

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Chapter 31

"In Which Jos Sedley Takes Care of His Sister"

Thus all the superior officers being summoned on duty elsewhere, Jos Sedley was left in command of the little colony at Brussels, with Amelia invalided, Isidor, his Belgian servant, and the *bonne*, who was maid-of-all-work for the establishment, as a garrison under him. Though he was disturbed in spirit, and his rest destroyed by Dobbin's interruption and the occurrences of the morning, Jos nevertheless remained for many hours in bed, wakeful and rolling about there until his usual hour of rising had arrived. The sun was high in the heavens, and our gallant friends of the —th miles on their march, before the civilian appeared in his flowered dressing-gown at breakfast.

About George's absence, his brother-in-law was very easy in mind. Perhaps Jos was rather pleased in his heart that Osborne was gone, for during George's presence, the other had played but a very secondary part in the household, and Osborne did not scruple to show his contempt for the stout civilian. But Emmy had always been good and attentive to him. It was she who ministered to his comforts, who superintended the dishes that he liked, who walked or rode with him (as she had many, too many, opportunities of doing, for where was George?) and who interposed her sweet face between his anger and her husband's scorn. Many timid remonstrances had she uttered to George in behalf of her brother, but the former in his trenchant way cut these entreaties short. "I'm an honest man," he said, "and if I have a feeling I show it, as an honest man will. How the deuce, my dear, would you have me behave respectfully to such a fool as your brother?" So Jos was pleased with George's absence. His plain hat, and gloves on a sideboard, and the idea that the owner was away, caused Jos I don't know what secret thrill of pleasure. "He won't be troubling me this morning," Jos thought, "with his dandified airs and his impudence."

"Put the Captain's hat into the ante-room," he said to Isidor, the servant.

"Perhaps he won't want it again," replied the lackey, looking knowingly at his master. He hated George too, whose insolence towards him was

quite of the English sort.

“And ask if Madame is coming to breakfast,” Mr. Sedley said with great majesty, ashamed to enter with a servant upon the subject of his dislike for George. The truth is, he had abused his brother to the valet a score of times before.

Alas! Madame could not come to breakfast, and cut the tartines that Mr. Jos liked. Madame was a great deal too ill, and had been in a frightful state ever since her husband’s departure, so her bonne said. Jos showed his sympathy by pouring her out a large cup of tea. It was his way of exhibiting kindness: and he improved on this; he not only sent her breakfast, but he bethought him what delicacies she would most like for dinner.

Isidor, the valet, had looked on very sulkily, while Osborne’s servant was disposing of his master’s baggage previous to the Captain’s departure: for in the first place he hated Mr. Osborne, whose conduct to him, and to all inferiors, was generally overbearing (nor does the continental domestic like to be treated with insolence as our own better-tempered servants do), and secondly, he was angry that so many valuables should be removed from under his hands, to fall into other people’s possession when the English discomfiture should arrive. Of this defeat he and a vast number of other persons in Brussels and Belgium did not make the slightest doubt. The almost universal belief was, that the Emperor would divide the Prussian and English armies, annihilate one after the other, and march into Brussels before three days were over: when all the movables of his present masters, who would be killed, or fugitives, or prisoners, would lawfully become the property of Monsieur Isidor.

As he helped Jos through his toilsome and complicated daily toilette, this faithful servant would calculate what he should do with the very articles with which he was decorating his master’s person. He would make a present of the silver essence-bottles and toilet knickknacks to a young lady of whom he was fond; and keep the English cutlery and the large ruby pin for himself. It would look very smart upon one of the fine frilled shirts, which, with the gold-laced cap and the frogged frock coat, that might easily be cut down to suit his shape, and the Captain’s gold-headed cane, and the great double ring with the rubies, which he would

have made into a pair of beautiful earrings, he calculated would make a perfect Adonis of himself, and render Mademoiselle Reine an easy prey. “How those sleeve-buttons will suit me!” thought he, as he fixed a pair on the fat pudgy wrists of Mr. Sedley. “I long for sleeve-buttons; and the Captain’s boots with brass spurs, in the next room, corbleu! what an effect they will make in the Allee Verte!” So while Monsieur Isidor with bodily fingers was holding on to his master’s nose, and shaving the lower part of Jos’s face, his imagination was rambling along the Green Avenue, dressed out in a frogged coat and lace, and in company with Mademoiselle Reine; he was loitering in spirit on the banks, and examining the barges sailing slowly under the cool shadows of the trees by the canal, or refreshing himself with a mug of Faro at the bench of a beer-house on the road to Laeken.

But Mr. Joseph Sedley, luckily for his own peace, no more knew what was passing in his domestic’s mind than the respected reader, and I suspect what John or Mary, whose wages we pay, think of ourselves. What our servants think of us!—Did we know what our intimates and dear relations thought of us, we should live in a world that we should be glad to quit, and in a frame of mind and a constant terror, that would be perfectly unbearable. So Jos’s man was marking his victim down, as you see one of Mr. Paynter’s assistants in Leadenhall Street ornament an unconscious turtle with a placard on which is written, “Soup tomorrow.”

Amelia’s attendant was much less selfishly disposed. Few dependents could come near that kind and gentle creature without paying their usual tribute of loyalty and affection to her sweet and affectionate nature. And it is a fact that Pauline, the cook, consoled her mistress more than anybody whom she saw on this wretched morning; for when she found how Amelia remained for hours, silent, motionless, and haggard, by the windows in which she had placed herself to watch the last bayonets of the column as it marched away, the honest girl took the lady’s hand, and said, *Tenez, Madame, est-ce qu’il n’est pas aussi a l’armee, mon homme a moi?* with which she burst into tears, and Amelia falling into her arms, did likewise, and so each pitied and soothed the other.

Several times during the forenoon Mr. Jos’s Isidor went from his lodgings into the town, and to the gates of the hotels and lodging-houses round about the Parc, where the English were congregated, and there

mingled with other valets, couriers, and lackeys, gathered such news as was abroad, and brought back bulletins for his master's information. Almost all these gentlemen were in heart partisans of the Emperor, and had their opinions about the speedy end of the campaign. The Emperor's proclamation from Avesnes had been distributed everywhere plentifully in Brussels. "Soldiers!" it said, "this is the anniversary of Marengo and Friedland, by which the destinies of Europe were twice decided. Then, as after Austerlitz, as after Wagram, we were too generous. We believed in the oaths and promises of princes whom we suffered to remain upon their thrones. Let us march once more to meet them. We and they, are we not still the same men? Soldiers! these same Prussians who are so arrogant to-day, were three to one against you at Jena, and six to one at Montmirail. Those among you who were prisoners in England can tell their comrades what frightful torments they suffered on board the English hulks. Madmen! a moment of prosperity has blinded them, and if they enter into France it will be to find a grave there!" But the partisans of the French prophesied a more speedy extermination of the Emperor's enemies than this; and it was agreed on all hands that Prussians and British would never return except as prisoners in the rear of the conquering army.

These opinions in the course of the day were brought to operate upon Mr. Sedley. He was told that the Duke of Wellington had gone to try and rally his army, the advance of which had been utterly crushed the night before.

"Crushed, psha!" said Jos, whose heart was pretty stout at breakfast-time. "The Duke has gone to beat the Emperor as he has beaten all his generals before."

"His papers are burned, his effects are removed, and his quarters are being got ready for the Duke of Dalmatia," Jos's informant replied. "I had it from his own maitre d'hotel. Milor Duc de Richemont's people are packing up everything. His Grace has fled already, and the Duchess is only waiting to see the plate packed to join the King of France at Ostend."

"The King of France is at Ghent, fellow," replied Jos, affecting incredulity.

“He fled last night to Bruges, and embarks today from Ostend. The Duc de Berri is taken prisoner. Those who wish to be safe had better go soon, for the dykes will be opened to-morrow, and who can fly when the whole country is under water?”

“Nonsense, sir, we are three to one, sir, against any force Boney can bring into the field,” Mr. Sedley objected; “the Austrians and the Russians are on their march. He must, he shall be crushed,” Jos said, slapping his hand on the table.

“The Prussians were three to one at Jena, and he took their army and kingdom in a week. They were six to one at Montmirail, and he scattered them like sheep. The Austrian army is coming, but with the Empress and the King of Rome at its head; and the Russians, bah! the Russians will withdraw. No quarter is to be given to the English, on account of their cruelty to our braves on board the infamous pontoons. Look here, here it is in black and white. Here’s the proclamation of his Majesty the Emperor and King,” said the now declared partisan of Napoleon, and taking the document from his pocket, Isidor sternly thrust it into his master’s face, and already looked upon the frogged coat and valuables as his own spoil.

Jos was, if not seriously alarmed as yet, at least considerably disturbed in mind. “Give me my coat and cap, sir, said he, “and follow me. I will go myself and learn the truth of these reports.” Isidor was furious as Jos put on the braided frock. “Milor had better not wear that military coat,” said he; “the Frenchmen have sworn not to give quarter to a single British soldier.”

“Silence, sirrah!” said Jos, with a resolute countenance still, and thrust his arm into the sleeve with indomitable resolution, in the performance of which heroic act he was found by Mrs. Rawdon Crawley, who at this juncture came up to visit Amelia, and entered without ringing at the antechamber door.

Rebecca was dressed very neatly and smartly, as usual: her quiet sleep after Rawdon’s departure had refreshed her, and her pink smiling cheeks were quite pleasant to look at, in a town and on a day when everybody else’s countenance wore the appearance of the deepest anxiety and gloom. She laughed at the attitude in which Jos was discovered, and the

struggles and convulsions with which the stout gentleman thrust himself into the braided coat.

“Are you preparing to join the army, Mr. Joseph?” she said. “Is there to be nobody left in Brussels to protect us poor women?” Jos succeeded in plunging into the coat, and came forward blushing and stuttering out excuses to his fair visitor. “How was she after the events of the morning—after the fatigues of the ball the night before?” Monsieur Isidor disappeared into his master’s adjacent bedroom, bearing off the flowered dressing-gown.

“How good of you to ask,” said she, pressing one of his hands in both her own. “How cool and collected you look when everybody else is frightened! How is our dear little Emmy? It must have been an awful, awful parting.”

“Tremendous,” Jos said.

“You men can bear anything,” replied the lady. “Parting or danger are nothing to you. Own now that you were going to join the army and leave us to our fate. I know you were—something tells me you were. I was so frightened, when the thought came into my head (for I do sometimes think of you when I am alone, Mr. Joseph), that I ran off immediately to beg and entreat you not to fly from us.”

This speech might be interpreted, “My dear sir, should an accident befall the army, and a retreat be necessary, you have a very comfortable carriage, in which I propose to take a seat.” I don’t know whether Jos understood the words in this sense. But he was profoundly mortified by the lady’s inattention to him during their stay at Brussels. He had never been presented to any of Rawdon Crawley’s great acquaintances: he had scarcely been invited to Rebecca’s parties; for he was too timid to play much, and his presence bored George and Rawdon equally, who neither of them, perhaps, liked to have a witness of the amusements in which the pair chose to indulge. “Ah!” thought Jos, “now she wants me she comes to me. When there is nobody else in the way she can think about old Joseph Sedley!” But besides these doubts he felt flattered at the idea Rebecca expressed of his courage.

He blushed a good deal, and put on an air of importance. “I should like

to see the action,” he said. “Every man of any spirit would, you know. I’ve seen a little service in India, but nothing on this grand scale.”

“You men would sacrifice anything for a pleasure,” Rebecca answered. “Captain Crawley left me this morning as gay as if he were going to a hunting party. What does he care? What do any of you care for the agonies and tortures of a poor forsaken woman? (I wonder whether he could really have been going to the troops, this great lazy gourmand?) Oh! dear Mr. Sedley, I have come to you for comfort—for consolation. I have been on my knees all the morning. I tremble at the frightful danger into which our husbands, our friends, our brave troops and allies, are rushing. And I come here for shelter, and find another of my friends—the last remaining to me—bent upon plunging into the dreadful scene!”

“My dear madam,” Jos replied, now beginning to be quite soothed, “don’t be alarmed. I only said I should like to go—what Briton would not? But my duty keeps me here: I can’t leave that poor creature in the next room.” And he pointed with his finger to the door of the chamber in which Amelia was.

“Good noble brother!” Rebecca said, putting her handkerchief to her eyes, and smelling the eau-de-cologne with which it was scented. “I have done you injustice: you have got a heart. I thought you had not.”

“O, upon my honour!” Jos said, making a motion as if he would lay his hand upon the spot in question. “You do me injustice, indeed you do—my dear Mrs. Crawley.”

“I do, now your heart is true to your sister. But I remember two years ago—when it was false to me!” Rebecca said, fixing her eyes upon him for an instant, and then turning away into the window.

Jos blushed violently. That organ which he was accused by Rebecca of not possessing began to thump tumultuously. He recalled the days when he had fled from her, and the passion which had once inflamed him—the days when he had driven her in his curricule: when she had knit the green purse for him: when he had sate enraptured gazing at her white arms and bright eyes.

“I know you think me ungrateful,” Rebecca continued, coming out of the

window, and once more looking at him and addressing him in a low tremulous voice. “Your coldness, your averted looks, your manner when we have met of late—when I came in just now, all proved it to me. But were there no reasons why I should avoid you? Let your own heart answer that question. Do you think my husband was too much inclined to welcome you? The only unkind words I have ever had from him (I will do Captain Crawley that justice) have been about you— and most cruel, cruel words they were.”

“Good gracious! what have I done?” asked Jos in a flurry of pleasure and perplexity; “what have I done—to—to—?”

“Is jealousy nothing?” said Rebecca. “He makes me miserable about you. And whatever it might have been once—my heart is all his. I am innocent now. Am I not, Mr. Sedley?”

All Jos’s blood tingled with delight, as he surveyed this victim to his attractions. A few adroit words, one or two knowing tender glances of the eyes, and his heart was inflamed again and his doubts and suspicions forgotten. From Solomon downwards, have not wiser men than he been cajoled and befooled by women? “If the worst comes to the worst,” Becky thought, “my retreat is secure; and I have a right-hand seat in the barouche.”

There is no knowing into what declarations of love and ardour the tumultuous passions of Mr. Joseph might have led him, if Isidor the valet had not made his reappearance at this minute, and begun to busy himself about the domestic affairs. Jos, who was just going to gasp out an avowal, choked almost with the emotion that he was obliged to restrain. Rebecca too bethought her that it was time she should go in and comfort her dearest Amelia. “Au revoir,” she said, kissing her hand to Mr. Joseph, and tapped gently at the door of his sister’s apartment. As she entered and closed the door on herself, he sank down in a chair, and gazed and sighed and puffed portentously. “That coat is very tight for Milor,” Isidor said, still having his eye on the frogs; but his master heard him not: his thoughts were elsewhere: now glowing, maddening, upon the contemplation of the enchanting Rebecca: anon shrinking guiltily before the vision of the jealous Rawdon Crawley, with his curling, fierce mustachios, and his terrible duelling pistols loaded and cocked.

Rebecca's appearance struck Amelia with terror, and made her shrink back. It recalled her to the world and the remembrance of yesterday. In the overpowering fears about to-morrow she had forgotten Rebecca—jealousy—everything except that her husband was gone and was in danger. Until this dauntless worldling came in and broke the spell, and lifted the latch, we too have forborne to enter into that sad chamber. How long had that poor girl been on her knees! what hours of speechless prayer and bitter prostration had she passed there! The war-chroniclers who write brilliant stories of fight and triumph scarcely tell us of these. These are too mean parts of the pageant: and you don't hear widows' cries or mothers' sobs in the midst of the shouts and jubilation in the great Chorus of Victory. And yet when was the time that such have not cried out: heart-broken, humble protestants, unheard in the uproar of the triumph!

After the first movement of terror in Amelia's mind—when Rebecca's green eyes lighted upon her, and rustling in her fresh silks and brilliant ornaments, the latter tripped up with extended arms to embrace her—a feeling of anger succeeded, and from being deadly pale before, her face flushed up red, and she returned Rebecca's look after a moment with a steadiness which surprised and somewhat abashed her rival.

“Dearest Amelia, you are very unwell,” the visitor said, putting forth her hand to take Amelia's. “What is it? I could not rest until I knew how you were.”

Amelia drew back her hand—never since her life began had that gentle soul refused to believe or to answer any demonstration of good-will or affection. But she drew back her hand, and trembled all over. “Why are you here, Rebecca?” she said, still looking at her solemnly with her large eyes. These glances troubled her visitor.

“She must have seen him give me the letter at the ball,” Rebecca thought. “Don't be agitated, dear Amelia,” she said, looking down. “I came but to see if I could—if you were well.”

“Are you well?” said Amelia. “I dare say you are. You don't love your husband. You would not be here if you did. Tell me, Rebecca, did I ever do you anything but kindness?”

“Indeed, Amelia, no,” the other said, still hanging down her head.

“When you were quite poor, who was it that befriended you? Was I not a sister to you? You saw us all in happier days before he married me. I was all in all then to him; or would he have given up his fortune, his family, as he nobly did to make me happy? Why did you come between my love and me? Who sent you to separate those whom God joined, and take my darling’s heart from me—my own husband? Do you think you could I love him as I did? His love was everything to me. You knew it, and wanted to rob me of it. For shame, Rebecca; bad and wicked woman—false friend and false wife.”

“Amelia, I protest before God, I have done my husband no wrong,” Rebecca said, turning from her.

“Have you done me no wrong, Rebecca? You did not succeed, but you tried. Ask your heart if you did not.”

She knows nothing, Rebecca thought.

“He came back to me. I knew he would. I knew that no falsehood, no flattery, could keep him from me long. I knew he would come. I prayed so that he should.”

The poor girl spoke these words with a spirit and volubility which Rebecca had never before seen in her, and before which the latter was quite dumb. “But what have I done to you,” she continued in a more pitiful tone, “that you should try and take him from me? I had him but for six weeks. You might have spared me those, Rebecca. And yet, from the very first day of our wedding, you came and blighted it. Now he is gone, are you come to see how unhappy I am?” she continued. “You made me wretched enough for the past fortnight: you might have spared me to-day.”

“I—I never came here,” interposed Rebecca, with unlucky truth.

“No. You didn’t come. You took him away. Are you come to fetch him from me?” she continued in a wilder tone. “He was here, but he is gone now. There on that very sofa he sate. Don’t touch it. We sate and talked there. I was on his knee, and my arms were round his neck, and we said

“Our Father.” Yes, he was here: and they came and took him away, but he promised me to come back.”

“He will come back, my dear,” said Rebecca, touched in spite of herself.

“Look,” said Amelia, “this is his sash—isn’t it a pretty colour?” and she took up the fringe and kissed it. She had tied it round her waist at some part of the day. She had forgotten her anger, her jealousy, the very presence of her rival seemingly. For she walked silently and almost with a smile on her face, towards the bed, and began to smooth down George’s pillow.

Rebecca walked, too, silently away. “How is Amelia?” asked Jos, who still held his position in the chair.

“There should be somebody with her,” said Rebecca. “I think she is very unwell”: and she went away with a very grave face, refusing Mr. Sedley’s entreaties that she would stay and partake of the early dinner which he had ordered.

Rebecca was of a good-natured and obliging disposition; and she liked Amelia rather than otherwise. Even her hard words, reproachful as they were, were complimentary—the groans of a person stinging under defeat. Meeting Mrs. O’Dowd, whom the Dean’s sermons had by no means comforted, and who was walking very disconsolately in the Parc, Rebecca accosted the latter, rather to the surprise of the Major’s wife, who was not accustomed to such marks of politeness from Mrs. Rawdon Crawley, and informing her that poor little Mrs. Osborne was in a desperate condition, and almost mad with grief, sent off the good-natured Irishwoman straight to see if she could console her young favourite.

“I’ve cares of my own enough,” Mrs. O’Dowd said, gravely, “and I thought poor Amelia would be little wanting for company this day. But if she’s so bad as you say, and you can’t attend to her, who used to be so fond of her, faith I’ll see if I can be of service. And so good marning to ye, Madam”; with which speech and a toss of her head, the lady of the repayther took a farewell of Mrs. Crawley, whose company she by no means courted.

Becky watched her marching off, with a smile on her lip. She had the keenest sense of humour, and the Parthian look which the retreating Mrs. O'Dowd flung over her shoulder almost upset Mrs. Crawley's gravity. "My service to ye, me fine Madam, and I'm glad to see ye so cheerful," thought Peggy. "It's not you that will cry your eyes out with grief, anyway." And with this she passed on, and speedily found her way to Mrs. Osborne's lodgings.

The poor soul was still at the bedside, where Rebecca had left her, and stood almost crazy with grief. The Major's wife, a stronger-minded woman, endeavoured her best to comfort her young friend. "You must bear up, Amelia, dear," she said kindly, "for he mustn't find you ill when he sends for you after the victory. It's not you are the only woman that are in the hands of God this day."

"I know that. I am very wicked, very weak," Amelia said. She knew her own weakness well enough. The presence of the more resolute friend checked it, however; and she was the better of this control and company. They went on till two o'clock; their hearts were with the column as it marched farther and farther away. Dreadful doubt and anguish—prayers and fears and griefs unspeakable—followed the regiment. It was the women's tribute to the war. It taxes both alike, and takes the blood of the men, and the tears of the women.

At half-past two, an event occurred of daily importance to Mr. Joseph: the dinner-hour arrived. Warriors may fight and perish, but he must dine. He came into Amelia's room to see if he could coax her to share that meal. "Try," said he; "the soup is very good. Do try, Emmy," and he kissed her hand. Except when she was married, he had not done so much for years before. "You are very good and kind, Joseph," she said. "Everybody is, but, if you please, I will stay in my room to-day."

The savour of the soup, however, was agreeable to Mrs. O'Dowd's nostrils: and she thought she would bear Mr. Jos company. So the two sate down to their meal. "God bless the meat," said the Major's wife, solemnly: she was thinking of her honest Mick, riding at the head of his regiment: "'Tis but a bad dinner those poor boys will get to-day," she said, with a sigh, and then, like a philosopher, fell to.

Jos's spirits rose with his meal. He would drink the regiment's health;

or, indeed, take any other excuse to indulge in a glass of champagne. “We’ll drink to O’Dowd and the brave –th,” said he, bowing gallantly to his guest. “Hey, Mrs. O’Dowd? Fill Mrs. O’Dowd’s glass, Isidor.”

But all of a sudden, Isidor started, and the Major’s wife laid down her knife and fork. The windows of the room were open, and looked southward, and a dull distant sound came over the sun-lighted roofs from that direction. “What is it?” said Jos. “Why don’t you pour, you rascal?”

“Cest le feu!” said Isidor, running to the balcony.

“God defend us; it’s cannon!” Mrs. O’Dowd cried, starting up, and followed too to the window. A thousand pale and anxious faces might have been seen looking from other casements. And presently it seemed as if the whole population of the city rushed into the streets.