A Mystery with a Moral

The Lock and Key Library

by Laurence Sterne, 1713-1768

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in »Sentimental Journey«

Introduction

The next Mystery Story is like no other in these volumes. The editor's defense lies in the plea that Laurence Sterne is not like other writers of English. He is certainly one of the very greatest. Yet nowadays he is generally unknown. His rollicking frankness, his audacious unconventionality, are enough to account for the neglect. Even the easy mannered England of 1760 opened its eyes in horror

when *Tristram Shandy* appeared. "A most unclerical clergyman," the public pronounced the rector of Sutton and prebendary of York.

Besides, his style was rambling to the last degree. Plot concerned him least of all authors of fiction.

For instance, it is more than doubtful that the whimsical parson really INTENDED a moral to be read into the adventures of his *Sentimental Journey* that follow in these pages. He used to declare that he never intended anything—he never knew whither his pen was leading—the rash implement, once in hand, was likely to fly with him from Yorkshire to Italy—or to Paris—or across the road to Uncle Toby's; and what could the helpless author do but improve each occasion?

So here is one such "occasion" thus "improved" by disjointed sequels—heedless, one would say, and yet glittering with the unreturnable thrust of subtle wit, or softening with simple emotion, like a thousand immortal passages of this random philosopher.

Even the slightest turns of Sterne's pen bear inspiration. No less a critic than the severe Hazlitt was satisfied that "his works consist only of brilliant passages."

And because the editors of the present volumes found added to "The Mystery" not only a "Solution" but an "Application" of worldly wisdom, and a "Contrast" in Sterne's best vein of quiet happiness— they have felt emboldened to ascribe the passage *A Mystery with a Moral*.

As regards the "Application": Sterne knew whereof he wrote. He sought the South of France for health in 1762, and was run after and feted by the most brilliant circles of Parisian litterateurs. This foreign sojourn failed to cure his lung complaint, but suggested the idea to him of the rambling and charming *Sentimental Journey*. Only three weeks after its publication, on March 18, 1768, Sterne died alone in his London lodgings.

Spite of all that marred his genius, his work has lived and wil1 live, if only for the exquisite literary art which ever made great things out of little.—The EDITOR.

A Mystery with a Moral

Parisian Experience of Parson Yorick, on his "Sentimental Journey"

I remained at the gate of the hotel for some time, looking at everyone who passed by, and forming conjectures upon them, till my attention got fixed upon a single object, which confounded all kind of reasoning upon him.

It was a tall figure of a philosophic, serious adult look, which passed and repassed sedately along the street, making a turn of about sixty paces on each side of the gate of the hotel. The man was about fifty-two, had a small cane under his arm, was dressed in a dark drab-colored coat, waistcoat, and breeches, which seemed to have seen some years' service. They were still clean, and there was a little air of frugal propriete throughout him. By his pulling off his hat, and his attitude of accosting a good many in his way, I saw he was asking charity; so I got a sous or two out of my pocket, ready to give him as he took me in his turn. He

passed by me without asking anything, and yet he did not go five steps farther before he asked charity of a little woman. I was much more likely to have given of the two. He had scarce done with the woman, when he pulled his hat off to another who was coming the same way. An ancient gentleman came slowly, and after him a young smart one. He let them both pass and asked nothing. I stood observing him half an hour, in which time he had made a dozen turns backward and forward, and found that he invariably pursued the same plan.

There were two things very singular in this which set my brain to work, and to no purpose; the first was, why the man should only tell his story to the sex; and secondly, what kind of a story it was and what species of eloquence it could be which softened the hearts of the women which he knew it was to no purpose to practice upon the men.

There were two other circumstances which entangled this mystery. The one was, he told every woman what he had to say in her ear, and in a way which had much more the air of a secret than a petition; the other was, it was always successful—he never stopped a woman but she pulled out her purse and immediately gave him something.

I could form no system to explain the phenomenon.

I had got a riddle to amuse me for the rest of the evening, so I walked upstairs to my chamber.

OVERHEARD

The man who either disdains or fears to walk up a dark entry may be an excellent, good man, and fit for a hundred things, but he will not do to make a sentimental traveler. I count little of the many things I see pass at broad noonday, in large and open streets; Nature is shy, and hates to act before spectators; but in such an unobservable corner you sometimes see a single short scene of hers worth all the sentiments of a dozen French plays compounded together; and yet they are ABSOLUTELY fine, and whenever I have a more brilliant affair upon my hands than common, as they suit a preacher just as well as a hero, I generally make my sermon out of them, and for the text, "Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphilia," is as good as anyone in the Bible.

There is a long, dark passage issuing out from the Opera Comique into a narrow street. It is trod by a few who humbly wait for a fiacre[1] or wish to get off quietly o' foot when the opera is done. At the end of it, toward the theater, 'tis lighted by a small candle, the light of which is almost lost before you get halfway down, but near the door—it is more for ornament than use—you see it as a fixed star of the least magnitude; it burns, but does little good to the world that we know of.

In returning [from the opera] along this passage, I discerned, as I approached within five or six paces of the door, two ladies standing arm in arm with their backs against the wall, waiting, as I imagined, for a fiacre. As they were next the door, I thought they had a prior right, so I edged myself up within a yard or little more of them, and quietly took my stand. I was in black and scarce seen.

The lady next me was a tall, lean figure of a woman of about thirty-six; the other, of the same size and make of about forty. There was no mark of wife or

widow in any one part of either of them. They seemed to be two upright vestal sisters, unsapped by caresses, unbroke in upon by tender salutations. I could have wished to have made them happy. Their happiness was destined, that night, to come from another quarter.

A low voice with a good turn of expression and sweet cadence at the end of it, begged for a twelve-sous piece between them for the love of heaven. I thought it singular that a beggar should fix the quota of an alms, and that the sum should be twelve times as much as what is usually given in the dark. They both seemed astonished at it as much as myself. "Twelve sous," said one. "A twelve-sous piece," said the other, and made no reply.

The poor man said he knew not how to ask less of ladies of their rank, and bowed down his head to the ground.

"Pooh!" said they, "we have no money."

The beggar remained silent for a moment or two, and renewed his supplication.

"Do not, my fair young ladies," said he, "stop your good ears against me."

"Upon my word, honest man," said the younger, "we have no change."

"Then God bless you," said the poor man, "and multiply those joys which you can give to others without change."

I observed the older sister put her hand into her pocket. "I will see," said she, "if I have a sous."

"A sous! Give twelve," said the suppliant. "Nature has been bountiful to you; be bountiful to a poor man."

"I would, friend, with all my heart," said the younger, "if I had it."

"My fair charitable," said he, addressing himself to the elder, "what is it but your goodness and humanity which make your bright eyes so sweet that they outshine the morning even in this dark passage? And what was it which made the Marquis de Santerre and his brother say so much of you both, as they just passed by?"

The two ladies seemed much affected, and impulsively at the same time they put their hands into their pockets and each took out a twelve-sous piece.

The contest between them and the poor suppliant was no more. It was continued between themselves which of the two should give the twelve-sous piece in charity, and, to end the dispute, they both gave it together, and the man went away.

SOLUTION

I stepped hastily after him; it was the very man whose success in asking charity of the woman before the door of the hotel had so puzzled me, and I found at once his secret, or at least the basis of it: it was flattery.

Delicious essence! how refreshing art thou to Nature! How strongly are all its powers and all its weaknesses on thy side! How sweetly dost thou mix with the blood, and help it through the most difficult and tortuous passages to the heart!

The poor man, as he was not straitened for time, had given it here in a larger dose. It is certain he had a way of bringing it into less form for the many sudden causes he had to do with in the streets; but how he contrived to correct, sweeten, concenter, and qualify it—I vex not my spirit with the inquiry. It is enough, the

beggar gained two twelve-sous pieces, and they can best tell the rest who have gained much greater matters by it.

APPLICATION

We get forward in the world not so much by doing services as receiving them. You take a withering twig and put it in the ground, and then you water it because you have planted it.

Monsieur le Comte de B___, merely because he had done me one kindness in the affair of my passport, would go on and do me another the few days he was at Paris, in making me known to a few people of rank; and they were to present me to others, and so on.

I had got master of my SECRET just in time to turn these honors to some little account; otherwise, as is commonly the case, I should have dined or supped a single time or two round, and then by TRANSLATING French looks and attitudes into plain English, I should presently have seen that I had got hold of the couvert[2] of some more entertaining guest; and in course of time should have resigned all my places one after another, merely upon the principle that I could not keep them. As it was, things did not go much amiss.

I had the honor of being introduced to the old Marquis de B___. In days of yore he had signalized himself by some small feats of chivalry in the Cour d'Amour, and had dressed himself out to the idea of tilts and tournaments ever since. The Marquis de B___ wished to have it thought the affair was somewhere else than in his brain. "He could like to take a trip to England," and asked much of the English ladies. "Stay where you are, I beseech you, Monsieur le Marquis," said I. "Les Messieurs Anglais can scarce get a kind look from them as it is." The marquis invited me to supper.

M. P___, the farmer-general, was just as inquisitive about our taxes. They were very considerable, he heard. "If we knew but how to collect them," said I, making him a low bow.

I could never have been invited to M. P___'s concerts upon any other terms.

I had been misrepresented to Mme. de Q___ as an esprit—Mme. de Q___ was an esprit herself; she burned with impatience to see me and hear me talk. I had not taken my seat before I saw she did not care a sou whether I had any wit or no. I was let in to be convinced she had. I call Heaven to witness I never once opened the door of my lips.

Mme. de V___ vowed to every creature she met, "She had never had a more improving conversation with a man in her life."

There are three epochs in the empire of a Frenchwoman—she is coquette, then deist, then devote. The empire during these is never lost—she only changes her subjects. When thirty-five years and more have unpeopled her dominion of the slaves of love she repeoples it with slaves of infidelity, and, then with the slaves of the church.

Mme. de V___ was vibrating between the first of these epochs; the color of the rose was fading fast away; she ought to have been a deist five years before the time I had the honor to pay my first visit.

She placed me upon the same sofa with her for the sake of disputing the point of religion more closely. In short, Mme. de V___ told me she believed nothing.

I told Mme. de V___ it might be her principle, but I was sure it could not be her interest, to level the outworks, without which I could not conceive how such a citadel as hers could be defended; that there was not a more dangerous thing in the world than for a beauty to be a deist; that it was a debt I owed my creed not to conceal it from her; that I had not been five minutes upon the sofa beside her before I had begun to form designs; and what is it but the sentiments of religion, and the persuasion they had existed in her breast, which could have checked them as they rose up?

"We are not adamant," said I, taking hold of her hand, "and there is need of all restraints till age in her own time steals in and lays them on us; but, my dear lady," said I, kissing her hand, "it is too—too soon."

I declare I had the credit all over Paris of unperverting Mme. de V___. She affirmed to M. D___ and the Abbé M___ that in one half hour I had said more for revealed religion than all their encyclopaedia had said against it. I was listed directly into Mme. de V___'s coterie, and she put off the epoch of deism for two years.

I remember it was in this coterie, in the middle of a discourse, in which I was showing the necessity of a first cause, that the young Count de Faineant took me by the hand to the farthest corner of the room, to tell me that my solitaire was pinned too strait about my neck. "It should be plus badinant," said the count, looking down upon his own; "but a word, M. Yorick, to the wise—"

"And from the wise, M. le Comte," replied I, making him a bow, "is enough."

The Count de Faineant embraced me with more ardor than ever I was embraced by mortal man.

For three weeks together I was of every man's opinion I met.

"Pardi! ce M. Yorick a autant d'esprit que nous autres."

"Il raisonne bien," said another.

"C'est un bon enfant," said a third.

And at this price I could have eaten and drunk and been merry all the days of my life at Paris; but it was a dishonest reckoning. I grew ashamed of it; it was the gain of a slave; every sentiment of honor revolted against it; the higher I got, the more was I forced upon my beggarly system; the better the coterie, the more children of Art, I languished for those of Nature. And one night, after a most vile prostitution of myself to half a dozen different people, I grew sick, went to bed, and ordered horses in the morning to set out for Italy.

CONTRAST

A shoe coming loose from the forefoot of the thill horse at the beginning of the ascent of Mount Taurira, the postilion dismounted, twisted the shoe off, and put it in his pocket; as the ascent was of five or six miles, and that horse our main dependence I made a point of having the shoe fastened on again as well as we could, but the postilion had thrown away the nails, and the hammer in the chaise box being of no great use without them, I submitted to go on.

He had not mounted half a mile higher when, coming to a flinty piece of road, the poor devil lost a second shoe, and from off his other forefoot. I then got out of the chaise in good earnest, and seeing a house about a quarter of a mile to the left hand, with a great deal to do I prevailed upon the postilion to turn up to it. The look of the house, and of everything about it, as we drew nearer, soon reconciled me to the disaster. It was a little farmhouse surrounded with about twenty acres of vineyard, about as much corn, and close to the house on one side was a potagerie of an acre and a half, full of everything which could make plenty in a French peasant's house, and on the other side was a little wood which furnished wherewithal to dress it. It was about eight in the evening when I got to the house, so I left the postilion to manage his point as he could, and for mine I walked directly into the house.

The family consisted of an old gray-headed man and his wife, with five or six sons and sons-in-laws, and their several wives, and a joyous genealogy out of them.

They were all sitting down together to their lentil soup. A large wheaten loaf was in the middle of the table, and a flagon of wine at each end of it promised joy through the stages of the repast— 'twas a feast of love.

The old man rose up to meet me, and with a respectful cordiality would have me sit down at the table. My heart was sat down the moment I entered the room, so I sat down at once like a son of the family, and to invest myself in the character as speedily as I could, I instantly borrowed the old man's knife, and taking up the loaf cut myself a hearty luncheon; and, as I did it, I saw a testimony in every eye, not only of an honest welcome, but of a welcome mixed with thanks that I had not seemed to doubt it.

Was it this, or tell me, Nature, what else it was that made this morsel so sweet, and to what magic I owe it that the draught I took of their flagon was so delicious with it that they remain upon my palate to this hour?

If the supper was to my taste, the grace which followed it was much more so.

When supper was over, the old man gave a knock upon the table with the haft of his knife to bid them prepare for the dance. The moment the signal was given, the women and girls ran all together into a back apartment to tie up their hair, and the young men to the door to wash their faces and change their sabots, and in three minutes every soul was ready upon a little esplanade before the house to begin. The old man and his wife came out last, and, placing me betwixt them, sat down upon a sofa of turf by the door.

The old man had some fifty years ago been no mean performer upon the vielle,[3] and at the age he was then of, touched well enough for the purpose. His wife sung now and then a little to the tune, then intermitted, and joined her old man again, as their children and grandchildren danced before them.

It was not till the middle of the second dance when, from some pauses in the movement wherein they all seemed to look up, I fancied I could distinguish an elevation of spirit different from that which is the cause or the effect of simple jollity. In a word, I thought I beheld RELIGION mixing in the dance; but, as I had never seen her so engaged, I should have looked upon it now as one of the illusions of an imagination, which is eternally misleading me, had not the old man, as soon as the dance ended, said that this was their constant way, and that all his

life long he had made it a rule, after supper was over, to call out his family to dance and rejoice, believing, he said, that a cheerful and contented mind was the best sort of thanks to heaven that an illiterate peasant could pay—

"Or a learned prelate either," said I.

When you have gained the top of Mount Taurira, you run presently down to Lyons. Adieu then to all rapid movements! It is a journey of caution, and it fares better with sentiments not to be in a hurry with them, so I contracted with a volturin to take his time with a couple of mules and convey me in my own chaise safe to Turin through Savoy.

Poor, patient, quiet, honest people, fear not! Your poverty, the treasury of your simple virtues, will not be envied you by the world, nor will your values be invaded by it. Nature, in the midst of thy disorders, thou art still friendly to the scantiness thou hast created; with all thy great works about thee little hast thou left to give, either to the scythe or to the sickle, but to that little thou grantest safety and protection, and sweet are the dwellings which stand so sheltered!

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(1) Hackney coach.
(2) Plate, napkin, knife, fork, and spoon.
(3) A small violin, such as was used by the wandering jongleurs of the Middle Ages.