

Philibert Lescale: Brief Portrait of a Rich Young Man in Paris¹

Stendhal

Translated by William Butcher

A literary event: the first publication in English of 'Philibert Lescale' by Stendhal (1783-1842). Stendhal wrote this short story towards the end of his life (1835?), and seems to have put a great deal of himself into the narrator. The advice that the 'I' offers to Philibert, in particular, is written in a style mixing dryness and intimacy, worldliness and sincerity, and craftiness and simplicity, and this is reminiscent of advice given by the narrators of both *Scarlet and Black* and *The Green Huntsman*.

I vaguely knew that giant of a man called M. Lescale -- he was six feet tall, and one of the richest businessmen in Paris: he had his own business in Marseilles and quite a few sea-going ships. He has just died. It would be wrong to say he was a gloomy man, but it was a miracle if he ever managed to say ten words in a day. All the same he liked a bit of excitement and he would do everything to get himself invited to the suppers we had arranged to hold on Saturdays, and which we were keeping very secret. He possessed an instinct for business affairs, and I would have asked his advice about an awkward affair.

When he died he did me the compliment of writing me a letter three lines long. It was about a young man in whom he took an interest, but who went under a different surname. Lescale called him Philibert.

Some time before, his father said to him:

'Do what you want, I don't mind: I'll be dead when you make a fool of yourself. You've got two brothers, I am going to leave my fortune to the least stupid of the three, and 2000 francs a year to the other two.'

¹ *Graffiti*, no. 5, Autumn 1981, pp. 24–27.

Philibert had won all the prizes at school, but the truth was that when he left he knew nothing. Since then he has been in the cavalry for three years, and to America twice. At the time of the last visit, he claimed he was in love with a second-singer whom I consider an absolute slut, ideally suited for leading her lover into debt, then into forgery, and finally maybe into committing a lovely little crime leading straight into court, which is what I told his father.

M. Lescale sent for Philibert, whom he had not seen for two months.

'If you want to leave Paris and go to New Orleans,' he said to him, 'I'll give you fifteen thousand francs, to be paid on board, where you will be company agent.'

The young man departed, and under the terms of our agreement, of his own free will, his stay in America lasted longer than the memory of his passion.

He was recalled by the news of poor Lescale's death, who used to say he was sixty-five but was in fact seventy-nine. In his will, he duly recognised his son and left him about forty thousand francs a year. In addition, even if Philibert sells all his holdings and is completely penniless, one of Lescale's friends will pay him two hundred francs, or three hundred francs if he is in prison for debt.

Philibert came to see me, he seemed very touched, and as he was seriously asking for advice, I told him:

'Stay in Paris, that's best; but only provided that you join the Legitimist Party in Opposition and that you always criticise the government, whichever party is in power. Keep a woman at the Opera, and try to avoid bankruptcy; if you do all this, I will continue to see you, and in eight years time, when you are thirty-two, you'll be a wise man.'

'Starting today, I am wise, at least in one sense,' he said. 'But what's the point of joining the Opposition?'

'You get better parts to play, in any case you're not trying to get anything out of it.'

This story does not amount to much, but I wanted to get it down because every word of it is true. Philibert had some mad moments, but on the whole followed my advice -- except for the first year, when he got through sixty thousand francs, but he is so ashamed, that this year he does not even seem to be spending as much as two thousand francs a month.

Of his own accord, he started to learn Latin and mathematics again; he insists that one day he will sail his very own ship, re-visit America and go to the Indies. In short, despite the shock of his fortune, he may yet become a highly distinguished man, who will be pleased to read these pages.

I gave him some scraps of advice which proved helpful. He lives in one of the streets furthest away from the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and he is popular with all the porters in the area. He spends a thousand francs a month on charity; he has only three horses; but he went himself to fetch them from England. He does not subscribe to any literary circle and he never reads a book unless it belongs to him and is richly bound. He maintains only two servants, to whom he never speaks, but their wages go up by a quarter per year. He has come near marriage three times, upon which I said to him that if he got married before he was thirty-six, he would lose my protection. I am always hoping that he will do something silly, I am afraid of becoming attached to him. He is very handsome and very uncommunicative.

On my advice he always dresses in black, as if he were in mourning. I have told people in confidence that he has not got over the death of a lady in Baton Rouge, near New Orleans. He would very much like to leave his mistress at the Opera, but a serious passion is always a danger, and I make him keep her.

Where he is very amusing is on an estate I made him buy ten miles from Compiègne on the edge of the forest: what made up my mind was the excellent company, namely the straightforward nature of eight or ten of the local landowners. The layabouts for miles around approve of him; he gives a lot away in charity and everybody always seems to be taking advantage of him. He has had some amazing affairs; but deep down he can only love a woman he sees twice a week on the stage. He finds that the comedy played by other women is at the same time serious and empty.

In short, Philibert Lescale is an educated man and what is called a kind man.

N.B. (Two years later.) I was wrong to force poor Philibert to keep his singer, he has just had a duel over her with a self-styled Russian Prince who shot him in the forehead, from which he has died.

The Russian Prince, who was in debt, and who, what is more, was neither a Russian nor a Prince, has hurriedly taken this opportunity to abandon France and his quarter-share of a box at the Opéra.