenies, but merely a competency – but I did not speak on the hint and as the respectable dowagers find they can make nothing of me they almost cut me.’²⁴

By the end of the year his mother had heard more than enough, and from his reply we can assume that she sent a letter which attacked on several fronts. Her lingering irritation about his Cambridge years, and fresh anxieties at his current frivolities – she may have put it stronger – prevented her from keeping silent. His attitude spoke to her of a decided lack of seriousness. Then there was his immortal soul to worry about, for she was certain that he was neglecting his church attendance. Thackeray’s self-justifying response voices his own disappointment in a wasted school and university experience. His mention of the new German theology that he has encountered, which would revolutionise biblical criticism in the years to come by challenging the literal interpretation of scripture to which Mrs Carmichael-Smyth unquestioningly adhered, skilfully deflected the attack by raising the spectre of a more powerful threat.

Your letters always make me sorrowful, dearest Mother, for there seems some hidden cause of dissatisfaction, some distrust which you do not confess & cannot conceal & for which on looking into myself I can find no grounds or reason....

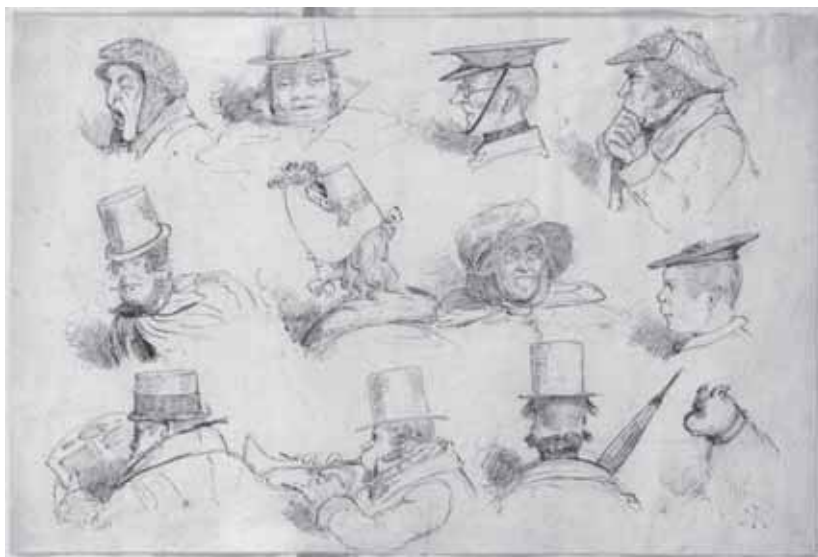
You seem to take it so much to heart, that I gave up trying for Academical honors – perhaps Mother I was too young to form opinions but I did form them – & these told me that there was little use in studying what could after a certain

point be of no earthly use to me.... For ten years of my life I was at school, it was thought that this discipline of misery was necessary to improve & instruct me; with all the power I had I struggled against it – the system was persevered in – & the benefit of ten years schooling was a little Latin & a very little Greek.... You will think me ungrateful, because I set myself so resolutely against what I know to be your wish, I am very young but if I have had any experience at all it has been in the system of education which you wish me to adopt.... In my reading & my pursuits here I have had a freedom which I never enjoyed in England – & I hope you will feel the benefit it has done me.

....When I first came here I did not go to Church very regularly as my attendance there was productive but of small profit – as I begin to comprehend the language of course I shall attend more regularly – The doctrine here is not near so strict as in England – many of the dogmas by w^h. we hold are here disregarded as allegories or parables – or I fear by most people as fictions altogether. They call our Religion in England too ‘objective’ & not refined enough for their more mature understandings.²⁵

He returned to England in March 1831, and late in May went to London where he took chambers and entered the Middle Temple to train for the promised legal career. He was attracted by its social trappings, for ‘the Inns of Court provided a setting for an existence of gentlemanly idleness’.²⁶ Whether or not he knew before he started, it can have taken him very little time to realise that such a career was not for him, and although he found it convenient to keep his chambers on for the rest of his life – a strange decision – this was the extent of his commitment to the law.

The financial independence that was granted when he turned twenty-one in 1832 proved useful, if temporary, for subsequent failures in Indian investments effectively wiped out what remained of his inheritance by the end of 1833. But while the money lasted, he gained his first involvement with the print press, and unwisely (though only from a commercial viewpoint) bought a failing weekly paper called the National Standard, becoming its proprietor and editor. The paper closed by February 1834, but it was an introduction to London journalism, or at least to its rougher side. Even as he struggled to keep the National Standard afloat, Thackeray was considering another scheme which would lead him once again across the English channel to Paris. He wanted to be a painter.



Page from an album of Thackeray sketches.

His artistic ambition cannot have been a surprise to the Carmichael-Smyths, yet scarcely what his mother had been hoping for. There was plenty of evidence of a natural talent. From his earliest years, his letters regularly include a caricature or illustrative sketch, and those from Weimar are at times quite elaborate; the letters to Edward FitzGerald from autumn 1831 onwards are especially fine. The very first letter to his mother which has survived, written when he was six, contains a delicate drawing of a horse and rider, and his school books have similar evidence of idle but talented doodlings. Something of this skill at drawing and especially caricature was inherited by both of his daughters: their letters often contain a sketch or two, usually executed swiftly. In due course the facility passed to the grandson named after him, and although at one stage his mother hoped that Billy might make art his profession, nothing came of it. The highly successful John Everett Millais refused to recommend life as a jobbing painter, writing with relief after she had abandoned this idea that 'I am glad to hear you have given up the idea of making your boy an Artist, as it is going to be a bad business for some years to come. The moneymaking class who were the only patrons are becoming too wise to buy pictures, or have ceased to make money.'²⁷

Sketches of people rather than topographical detail is what interested the Thackerays, father and daughters. It was not a gift he inherited from

his mother, who may in any case have felt that this facility bordered on time-wasting, disappointing evidence of how father and son approached the serious business of life. A revealing comment by Thackeray's aunt Maria, written in a letter to his mother even before he had started at Charterhouse, is enough to suggest that the Becher women had regarded Richmond Thackeray as clever but lazy. Were they worried that it might all be coming out again in the son? 'Does not this great quickness and idleness except when roused, remind you of his poor father?'²⁸ On the other hand, when his mother saw her son for the first time after her arrival back in England in 1820, his resemblance to his father was both striking and comforting. 'He is the living image of his father, and God in heaven send that he may resemble him in all but his too short life! He is tall, stout, and sturdy. His eyes are become darker, but there is still the same dear expression. His drawing is wonderful.'²⁹

Wonderful, but insubstantial perhaps. Yet in one respect Mrs Carmichael-Smyth could feel reassured about his new venture. When he left for Paris, it was to stay with her own mother, Mrs Butler, who had herself just moved to the capital. For the first few weeks the two lodged together at a boarding-house, and then transferred in October 1834 to the Rue de Provence, where Mrs Butler took rooms. Thackeray's new determination to acquire a formal artistic training took him daily to the Louvre to copy old masters, and to attend life classes. But Paris also offered the familiar distractions, now to be experienced within a bohemian milieu whose new opportunities both thrilled and shocked him. His fragmentary diary hints at erotic excitements. 'The conduct of the model, a pretty little woman, the men & the master of the establishment was about as disgusting as possible – The girl w^d. not pose but instead sung songs & cut capers; the men from sixty to sixteen seemed to be in habits of perfect familiarity with the model.' His grandmother was not told the details, but she seems to have voiced her concerns nonetheless, for at the end of this same diary entry Thackeray adds 'a few domestic storms & scolds'.³⁰ As for his painting, Edward FitzGerald was encouraging from a distance, but the technical challenges were considerable. With honest self-deprecation Thackeray shared his frustrations with another friend, admitting that 'I have got enough torn up pictures to roast an ox by – the sun riseth upon my efforts & goeth down on my failures, and I have become latterly so disgusted with myself, and art & every thing belonging to it, that for a month past I have been lying on sofas reading novels, and never touching a pencil.'³¹

He took the opportunity to renew his acquaintance with his father's younger sister, Charlotte and her husband John Ritchie, who had been especially kind to him when he had first arrived in England as a little

boy. The Ritchies had made Paris their permanent home in 1830, like so many genteel English seeking out its cheaper living costs and relatively comfortable lifestyle. The Carmichael-Smyths would also make the move across the English channel in due course, in an attempt to stretch the value of Major Carmichael-Smyth's modest army pension. Thackeray's friendship with his younger cousin, William Ritchie, dates from this Parisian trip: Ritchie would eventually make his career in India. More than forty years later, long after both men were dead, their children tied the family knots even more tightly when second cousins Anne Thackeray and Richmond Ritchie married.

Thackeray also was a welcome visitor at the home of the *Morning Chronicle's* Paris correspondent, Eyre Evans Crowe, and became acquainted with the Crowes' circle of English writers and painters. Two of Crowe's children return as important figures in Thackeray's later life, a son, also called Eyre Crowe, becoming his secretary and assistant during his first American trip, and Amy subsequently joining his household as a companion to his daughters. Amy Crowe would marry yet another Thackeray cousin, and, as if to complete the loop, their own elder daughter Margie Thackeray would marry another of William Ritchie's sons, Gerald.

Amongst the 1835 Parisian ex-patriot community was an Anglo-Irish family with strong roots in India. Quite how and where Thackeray met the Shawes is not clear. The father was dead, and his widow and children had recently been prompted to move to Paris for economic reasons. Like Thackeray, Isabella Gethin Shawe was born in India, in 1818, and she was just seventeen when they met. Why she in particular captivated him is difficult to fathom, but having willed himself to fall in love with someone, Isabella appeared as if on cue. She had a naïve charm and was musically talented, but she was also shy, not regarded as especially pretty, lacked firm opinions, and came with a formidable mother. Once he had fixed her as 'the gal of my art', Thackeray set about winning her no less determinedly than on all previous occasions when he had met with opposition and had got his way. It became his current project. He had declared to his mother back in the autumn of 1833 that he should marry, and even at that time told her of his need to find someone. 'I shall go back to Paris, I think, & marry somebody'; 'I want now to settle ... to marry someone with money ... going to Church regularly, rising early, & walking in the Park with M^{rs}. T. & the children'.³² This is playfully put, but seriously meant. He needed simply to put a name and a face to the idea.

Isabella Shawe lacked money, but despite that significant detail the plan laid out two years earlier was now set in motion. If one pauses to

wonder why in 1833 Thackeray sought out marriage, when his finances and career were very far from secure, then a need for emotional stability and an anchoring female influence must largely explain it. He wished to restore what he may have regarded as his entitlement, the supporting presence of a woman, a filling of the gap left by the mother from whom he had been removed as a child. Perhaps, too, the curious manner in which he chose to declare this ambition to his mother was a subliminal desire to punish her now for having sent him away.

By September of 1835 he was representing himself to William Ritchie as conventionally lovesick. 'I sleep not neither do I eat, only smoke a little & build castles in the clouds... God knows how it will end, I will, if I can, bolt before I have committed myself for better or worser, – but I don't think I shall have the power. My mamma has given me a five franc piece to amuse myself and stop away for a day, but like the foolish fascinated moth I flicker round the candle of my love.'³³

But he had no intention of bolting. Instead he endeavoured to prove himself to Mrs Shawe, the only real obstacle to his plan of marrying her daughter. She would not have viewed his prospects with much confidence, and her own depleted income did not permit her to endow Isabella with anything. The Carmichael-Smyths had similar initial doubts, though they appear to have been persuaded by Thackeray's earnestness and ended by supporting his ambition. Perhaps he was just more used to winning their favour. At considerable personal financial risk, Major Carmichael-Smyth invested in and became chairman of the Metropolitan Newspaper Company, the vehicle by which he launched a radical journal called *The Constitutional and Public Ledger*, of which Thackeray was to be Paris correspondent. Funds were raised only slowly, and the first number of the paper was delayed beyond its planned launch date in May 1836.

The relationship with Isabella appears to have proceeded on his side only, with Thackeray cast as the importuning lover. He wrote to her in his most persuasive vein from London in April, recreating the make-believe world that he had spelled out three years earlier to his mother.

My father says I could not do better than to marry, my mother says the same. I need not say that I agree with the opinion of my parents – so, dearest, make the little shifts ready, and the pretty night caps; and we will in a few few months, go & hear Bishop Luscombe read, and be married, and have children, & be happy ever after, as they are in the Story books – Does this news please you as it does



Isabella Thackeray, *pastel by Thackeray*

me? Are you ready and willing to give up your home, & your bedfellow, and your kind mother, to share the fate of a sulky grey headed old fellow with a small income, & a broken nose? – Dear little woman, think a great deal on this now, for it seems to me that up to the present time (& considering the small chance of our union you were wise) you have avoided any thoughts as to the change of your

condition, & the change of sentiments & of duties, w^h. your marriage with me must entail.³⁴

There are disturbing references to Isabella's health, indicating that even in comparative youth she was not strong. Whether the 'thinness' referred to was an early symptom of her later illness cannot now be known, but it does suggest that any medical treatment she may have been receiving was ineffective, for Thackeray presses her to try the alternative remedies in which his mother always placed her faith. 'I have been telling my Mother of your ills and your thinness, and she earnestly begs that you will go to one of the Homœopaths in Paris, and explain to him the whole state of your case. Now I ask it as an especial favor that you should do this – for the system if it be true will cure you, and if false can do you no possible harm, for the hundredth part of a grain of medicine is all w^h. they will give you to take.'

She took a week to reply, and although Isabella appeared to have reassured him, she seemed unable to understand that marriage would necessarily remove her from her mother's house and primary guardianship. It can be inferred that Isabella's letters devolve power and choices to Mrs Shawe.

[W]hat in God's name have I been saying to hurt you (for I see you are hurt) and your Mother? – What a scoundrel I should be were I to endeavour to weaken such a tie as exists between you two – The separation to w^h. I alluded did not go farther than the bedroom – If I recollect rightly this was the chief object of my thoughts at the moment, and I opined that you would be unwilling to quit your bedfellow, and your present comfortable home for another with me. If you are my wife you must sleep in my bed and live in my house – voila tout – I have no latent plans – no desire to exclude you from those whom I sh^d. think very meanly of you, were you to neglect.³⁵

Continued delay in the appearance of *The Constitutional* seems to have led Mrs Shawe to insist that marriage should be deferred, and early in July Thackeray agreed that there should be a cooling off period. He urged Isabella to continue to write, and even if these should be but a few lines, she should send them regularly; he even persuaded himself that absence would make her mother grow fonder of him – 'it will put the intimacy w^h. ought to exist between your Mother & me upon its proper footing; for I think that when we are not too intimate

or familiar we shall be much better friends; and finally it will make my little Trot conquer two lazinesses that beset her, not writing letters, and lying abed'.³⁶ However, Mrs Shawe continued to exercise strong pressure on her daughter, resulting in what at first appeared to be a complete break. Then, in an episode curiously reminiscent of the early romance between the young Anne Beecher and Henry Carmichael-Smyth, Thackeray arranged for a sympathetic servant to smuggle a letter to Isabella. He presents himself as the victim whose consistently warm and honest love is met with coldness.

My love for you is greater than I thought, for it has withstood this terrible three days trial. I have tried to leave you, & you will hardly credit me that I felt obliged to return – for I do not believe in spite of all this heartlessness on your part, that you ever can be other than my wife – You may recollect, that after our second quarrel, we made a kind of vow that, happen what would – you & I were bound together & married before God, & that I told you but a few nights since, that I had prayed to Him to give me aid in quelling any improper desires w^h. might create your disgust or lessen me in y^f. esteem.

If you feel that after our three months' marriage, for I can call it no less, you are sick of me & my love, tell me so with your own lips – you have not spared me, God knows, through all this business & I see no reason why I should be called on to be polite, merely to spare you the bore of an interview.

... Should anything occur to your Mother w^h. God forbid, where will you & your sister live? – with your Aunt Mary? – Or will you return to the man who loves you still, better than you deserve, Isabella – for if I have given needlessly vent to my feelings you don't know how often I have smothered them; if I have hurt you by my warmth, have you never wounded me by y^f. coldness? ...

However, take me or leave me – I never can love you as I have; although you fancy that my love for you was not 'pure' enough – it was a love of w^h. any woman in the world should have been proud, & w^h. I never can give to any other – but still dearest, I love you; forgive me my trespasses as I here remit you yours, and you will restore happiness to your family, & to one whose misery you never can feel or know, please God.³⁷



William and Isabella Out Walking, *sketch by Thackeray*

This insistence that Isabella ought to recognise him as deserving of her is extraordinary, but no less so is her immediate capitulation and facing up to her mother. The episode is fictionalised in Thackeray's late novel *Philip*, revealing how long-lasting was the harbouring of his resentment towards his mother-in-law, and there is an almost pathetic irony that in looking back over the years to his Parisian infatuation he described it to his friend and publisher George Smith as his 'absurdly imprudent marriage'.³⁸ They married on 20 August in the British Embassy, and Mrs Shawe was sufficiently reconciled to attend and sign as a witness.

Despite this troubled courtship, the first years of the marriage itself would be regarded by Thackeray as the happiest of his life. They had no money, and when they moved to their first set of rooms in the Rue Neuve St Augustin they spent Edward FitzGerald's wedding gift of cash on furniture. The idleness for which he had gently rebuked Isabella before they married now affected his own behaviour, but in confessing it to his mother he shifted the blame onto his naïve wife. 'I am ashamed and angry every morning of my life, but do what I will scold or laugh she won't get up, & I am only too glad of an excuse to lie in bed – fancy that out of the 24 hours we spend at least eleven in bed.'³⁹ He knew that this could only meet with his mother's disapproval, and indeed a few

years later she skipped generations to extol the godly merits of early rising and wholesome work to Thackeray's two young daughters.

But at last *The Constitutional* had started to appear, and from mid-September Thackeray's commentary on the Parisian political scene was a regular item. Meanwhile he sought out other journalistic opportunities to boost his income. Larger writing ambitions also began to surface. In January 1837 he wrote to the publisher John Macrone proposing 'a book in 2 Wollums. with 20 drawings. entitled Rambles & Sketches in old and new Paris by WT. I have not of course written a word of it, that's why I offer it so cheap.'⁴⁰ He was asking £50 for the proposal, and wanted an immediate £20 on account. Nothing at the time came of the suggestion, but three years later *The Paris Sketch Book* appeared under Macrone's imprint.

We also hear Isabella's own voice for the first time, when she started to write to Mrs Carmichael-Smyth – 'dear Mother I may call you now' – urging Thackeray's parents to visit them. 'We are always looking forward to your coming to Paris so we often look at apartments with a sufficient number of bedrooms.' Hers is a gentle and kindly personality, living in the shadow of her husband perhaps but with its own humour and warmth. Within a few months of their marrying, she was also able to allude to her pregnancy – 'I suffer a little but for so pleasing a cause that I do not mind it.'⁴¹ She seemed to have fully transferred her loyalty to Thackeray, whose relations with his new mother-in-law had not prospered – indeed he kept out of Mrs Shawe's way to avoid quarrels. 'Puss goes to her now and then, but I can't; I have no time and as little inclination – I don't know how it is that I have got to dislike her so.'⁴² In these earliest days it is unlikely that the Thackerays would have been able to afford any domestic support, so that all the housekeeping responsibilities fell on Isabella. She would have had no training in household management, nor any personal experience of cleaning and cooking. (Thackeray once discreetly had to enquire of his mother how to make hash taste of something other than onions and water.) Even when their money ran to employing servants, they had to be managed effectively, and here too Isabella was wanting.

By the spring of 1837 the couple had given up Paris to stay with the Carmichael-Smyths in London, who had themselves moved up from Devon, to Albion Street, Hyde Park. There were self-evident financial reasons for doing so, but Thackeray also needed to be closer to the offices of *The Constitutional*, which was struggling. By March, Major Carmichael-Smyth was carrying most of the paper's costs. At the end of April, Thackeray became its managing director, whereupon he immediately wrote to shareholders in what turned out to be an

unsuccessful appeal to fund the flagging publication. It closed at the beginning of July, leaving Carmichael-Smyth with heavy losses. He nevertheless earned his stepson's admiration for the honourable way in which he had borne his responsibilities.

The principal reason for the Thackerays joining the Carmichael-Smyths in London at this time may have had nothing to do with business at all, but in order that Isabella could be supported in the closing stages of her pregnancy, for on 9 June the Thackerays became parents for the first time. Looking back on it, Thackeray may well have reflected that staying in Paris for the birth would have been safer, for Isabella had a very difficult time. This was in part caused by the inadequacy of the homeopathic doctor whom Mrs Carmichael-Smyth had insisted should attend her daughter-in-law at Albion Street. Thackeray's daughter records how, shortly before he died, her father still recalled the very real dangers. 'Papa said, how when I was born he knew nothing about it & the homeopathic doctor nearly killed her, & he sent out & brought in another who only was in time to save her life.'⁴³ This same first daughter was named after paternal grandmother and mother, Anne Isabella – in fact she took both grandmothers' names as Isabella was also Mrs Shawe's given name. In a letter written to Annie in her mid-teens, Mrs Carmichael-Smyth wonders about the original spelling of her own name in a time when rules were more flexible. 'Your name is Anne, in the Paddington register. Mine is Ann I believe but I have always written it Anne.'⁴⁴

Despite the trauma of her arrival, Annie seems to have been a perfectly healthy baby and soon became the focus of her parents' interest, especially after the arrival of her sister Jane, born a year later on 9 July 1838 and named after Isabella's unmarried sister as well as Thackeray's cousin, Jane Ritchie. Annie was old enough to be aware of 'dear little No 2', and was beginning to walk.

Great fat deedle deedle, is extremely fond of her sister, but shows her affection in rather a rough manner, she would willingly poke out her little 2's eyes or pull her out of ones arms by her long robes, all out of pure love, she hushes her to sleep and exclaims oh! oh! in a very patronising manner. She held out her fat arms that the small babe might be put in but that was an experiment we were not willing to try, I am happy to say she promises fair to walk alone in a short time she can already go a short distance.⁴⁵

The Carmichael-Smyths had left Albion Street and moved to Paris, so the Thackerays transferred to 13 Great Coram Street in Bloomsbury. They had taken no chances this time, for as Thackeray

reported to Mrs Shawe three days after Jane's birth, 'The Doctor in attendance is no less a person than Sir Charles Herbert the very pink of accouchers',⁴⁶ and Isabella was also quick to reassure her that 'after the bad business we made of it last time I was determined to submit to black dose, castor oil pills, or any other abomination that was ordered'.

Thackeray had managed to secure regular writing for *Fraser's Magazine* to which he was contributing his first real success, the *Yellowplush Papers* (1837-40), with *Catherine* (his parody of Edward Bulwer's criminal romance genre) and *A Shabby Genteel Story* following in 1840. He maintained something of a peripatetic existence in these early years, travelling to Paris to stay with the Carmichael-Smyths, usually alone but at least once with Isabella. It was from Paris that, scarcely able to credit their current contentedness, he had written to her back in Great Coram Street in terms which would prove to have a cruel irony in view of the fragility of their situation and the sadness which would visit them. 'Here have we been nearly 2 years married & not a single unhappy day. Oh I do bless God for all this great happiness w^h. He has given us. It is so great that I almost tremble for the future, except that I humbly hope (for what man is certain about his own weakness and wickedness) our love is strong enough to stand any pressure from without, and as it is a gift greater than any fortune, is likewise one superior to poverty or sickness or any other worldly evil with w^h. Providence may visit us.'⁴⁷

Exactly a year later came the first test, when Jane died after a chest infection. Thackeray was profoundly affected, and never forgot this daughter near whom he was to be buried in Kensal Green; Jane was one of the earliest occupants of the cemetery which had opened in 1832. He remembered her for her purity and innocence, 'as something charming that for a season we were allowed to enjoy.... We have sent to Heaven a little angel who came from us & loved us and God will understand her language & visit us mildly.'⁴⁸ Isabella was similarly stoical in writing to Mrs Carmichael-Smyth of her loss, showing a wisdom not usually associated with Thackeray's now-obscure wife. Even if some of the opinions were shaped by those of her husband, the freshness of expression is Isabella's own, and the way in which she tries to comfort her mother-in-law from the depths of her own loss is touching. It is likely that the start of her own mental decline is rooted in this first trauma, and was accelerated by the severe post-natal depression which followed Minny's birth in 1840. Meanwhile, we can only admire the measured insight, so painfully acquired.

Her little heart seemed full of love for every body and such a gentle sweet tempered Lamb that it seems almost merciful she should not have had to struggle with this world. I sometimes grieve to think that she was so quickly taken, but how foolish, would I have had her pine and fade because it was sudden shock to me to have her suddenly removed. A child's death is dreadful but a child's suffering is ten thousand times worse. If we know our hearts right I do not think we question Gods justice but cannot one bow to the Divine will and yet mourn for the precious gift that was lent one so short a time and yet so long as to make one sensible for all its value ... There is scarcely a minute I do not think of her so you cannot wonder if I write a great deal about her. But if it makes you grieve you must put a restraint on me.⁴⁹

One cannot help but think that if only Isabella had continued to articulate her anxieties and feelings in this way, to sympathetic and understanding hearers, she might yet have diverted the full force of the gathering storm that was to put an end to the normal pattern of family and domestic life for all of the Thackerays.