Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

The Tenants of Malory
Volume 2 of 3

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CHAPTER I.
IN THE OAK PARLOUR—A MEETING AND PARTING.

"Gossiping place Cardyllian is," said Miss Anne Sheckleton, after they had walked on a little in silence. "What nonsense the people do talk. I never heard anything like it. Did you ever hear such a galamathias?"

The young lady walking by her side answered by a cold little laugh—

"Yes, I suppose so. All small country towns *are*, I believe," said she.

"And that good old soul, Mrs. Jones, she does invent the most absurd gossip about every body that imagination can conceive. Wilmot told me the other day that she had given her to understand that your father is a madman, sent down here by London doctors for change of air. I make it a point never to mind one word she says; although her news, I confess, does amuse me."

"Yes, it is, very foolish. Who are those Etherages?" said Margaret.

"Oh! They are village people—oddities," said Miss Sheckleton. "From all I can gather, you have no idea what absurd people they are."

"He was walking with them. Was not he?" asked the young lady.

"Yes—I think so," answered her cousin.

Then followed a long silence, and the elder lady at length said—

"How fortunate we have been in our weather; haven't we? How beautiful the hills look this evening!" said the spinster; but her words did not sound as if she cared about the hills or the light. I believe the two ladies were each acting a part.

"Yes," said Margaret; "so they do."

The girl felt as if she had walked fifty miles instead of two—quite worn out—her limbs aching with a sense of fatigue; it was a trouble to hold her head up. She would have liked to sit down on the old stone bench they were passing now, and to die there like a worn-out prisoner on a march.

Two or three times that evening as they sat unusually silent and listless, Miss Anne Sheckleton peeped over her spectacles, lowering her work for a moment, with a sad inquiry, into her face, and seemed on the point of speaking. But there was nothing inviting to talk, in Margaret's face, and when she spoke there was no reference to the subject on which Miss Sheckleton would have liked to speak.

So, at last, tired, with a pale, wandering smile, she kissed the kind old spinster, and bid her good night. When she reached her room, however, she did not undress, but having secured her door, she sat down to her little desk, and wrote a letter; swiftly and resolutely the pen glided over the page. Nothing added—nothing erased; each line remained as she penned it first.

Having placed this letter in its envelope, and addressed it to "Cleve Verney, Esq., Ware," she opened her window. The air was mild; none of the sharpness in it that usually gives to nights at that time of year, a frosty foretaste of winter. So sitting by the window, which, placed in one of the gables of the old house, commands a view of the uplands of Cardyllian, and to the left, of the sea, and the misty mountains—she sat there, leaning upon her hand.

Here, with the letter on her lap, she sat, pale as a meditating suicide, and looking dreamily over the landscape. It is, at times, some little incident of by-play, or momentary hesitation of countenance, that gives its whole character and force to a situation. Before

the retina of Margaret one image was always visible, that of Cleve Verney as she saw him to-day, looking under Agnes Etherage's bonnet, with interest, into her eyes, as he talked and walked by her side, on the Green of Cardyllian.

Of course there are false prophecies as well as true, in love; illusions as well as inspirations, and fancied intimations may mislead. But Margaret could not doubt here. All the time she smiled and assumed her usual tone and manner, there was an agony at her heart.

Miss Fanshawe would trust no one with her secret. She was not like other girls. Something of the fiery spirit of her southern descent she had inherited. She put on the shawl and veil she had worn that day, unbarred the hall-door, and at two o'clock, when Cardyllian was locked in the deepest slumber, glided through its empty streets, to the little wooden portico, over which that day she had read "Post-office," and placed in it the letter which next morning made quite a little sensation in the Post-office *coterie*.

Under the awful silence and darkness of the old avenue, she reached again the hall-door of Malory. She stood for a moment upon the steps looking seaward—I think towards Ware—pale as a ghost, with one slender hand clenched, and a wild sorrow in her face. She cared very little, I think, whether her excursion were discovered or not. The messenger had flown from her empty hand; her voice could not recall it, or delay it for an hour—quite irrevocable, and all was over.

She entered the hall, closed and barred the door again, ascended to her room, and lay awake, through the long night, with her hand under her cheek, not stunned, not dreaming, but in a frozen apathy, in which she saw all with a despairing clearness.

Next day Cleve Verney received a note, in a hand which he knew not; but having read—could not mistake—a cold, proud note, with a gentle cruelty, ending all between them, quite decisively, and not deigning a reason for it.

I dare say that Cleve could not himself describe with much precision the feelings with which he read this letter.

Cleve Verney, however, could be as impetuous and as rash too, on occasion, as other people. There was something of rage in his soul which scouted all consequences. Could temerity be imagined more audacious than his?

Right across from Ware to the jetty of Malory ran his yacht, audaciously, in open sea, in broad daylight. There is, in the Dower House, a long low room, wainscoted in black shining panels from floor to ceiling, and which in old times was called the oak parlour. It has two doors, in one of its long sides, the farther opening near the stairs, the other close to the hall door.

Up the avenue, up the steps, into the hall, and, taking chance, into this room, walked Cleve Verney, without encountering interruption or even observation. *Fortuna favet fortibus*, so runs the legend in faded gold letters, under the dim portrait of Sir Thomas Verney, in his armour, fixed in the panel of the hall. So it had proved with his descendant.

Favoured by fortune, without having met a human being, and directed by the same divinity it would seem, he had entered the room I have described; and at the other end, alone, awaiting Miss Sheckleton, who was to accompany her in a little ramble among the woods, stood Miss Fanshawe, dressed for her walk.

In came Cleve pale with agitation; approached her quickly, and stopped short, saying—

"I've come; I'm here to ask—how could you—my God!—how *could* you write the letter you sent this morning?"

Miss Fanshawe was leaning a little against the oak window-frame, and did not change this pose, which was haughty and almost sullen.

"*Why* I wrote that letter, *no* one has a right to ask me, and I shall say no more than is contained in the letter itself." She spoke so coldly and quietly that there seemed almost a sadness in her tones.

"I don't think you can really mean it," said Cleve, "I'm *sure* you can't; you can't *possibly* think that any one would use another so, without a reason."

"*Not* without a reason," said she.

"But I say, surely I have a right to hear it," urged Cleve. "Is it fair to condemn me, as your letter does, unheard, and to punish me, in ignorance?"

"*Not* in ignorance; at this moment, you *know* the reason perfectly," replied the girl, and he felt as if her great hazel eyes lighted up all the dark labyrinths of his brain, and disclosed every secret that lurked there.

Cleve was for a moment embarrassed, and averted his eyes. It was true. He *did* know; he could not fail to guess the cause. He had been cursing his ill luck all the morning, and wondering what malign caprice could have led her, of all times and places, at that moment, to the Green of Cardyllian.

In the "Arabian Nights," that delightful volume which owes nothing to trick or book-craft, and will preserve its charm undimmed

through all the mutations of style and schools, which, projecting its images from the lamp and hues of a dazzling fancy, can no more be lectured into neglect than the magic lantern, and will preserve its popularity while the faculty of imagination and the sense of colour remain, we all remember a parallel. In the "Sultan's Purveyor's Story," where the beautiful favourite of Zobaïde is about to make the bridegroom of her love quite happy, and in the moment of his adoration, starts up transformed with a "lamentable cry," and hate and fury in her aspect, all about an unfortunate "ragout made with garlic," and thereupon, with her own hand and a terrible scourge, lashes him, held down by slaves, into a welter of blood, and then orders the executioner to strike off, at the wrist, his offending hand.

"*Yes!* you *do* know, self-convicted, *why* I think it better for both that we should part now—better that we should thus early be undeceived; with little pain and less reluctance, forget the precipitation and folly of an hour, and go our several ways through life apart. You are fickle; you are selfish; you are reckless; you are quite unworthy of the love you ask for; if you are trifling with that young lady, Miss Etherage, how cruel and unmanly! and if *not*, by what right do you presume to stand here?"

Could he ever forget that beautiful girl as he saw her before him there, almost terrible—her eyes—the strange white light that seemed to flicker on her forehead—her attitude, Italian more than English, statuesque and wild?

On a sudden came another change, sad as a broken-hearted death and farewell—the low tone—the fond lingering—of an unspeakable sorrow, and eternal leave-taking.

"In either case my resolution is taken. I have said *Farewell*; and I will see you no more—no more—never."

And as she spoke, she left the room by the door that was beside her.

It was a new sensation for Cleve Verney to feel as he did at that moment. A few steps he followed toward the door, and then hesitated. Then with a new impulse, he did follow and open it. But she was gone. Even the sound of her step was lost.

He turned back, and paused for a minute to collect his thoughts. Of course this must not be. The idea of giving her up so, was simple nonsense, and not to be listened to.

The door at which the young lady had left the room but two or three minutes before, now opened, and Miss Sheckleton's natty figure and kind old face came in. Quite aghast she looked at him.

"For God's sake, Mr. Verney, why are you here? How *can* you be so rash?" she almost gasped. "You *must* go, *instantly*."

"How could you advise the cruelty and folly of that letter?" he said, impetuously.

"What letter?"

"Oh! Miss Sheckleton, do let us be frank; only say what have I done or said, or thought, that I should be condemned and discarded without a hearing?"

Hereupon Miss Sheckleton, still urging his departure in frightened whispers, protested her innocence of his meaning, and at last bethought her of persuading him, to leave the house, and meet her for the purpose of explaining all, of which he soon perceived she was honestly ignorant, in their accustomed trysting-place.

There, accordingly, among the old trees, they met, and discussed, and she blamed and pitied him; and promised, with such caution as old ladies use in speaking for the resolves of the young of their own sex, that Margaret should learn the truth from her, although she could not of course say what she might think of it, taking as she did such decided, and, sometimes, strange views of things.

So they parted kindly. But Cleve's heart was disquieted within him, and his sky this evening was wild and stormy.

CHAPTER II.
JUDÆUS APELLA.

On the stillest summer day did you ever see nature quite still, even that circumscribed nature that hems you round with densest trees, as you lounge on your rustic seat, in lazy contemplation, amid the shorn grass of your flower-beds, while all things are oppressed and stifled with heat and slumber? Look attentively, and you will see a little quiver like a dying pulse, in the hanging flower-bells, and a light faint tremble in this leaf and that. Of nature, which is, being interpreted, life, the law is motion, and this law controls the moral as well as the physical world. Thus it is that there is nowhere any such thing as absolute repose, and everywhere we find change and action.

Over Malory, if anywhere, broods the spirit of repose. Buried in deep forest—fenced on one side by the lonely estuary—no town or village lying beyond it; seaward the little old-world road that passes by it is quite forsaken by traffic. Even the sound of children's laughter and prattle is never heard there, and little but the solemn caw of the rooks and the baying of the night-dog. Yet chance was then invading that quiet seclusion with an unexpected danger.

A gentleman driving that day to the "George Inn" at Cardyllian, from a distant station on the Great London line, and having picked up from his driver, a Cardyllian man, all he could about Malory, and an old Mrs. Mervyn who lived there, stopped suddenly at the corner of the old road, which, two miles below Cardyllian, turns off inland, and rambles with many pleasant windings into the road that leads to Penruthyn Priory.

This gentleman, whose dress was in the cheap and striking style, and whose jewellery was conspicuous, was high-shouldered, with a very decided curve, though not exactly a hunch. He was small, with rather long arms. His hair, whiskers, and beard were glossy black, and his features Jewish. He switched and twirled a black walking-cane, with silver knobs on it, in his hand, and he had two or three rings on his fingers.

His luggage had gone on to the "George," and whenever opportunity occurred along that solitary road he renewed his inquiries about Malory, with a slight peculiarity of accent which the unsophisticated rustics in that part of the world had never heard before.

By this time it was evening, and in the light of the approaching sunset, he might now, as the view of the sea and the distant mountains opened, have enjoyed a pleasure for which, however, he had no taste; these evening glows and tints were to him but imperfect light, and he looked along the solemn and shadowy hills as he would have run his eye along the shops in Cheapside—if with any interest, simply to amuse himself with a calculation of what they might be worth in money.

He was now passing the pretty church-yard of Llanderris. The gray head-stones and grass-grown graves brought home to him no passing thought of change and mortality; death was to him an arithmetical formula by which he measured annuities and reversions and policies. And now he had entered the steep road that leads down with an irregular curve to Malory.

He looked down upon the grand old wood. He had a smattering of the value of timber, and remembered what a hit Rosenthal and Solomons had made of their purchase of the wood at East Milton, when the railway was about to be made there; and what a nice bit of money they had made of their contract for sleepers and all sorts of other things. Could not Jos. Larkin, or some better man, be found to get up a little branch line from Llwynan to Cardyllian? His large mouth almost watered as he thought of it; and how that eight or nine miles of rail would devour every inch of timber that grew there—not a branch would be lost.

But now he was descending toward Malory, and the banks at the right hand and the left shut out the view. So he began to descend the slope at his leisure, looking up and about him and down at the worn road for material for thought, for his mind was bustling and barren.

The road is not four steps across. It winds steeply between high banks. Over these stoop and mingle in the perspective, the gray stems of tall ash trees mantled in ivy, which here and there climbs thickly among the boughs, and makes a darker umbrage among the foliage of the trees. Beneath, ascending the steep banks, grow clumps of nettles, elder, hazel, and thorn. Only down the slope of the road can the passenger see anything of the country it traverses, for the banks out-top him on either side. The rains have washed its stones so bare, wearing a sort of gulley in the centre, as to give it the character in some sort of a forest ravine.

The sallow, hatchet-faced man, with prominent black eyes, was walking up this steep and secluded road. Those sharp eyes of his were busy. A wild bee hummed over his head, and he cut at it pleasantly with his stick, but it was out of reach, and he paused and eyed its unconscious flight, with an ugly smile, as if he owed it a grudge for having foiled him. There was little life in that secluded and dark track. He spied a small dome-shaped black beetle stumbling through the dust and pebbles, across it.

The little man drew near and peered at it with his piercing eyes and a pleasant grin. He stooped. The point of his pale nose was right over it. Across the desert the beetle was toiling. His path was a right line. The little man looked across to see what he was aiming at, or where was his home. There was nothing particular that he could perceive in the grass and weeds at the point witherward he was tending in a right line. The beetle sprawled and stumbled over a little bead of clay, recovered his feet and his direction, and plodded on in a straight line. The little man put his stick, point downward, before him. The beetle rounded it carefully, and plodded on inflexibly in the same direction. Then he of the black eyes and long nose knocked him gently in the face, and again and again, jerking him this way or that. Still, like a prize-fighter he rallied between the rounds, and drove right on in his old line. Then the little man gave him a sharper knock, which sent him a couple of feet away, on his back; right and left sprawled and groped the short legs of the beetle, but alas! in vain. He could not right himself. He tried to lurch himself over, but in vain. Now and then came a frantic gallop with his little feet; it was beating the air. This was pleasant to the man with the piercing eyes, who stooped over, smiling with his wide mouth, and showing his white fangs. I wonder what the beetle thought of his luck—what he thought of it all. The paroxysms of hope, when his feet worked so hard, grew shorter. The intervals of despair and inaction grew longer. The beetle was making up his mind that he must lie on his back and die slowly, or be crushed under a hoof, or picked up and swallowed by a wandering farm-yard fowl.

Though it was pleasant to witness his despair, the man with the prominent eyes tired of the sight, he gave him a poke under the back, and tumbled him up again on his feet, and watched him. The beetle seemed a little bothered for a while, and would have shaken himself I'm sure if he could. But he soon came to himself, turned in his old direction, and, as it seemed to the observer, marched stumbling on with indomitable perseverance toward the selfsame point. I know nothing of beetle habits. I can make no guess why he sought that particular spot. Was it merely a favourite haunt, or were there a little beetle brood, and a wife awaiting him there? A strong instinct of some sort urged him, and a most heroic perseverance.

And now I suppose he thought his troubles over, and that his journey was about surely to be accomplished. Alas! it will never be accomplished. There is an influence near which you suspect not. The distance is lessening, the green grass, and dock leaves, and

mallows, very near. Alas! there is no sympathy with your instinct, with the purpose of your life, with your labours and hopes. An inverted sympathy is *there*; a sympathy with the difficulty—with "the Adversary"—with death. The little man with the sharp black eyes brought the point of his stick near the beetle's back, having seen enough of his pilgrimage, and squelched him.

The pleasure of malice is curious. There are people who flavour their meals with their revenges, whose future is made interesting by the hope that this or that person may come under their heel. Which is pleasantest, building castles in the air for ourselves, or dungeons in pandemonium for our enemies? It is well for one half of the human race that the other has not the disposal of them. More rare, more grotesque, more exquisitely fiendish, is that sport with the mysteries of agony, that lust of torture, that constitute the desire and fruition of some monstrous souls.

Now, having ended that beetle's brief life in eternal darkness, and reduced all his thoughts and yearnings to cypher, and dissolved his persevering and resolute little character, never to be recombined, this young gentleman looked up among the yellow leaves in which the birds were chirping their evening gossip, and treated them to a capital imitation of a wild cat, followed by a still happier one of a screech-owl, which set all the sparrows in the ivy round twittering in panic; and having sufficiently amused himself, the sun being now near the horizon, he bethought him of his mission to Malory. So on he marched whistling an air from an opera, which, I am bound to admit, he did with the brilliancy and precision of a little flageolet, in so much that it amounted to quite a curiously pretty accomplishment, and you would have wondered how a gentleman with so unmistakeable a vein of the miscreant in him, could make such sweet and bird-like music.

A little boy riding a tired donkey into Cardyllian, pointed out to him the gate of the old place, and with a jaunty step, twirling his cane, and whistling as he went, he reached the open space before the door steps.

The surly servant who happened to see him as he hesitated and gaped at the windows, came forth, and challenged him with tones and looks the reverse of hospitable.

"Oh! Mrs. Mervyn?" said he; "well, she doesn't live here. Get ye round that corner there, and you'll see the steward's house with a hatch-door to it, and you may ring the bell, and leave, d'ye mind, by the back way. You can follow the road by the rear o' the house."

So saying, he warned him off peremptorily with a flunkey's contempt for a mock gentleman, and the sallow man with the black eyes and beard, not at all put out by that slight treatment, for he had seen all sorts of adventures, and had learned unaffectedly to despise contempt, walked listlessly round the corner of the old house, with a somewhat knock-kneed and ungainly stride, on which our bandy friend sneered gruffly.

CHAPTER III.
MR. LEVI VISITS MRS. MERVYN.

And now the stranger stood before the steward's house, which is an old stone building, just three stories high, with but few rooms, and heavy stone shafts to the windows, with little diamond lattices in them, all stained and gray with age—antiquaries assign it to the period of Henry VII.—and when the Jewish gentleman, his wide, loose mouth smiling in solitary expectation, slapped and rattled his cane upon the planks of the hatch, as people in old times called "house!" to summon the servants, he was violating the monastic silence of a building as old as the bygone friars, with their matin bells and solemn chants.

A little Welsh girl looked over the clumsy banister, and ran up with his message to Mrs. Mervyn.

"Will you please come up stairs, sir, to the drawing-room?" asked the child.

He was amused at the notion of a "drawing-room" in such a place, and with a lazy sneer climbed the stairs after her.

This drawing-room was very dark at this hour, except for the patch of red light that came through the lattice and rested on the old cupboard opposite, on which stood, shelf above shelf, a grove of coloured delf candlesticks, tea-cups, jugs, men, women, teapots, and beasts, all in an old-world style, a decoration which prevails in humble Welsh chambers, and which here was a property of the house, forgotten, I presume, by the great house of Verney, and transmitted from tenant to tenant, with the lumbering furniture.

The flighty old lady, Mrs. Mervyn of the large eyes, received him with an old-fashioned politeness and formality which did not in the least embarrass her visitor, who sate himself down, smiling his moist, lazy smile, with his knees protruded under the table, on which his elbows rested, and with his heels on the rung of his chair, while his hat and cane lay in the sunlight beside him.

"The maid, I think, forgot to mention your name, sir?" said the old lady gently, but in a tone of inquiry.

"Very like, ma'am—very like, indeed—because, I think, I forgot to mention my name to her," he drawled pleasantly. "I've taken a deal of trouble—I have—to find you out, ma'am, and two hundred and forty-five miles here, ma'am, and the same back again—a journey of four hundred and ninety miles—is not just nothing. I'm glad to see you, ma'am—happy to find you in your drawing-room, ma'am—hope you find yourself as well, ma'am, as your numerous friends could wish you. My name, ma'am, is Levi, being junior governor of the firm of Goldshed and Levi, well known on 'Change, ma'am, and justly appreciated by a large circle of friends, as you may read upon this card."

The card which he tendered did not, it must be allowed, speak of these admiring friends, but simply announced that "Goldshed and Levi" were "Stockbrokers," pursuing their calling at "Offices—10, Scroop Street, Gimmel Lane," in the City. And having held this card before her eyes for a sufficient time, he put it into his pocket.

"You see, ma'am, I've come all this way for our house, to ask you whether you would like to hear some news of your governor, ma'am?"

"Of whom, sir?" inquired the tall old lady, who had remained standing all this time, as she had received him, and was now looking at him with eyes, not of suspicion, but of undisguised fear.

"Of your husband, ma'am, I mean," drawled he, eyeing her with his cunning smile.

"You don't mean, sir——" said she faintly, and thereupon she was seized with a trembling, and sat down, and her very lips turned white, and Mr. Levi began to think "the old girl was looking uncommon queerish," and did not like the idea of "its happening," under these circumstances.

"There, ma'am—don't take on! Where's the water? Da-a-a-mn the drop!" he exclaimed, turning up mugs and jugs in a flurry. "I say—Mary Anne—Jane—chick-a-biddy—girl—be alive there, will ye?" howled the visitor over the banister. "Water, can't ye? Old woman's sick!"

"Better now, sir—better—just open that—a little air, please," the old lady whispered.

With some hurried fumbling he succeeded in getting the lattice open.

"Water, will you? What a time you're about it, little beast!" he bawled in the face of the child.

"Much better, thanks—very much better," whispered the old lady.

"Of course, you're better, ma'am. Here it is at la-a-ast. Have some water, ma'am? Do. Give her the water, you little fool."

She sipped a little.

"Coming round—all right," he said tenderly. "What cattle them old women are! drat them." A little pause followed.

"A deal better now, ma'am?"

"I'm startled, sir."

"Of course you're startled, ma'am."

"And faint."

"Why not, ma'am?"

Mrs. Rebecca Mervyn breathed three or four great sighs, and began to look again like a living woman.

"Now she looks quite nice," (he pronounced it ni-i-ishe) "doesn't she? You may make tracksh, young woman; go, will you?"

"I feel so much better," said the old lady when they were alone, "pray go on."

"You do—quite—ever so much better. *Shall* I go on?"

"Pray do, sir."

"Well now, see, if I do, there must be no more of that, old lady. If you can't talk of the governor, we'll just let him alone," said Levi, sturdily.

"For God's sake, sir, if you mean my husband, tell me all you know."

"All aint a great deal, ma'am; but a cove has turned up who knew him well."

"Some one who knew him?"

"Just so, ma'am." He balanced whether he should tell her that he was dead or not, but decided that it would be more convenient,

though less tragic, to avoid getting up a new scene like the other, so he modified his narrative. "He's turned up, ma'am, and knew him very intimate; and has got a meogny" (he so pronounced mahogany) "desk of his, gave in charge to him, since he could not come home at present, containing a law paper, ma'am, making over to his son and yours some property in England."

"Then, he is not coming?" said she.

"Not as I knowzh, ma'am."

"He has been a long time away," she continued.

"So I'm informed, ma'am," he observed.

"I'll tell you how it was, and when he went away."

"Thank ye, ma'am," he interposed. "I've heard—melancholy case, ma'am; got seven penn'orth, didn't he, and never turned up again?"

"Seven what, sir?"

"Seven years, ma'am; seven penn'orth we call it, ma'am, familiar like."

"I don't understand you, sir—I don't know what it means; I saw him sail away. It went off, off, off."

"I'll bet a pound it did, ma'am," said Mr. Levi.

"Only to be for a very short time; the sail—I could see it very far—how pretty they look on the sea; but very lonely, I think—too lonely."