

## **WESTRALIA FAIR or Becky a rose by any other name.**

The characters of great satiric literature never die, but reappear in fresh-minted guises to entertain and instruct us today.

To wit, the recent unseemly show in Court 11 of the West Australian Supreme Court where a millionaire's widow and his daughter were wrangling over forty four million.

"This isn't a spectacle, this is a very serious case" the judge said, and as Thackeray might have remarked, 'Tis a veritable Vanity Fair.

The passionate interest harboured in the bosom of Miss Rose nee Lacson for iron ore is only matched in its intensity by that avowed by Miss Becky nee Sharpe for malt. "Deep into the night if Lang were awake, I would ask him questions about iron ore...he responded with equal enthusiasm".

Such glamorous women such plain and homely substances, such sustained interest, it beggars belief were it not true.

Rose Lacson and Becky Sharp were cursed from the cradle. They came from classes and cultures not deemed proper for women who wish to disport in high society, be it Peppermint Grove or Park Lane. Becky was the daughter of a French Opera dancer and Rose was, according to her daughter-in-law, a "Filipina prostiute" and "ex-maid".

Both were forced by the inopportune circumstances of their birth to make the most of their not inconsiderable natural talents - Rose for cooking and housekeeping, Becky for music and backgammon - to soothe and seduce the savage beasts that roamed the patios and drawing rooms of Perth and London.

Both had a keen capacity for hard work and an enthusiastic devotion to the interests and welfare of others. Becky ordered Sir Pitt's accounts and transcribed his litigious letters, while subsisting on tripe. Rose found Lang, "living in a pigsty" and would scrub the floors at Dalkieth long into the night and cut the old man's toenails.

By her own pitiful testimony Rose was required to "fly around the world...look good for visitors ... stay up late ... smile at dignitaries, entertain overseas guests and do all the cooking myself".

And throughout neither woman ever forgot the value of malt and iron ore.

Rose chides Tom Hughes QC for his ungentlemanly tone of voice -"my ears are very sensitive", she says, but he is onto her game, "an adventuress on the make" he said, just as plain old Major Dobbin wasn't for a minute taken in by fair Becky.

While in the background hovers the ever faithful Aide de Camp, Willie Porteous like Captain Rawdon Crawley pleased to lend his name to a woman other men might have been shy of claiming in the circumstances. Instead they are amused at the fuss precipitated by their clever little wives and protect them from "the riff-raff".

At the centre of this "novel without a hero", is the late octogenarian, Langley George Hancock. The man who once personally flew through a radiocative cloud to prove the safety of his innovative plan to use nuclear explosions to pulverise iron ore, the man who cut a deal with Nicolae Ceausescu, the man who was the original miner of asbestos at Wittenoon and always denied responsibility for its carcinogenic legacy, and finally the man who so astutely backed Joh for PM.

Even Thackeray could not have contained the various qualities of "The Rogue Bull" in one character so we must concoct him from the personable rustic charm of Sir Pitt Crawley combined with the financial accumen, moral integrity and social discretion of Lord Steynes.

Just as Becky was finally presented at Court and won the favour of the King, so did Lang present his Rose at the court of Sir Joh, where her charms were evidently winning, notwithstanding that her scones may not have come within cooe of Flo's famed pumpkin confections.

In this Westralian Vanity Fair, the mineral boom of the West provides the same emblematic backdrop as the Napoleonic Wars, where fortunes and reputations are won and lost overnight; and prospecting in the Pilbara has the same exotic resonance as that farthest outpost of Empire, Boggley Wollah, where even a fool like Jos Sedley can make a fortune at the expense of the natives.

Maternal feelings, the apparent lack thereof is another quality equally unfound in Rose and Becky. Both only mother one unfortunate child, who soon must be hastily dispatched so as not to inhibit the main game. Young Rawdie is packed off to Boarding School lest he report on what he sees in the house. Rose's daughter, Johanna being a little older at the time saw more and subsequently cost more to be removed from the scene.

Rose and Becky were blessed with a redoubtable strength of purpose, yet both had acknowledged moments of weakness, Becky took too much to the bottle and Rose was the beneficiary of some dodgy prescriptions. Such vulnerabilities are conscripted to support the heroine's self-dramatisation as a mere weak creature in need of protection:

"I was just the icing" Rose attests, "Lang was the cake".

Gina Rinehart may not be as given to tears as the simpering Amelia Sedley but she is governed by similar sanctimonious motives. Gina holds tenaciously onto a rosy portrait of her father, making a cult of his entrepreneurship, as Amelia made of her widowhood. Gina's sacred relic is the Hancock Family Memorial Foundation and Hancock Prospecting, but she needs must wait the day for her champion Dobbin Hughes QC, to take up her cause, for a not inconsiderable fee. Indeed as Thackeray might have said, a top Sydney silk's fee and a woman's hand in a marriage are both negotiable currency.

So in court, Gina plays her trump card, fiduciary duty, which finds its parallel in Amelia's disinterested maternal desire to see Young Georgie recognised as the Osborne heir. For Gina, the future of Hancock Investment is at stake, not vaunting personal ambition, but a larger, nobler cause, to wit: controlling shares.

In the opening chapters of *Westralia Fair*, Gina like Amelia patronises poor Rose, introducing her into the household, hiring her as a maid for \$180 a week with bed and board kindly thrown in. Upon realising Rose's value as a housekeeper, Gina contrives to see her safely married off, in order to retain Rose in her place for convenience sake - in the country, in the house, but not in Lang's bed.

Who knows there may have been a moment when Rose would have married the electrician, notwithstanding her recent protestation, "Me, marry an electrician!" Just as for a brief moment Becky would have settled for Jos Sedley, both women knew the first stepping stone is the hardest to secure but the easiest to jump off from, should a more advantageous path present. When the marriage with the sparkie doesn't come off, Gina like Amelia finds herself locked in combat with Rose over the most important man in her life.

There are differences of course, Rose's overblown dress sense has more in common with the excess of display favoured by Miss Swartz, the dusky sugar heiress noted for her diamonds like chandeliers, than the clever contrivances of Becky's couture. Dress sense is not marked in either Gina or Amelia, they share a tendency to the drab and plain. The widows weeds and the power suit attest to their former status and closeness to the beloved, before Rose's arrival Gina and her father had adjoining offices and business was strictly *en famille*.

By the closing chapters, Rose has exacted her *Prix D'Amour* at a cost of 24 million while poor Becky is left with the vain and inglorious Jos Sedley, and his insurance policies. A certain murkiness surrounds the deaths of Jos Sedley and Lang Hancock, shadowed by varying reports of both men living (and dying) in fear of their paramours.

Hancock had taken out a restraining order against Rose the day before his demise. And at their deaths accusations flew about medicines and potions administered by fair hands; while nothing was proved, the worst was believed.

Shelf companies were kinder to Rose than Thackeray was to Becky. If only Sir Pitt had had more cash, at wandering hand, if instead of the expectation of Miss Crawley's estate he had his own Mt Tom Price to pulverise, Becky might have been happy. If Rose's only crime was to marry a rich old man, Becky's tragedy was that she did not. Becky said, "I think I could be a good woman if I had 5,000 a year." Rose with 24 million unquestionably is.

Prix D'Amour is usually translated, by commentators presumably not as proficient in the French language as Miss Sharp, as Prize of Love or Grand Prix, however the primary sense of prix is price, as in prix fixe /fixed price, prix-courant/price list, prix de vente/selling price, articles de prix/expensive goods, se vendre a prix d'or/to sell oneself for gold, and couter un prix fou/ to cost the earth, or all the iron in WA!

Becky knew the price of love but Rose knew how to exact it.