

DENIS DIDEROT

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STORY

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This Is Not A Story

When one tells a story it is for a listener; and however short the story is, it is highly unlikely that the teller is not occasionally interrupted by his audience. So I have introduced into the narration that will be read, and which is not a story, or which is a bad one if you have doubts about that, a character that might approximate the role of the reader; and I begin.

* * * * *

And you conclude right there?

– That a subject this interesting must make us dizzy, be the talk of the town for a month, be phrased and rephrased until flavorless, produce a thousand arguments, at least twenty leaflets, and around a hundred bits of verse in favor or against. In spite of all the finesse, learning, and pure grit of the author, given that his work has not lead to any violence it is mediocre. Very mediocre.

– But it seems to me that we owe him a rather agreeable evening, and that this reading has brought...

– What? A litany of worn-out vignettes fired from left and

right, saying just one single thing known for all eternity, that man and woman are extraordinarily unfortunate beasts.

– Nevertheless the epidemic has won you over, and you have contributed just like any other.

– Whether or not it be to one's taste, it is only good taste to strike the tone given. When meeting company, we customarily tidy up appearances at the door of the apartment for whomever we are seeing; we pretend to be funny when we are sad; sad, when we would have liked to be funny. We do not want to appear out of place anywhere; so the literary hack politicizes, the political pundit talks metaphysics, the metaphysician moralizes, the moralist talks finance, the financier, letters or logic. Rather than listen or keep quiet, each ramble on about what they are ignorant of, and everyone bores each other with silly vanity or politeness.

– You are in a bad mood.

– I usually am.

– And I think it is appropriate for me to reserve my vignette for a better time.

– You mean you will wait for me to leave.

– It is not that.

– Or you are afraid that I might have less indulgence for you, face to face, than I would for your average gentleman.

– It is not that.

– Be agreeable then and tell me what it is.

– That my vignette will not prove any better than those that

have annoyed you.

– Hmph. Tell it anyway.

– No. You have had enough.

– You know that of all the ways the others have enraged me, yours is the most unpleasant?

– And what is mine?

– That of being asked to do the thing you are dying to do.

Well, my friend, I ask you, I pray you satisfy yourself.

– Satisfy myself?

– Begin, by God, begin.

– I will try to be short.

– That cannot hurt.

Here, a little out of spite, I coughed, I spat, I drew my handkerchief out slowly, I blew my nose, I opened my snuff box, I took out a pinch of snuff; and I heard my fellow man say between his teeth: ‘If the telling is short, the preliminaries are long...’ I had the urge to call a servant under the pretext of some errand. But I did not, and I said:

* * * * *

It must be admitted that there are very good men, and very bad women.

– One sees that every day, and sometimes without leaving the house. Go on?

– Go on? I knew an Alsatian beauty. Beautiful enough to make

old men come running and stop younger ones in their tracks.

– I also knew her. Her name was Madame Reymer.

– That is correct. A newcomer from Nancy by the name of Tanié fell madly in love with her. He was poor, one of those lost children chased from the house by harsh parents with a large family, thrown into the world with no idea what will become of them, knowing instinctually that there will never be a worse sort than the one they are fleeing from. Tanié was infatuated with Madame Raymer, consumed by a passion that gave him courage and ennobled all his actions in his eyes, so that he willingly performed those most disturbing and vile to soothe the misery of his soul. During the day he would work the docks; at evening he begged in the streets.

– It was wonderful, but it could not last.

– Tanié, sick of living on the brink, or rather of keeping a charming woman in poverty, ever haunted by rich men urging her to rid herself of that beggar Tanié...

– Which she would have done fifteen days or a month later.

– and to accept their riches, decided to leave her and set out in search of fortune abroad. He hunted around and won passage on one of the king's ships. It came time to depart. He took leave of Madame Reymer. 'My love,' he said to her, 'I can no longer exploit your affections. I have accepted the inevitable. I am leaving.' 'You are leaving!' 'Yes...' 'And where are you going?' 'To the islands. You deserve something more, and I can no longer come between you and it.'

– Kindhearted Tanié!..

– ‘And what is to become of me?..’

– Traitor!..

– ‘You are surrounded by people who want to please you. I release you from your promises, I release you from your vows. Find the suitor that is most agreeable to you; accept him. I beg of you...’ ‘Oh Tanié! If you so desire...’

– No need to pantomime Madame Reymer. I get it...

– ‘As I leave, all I ask is that you not commit yourself to anything that might stand between us permanently. Promise me, my beautiful friend. Whatever country on earth I find myself in, you will know something terrible has befallen me if a year goes by without my bearing you witness of my tender attachment. Do not cry...’

– Women can cry on command.

– ‘...and do not fight against plans that are in the end inspired by the reproaches of my heart and from which they would not keep me.’ And just like that Tanié left for Saint-Domingue.

– And just in time, for Madame Reymer as for himself.

– How would you know?

– I know as well as anyone that when Tanié advised her to make a choice she made it.

– Well done!

– Continue your narration.

– Tanié had a strong will and an entrepreneurial spirit. He did not tarry in making himself known. He joined the sovereign

council of the Cape. He distinguished himself by his wisdom and equity. He had no ambitions to great fortune; all he wanted was a quick and an honest one. Each year he sent a portion of it to Madame Reymer. He reached his goal... somewhere between nine and ten years; no, I do not believe he was absent any longer than that... to present his lover with a small wallet containing the product of his work and virtue... and lucky for Tanié, it was just at the moment when she had left the last of his successors.

– The last?

– Yes.

– So there were several?

– Assuredly.

– Go on, go on.

– But perhaps I have nothing left to tell you that you do not already know better than I.

– What does it matter? Go on anyway.

– Madame Reymer and Tanié occupied a rather pretty building on rue Sainte- Marguerite, at my doorstep. I took a great liking to Tanié and frequented his house, which was, if not opulent, at least luxurious.

– I can assure you, without having done Reymer's accounting, that she had an income of over 15,000 pounds before Tanié returned.

– and she kept it from him?

– Yes.

– Why would she?

– She was greedy and predatory.

– I could see predatory, but greedy? A greedy courtesan?..

These two lovers

had lived in perfect harmony for five or six years.

– Thanks to the shrewdness of the one and the unconditional confidence of the other.

– Ah. It is true that it would have been impossible for the shadow of a doubt to enter a soul as pure as Tanié's. The one thing I did occasionally notice was that Madame Reymer quickly forgot her original poverty, was tormented by her love of wealth and splendor, was humiliated that so beautiful a woman had traveled on foot...

– That she had not gone by coach?

– And the spark of vice brought out the worst in her. You laugh?.. It was then that M. de Maurepas¹ hatched the plan to build a market up north. The success of the enterprise demanded a lively and intelligent man. He had his eye on Tanié, to whom he had entrusted the direction of many important business ventures while he was at the Cape, which were always carried out to the satisfaction of the minister. Tanié was upset by this mark of distinction. He was so content, so happy with his girl! He loved, he was or he thought himself loved.

– Well said.

¹ In 1749, M. de Maurepas, still Secretary of the Navy, wrote Louis XV a report in which he developed a strategy for opening trade relations with the English colonies through inland Canada. This plan was thereafter adopted, and Maurepas saw it executed before his death. (BR.)

– What could gold possibly add to his good fortune? Nothing. But the minister insisted. He had to strengthen his resolve; he had to tell Madame Reymer. I arrived at his quarters right at the end of this unfortunate episode. Poor Tanié was collapsed in tears. ‘What is the matter, my friend?’ I asked him. Between sobs he told me, ‘It is this woman!’ Madame Reymer was working calmly at a tapestry. Tanié rose brusquely and left. I stayed behind with his lover, who did not allow me to remain ignorant of what she thought of Tanié’s irrationality. She exaggerated the severity of her financial state; she adorned her appeal with all the art that a cunning mind like hers knows to compensate for the sophisms of ambition. ‘What does it amount to? An absence of two or three years at most.’ ‘That is some time for a man that you love and who loves you as much as he does.’ ‘He? loves me? If he loved me, would he hesitate to satisfy me?’ ‘But Madame, will you not go with him?’ ‘Me? I will not go; and as eccentric as he is he has not even suggested it to me. Does he have doubts about me?’ ‘I do not believe so, not at all.’ ‘After awaiting him for twelve years, he can certainly count on my good faith.’ ‘Sir, it is one of those unique opportunities that only presents itself once in a lifetime; and I do not want the day to come when I must have regrets and reproach myself for missing it.’ ‘Tanié will have no regrets, so long as he has the good fortune of pleasing you.’ ‘That is very decent of you; but you can be sure that he will be very happy being wealthy when I am old. It is a peculiarity of women to never think of the future; it is not mine...’ The minister was

in Paris. His hotel was only a foot from rue Sainte-Marguerite. Tanié met with him there and was hired. He returned with eyes dry and heart wrung out. 'Madame,' he said to her, 'I saw M. de Maurepas; I have given him my word. I will go, I will go. And you will be satisfied.' 'Oh! My love!..' Madame Reymer drops her line of work, throws herself on Tanié, tosses her arms around his neck, devastates him with kisses and sweet nothings. 'Ah! It is times like these that let me know I am dear to you!' Tanié answered her coldly: 'You want to be rich.'

– She was, the little minx, ten times more so than she was worth...

– 'And you will be. Since it is gold that you love, you must seek it out.' It was Tuesday, and the minister had set the date of departure for Friday without delay. I bid him farewell as he was wrestling with himself, attempting to wrest himself from the arms of the beautiful, disgraceful and cruel Reymer. Of such a disorder of ideas, hopelessness, agony, I have never seen a second example. This was not a wail; it was an extended scream. Madame Reymer was still in bed. He held one of her hands. He could not stop saying and repeating: 'Cruel woman! Woman cruel! What more do you need than the comfort you enjoy, and a friend, a lover such as myself? I have tried to find fortune in the sweltering countries of America; she wants me to seek it out once more in the ice floes of the North. My friend, I am aware that this woman is mad; I am aware that I am foolish, but I am less afraid of death than I am of causing her sadness. You

want me to leave you; I will leave you.' He was on his knees beside her bed, mouth glued to her hand and face hidden in the covers, which, in stifling his mutterings, only made them sadder and more dreadful. The bedroom door opened; his head rose up brusquely; he saw the coachman who had come to announce that the horses were hitched up. He cried out, and again hid his face under the covers. After a moment's silence, he rose, he said to his love, 'Kiss me, madame. Kiss me one more time, for you will never see me again.' His premonition was only too accurate. He departed. He arrived in Petersburg and, three days later, was struck by a fever from which he died on the fourth.

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