Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

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MEMOIR OF JOSEPH SHERIDAN LE FANU.

A noble Huguenot family, owning considerable property in Normandy, the Le Fanus of Caen, were, upon the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, deprived of their ancestral estates of Mandeville, Sequeville, and Cresseron; but, owing to their possessing influential relatives at the court of Louis the Fourteenth, were allowed to quit their country for England, unmolested, with their personal property. We meet with John Le Fanu de Sequeville and Charles Le Fanu de Cresseron, as cavalry officers in William the Third's army; Charles being so distinguished a member of the King's staff that he was presented with William's portrait from his master's own hand. He afterwards served as a major of dragoons under Marlborough.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, William Le Fanu was the sole survivor of his family. He married Henrietta Raboteau de Puggibaut, the last of another great and noble Huguenot family, whose escape from France, as a child, by the aid of a Roman Catholic uncle in high position at the French court, was effected after adventures of the most romantic danger.

Joseph Le Fanu, the eldest of the sons of this marriage who left issue, held the office of Clerk of the Coast in Ireland. He married for the second time Alicia, daughter of Thomas Sheridan and sister of Richard Brinsley Sheridan; his brother, Captain Henry Le Fanu, of Leamington, being united to the only other sister of the great wit and orator.

Dean Thomas Philip Le Fanu, the eldest son of Joseph Le Fanu, became by his wife Emma, daughter of Dr. Dobbin, F.T.C.D., the father of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, the subject of this memoir, whose name is so familiar to English and American readers as one of the greatest masters of the weird and the terrible amongst our modern novelists.

Born in Dublin on the 28th of August, 1814, he did not begin to speak until he was more than two years of age; but when he had once started, the boy showed an unusual aptitude in acquiring fresh words, and using them correctly.

The first evidence of literary taste which he gave was in his sixth year, when he made several little sketches with explanatory remarks written beneath them, after the manner of Du Maurier's, or Charles Keene's humorous illustrations in 'Punch.'

One of these, preserved long afterwards by his mother, represented a balloon in mid-air, and two aeronauts, who had occupied it, falling headlong to earth, the disaster being explained by these words: 'See the effects of trying to go to Heaven.'

As a mere child, he was a remarkably good actor, both in tragic and comic pieces, and was hardly twelve years old when he began to write verses of singular spirit for one so young. At fourteen, he produced a long Irish poem, which he never permitted anyone but his mother and brother to read. To that brother, Mr. William Le Fanu, Commissioner of Public Works, Ireland, to whom, as the suggester of Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Phaudrig Croohore' and 'Shamus O'Brien,' Irish ballad literature owes a delightful debt, and whose richly humorous and passionately pathetic powers as a raconteur of these poems have only doubled that obligation in the hearts of those who have been happy enough to be his hearers—to Mr. William Le Fanu we are indebted for the following extracts from the first of his works, which the boy-author seems to have set any store by:

'Muse of Green Erin, break thine icy slumbers!
Strike once again thy wreathed lyre!
Burst forth once more and wake thy tuneful numbers!
Kindle again thy long-extinguished fire!

'Why should I bid thee, Muse of Erin, waken?
Why should I bid thee strike thy harp once more?
Better to leave thee silent and forsaken
Than wake thee but thy glories to deplore.

'How could I bid thee tell of Tara's Towers,
Where once thy sceptred Princes sate in state—
Where rose thy music, at the festive hours,

Through the proud halls where listening thousands
sate?

'Fallen are thy fair palaces, thy country's glory,
Thy tuneful bards were banished or were slain,
Some rest in glory on their deathbeds gory,
And some have lived to feel a foeman's chain.

'Yet for the sake of thy unhappy nation,
Yet for the sake of Freedom's spirit fled,
Let thy wild harpstrings, thrilled with indignation,
Peal a deep requiem o'er thy sons that bled.

'O yes! like the last breath of evening sighing,
Sweep thy cold hand the silent strings along,
Flash like the lamp beside the hero dying,
Then hushed for ever be thy plaintive song.'

To Mr. William Le Fanu we are further indebted for the accompanying specimens of his brother's serious and humorous powers in verse, written when he was quite a lad, as valentines to a Miss G. K.:

'Life were too long for me to bear
If banished from thy view;
Life were too short, a thousand year,
If life were passed with you.

'Wise men have said "Man's lot on earth
Is grief and melancholy,"
But where thou art, there joyous mirth
Proves all their wisdom folly.

'If fate withhold thy love from me,
All else in vain were given;
Heaven were imperfect wanting thee,
And with thee earth were heaven.'

A few days after, he sent the following sequel:

'My dear good Madam, You can't think how very sad I'm. I sent you, or I mistake myself foully, A very excellent imitation of the poet Cowley, Containing three very fair stanzas, Which number Longinus, a very critical man, says, And Aristotle, who was a critic ten times more caustic, To a nicety fits a valentine or an acrostic. And yet for all my pains to this moving epistle, I have got no answer, so I suppose I may go whistle. Perhaps you'd have preferred that like an old monk I had pattered on In the style and after the manner of the unfortunate Chatterton; Or that, unlike my reverend daddy's son, I had attempted the classicalities of the dull, though immortal Addison.

I can't endure this silence another week;
What shall I do in order to make you speak?
Shall I give you a trope
In the manner of Pope,
Or hammer my brains like an old smith
To get out something like Goldsmith?
Or shall I aspire on
To tune my poetic lyre on
The same key touched by Byron,
And laying my hand its wire on,
With its music your soul set fire on
By themes you ne'er could tire on?
Or say,
I pray,
Would a lay
Like Gay
Be more in your way?
I leave it to you,
Which am I to do?
It plain on the surface is
That any metamorphosis,
To affect your study
You may work on my soul or body.
Your frown or your smile makes me Savage or Gay

In action, as well as in song;
And if 'tis decreed I at length become Gray,
Express but the word and I'm Young;
And if in the Church I should ever aspire
With friars and abbots to cope,
By a nod, if you please, you can make me a Prior—
By a word you render me Pope.
If you'd eat, I'm a Crab; if you'd cut, I'm your Steel,
As sharp as you'd get from the cutler;
I'm your Cotton whene'er you're in want of a reel,
And your livery carry, as Butler.
I'll ever rest your debtor
If you'll answer my first letter;
Or must, alas, eternity
Witness your taciturnity?
Speak—and oh! speak quickly
Or else I shall grow sickly,
And pine,
And whine,
And grow yellow and brown
As e'er was mahogany,
And lie me down
And die in agony.

P.S.—You'll allow I have the gift
To write like the immortal Swift.'

But besides the poetical powers with which he was endowed, in common with the great Brinsley, Lady Dufferin, and the Hon. Mrs. Norton, young Sheridan Le Fanu also possessed an irresistible humour and oratorical gift that, as a student of Old Trinity, made him a formidable rival of the best of the young debaters of his time at the 'College Historical,' not a few of whom have since reached the highest eminence at the Irish Bar, after having long enlivened and charmed St. Stephen's by their wit and oratory.

Amongst his compeers he was remarkable for his sudden fiery eloquence of attack, and ready and rapid powers of repartee when on his defence. But Le Fanu, whose understanding was elevated by a deep love of the classics, in which he took university honours, and further heightened by an admirable knowledge of our own great authors, was not to be tempted away by oratory from literature, his first and, as it proved, his last love.

Very soon after leaving college, and just when he was called to the Bar, about the year 1838, he bought the 'Warder,' a Dublin newspaper, of which he was editor, and took what many of his best friends and admirers, looking to his high prospects as a barrister, regarded at the time as a fatal step in his career to fame.

Just before this period, Le Fanu had taken to writing humorous Irish stories, afterwards published in the 'Dublin University Magazine,' such as the 'Quare Gander,' 'Jim Sulivan's Adventure,' 'The Ghost and the Bone-setter,' etc.

These stories his brother William Le Fanu was in the habit of repeating for his friends' amusement, and about the year 1837, when he was about twenty-three years of age, Joseph Le Fanu said to him that he thought an Irish story in verse would tell well, and that if he would choose him a subject suitable for recitation, he would write him one. 'Write me an Irish "Young Lochinvar,"' said his brother; and in a few days he handed him 'Phaudrig Croohore'—Anglice, 'Patrick Crohore.'

Of course this poem has the disadvantage not only of being written after 'Young Lochinvar,' but also that of having been directly inspired by it; and yet, although wanting in the rare and graceful finish of the original, the Irish copy has, we feel, so much fire and feeling that it at least tempts us to regret that Scott's poem was not written in that heart-stirring Northern dialect without which the noblest of our British ballads would lose half their spirit. Indeed, we may safely say that some of Le Fanu's lines are finer than any in 'Young Lochinvar,' simply because they seem to speak straight from a people's heart, not to be the mere echoes of medieval romance.

'Phaudrig Croohore' did not appear in print in the 'Dublin University Magazine' till 1844, twelve years after its composition, when it was included amongst the Purcell Papers.

To return to the year 1837. Mr. William Le Fanu, the suggester of this ballad, who was from home at the time, now received daily instalments of the second and more remarkable of his brother's Irish poems—'Shamus O'Brien' (James O'Brien)—learning them by heart as they reached him, and, fortunately, never forgetting them, for his brother Joseph kept no copy of the ballad, and he had himself to write it out from memory ten years after, when the poem appeared in the 'University Magazine.'

Few will deny that this poem contains passages most faithfully, if fearfully, picturesque, and that it is characterised throughout by a profound pathos, and an abundant though at times a too grotesquely incongruous humour. Can we wonder, then, at the immense popularity with which Samuel Lover recited it in the United States? For to Lover's admiration of the poem, and his addition of it to his entertainment, 'Shamus O'Brien' owes its introduction into America, where it is now so popular. Lover added some lines of his own to the poem, made Shamus emigrate to the States, and set up a public-house. These added lines appeared in most of the published

versions of the poem. But they are indifferent as verse, and certainly injure the dramatic effect of the poem.

'Shamus O'Brien' is so generally attributed to Lover (indeed we remember seeing it advertised for recitation on the occasion of a benefit at a leading London theatre as 'by Samuel Lover') that it is a satisfaction to be able to reproduce the following letter upon the subject from Lover to William le Fanu:

'Astor House,
'New York, U.S. America.
'Sept. 30, 1846.

'My dear Le Fanu,
'In reading over your brother's poem while I crossed the Atlantic, I became more and more impressed with its great beauty and dramatic effect—so much so that I determined to test its effect in public, and have done so here, on my first appearance, with the greatest success. Now I have no doubt there will be great praises of the poem, and people will suppose, most likely, that the composition is mine, and as you know (I take for granted) that I would not wish to wear a borrowed feather, I should be glad to give your brother's name as the author, should he not object to have it known; but as his writings are often of so different a tone, I would not speak without permission to do so. It is true that in my programme my name is attached to other pieces, and no name appended to the recitation; so far, you will see, I have done all I could to avoid "appropriating," the spirit of which I might have caught here, with Irish aptitude; but I would like to have the means of telling all whom it may concern the name of the author, to whose head and heart it does so much honour. Pray, my dear Le Fanu, inquire, and answer me here by next packet, or as soon as convenient. My success here has been quite triumphant.

'Yours very truly,

'SAMUEL LOVER.'
We have heard it said (though without having inquired into the truth of the tradition) that 'Shamus O'Brien' was the result of a match at pseudo-national ballad writing made between Le Fanu and several of the most brilliant of his young literary confreres at T. C. D. But however this may be, Le Fanu undoubtedly was no young Irelander; indeed he did the stoutest service as a press writer in the Conservative interest, and was no doubt provoked as well as amused at the unexpected popularity to which his poem attained amongst the Irish Nationalists. And here it should be remembered that the ballad was written some eleven years before the outbreak of '48, and at a time when a '98 subject might fairly have been regarded as legitimate literary property amongst the most loyal.

We left Le Fanu as editor of the 'Warder.' He afterwards purchased the 'Dublin Evening Packet,' and much later the half-proprietorship of the 'Dublin Evening Mail.' Eleven or twelve years ago he also became the owner and editor of the 'Dublin University Magazine,' in which his later as well as earlier Irish Stories appeared. He sold it about a year before his death in 1873, having previously parted with the 'Warder' and his share in the 'Evening Mail.'

He had previously published in the 'Dublin University Magazine' a number of charming lyrics, generally anonymously, and it is to be feared that all clue to the identification of most of these is lost, except that of internal evidence.

The following poem, undoubtedly his, should make general our regret at being unable to fix with certainty upon its fellows:

'One wild and distant bugle sound
Breathed o'er Killarney's magic shore
Will shed sweet floating echoes round
When that which made them is no more.

'So slumber in the human heart
Wild echoes, that will sweetly thrill
The words of kindness when the voice
That uttered them for aye is still.

'Oh! memory, though thy records tell
Full many a tale of grief and sorrow,
Of mad excess, of hope decayed,
Of dark and cheerless melancholy;

'Still, memory, to me thou art
The dearest of the gifts of mind,
For all the joys that touch my heart
Are joys that I have left behind.
Le Fanu's literary life may be divided into three distinct periods. During the first of these, and till his thirtieth year, he was an Irish ballad, song, and story writer, his first published story being the 'Adventures of Sir Robert Ardagh,' which appeared in the 'Dublin University Magazine' of 1838.