Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

The Tenants of Malory
Volume 1 of 3

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CHAPTER I.
CONCERNING TWO LADIES WHO SAT IN THE MALORY PEW.

There were tenants at last in Malory; and the curiosity of the honest residents of Cardyllian, the small and antique town close by, was at once piqued and mortified by the unaccountable reserve of these people.

For four years, except from one twisted chimney in the far corner of the old house, no smoke had risen from its flues. Tufts of grass had grown up between the paving-stones of the silent stable-yard, grass had crept over the dark avenue, which, making a curve near the gate, is soon lost among the sombre trees that throw a perpetual shadow upon it; the groves of nettles had spread and thickened among their trunks; and in the signs of neglect and decay, the monastic old place grew more than ever *triste*.

The pretty little Welsh town of Cardyllian stands near the shingle of a broad estuary, beyond which tower the noble Cambrian mountains. High and dim, tier above tier, undulating hills, broken by misty glens, and clothed with woods, rise from the opposite shore, and are backed, range behind range, by the dim outlines of Alpine peaks and slopes, and flanked by purple and gold-tinted headlands, rising dome-like from the sea.

Between the town and the gray shingle stretches a strip of bright green sward, the Green of Cardyllian, along which rows of pleasant houses, with little gardens in front, look over the sea to the mountains.

It is a town quaint, old, and quiet. Many of the houses bear date anterior to the great civil wars of England, and on the oak beams of some are carved years of grace during which Shakespeare was still living among his friends, in Stratford-on-Avon.

At the end of long Castle Street rise the battlements and roofless towers of that grand old feudal fortress which helped to hold the conquest of Wales for the English crown in the days of tabards, lances, and the long-bow. Its other chief street strikes off at right angles, and up hill from this, taking its name from the ancient church, which, with its churchyard, stands divided from it by a low wall of red sandstone, surmounted by one of those tall and fanciful iron rails, the knack of designing which seems to be a lost art in these countries.

There are other smaller streets and by-lanes, some dark with a monastic stillness, others thinly built, with little gardens and old plum and pear trees peeping over grass-grown walls, and here and there you light upon a fragment of that ancient town wall from which, in the great troubles which have helped to build up the glory of England, plumed cavaliers once parleyed with steel-capped Puritans. Thus the tints and shadows of a great history rest faintly even upon this out-of-the-way and serene little town.

The permanent residents of Cardyllian for half the year are idle, and for mere occupation are led to inquire into and report one another's sins, vanities, and mishaps. Necessity thus educates them in that mutual interest in one another's affairs, and that taste for narrative, which pusillanimous people call prying and tattle. That the people now residing in Malory, scarcely a mile away, should have so totally defeated them was painful and even irritating.

It was next to impossible to take a walk near Cardyllian without seeing Malory; and thus their failure perpetually stared them in the face.

You can best see Malory from the high grounds which, westward of the town, overlook the estuary. About a mile away you descry a dark and rather wide-spread mass of wood, lying in a gentle hollow, which, I think, deepens its sombre tint. It approaches closely to the long ripple of the sea, and through the foliage are visible some old chimneys and glimpses of gray gables. The refectory of the friary that once stood there, built of gray and reddish stones, half hid in ivy, now does duty as a barn. It is so embowered in trees, that you can scarcely, here and there, gain a peep from without at its tinted walls; and the whole place is overhung by a sadness and silence that well accord with its cloistered traditions. That is Malory.

It was Sunday now. Over the graves and tombstones of those who will hear its sweet music no more, the bell had summoned the townsfolk and visitors to the old church of Cardyllian.

The little town boasts, indeed, a beautiful old church, Gothic, with side-aisles, and an antique stained window, from which gloried saints and martyrs look down, in robes as rich and brilliant as we see now-a-days only upon the kings and queens of our court cards. It has also some fine old monuments of the Verney family. The light is solemn and subdued. There is a very sweet-toned organ, which they say is as old as the reign of Charles I., but I do not know how truly. In the porch are hung in chains two sacrilegious round-shot, which entered the church when Cromwell's general opened his fire, in those days of sorrow when the liberties of England were in the throes of birth. Beside the brilliant stained window, engraven upon a brass plate, is a record of the same "solemn times," relating how certain careful men, to whom we are obliged, had taken down, enclosed in boxes, and buried, in hope of a typical resurrection, the ancient window which had for so long beautified "this church," and thus saved it from the hands of "violent and fanatical men."

When "the season" is still flourishing at Cardyllian, the church is sometimes very full. On the Sunday I speak of it was so. One pew, indeed, was quite relieved from the general pressure. It was the large panelled enclosure which stands near the communion rails, at the right as you look up the aisle toward the glowing window. Its flooring is raised a full foot higher than the surrounding level. This is the seat of the Verney family.

But one person performed his devotions in it, upon the day of which I speak. This was a tall, elegantly slight young man, with the indescribable air of careless fashion; and I am afraid he was much more peeped at and watched than he ought to have been by good Christians during divine service.

Sometimes people saw but the edge of his black whisker, and the waves of his dark hair, and his lavender-gloved hand resting on the edge of the pew. At other times—when, for instance, during the Litany, he leaned over with his arms resting on the edge of the pew—he was very satisfactorily revealed, and elicited a considerable variety of criticism. Most people said he was very handsome, and so, I think, he was—a dark young man, with very large, soft eyes, and very brilliant even teeth. Some people said he was spoiled by an insolent and selfish expression of countenance. Some ladies again said that his figure was perfect, while others alleged that there was a slight curve—not a stoop, but a bend at the shoulder, which they could not quite sanction.

The interest, and even anxiety with which this young gentleman was observed and afterwards discussed, were due to the fact that he was Mr. Cleve Verney, the nephew, not of the present Viscount Verney, but of the man who must very soon be so, and heir presumptive to the title—a position in the town of Cardyllian, hardly inferior to that of Prince of Wales.

But the title of Verney, or rather the right claimant of that title, was then, and had been for many years, in an extremely odd position. In more senses than one, a cloud rested upon him. For strong reasons, and great danger, he had vanished more than twenty years ago, and lived, ever since, in a remote part of the world, and in a jealous and eccentric mystery.

While this young gentleman was causing so many reprehensible distractions in the minds of other Christians, he was himself, though not a creature observed it, undergoing a rather wilder aberration of a similar sort himself.

In a small seat at the other side, which seems built for privacy, with a high panelling at the sides and back, sat a young lady, whose beauty riveted and engrossed his attention in a way that seemed to the young gentleman, of many London seasons, almost unaccountable.

There was an old lady with her—a lady-like old woman, he thought her—slight of figure, and rubrically punctual in her up-risings, and down-sittings. The seat holds four with comfort, but no more. The oak casing round it is high. The light visits it through the glorious old eastern window, mellowed and solemnized—and in this chiar'oscuro, the young lady's beauty had a transparent and saddened character which he thought quite peculiar. Altogether he felt it acting upon him with the insidious power of a spell.

The old lady—for the halo of interest of which the girl was the centre, included her—was dressed, he at first thought, in black, but now he was nearly sure it was a purple silk.

Though she wore a grave countenance, suitable to the scene and occasion, it was by no means sombre—a cheerful and engaging countenance on the contrary.

The young lady's dress was one of those rich Welsh linseys, which exhibit a drapery of thick ribbed, dark gray silk, in great measure concealed by a short but ample cloak or coat of black velvet—altogether a costume, the gravity of which struck him as demure and piquant.

Leaning over the side of his pew, Mr. Cleve Verney prayed with a remarkable persistence in the direction of this seat. After the Litany he thought her a great deal more beautiful than he had before it, and by the time the Communion service closed, he was sure he had never seen any one at all so lovely. He could not have fancied, in flesh and blood, so wonderful an embodiment of Guido's portrait of Beatrice Cenci. The exquisite brow, and large hazel eye, so clear and soft, so bold and shy. The face voluptuous, yet pure; *funeste* but innocent. The rich chestnut hair, the pearly whiteness, and scarlet lips, and the strange, wild, melancholy look—and a shadow of fate. Three-quarters, or full face, or momentary profile—in shade, now—in light—the same wonderful likeness still. The phantom of Beatrice was before him.

I can't say whether the young lady or the old observed the irregular worship directed towards their pew. Cleve did not think they did. He had no particular wish that they should. In fact, his interest was growing so strangely absorbing that something of that jealousy of observation which indicates a deeper sentiment than mere admiration, had supervened, and Mr. Cleve conducted his

reconnoitring with slyness and caution.

That small pew over the way, he was nearly certain, belonged to Malory. Now Malory is a dower house of the Verneys. His own grandmother, the Venerable Dowager Lady Verney, as much to her annoyance the fashionable morning paper respectfully called her, was at that time the incumbent. But though she held it with the inflexible grip of an old lady whose rights were not to be trifled with, she would not reside, and the place was, as I have said, utterly neglected, and the old house very much out of repair.

Why, then, should the Malory pew be thus tenanted? These ladies, he had no doubt, sat there of right—for if the seat had been opened to the congregation at large, in the then state of pressure, it would have been filled. Could they possibly be of kindred to the Verneys, and sit where they did by virtue of an order from the Dowager?

So Cleve Verney began to count up cousins whom he had never seen, and left off no wiser.

Close by this dark Malory pew, is a small side-door of the church. There is another like it, a little lower down, in the opposite wall, not far from the Verney pew, and through these emerge thin files of worshippers, while the main column shuffles and pushes through the porch. So, when the Rector had pronounced his final blessing, Cleve Verney having improved the little silence that followed to get his hat and cane into his hand, glided from his seat before the mass of the congregation were astir, and emerging on the little gravel walk, stepped lightly down to the stone stile, from whence you command a view of every exit from the churchyard.

He stood with one foot upon it, like a man awaiting a friend, and looking listlessly toward the church. And as he loitered, a friend did turn up whom he very little expected to see. A young man, though hardly so young as Cleve—good-looking, decidedly, with light golden moustache, and a face so kind, frank, and merry, it made one happy to look at it.

"Ah! Sedley! I had not an idea. What brings you here?" said Cleve, smiling, and shaking his hand moderately, but keeping his large eyes steadily on the distant point at which he expected to see the unknown ladies emerge.

"Down here just for a day or two," answered Tom Sedley. "I was above you in the gallery. Did you see that beautiful creature in the Malory seat, right before you? By Jove, she's a stunning girl. There was an old woman with her. I think I never saw so beautiful a being."

"Well, I did see a pretty girl at the other side of the church, I *think*; isn't *that* she?" said Cleve, as he saw the two ladies—the younger with one of those short black veils which nearly obliterate the face of the wearer behind the intricacies of a thick lace pattern.

"By Jove! so it is," said Sedley; "come along—let us see where they go."

They were walking almost solitarily, followed only by an old servant who carried their books, toward the entrance at the further side of the churchyard, a small door opening upon a flight of steps by which you descend into one of the deserted back streets of Cardyllian.

Cleve and Sedley pursued as little conspicuously as possible. The quaint street, into which the stone stairs led them, follows the mouldering shelter of the old town wall.

Looking along the perspective of this street, if such the single row of small old houses confronting the dark ivied wall may be termed, the two young gentlemen saw the figures in pursuit of which they had entered it, proceeding in the direction of Malory.

"We mustn't get *too* near; let us wait a little, and let them go on," suggested Sedley in a whisper, as if the ladies could have overheard them.

Cleve laughed. He was probably the more eager of the two; but some men have no turn for confidences, and Cleve Verney was not in the habit of opening either his plans or his feelings to anyone.

CHAPTER II.
ALL THAT THE DRAPER'S WIFE COULD TELL.

This street, in a few hundred steps emerging from the little town, changes its character into that of a narrow rural road, overhung by noble timber, and descending with a gentle curve toward the melancholy woods of Malory.

"How beautifully she walks, too! By Jove, she's the loveliest being I ever beheld. She's the most perfectly beautiful girl in England. How I wish some d—d fellow would insult her, that I might smash him, and have an excuse for attending her home."

So spoke enthusiastic Tom Sedley, as they paused to watch the retreat of the ladies, leaning over the dwarf stone wall, and half hidden by the furrowed stem of a gigantic ash tree.

From this point, about a quarter of a mile distant from Malory, they saw them enter the wide iron gate and disappear in the dark

avenue that leads up to that sombre place.

"*There!* I *said* it was Malory," exclaimed Sedley, laying his hand briskly on Cleve's arm.

"Well, I hope you're pleased; and tell me, now, what stay do you make at Cardyllian, Tom? Can you come over to Ware—not to-morrow, for I'm not quite sure that I shall be there, but on Tuesday, for a day or two?"

No—Tom Sedley couldn't. He must leave to-morrow, or, at latest, on Tuesday morning; and, for to-day, he had promised to go to afternoon service with the Etherges, and then home to tea with them. He was to meet the party on the Green.

So after a little talk, they turned together toward the town; and they parted near the Verney Arms, where Cleve's dog-cart awaited him. Having given his order in the hall, he walked into the coffee-room, in which, seated demurely, and quite alone, he found stout Mrs. Jones, the draper's wife—suave, sedate, wearing a subdued Sabbath smile upon her broad and somewhat sly countenance.

Her smile expanded as Cleve drew near. She made a great and gracious courtesy, and extended her short fat hand, which Cleve Verney took and shook—for the tradition of homelier, if not kindlier times, still lingered in Cardyllian, and there were friendly personal relations between the great family and the dozen and a half of shop-keepers who constituted its commercial strength.

So Cleve Verney joked and talked with her, leaning on the back of a chair, with one knee on the seat of it. He was pleased to have lighted upon such a gossip, as good Mrs. Jones, the draper, who was waiting for the return of her husband, who was saying a word to Mr. Watkyn Hughes, in the bar, about a loan of his black horse for a funeral next morning.

"So it seems Lady Verney has got a tenant in Malory?" he said at last.

"Yes, *indeed*, sir," she replied, in her most confidential manner; "and I *hope*—I do *indeed*—it may turn out such a thing as she would like."

Mrs. Jones usually spoke in low and significant tones, and with a mystery and caution worthy of deeper things than she often talked about.

"Why, is there anything odd?" asked the young gentleman curiously.

"Well, it is *not*, now, *altogether* what I would *wish* for Lady Verney. I haven't seen any of the Malory family, excepting in church to-day; not one, indeed, sir; they are very strange; they never *come* into the town—not once since ever they came to Malory! but *dear* me! you know, sir, that might *be*, and yet everything as we could wish, mightn't it; yes, sure; still, you know, people *will* be *talking*; it's a pity we don't mind our own business more, and let others be, isn't it, sir?"

"Great pity; but—but what's the matter?" urged Cleve Verney.

"Well, Master Cleve, you know, Cardyllian, and how we *do talk* here; I don't say *more* than *other* places, but we *do*, and I do not like *repeatin*' everything I hear. There's more mischief than good, *I* think, comes of repeatin' stories."

"Oh! come, pray what's the good of a story except to repeat it? I ought to know, perhaps I should tell Lady Verney about it," said Cleve, who was really curious, for nothing could be more quiet than the get up and demeanour of the ladies.

"They haven't been here, you know, very *long*," murmured Mrs. Jones, earnestly.

"No, I *don't* know. I know nothing about it; *how* long?"

"Well, about five weeks—a little more; and we never saw the gentleman once; he's never been down to the town since he came; never indeed, sir, not once."

"He shows his sense; doesn't he?"

"Ah, you were always pleasant, Master Cleve, but you don't think *so*; no, you don't *indeed*; his conduct is *really most singular*, he's never been outside the walls of Malory all that time, in the *daylight*; very odd; he has hired Christmass Owen's boat, and he goes out in it *every night*, unless twice, the wind was too high, and Owen didn't choose to venture his boat. He's a *tall* man, Christmass Owen says, and holds himself straight, like an officer, for people *will* be making *inquiries*, you know; and he has *gray* hair; not *quite* white, you know."

"How *should* I know?"

"Ah, ha, you were always *funny*; yes, indeed, but it *is* gray, gone *quite* gray, Christmass Owen says."

"Well, and what about the ladies?" inquired the young gentleman. "*They*'re not gone gray, *all*? though I shouldn't wonder much, in

Malory."

"The *ladies*? *Well*. There's *two*, you know; there's Miss Sheckleton, that's the elderly lady, and all the Malory accounts in the town is opened in her name. Anne Sheckleton, very reg'lar she is. I have nothing to say concerning her. They don't spend a great *deal*, you understand, but their money is *sure*."

"Yes, of course; but, you said, didn't you? that there was something not quite right about them."

"Oh dear, no, sir; I did not say quite *that*; nothing *wrong*, no sure, but very odd, sir, and most *unpleasant*, and that is all."

"And that's a good deal; isn't it?" urged Cleve.

"Well, it *is* something; it is *indeed* a great *deal*," Mrs. Jones emphasised oracularly.

"And *what is* it, what do you know of them, or the people here what do they *say?*"

"Well, they say, putting this and that together, and some hints from the servant that comes down to order things up from the town—for servants, you know, will be talking—that the family is *mad*."

"*Mad!*" echoed Cleve.

"That's what they say."

"The whole family are *mad!* and yet continue to manage their affairs as they do! By Jove, it is a comfort to find that people can get on without heads, on emergency."

"They don't say, no, dear me! that *all* that's in the house are mad; *only* the old man and the young lady."

"And what is she mad upon?"

"Well, they don't say. I don't know—melancholy I do suppose."

"And what is the old gentleman's name?"

"We don't *know*, the *servants* don't know, they say; they were hired by Miss Sheckleton, in Chester, and never saw the old gentleman, nor the young lady, till after they were two or three days in Malory; and one night comes a carriage, with a madhouse gentleman, they do say, a doctor, in charge of the old gentleman, and the young lady, poor thing! and so they were handed over by him, to Miss Sheckleton."

"And what sort of lunacies do they commit? They're not pulling down the house among them, I hope?"

"Very gentle—very. I'm told, quite, as you may say, *manageable*. It's a very sad thing, sir, but *what* a world it is! yes, indeed. Isn't it?"

"Ay, so it is.—I've heard that, I think, before."

"You may have heard it from *me*, sir, and it's long been my feeling and opinion, dear me! The longer I live the more melancholy sights I see!"

"How long is Malory let for?"

"Can't say, indeed, sir. That is they may give it up every three months, but has the right to keep it two whole years, that is if they *like*, you understand."

"Well, it is rather odd. It was they who sat in the Malory seat to-day?"

"That was Miss Sheckleton, was the old lady; and the young one, didn't you think her very pretty, sir?"

"Yes—she's pretty," he answered carelessly. "But I really could not see very well."

"I was very near as she turned to leave—before she took down her veil—and I thought what a really *beautiful* creature she was!"

"And what do they call her?"

"Miss Margaret, sir."

"Margaret! a pretty name—rather. Oh! here's Mr. Jones;" and Mr. Jones was greeted—and talked a little—somewhat more distantly and formally than his goodwife had done—and Mr. and Mrs. Jones, with a dutiful farewell, set off upon their Sunday's ramble.

CHAPTER III.
HOME TO WARE.

"Mad!" thought Cleve. "What an awful pity if she is. She doesn't *look* mad—melancholy she may. She does not look a *bit* mad. By Jove, I don't *believe* a word of it. It's utterly out of the question that the quiet old lady there could bring a mad girl to church with her. And thus resolved, Cleve walked out of the coffee-room, and awaiting his conveyance, stood on the steps of the Verney Arms, from whence he saw Wynne Williams, the portly solicitor of Cardyllian, and of a wide circle of comfortable clients round it. Wynne Williams is omniscient. Nothing ever happens in Cardyllian that he does not know with precision.

"Wynne," Cleve called up the quiet little street, and the attorney, looking over his fat shoulder, arrested his deliberate walk, and marched swiftly back, smiling.

So there was another greeting; and some more questions ensued, and answers, and then said Cleve—

"So Malory's let, I hear."

"Yes," said the attorney, with a slight shrug.

"You don't like the bargain, I see," said Cleve.

"It's a mismanaged place, you know. Lady Verney won't spend a shilling on it, and we must only take what we can get. We haven't had a tenant for five years till now."

"And who has taken it?"

"The Reverend Isaac Dixie."

"The devil he has. Why old Dixie's not mad, is he?"

"No, he's no fool. More like the other thing—rather. Drove a hard bargain—but *I* wouldn't take it myself at the money."

"Doesn't he live there?"

"No. There's an old gentleman and two ladies; one of them an old woman."

"And what's the old gentleman's *name*, and the young lady's?"

"Don't know, indeed; and what does it matter?" The attorney was curious, and had taken some little trouble to find out. "The Reverend Isaac Dixie's the tenant, and Miss Sheckleton manages the family business; and devil a letter ever comes by post here, except to Miss Sheckleton or the servants."

"Old Mother Jones, the draper's wife, over the way, says the girl and the old fellow are mad."

"Don't believe it. More likely he's in a fix, and wants to keep out of sight and hearing just now, and Malory's the very place to hide a fellow in. It's just *possible*, you know, there may be a screw loose in the upper works; but I don't believe it, and don't for the world hint it to the old lady. She's half mad herself about mad people, and if she took that in her head, by Jove, she'd never forgive me," and the attorney laughed uneasily.

"You do think they're mad. By Jove, you *do*. I *know* you think they're mad."

"I *don't* think they're mad. I don't know anything about them," said the good-humoured attorney, with Dundreary whiskers, leaning on the wooden pillar of the Verney Arms, and smiling provokingly in the young man's face.

"Come now, Wynne, I'll not tell the old lady, upon my honour. You may as well tell me all you know. And you *do* know; of *course*, you do; you *always* know. And these people living not a mile away! You *must* know."