

Obstacle Race, Aldous Leonard Huxley

Obstacle Race

Armance, if not one of the best, is certainly the queerest of all Stendhal's writings: the queerest and, for me at any rate, one of the most richly suggestive. It is the history of the unhappy loves of two young people, members of that strange society of Ultras which flourished, briefly and anachronistically, under the restored Bourbons. Aristocrats, Armance and Octave are also noble by temperament and intimate conviction; they have 'well-born souls.' Hence their unhappiness. They love one another; but their relations are simply a long series of misunderstandings—misunderstandings which can never be explained away, since each is bound to silence by the dictates now of religion, now of social convention, now of a categorically imperative code of honour. Moreover, poor Octave has a private source of misery all his own. What it is we are never told.

All we know is that the young man bears the burden of an awful secret—a secret that makes him behave at moments like a dangerous lunatic, that plunges him at other times into the blackest melancholy. What is this secret? Armance actually brings herself to ask the indelicate question; and after a terrible inward struggle Octave sets down the answer in a briefly worded note. But there is yet another misunderstanding, brought about this time by their enemies. At the last moment Octave decides not to post his letter. Its contents remain for ever undivulged, not only to Armance, but even to the inquisitive reader. However, the inquisitive reader, if he is also a perspicacious reader, will by this time have guessed what that fatal note contained; and his guess finds itself confirmed by certain earlier readers, friends of the author, who applied to Stendhal himself for an answer to the riddle and have recorded his reply. Octave, poor devil, was impotent. His well-born soul was lodged in a, physiologically speaking, ill-born body.

Born a century later, how would Octave and Armance behave themselves today? It is amusing, it is also deeply instructive, to speculate. To start with, they would be at liberty to see one another as much as they liked. No social conventions, no inward scruples of religion would prevent Armance (who, as an orphan with a small independent income, would almost certainly be studying Art, or taking courses at the London School of Economics) from accepting all Octave's invitations to walk and talk, to dine and (for this is the Age of Prohibition) wine, to go motoring with him into the country, and even to accompany him for weekends to Paris, fortnights to Spain or Sicily. (En tout bien, tout honneur, of course. In this particular case, it is true, it could hardly be otherwise. But in our days bien and honneur will often remain intact, even when the young man is not afflicted with poor Octave's disability, even when the season is spring and the scene Taormina or Granada. And when they don't remain intact, who cares, after all?)

Stendhal's hero and heroine had as little liberty of speech as they had of action. Not only did the conventions keep them physically apart; it was also morally impossible for them to talk openly about almost any matter which they felt to be vitally important. Octave was rich, Armance poor and proud. Delicacy and a convention of honour did not permit them to talk about money. And yet it was the disparity of their fortunes which made Armance reluctant to admit her love for Octave—so reluctant, that she invented a phantom fiancé to keep him at a distance. They were

condemned to suffer in silence and because of silence. Silence, again, impenetrably surrounded poor Octave's secret.

Christian modesty forbade its discussion; and even if Octave had actually posted the note, in which, after so much inward wrestling, he had divulged the dreadful truth, would Armance have understood a word of it? Certainly not, if she had been well brought up. Today there would be no inward impediment to their working out the financial problem, with its moral corollaries, down to the last, most practical details. Nor is it in the least difficult for us to imagine two young contemporaries discussing the still more intimate questions raised by Octave's disability—whether it were best treated by psycho-analysis or electricity, whether, if it proved incurable, marriage would be possible and, if so, on what conditions . . .

Poor Octave! Unhappy Armance! Their whole life was a kind of obstacle race—a climbing over and a crawling under barriers, a squeezing through narrow places. And the winning-post? For Octave the winning-post was an overdose of laudanum; for Armance, a cell in a nunnery.

If they had run their race today, they would have run it on the flat, or at any rate over a course irregular only by nature, not artificially obstructed. The going is easier now. But are they entirely to be pitied, are we to be congratulated without reserve? And the notion of turning life into an obstacle race—is that so wholly bad? Isn't plain flat racing just a little boring—not merely for the spectators, but even for the runners themselves?

The flattest racing in the world, at any rate in the sphere of sexual relationships, is modern Russian racing. I have never been in Russia, and must depend for my information on books. One of the best of these informative books is the collection of short stories by Romanof, recently translated into English under the title, *Without Cherry Blossom*. The theme of almost all these stories is fundamentally the same—the depressing flatness of amorous flat racing. And, heavens, how intolerably flat it must be in a country where souls have been abolished by official decree, where 'psychology' is a term of abuse and being in love is disparaged as merely 'mental'! 'For us,' says one of Romanof's women students, 'love does not exist; we have only sexual relationships. And so, love is scornfully relegated to the realm of "psychology," and our right to existence is only understood physiologically . . . And any one who is trying to find in love anything beyond the physiological is laughed down as mental or a bad case.'

Elsewhere, the racing is by no means as flat as it is in Russia. And let us remember that in Russia it is flat only where sex is concerned. In other spheres, Communism has probably erected more obstacles than it pulled down. For to erect obstacles is one of the principal functions of religion (according to Salomon Reinach, the only function); and Communism is one of the few actively flourishing religions of the modern world. Our non-sexual racing is probably flatter than the corresponding thing in Communist Russia. And anyhow, sexual or non-sexual, compared with the fantastic steeple-chasing imposed by convention and Catholicism on the protagonists of Stendhal's little tragedy, it seems positively an affair of billiard tables. Men and women belonging to moderately 'advanced' sections of modern Western society find very few artificial obstacles in their path.

Most of the conventions and taboos through which Octave and Armance had to force their way have crumbled out of existence. Their disappearance is

due to a variety of causes, of which the decay of organized religion is perhaps the most important. The effects of disbelief have been reinforced by events which have occurred in spheres quite other than the religious. Thus, it is obvious that sexual morality would not have changed as radically as it has if the decay of religion had not synchronized with the perfection of a contraceptive technique which has robbed sexual indulgence of most of its terrors and, consequently, of much of its sinfulness. To take another case, increased prosperity has rendered self-denial less desperately necessary (and therefore less meritorious) than it was for the majority of men and women a few generations ago. Rationalization has led to over-production, and over-production calls insistently for a compensating over-consumption. Economic necessities easily and rapidly become moral virtues, and the first duty of the modern consumer is not to consume little, as in the pre-industrial epoch, but to consume much, to go on consuming more and more. Asceticism is bad citizenship; self-indulgence has become a social virtue.

Let us consider now the effect on obstacle racing of recent changes in the organization of society. Modern societies are democracies stratified according to wealth. The hereditary principle has, to all intents, been abolished. There are no longer any divine rights, with the result that there are no longer any good manners; for good manners are the expression of the respect which is due to those who have a divine right to be respected. In an aristocratic society, like that in which Octave and Armance lived, every individual has divine rights entitling him to respect; each makes claims and each admits the justice of every one else's claims. Result—an exquisite politeness, elaborate codes of honour and etiquette. Aristocracy is dead; politeness and etiquette and the point of honour are but the shadows of themselves. Most of the obstacles with which the course of the well-bred racer was once so plentifully interrupted have consequently vanished. (Some of these obstacles, it should be remembered, were of the most alarming nature. For example, anger and impatience had to be kept under an iron restraint. To be short with a man was to risk being called out to fight a duel. Octave was severely wounded by, and himself murdered, a young man who wrote him an impertinent note.)

Smashing obstacles is fun, and the fun, being a blow for freedom, is meritorious; smashing, you make the best of both worlds. The first flat racers after a régime of obstacle racing have a splendid time. It is only when flat racing has become the rule and not the bold exception, that its flatness begins to pall. Luckily, this flattening process is slow. Obstacles are not destroyed simultaneously in all the strata of a society. Some classes may still be wildly steeple-chasing over taboos and across yawning gulfs of prohibition years after the rest of the world has taken to flat racing. Moreover, the phantoms of old obstacles long survive their death—in literature (for we continue to read old books), in the memories of ageing individuals. Smashing ghosts is at least the ghost of fun, the ghost of a meritorious blow for freedom.

Contemporary England is full of heroic ghost-smashers. Not all, of course, of our obstacles are phantasmal; the course of most individual lives is dotted even today with solid barriers. The smashing of them will provide large numbers of people with amusement for a considerable time to come. There are many others, however, who are already finding the flat racing a bore. (The statement is sweeping and unverifiable; one can only rely on one's own observation and the evidence of contemporary fiction.) For most of these bored ones, it is true, habit has rendered a chronic 'good time' indispensably necessary. Confronted by an obstacle, whether external or internal, they suffer, genuinely. Which does not, however,

prevent them from being bored when there is no obstacle and they are at liberty to run their race of gastronomic, sexual, and recreational indulgence unhindered and on the moral flat. 'Il n'est pas bon d'être trop libre. Il n'est pas bon d'avoir toutes les nécessités.' Pascal was a realistic psychologist.

Suicide and a nunnery were the winning-posts towards which Octave and Armance crawled and scrambled. Unsatisfactory goals; but the race itself—that was never dull. (Incidentally, such winning-posts were not the inevitable, or even the common conclusion of these bygone obstacle races. The suicide rate is far higher today than it was when Octave took his fatal dose of laudanum; madness and neurasthenia are much commoner.) The only complaint one could make against such a race as that which Stendhal describes is that it might prove to be too thrilling by half. For those who like a quiet life, its exaltations and agonies, its pains and raptures would be altogether too intense. But for those, and they are very many, who do not like a quiet life, how exceedingly satisfactory! Much more satisfactory, for example, than even the fastest flat racing.

The pleasurable excitements to be derived from outwardly and inwardly permitted self-indulgence are insipid compared with those which are to be got from laboriously advancing (or even on occasion not advancing) over psychological obstacles towards a desired goal. No reasonable hedonist can consent to be a flat racer. Abolishing obstacles, he abolishes half his pleasures. And at the same time he abolishes most of his dignity as a human being. For the dignity of man consists precisely in his ability to restrain himself from dashing away along the flat, in his capacity to raise obstacles in his own path.

In the past man constructed most of these obstacles out of materials furnished by religion; and even when the obstacles were essentially economic, he took care to drape them picturesquely in religious or religious-ethical tapestries. The economic obstacles still exist; but for most men they are slightly, and for some much, lower than in the past. At the same time most of the religious obstacles, together with many of the ethical obstacles which it was reasonable for believing Christians to place in their own path, have collapsed. Modern man finds himself in the position of those Israelites who were called upon to make bricks without straw; he may desire to bar his way with obstacles a little more elaborate and subtle than those which laws and the current conventions pile clumsily across his path—he may desire to do this, I repeat, but he finds at hand no convenient raw materials out of which to manufacture such obstacles: nothing, that is to say, but what he can draw out of his own being.

Yes, he must draw the materials for his obstacles entirely out of his own being, and he must find in the needs of his own being his sufficient reasons for setting up obstacles at all. He will take to obstacle racing, not because obstacle racing pleases God and flat racing does not, but because the having to climb over obstacles is in the last resort more pleasurable than trotting along on the flat, and because the turning back from self-erected obstacles is, in many cases, the most nobly and dignifiedly human thing a man can do. Henceforth the only acceptable ethic will be an ethic based upon a verifiable psychology; morals, it seems, are destined to become a branch of medicine. If there are to be obstacles (and more or less often, more or less clearly, we are all conscious of a desire for obstacles), it is for science to decide what they shall be like, how constructed, where placed.

And if the science is genuinely scientific, it will prescribe the setting up, here and there, of quite fantastic obstacles, it will deliberately queer the pitch of even the most legitimate and reasonable desires. 'Here,' it will say, 'you must plant an irrational prohibition, here a preposterous taboo, here a whole series of frankly anti-biological impediments.' Absurd; but then the human spirit is absurd, the whole process of living is utterly unreasonable. Absurdly enough, men like obstacles, cannot be spiritually healthy without them, feel bored and ill when they take to flat racing. A realistic science can only accept the fact and prescribe accordingly.

In the past, obstacles were often gratuitously high, numerous, and neck-breaking. Inevitably; for if you set up obstacles, not for your own sake, but with the idea of pleasing a deity, it is obvious that they will tend to assume the superhuman proportions of the being for whose sake they are created. Thought has a life of its own independent of its thinkers, and even, on occasion, hostile to it. A notion comes into existence and, obeying the laws of its notional being, proceeds to grow with all the irresistibility and inevitability of a planted seed, or a crystal suspended in a saturated solution.

For a growing notion, human minds are simply receptacles of crystal-forming liquid, simply seed beds more or less well manured. In the end the grown thought often comes to dominate its thinkers, to impose upon them a way of life which it is not to their advantage to adopt. Sometimes the growing thought is susceptible of direct embodiment. The history of machinery is a case in point. The germinal notion of machines has grown in the minds, and been progressively embodied by the hands, of successive craftsmen-thinkers, until now machinery is our master and we are compelled to live, not as we would like to live, but as it commands. The history of the next few centuries will be, among other things, the history of men's efforts to redomesticate the monster they have created, to reassert a human mastery over these bits of embodied thought at present so domineeringly rebellious.

The history of the notion of God is like that of the notion of machinery: once planted, it grew, it assumed an independent life of its own, and ended by imposing upon its cultivators (its 'hosts,' in the language of parasitology) a novel and at times disadvantageous mode of existence. But while the notion of machinery still goes on growing and embodying itself in ever new forms, the notion of God (of God, at any rate, as a personal being) has not only ceased to grow, but is even ceasing to live. The idea has been attacked at the root, with the result that all the vast superstructure of trunk, branches, and leaves has withered. One of the ramifications of this great religious tree was a morality of obstacles. God likes us to go in for obstacle racing and the more impossibly, the more superhumanly difficult the obstacles, the better pleased He is.

This was the religious theory. Its acceptance entailed, as I have said, a quite gratuitous trenching and barricading of the human race-course. It will be the business of science to discover a set of obstacles at least as excitingly and sportingly difficult as those which Octave and Armance had to surmount, but less dangerous to sanity and life, and, in spite of their absurdity, somehow compatible with an existence rationally organized for happiness and social progress. It remains to be seen how far, without the aid of a mythology, it will be successful.

The end