

**LAURENCE
STERNE**

A POLITICAL
ROMANCE

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A Political Romance:

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A POLITICAL ROMANCE, ETC. SIR,

In my last, for want of something better to write about, I told you what a World of Fending and Proving we have had of late, in this little Village of ours, about an old-cast-Pair-of-black-Plush-Breeches, which John, our Parish-Clerk, about ten Years ago, it seems, had made a Promise of to one Trim, who is our Sexton and Dog-Whipper.—To this you write me Word, that you have had more than either one or two Occasions to know a good deal of the shifty Behaviour of this said Master Trim,—and that you are astonished, nor can you for your Soul conceive, how so worthless a Fellow, and so worthless a Thing into the Bargain, could become the Occasion of such a Racket as I have represented.

Now, though you do not say expressly, you could wish to hear any more about it, yet I see plain enough that I have raised your Curiosity; and therefore, from the same Motive, that I slightly mentioned it at all in my last Letter, I will, in this, give you a full and very circumstantial Account of the whole Affair.

But, before I begin, I must first set you right in one very material Point, in which I have misled you, as to the true Cause of all this Uproar amongst us;—which does not take its Rise, as I then told you, from the Affair of the Breeches;—but, on the contrary, the whole Affair of the Breeches has taken its Rise from it:—To understand which, you must know, that the first Beginning of the Squabble was not between John the Parish-Clerk and Trim the Sexton, but betwixt the Parson of the Parish and the said Master Trim, about an old Watch-Coat, which had many Years hung up in the Church, which Trim had set his Heart upon; and nothing would serve Trim but he must take it home, in order to have it converted into a warm Under-Petticoat for his Wife, and a Jerkin for himself, against Winter; which, in a plaintive Tone, he most humbly begg'd his Reverence would consent to.

I need not tell you, Sir, who have so often felt it, that a Principle of strong Compassion transports a generous Mind sometimes beyond what is strictly right,—the Parson was within an Ace of being an honourable Example of this very Crime;—for no sooner did the distinct Words—Petticoat—poor Wife—warm—Winter strike upon his Ear, but his Heart warmed,—and, before Trim had well got to the End of his Petition, (being a Gentleman of a frank and open Temper) he told him he was welcome to it, with all his Heart and Soul. But, Trim, says he, as you see I am but just got down to my Living, and am an utter Stranger to all Parish-Matters, know nothing about this old

Watch-Coat you beg of me, having never seen it in my Life, and therefore cannot be a Judge whether 'tis fit for such a Purpose; or, if it is, in Truth, know not whether 'tis mine to bestow upon you or not;—you must have a Week or ten Days Patience, till I can make some Inquiries about it;—and, if I find it is in my Power, I tell you again, Man, your Wife is heartily welcome to an Under-Petticoat out of it, and you to a Jerkin, was the Thing as good again as you represent it.

It is necessary to inform you, Sir, in this Place, That the Parson was earnestly bent to serve Trim in this Affair, not only from the Motive of Generality, which I have justly ascribed to him, but likewise from another Motive; and that was by way of making some Sort of Recompence for a Multitude of small Services which Trim had occasionally done, and indeed was continually doing, (as he was much about the House) when his own Man was out of the Way. For all these Reasons together, I say, the Parson of the Parish intended to serve Trim in this Matter to the utmost of his Power: All that was wanting was previously to inquire, if any one had a Claim to it;—or whether, as it had, Time immemorial, hung up in the Church, the taking it down might not raise a Clamour in the Parish. These Inquiries were the very Thing that Trim dreaded in his Heart—He knew very well that if the Parson should but say one Word to the Church- Wardens about it, there would be an End of the whole Affair. For this, and some other Reasons not necessary to be told you, at present, Trim was for allowing no Time in this Matter;—but, on the

contrary, doubled his Diligence and Importunity at the Vicarage-House;—plagued the whole Family to Death;—pressed his Suit Morning, Noon, and Night; and, to shorten my Story, teased the poor Gentleman, who was but in an ill State of Health, almost out of his Life about it.

You will not wonder, when I tell you, that all this Hurry and Precipitation, on the Side of Master Trim, produced its natural Effect on the Side of the Parson, and that was, a Suspicion that all was not right at the Bottom.

He was one Evening sitting alone in his Study, weighing and turning this Doubt every Way in his Mind; and, after an Hour and a half's serious Deliberation upon the Affair, and running over Trim's Behaviour throughout,—he was just saying to himself, It must be so;—when a sudden Rap at the Door put an End to his Soliloquy,—and, in a few Minutes, to his Doubts too; for a Labourer in the Town, who deem'd himself past his fifty-second Year, had been returned by the Constable in the Militia-List, —and he had come, with a Groat in his Hand, to search the Parish Register for his Age.—The Parson bid the poor Fellow put the Groat into his Pocket, and go into the Kitchen:—Then shutting the Study Door, and taking down the Parish Register,—Who knows, says he, but I may find something here about this self-same Watch-Coat?—He had scarce unclasped the Book, in saying this, when he popp'd upon the very Thing he wanted, fairly wrote on the first Page, pasted to the Inside of one of the Covers, whereon was a Memorandum about the very Thing in Question,

in these express Words:

MEMORANDUM

The great Watch-Coat was purchased and given above two hundred years ago, by the Lord of the Manor, to this Parish-Church, to the sole use and Behoof of the poor sextons thereof, and their Successors, for ever, to be Worn by them respectively in wintry cold Nights, in ringing Complines, Passing-Bells, &c. which the said Lord of the manor had done, in Piety, to keep the poor Wretches warm, and for the Good of his own Soul, for Which they were directed to pray, &c. &c. &c. &c. Just Heaven! said the Parson to himself, looking upwards, What an Escape have I had! Give this for an Under-Petticoat to Trim's Wife! I would not have consented to such a Desecration to be Primate of all England; nay, I would not have disturb'd a single Button of it for half my Tythes!

Scarce were the Words out of his Mouth, when in pops Trim with the whole Subject of the Exclamation under both his Arms.—I say, under both his Arms;—for he had actually got it ripp'd and cut out ready, his own Jerkin under one Arm, and the Petticoat under the other, in order to be carried to the Taylor to be made up,—and had just stepp'd in, in high Spirits, to shew the Parson how cleverly it had held out.

There are many good Similies now subsisting in the World, but which I have neither Time to recollect or look for, which would give you a strong Conception of the Astonishment and honest

Indignation which this unexpected Stroke of Trim's Impudence impress'd upon the Parson's Looks.—Let it suffice to say, That it exceeded all fair Description,—as well as all Power of proper Resentment,—except this, that Trim was ordered, in a stern Voice, to lay the Bundles down upon the Table,—to go about his Business, and wait upon him, at his Peril, the next Morning at Eleven precisely;—Against this Hour, like a wise Man, the Parson had sent to desire John the Parish-Clerk, who bore an exceeding good Character as a Man of Truth, and who having, moreover, a pretty Freehold of about eighteen Pounds a Year in the Township, was a leading Man in it; and, upon the whole, was such a one of whom it might be said,—That he rather did Honour to his Office,—than that his Office did Honour to him.—Him he sends for, with the Church-Wardens, and one of the Sides- Men, a grave, knowing, old Man, to be present:—For as Trim had withheld the whole Truth from the Parson, touching the Watch-Coat, he thought it probable he would as certainly do the same Thing to others; though this, I said, was wise, the Trouble of the Precaution might have been spared, —because the Parson's Character was unblemish'd,—and he had ever been held by the World in the Estimation of a Man of Honour and Integrity.—Trim's Character, on the contrary, was as well known, if not in the World, yet, at least, in all the Parish, to be that of a little, dirty, pimping, pettifogging, ambidextrous Fellow,—who neither cared what he did or said of any, provided he could get a Penny by it.—This might, I say, have made any Precaution needless;—

but you must know, as the Parson had in a Manner but just got down to his Living, he dreaded the Consequences of the least ill Impression on his first Entrance amongst his Parishioners, which would have disabled him from doing them the Good he Wished;—so that, out of Regard to his Flock, more than the necessary Care due to himself,—he was resolv'd not to lie at the Mercy of what Resentment might vent, or Malice lend an Ear to.—Accordingly the whole Matter was rehearsed from first to last by the Parson, in the Manner I've told you, in the Hearing of John the Parish-Clerk, and in the Presence of Trim.

Trim had little to say for himself, except "That the Parson had absolutely promised to befriend him and his Wife in the Affair, to the utmost of his Power: That the Watch-Coat was certainly in his Power, and that he might give it him if he pleased."

To this, the Parson's Reply was short, but strong, "That nothing was in his Power to do, but what he could do honestly:—That in giving the Coat to him and his Wife, he should do a manifest Wrong to the next Sexton; the great Watch-Coat being the most comfortable Part of the Place:—That he should, moreover, injure the Right of his own Successor, who would be just so much a worse Patron, as the Worth of the Coat amounted to;—and, in a Word, he declared, that his whole intent in promising that Coat, was Charity to Trim; but Wrong to no Man; that was a Reserve, he said, made in all Cases of this Kind:—and he declared solemnly, in Verbo Sacerdotis, That this was his Meaning, and was so understood by Trim himself."

With the Weight of this Truth, and the great good Sense and strong Reason which accompanied all the Parson said upon the Subject,—poor Trim was driven to his last Shift,—and begg'd he might be suffered to plead his Right and Title to the Watch-Coat, if not by Promise, at least by Services.—It was well known how much he was entitled to it upon these Scores: That he had black'd the Parson's Shoes without Count, and greased his Boots above fifty Times:—That he had run for Eggs into the Town upon all Occasions;—whetted the Knives at all Hours;—caught his Horse and rubbed him down:—That for his Wife she had been ready upon all Occasions to charr for them;—and neither he nor she, to the best of his Remembrance, ever took a Farthing, or any thing beyond a Mug of Ale.—To this Account of his Services he begg'd Leave to add those of his Wishes, which, he said, had been equally great.—He affirmed, and was ready, he said, to make it appear, by Numbers of Witnesses, "He had drank his Reverence's Health a thousand Times, (by the bye, he did not add out of the Parson's own Ale): That he not only drank his Health, but wish'd it; and never came to the House, but ask'd his Man kindly how he did; that in particular, about half a Year ago, when his Reverence cut his Finger in paring an Apple, he went half a Mile to ask a cunning Woman, what was good to stanch Blood, and actually returned with a Cobweb in his Breeches Pocket:—Nay, says Trim, it was not a Fortnight ago, when your Reverence took that violent Purge, that I went to the far End of the whole Town to borrow you a Close-stool,

—and came back, as my Neighbours, who flouted me, will all bear witness, with the Pan upon my Head, and never thought it too much."

Trim concluded his pathetick Remonstrance with saying, "He hoped his Reverence's Heart would not suffer him to requite so many faithful Services by so unkind a Return:—That if it was so, as he was the first, so he hoped he should be the last, Example of a Man of his Condition so treated."—This Plan of Trim's Defence, which Trim had put himself upon,—could admit of no other Reply but a general Smile.

Upon the whole, let me inform you, That all that could be said, pro and con, on both Sides, being fairly heard, it was plain, That Trim, in every Part of this Affair, had behaved very ill;—and one Thing, which was never expected to be known of him, happening in the Course of this Debate to come out against him; namely, That he had gone and told the Parson, before he had ever set Foot in his Parish, That John his Parish- Clerk,—his Church-Wardens, and some of the Heads of the Parish, were a Parcel of Scoundrels.—Upon the Upshot, Trim was kick'd out of Doors; and told, at his Peril, never to come there again.

At first Trim huff'd and bounced most terribly;—swore he would get a Warrant;—then nothing would serve him but he would call a Bye-Law, and tell the whole Parish how the Parson had misused him;—but cooling of that, as fearing the Parson might possibly bind him over to his good Behaviour, and, for aught he knew, might send him to the House of Correction,—he

let the Parson alone; and, to revenge himself, falls foul upon his Clerk, who had no more to do in the Quarrel than you or I;—rips up the Promise of the old-cast-Pair-of-black-Plush-Breeches, and raises an Uproar in the Town about it, notwithstanding it had slept ten Years.—But all this, you must know, is look'd upon in no other Light, but as an artful Stroke of Generalship in Trim, to raise a Dust, and cover himself under the disgraceful Chastisement he has undergone.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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