

**THE STORY OF MY
UNCLE TOBY,
NEWLY ARRANGED**

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The story of my Uncle Toby, newly arranged by Percy Fitzgerald

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PERCY FITZGERALD

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THE STORY OF

MY UNCLE TOBY, &c.,

NEWLY ARRANGED,

BY

PERCY FITZGERALD, M.A.,

AUTHOR OF "A LIFE OF STERNE," "BELLA DONNA,"
ETC., ETC.



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LIFE OF LAURENCE STERNE.

THE life of one who was a clergyman and prebendary in a cathedral town, a writer of sermons and odd romances, and a student of old books, would not seem to promise much that was exciting or adventurous. Yet, the life of Laurence Sterne has an unexpected flavour of romance and incident; which, from his cradle literally to his grave, dashes his life with an oddity and eccentricity, that only too faithfully reflects the extravagance of his *Tristram*. When a child he fell into a mill race, and was carried under the wheel, his life being saved by almost a miracle; and when he died his remains were snatched from the grave by resurrection men and sold for dissection.

An Archbishop of York, after being sorely persecuted in the days of Cromwell, left behind him a large family; the eldest of whom, Simon Sterne, was established at Elvington, in Yorkshire. Roger Sterne, youngest son of this squire, and father of the famous Laurence, was put into the army, and, like my uncle Toby, had nothing in the world but his commission to start him in life.

His regiment, the thirty-fourth, took its share in Marlborough's wars; and in 1711, during the campaign, the young officer married a Mrs. Agnes Herbert,

widow of a captain of good family, and daughter besides of a notorious army contractor and money lender, in whose debt the officer was. This poor lady was destined to have an unhappy time of it, following her husband from quarter to quarter, encumbered with her young children. On coming home to her father's father, at Clonmell, his famous son Laurence was born, on November 24th, 1713. And as if to mark the occasion in the most dismal fashion, the regiment was "broke" on that very day, and the officers cast adrift upon the world. Later it was re-established under Colonel Chudleigh; and then commenced for the family, steadily increasing up to seven, a series of disastrous wanderings all over England and Ireland, with peril, shipwreck, and many hardships on the long journeys; the young family was much thinned by death. About the year 1724, Laurence was taken by his father to the Free School, at Halifax, where, under the care of an able master, Mr. Lister, he remained till he was nineteen; being all but adopted by the officer's elder brother, Squire Richard Sterne, of Elvington. Three years later, his father and the regiment embarked for the siege of Gibraltar. When quarrelling with a Captain Philips, (more probably Philpotts, as an officer of that name was in his corps), he was run through the body, and died in consequence at Jamaica, in the year 1731. A goose was the cause of this fatal difference. Though he survived the immediate effects of the wound, it wore away his health; "and when he was sent to Jamaica," says his son in an affectionate passage, which shows that he had heart, and tenderly recalled the father from whom, with boyish delight, he had heard the story of the Flanders wars—"he soon fell by the country fever, which took away his senses first and made a child of him; and then, in a month or two, walking about continually without complaining, till the moment he sat down in an arm-chair, and breathed his last."—

At that time Laurence Sterne was still at school, and, on being soundly flogged for perpetrating the favourite boy's prank, of writing his name on the ceiling, was comforted by his master with the prophecy that he was a lad of genius who would come to preferment. No doubt, he was a clever, eccentric boy; and Colonel Ord, of Longridge, near Berwick-on-Tweed, who came to the school shortly after Sterne left, saw the name still upon the ceiling, and found the tradition of his humour still preserved, and instances of his wit quoted. When he grew famous, a morning paper recorded, that it was his way to learn when he pleased, and not oftener than once a fortnight.

After leaving school, his cousin, of Elvington, who treated him like a son, sent him to Jesus College, Cambridge, where, in July, 1733, he obtained a sizarship. There he read a good deal, and established an unfortunate friendship with the loose and witty John Hall Stevenson, author of "Crazy Tales," whose companionship must be accountable for much of Sterne's outrages against decency. Mr. Cole, the antiquary, remembered Hall as "an ingenious young gentleman, and very handsome." In March, 1735, Laurence matriculated, and, in January, 1736, took his Bachelor degree. In the March of the same year, he was ordained deacon, and in August, 1738, priest. No man was ever more unsuited to wearing the gown.

He now came to York, where his uncle, Dr. Jaques Sterne, precentor of the cathedral, a noisy ecclesiastical politician, had obtained for him the vicarage of Sutton; and in the meanwhile courted his first love, Miss Lumley, of Staffordshire. This was to be the weak part in Mr. Sterne's life—an unrestrained and incurable tendre for the fair sex. This he excused by the indulgent names of flirtation, innocent passion, and the like. But such fickleness is evidence of a certain untruthfulness of heart—a want of manliness and honour. The whole course of his life was to be

dotted with these "affairs of the heart," which at last grew indispensable to his spirits and comfort; as he rather absurdly proclaimed that, in one of these fits, he never could be guilty of a dirty action, and that it kept his moral sense healthy. It might be objected that the desertion of one of the objects of his evanescent passions, was something like a dirty action; but it must be allowed that the Rev. Mr. Sterne was as it were privileged, and "wrote so beautifully" on love, and was so devoted to the sex, that his ways and manners were well known. His courting of Miss Lumley was romantic enough. He wrote her passionate die-away letters; but some fantastic misconception as to money matters prevented them coming to an understanding. At last, she fell into a consumption, and then showed her lover her will, in which he had been left everything. "This generosity overpowered me," says Mr. Sterne; and on the 30th March, 1741, they were married at the cathedral.

They were quite unsuited to each other, though few ladies would have suited the agreeable and mercurial clergyman; but she had a homely, matter-of-fact mind. There can be no question but that she sat for Mrs. Shandy, and there are various traits of her in her husband's letters, which almost prove this likeness. She must have been plain also, if we can trust a curious pen-and-ink etching of her, which M. Stapfer has published in his monograph. The late Mr. Hawthorne saw a pair of crayon portraits of both husband and wife, and was struck by her unpleasant expression. With books, painting, fiddling, and shooting, Sterne spent his time at Satton—so he tells his daughter—leaving out some love-making, which he pursued at York, and much merry-making, at Skelton Castle with Hall Stevenson, where he paid frequent visits, met some of the abandoned "Monks of Medmenham," and pored over the curious old books in the library. Here it was that he was captivated by the piquant oddities of such writers as Bishop Hall,

Sir Thomas Browne, Brasenallille, and the author of the "Moyen de Parvenir," who helped him so much in his *Tristram*. "Crazy Castle," (Skelton) was a most congenial, quaint old place, and its old halls and towers saw many a wild prank. In the meantime his first child Lydia was born, in the year 1745, who only lived one day. The following year he obtained a prebend in the Cathedral, worth about £50 a-year, through the interest of his wife's family. He now figured as a "wit" in the cathedral society, and preached a series of strangely dramatic sermons, wholly unsuited to a country congregation, but which were modelled on the fantastic efforts of some eccentric mediæval preachers. Under his uncle's patronage, he plunged into the virulent politics of the day, but soon quarrelled with him, because he could not bring himself to write party paragraphs in the newspapers, though it was suspected he did so a good deal on his own account. In 1747, his second daughter was born, and christened Lydia. In the same year he preached a charity sermon in York, and in 1752, another, before the Judges of Assize, in the cathedral. This was an honour. But he was to have other, more congenial, matters on his hands, and in 1759 was to fall in love with a Miss Catherine de Fourmautelle, a young Huguenot girl, who had come to York from France. This lady he pursued after his favourite fashion, half-paternal, half-pious, or wholly sentimental, and it must be said that his letters are very charming love-letters. After some cathedral wranglings, in which he took part with his pen, and wrote a strange squib, called "The History of a Warm Watch Coat," he began to set to work on his great book, "*Tristram Shandy*." This was originally quite a local satire, but owing to the publisher's advice, he struck out many of the allusions and made it more general. It was offered to the London publishers for £50, which was thought too great a risk, so he resolved to print it at his own expense.