Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

The Tenants of Malory
Volume 3 of 3

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A LARK.

"There's some 'Old Tom,' isn't there? Get it, and glasses and cold water, *here*," said Cleve to his servant, who, patient, polite, sleepy, awaited his master. "You used to like it—and here are cigars;" and he shook out a shower upon his drawing-room table cover. "And where did you want to go at this time of night?"

"To Wright's, to see the end of the great game of billiards—Seller and Culverin, you know; I've two pounds on it."

"I don't care if I go with you, just now. What's this?—When the devil did this come?" Cleve had picked up and at one pale glance read a little note that lay on the table; and then he repeated coolly enough—

"I say, when did this come?"

"Before one, sir, I think," said Shepperd.

"Get me my coat," and Shepperd disappeared.

"Pestered to *death*," he said, moodily. "See, you have got the things here, and cigars. I shan't be five minutes away. If I'm longer, don't wait for me; but finish this first."

Cleve had turned up the collar of his outer coat, and buttoned it across his chin, and pulled a sort of travelling cap down on his brows, and away he went, looking very pale and anxious.

He did not come back in five minutes; nor in ten, twenty, or forty minutes. The "Old Tom" in the bottle had run low; Sedley looked at his watch; he could wait no longer.

When he got out upon the flagway, he felt the agreeable stimulus of the curious "Old Tom" sufficiently to render a little pause expedient for the purpose of calling to mind with clearness the geographical bearings of Wright's billiard-rooms—whither accordingly he sauntered—eastward, along deserted and echoing streets, with here and there a policeman poking into an area, or loitering along his two-mile-an-hour duty march, and now and then regaled by the unearthly music of love-sick cats among the roofs.

These streets and squares, among which he had in a manner lost himself, had in their day been the haunts and quarters of fashion, a fairy world, always migrating before the steady march of business. Sedley had quite lost his reckoning. If he had been content to go by Ludgate-hill, he would have been at Wright's half an hour before. Sedley did not know these dingy and respectable old squares; he had not even seen a policeman for the last twenty minutes, and was just then quite of the Irish lawyer's opinion that life is not long enough for short cuts.

In a silent street he passed a carriage standing near a lamp. The driver on the flagway looked hard at him. Sedley was not a romantic being only; he had also his waggish mood, and loved a lark when it came. He returned the fellow's stare with a glance as significant, slackening his pace.

"Well?" said Sedley.

"Well!" replied the driver.

"Capital!" answered Sedley.

"Be you him?" demanded the driver, after a pause.

"No; be *you*?" answered Sedley.

The driver seemed a little puzzled, and eyed Sedley doubtfully; and Sedley looked into the carriage, which, however, was empty, and then at the house at whose rails it stood; but it was dark from top to bottom.

He had thoughts of stepping in and availing himself of the vehicle; but seeing no particular fun in the procedure, and liking better to walk, he merely said, nodding toward the carriage—

"Lots of room."

"Room enough, I dessay."

"How long do you mean to wait?"

"As long as I'm paid for."

"Give my love to your mother."

"Feard she won't vally it."

"Take care of yourself—for *my* sake."

Doubtless there was a retort worthy of so sprightly a dialogue; but Sedley could not hear distinctly as he paced on, looking up at the moon, and thinking how beautifully she used to shine, and was no doubt then shining, on the flashing blue sea at Cardyllian, and over the misty mountains. And he thought of his pretty cousin Agnes Etherage; and "Yes," said he within himself, quickening his pace, "if I win that two pounds at Wright's, I'll put two pounds to it, the two pounds I should have lost, that is—there's nothing extravagant in that—and give little Agnes something pretty; I said I would; and though it was only joke, still it's a promise."

Some tradesmen's bills that morning had frightened him, and as he periodically did, he had bullied himself into resolutions of economy, out of which he ingeniously reasoned himself again. "What shall it be? I'll look in to-morrow at Dymock and Rose's—they have lots of charming little French trifles. Where the deuce are we now?"

He paused, and looking about him, and then down a stable-lane between two old-fashioned houses of handsome dimensions, he saw a fellow in a great coat loitering slowly down it, and looking up vigilantly at the two or three windows in the side of the mansion.

"A robbery, by George!" thought Sedley, as he marked the prowling vigilance of the man, and his peculiar skulking gait.

He had no sort of weapon about him, not even a stick; but he is one of the best sparrers extant, and thinks pluck and "a fist-full of fives" well worth a revolver.

Sedley hitched his shoulders, plucked off the one glove that remained on, and followed him softly a few steps, dogging him down the lane, with that shrewd, stern glance which men exchange in the prize-ring. But when on turning about the man in the surtout saw that he was observed, he confirmed Sedley's suspicions by first pausing irresolutely, and ultimately withdrawing suddenly round the angle.

Sedley had not expected this tactique. For whatever purpose, the man had been plainly watching the house, and it was nearly three o'clock. Thoroughly blooded now for a "lark," Sedley followed swiftly to the corner, but could not see him; so, as he returned, a low window in the side wall opened, and a female voice said, "Are you there?"

"Yes," replied Tom Sedley, confidentially drawing near.

"Take this."

"All right"—and thereupon he received first a bag and then a box, each tolerably heavy.

Sedley was amused. A mystification had set in; a quiet robbery, and he the receiver. He thought of dropping the booty down the area of the respectable house round the corner, but just then the man in the surtout emerged from the wing, so to speak, and marching slowly up the perspective of the lane, seemed about to disturb him, but once more changed his mind, and disappeared.

"What is to happen next?" wondered Tom Sedley. In a few minutes a door which opens from the back yard or garden of the house from which he had received his burthen, opened cautiously, and a woman in a cloak stepped out, carrying another bag, a heavy one it also seemed, and beckoning to him, said, so soon as he was sufficiently near—

"Is the carriage come?"

"Yes'm," answered Tom, touching his hat, and affecting as well as he could the ways of a porter or a cabman.

"When they comes," she resumed, "you'll bring us to where it is, mind, and fetch the things with you—and mind ye, no noise nor talking, and walk as light as you can."

"All right," said Tom, in the same whisper in which she spoke.

It could not be a robbery—Tom had changed his mind; there was an air of respectability about the servant that conflicted with that theory, and the discovery that the carriage was waiting to receive the party was also against it.

Tom was growing more interested in his adventure; and entering into the fuss and mystery of the plot.

"Come round, please, and show me where the carriage stands," said the woman, beckoning to Tom, who followed her round the corner.

She waited for him, and laid her hand on his elbow, giving him a little jog by way of caution.

"Hush—not a word above your breath, mind," she whispered; "*I* see that's it; well, it needn't come no nearer, mind."

"All right, ma'am."

"And there's the window," she added in a still more cautious whisper, and pointing with a nod and a frown at a window next the hall door, through the shutter of which a dim light was visible.

"Ha!" breathed Tom, looking wise, "and all safe *there*?"

"We're never sure; sometimes awake; sometimes not; sometimes quiet; sometimes quite wild-like; and the window pushed open, for hair! Hoffle he is!"

"And always was," hazarded Tom.

"Wuss now, though," whispered she, shaking her head ruefully, and she returned round the angle of the house and entered the door through which she had issued, and Tom set down his load not far from the same point.

Before he had waited many minutes the same door re-opened, and two ladies, as he judged them to be from something in their air and dress, descended the steps together, followed by the maid carrying the black-leather bag as before. They stopped just under the door, which the servant shut cautiously and locked; and then these three female figures stood for a few seconds whispering together; and after that they turned and walked up the lane towards Tom Sedley, who touched his hat as they approached, and lifted his load again.

The two ladies were muffled in cloaks. The taller wore no hat or bonnet; but had instead a shawl thrown over her head and shoulders, hood-wise. She walked, leaning upon the shorter lady, languidly, like a person very weak, or in pain, and the maid at the other side, placed her arm tenderly round her waist, under her mufflers, and aided her thus as she walked. They crossed the street at the end of the stable-lane, and walked at that side toward the carriage. The maid signed to Tom, who carried his luggage quickly to its destination on the box, and was in time to open the carriage-door.

"Don't you mind," said the woman, putting Tom unceremoniously aside, and herself aiding the taller lady into the old-fashioned carriage. As she prepared to get in, Tom for a moment fancied a recognition; something in the contour of the figure, muffled as it was, for a second struck him; and at the same moment all seemed like a dream, and he stepped backward involuntarily in amazement. Had he not seen the same gesture. The arm, exactly so, and that slender hand in a gardening glove, holding a tiny trowel, under the dark foliage of old trees.

The momentary gesture was gone. The lady leaning back, a muffled figure, in the corner of the carriage, silent. Her companion, who he thought looked sharply at him, from within, now seated herself beside her; and the maid also from her place inside, told him from the window—

"Bid him drive now where he knows, quickly," and she pulled up the window.

Tom was too much interested now to let the thread of his adventure go. So to the box beside the driver he mounted, and delivered the order he had just received.

Away he drove swiftly, Citywards, through silent and empty streets. Tom quickly lost his bearings; the gas lamps grew few and far between; he was among lanes and arches, and sober, melancholy streets, such as he had never suspected of an existence in such a region.

Here the driver turned suddenly up a narrow way between old brick walls, with tufts of dingy grass here and there at top, and the worn mortar lines overlaid with velvet moss. This short passage terminated in two tall brick piers, surmounted by worn and

moss-grown balls of stone.

Tom jumped down and pushed back the rusty iron gates, and they drove into an unlighted, melancholy court-yard; and Tom thundered at a tall narrow hall-door, between chipped and worn pilasters of the same white stone, surmounted by some carved heraldry, half effaced.

Standing on the summit of the steps he had to repeat his summons, till the cavernous old mansion pealed again with the echo, before a light gave token of the approach of a living being to give them greeting.

Tom opened the carriage door, and let down the steps, perhaps a little clumsily, but he was getting through his duties wonderfully.

The party entered the spacious wainscoted hall, in which was an old wooden bench, on which, gladly, it seemed, the sick lady sat herself down. A great carved doorway opened upon a square second hall or lobby, through which the ray of the single candle glanced duskily, and touched the massive banisters of a broad staircase.

This must have been the house of a very great man in its day, a Lord Chancellor, perhaps, one of those Hogarthian mansions in which such men as my Lord Squanderfield might have lived in the first George's days.

"How could any man have been such an idiot," thought Sedley, filled with momentary wonder, "as to build a palace like this in such a place?"

"Dear me! what a place—what a strange place!" whispered the elder lady, "where are we to go?"

"Up-stairs, please'm," said the woman with a brass candlestick in her hand.

"I hope there's fire, and more light, and—and proper comfort there?"

"Oh! yes'm, please; everythink as you would like, please."

"Come, dear," said the old lady tenderly, giving her arm to the languid figure resting in the hall.

So guided and lighted by the servant they followed her up the great well staircase.

A NEW VOICE.

The ladies ascended, led by the maid with the candle, and closely followed by their own servant, and our friend Tom Sedley brought up the rear, tugging the box and the bag with him.

At the stair-head was a great gallery from which many doors opened. Tom Sedley halted close by the banister for orders, depositing his luggage beside him. The maid set the candle down upon a table, and opened one of these tall doors, through which he saw an angle of the apartment, a fire burning in the grate, and a pleasant splendour of candlelight; he saw that the floor was carpeted, and the windows curtained, and though there was disclosed but a corner of a large room, there were visible such pieces of furniture as indicated general comfort.

In a large arm-chair, at the further side of the fire-place, sat the lady who had thrilled him with a sudden remembrance. She had withdrawn the shawl that hung in hood-like fashion over her head, and there was no longer a doubt. The Beatrice Cenci was there—his Guido—very pale, dying he thought her, with her white hands clasped, and her beautiful eyes turned upward in an agony of prayer.

The old lady, Miss Sheckleton, came near, leaned over her, kissed her tenderly, and caressingly smoothed her rich chestnut hair over her temples, and talked gently in her ear, and raised her hand in both hers, and kissed it, and drawing a chair close to hers, she sat by her, murmuring in her ear with a countenance of such kindness and compassion, that Tom Sedley loved her for it.

Looking up, Miss Sheckleton observed the door open, and Tom fancied perceived him in the perspective through it, for she rose suddenly, shut it, and he saw no more. Tom had not discovered in the glance of the old lady any sign of recognition, and for the sake of appearances he had buttoned his gray wrapper close across his throat and breast so as to conceal the evidences of his ball costume; his shining boots, however, were painfully conspicuous, but for that incongruity there was no help.

And now the servant who had let them in told Tom to bring the box and bag into the servants' room, to which she led him across the gallery.

There was a large fire, which was pleasant, a piece of matting on the floor, a few kitchen utensils ranged near the fire-place, a deal table, and some common kitchen chairs. Dismal enough would the room have looked, notwithstanding its wainscoting, had it not been for the glow diffused by the fire.

By this fire, on a kitchen chair, and upon his own opera hat, which he wished specially to suppress, sat Tom Sedley, resolved to see his adventure one hour or so into futurity, before abandoning it, and getting home to his bed, and in the meantime doing his best to act a servant, as he fancied such a functionary would appear in his moments of ease unbending in the kitchen or the servants' hall. The maid who had received the visitors in the hall, Anne Evans by name, square, black-haired, slightly pitted with smallpox, and grave, came and sat down at the other side of the fire, and eyed Tom Sedley in silence.

Now and then Tom felt uncomfortably about his practical joke, which was degenerating into a deception. But an hour or so longer could not matter much; and might he not make himself really useful if the services of a messenger were required?

Anne Evans was considering him in silence, and he turned a little more toward the fire, and poked it, as he fancied a groom would poke a fire for his private comfort.

"Are you servant to the ladies?" at last she asked.

Tom smiled at the generality of the question, but interpreting in good faith—

"No," said he, "I came with the carriage."

"Servant to the gentleman?" she asked.

"What gentleman?"

"You know well."

Tom had not an idea, but could not well say so. He therefore poked the fire again, and said, "Go on, miss; I'm listening."

She did not go on, however, for some time, and then it was to say—

"My name is Anne Evans. What may your name be?"

"Can't tell that. I left my name at home," said Tom, mysteriously.

"Won't tell?"

"Can't."

"I'm only by the month. Come in just a week to-morrow," observed Anne Evans.

"They'll not part with you in a month, Miss Evans. No; they has some taste and feelin' among them. I wouldn't wonder if you was here for ever!" said Tom, with enthusiasm; "and what's this place, miss—this house I mean—whose house is it?"

"Can't say, only I hear it's bought for a brewery, to be took down next year."

"Oh, criky!" said Tom; "that's a pity."

There was a short pause.

"I saw you 'ide your 'at," said Anne Evans.

"Not 'ide it," said Tom; "only sits on it—always sits on my 'at."

Tom produced it, let it bounce up like a jack-in-a-box, and shut it down again.

Miss Evans was neither amused nor surprised.

"Them's hopera 'ats—first quality—they used to come in boxes on 'em, as long as from here to you, when I was at Mr. Potterton's, the hatter. Them's for gents—they air—and not for servants."

"The gov'nor gives me his old uns," said Tom, producing the best fib he could find.

"And them French boots," she added, meditatively.

"Perquisite likewise," said Tom.

Miss Anne Evans closed her eyes, and seemed disposed to take a short nap in her chair. But on a sudden she opened them to say—

"I think you're the gentleman himself."

"The old gentleman?" said Tom.

"No. The young un."

"I'm jest what I tell you, not objectin' to the compliment all the same," said Tom.

"And a ring on your finger?"

"A ring on my finger—yes. I wear it two days in the week. My grand-uncle's ring, who was a gentleman, being skipper of a coal brig."

"What's the lady's name?"

"Can't tell, Miss Evans; dussn't."

"Fuss about nothin'!" said she, and closed her eyes again, and opened them in a minute more, to add, "but I think you're him, and that's *my* belief."

"No, I ain't miss, as you'll see, by-and-by."

"Tisn't nothin' to me, only people *is* so close."

The door opened, and a tall woman in black, with a black net cap on, came quietly but quickly into the room.

"You're the man?" said she, with an air of authority, fixing her eyes askance on Tom.

"Yes 'm, please."

"Well, you don't go on no account, for you'll be wanted just now."

"No, ma'am."

"Where's the box and bag you're in charge of?"

"Out here," said Tom.

"Hish, man, quiet; don't you know there's sickness? Walk easy, *can't* you? *please*, consider."

Tom followed her almost on tip-toe to the spot where the parcels lay.

"Gently now; into this room, please," and she led the way into that sitting-room into which Tom Sedley had looked some little time since, from the stair-head.

The beautiful young lady was gone, but Miss Sheckleton was standing at the further door of the room with her hands clasped, and her eyes raised in prayer, and her pale cheeks wet with tears.

Hearing the noise, she gently closed the door, and hastily drying her eyes, whispered, "Set them down *there*," pointing to a sofa, on which Tom placed them accordingly. "Thanks—that will do. You may go."

When Sedley had closed the door—

"Oh, Mrs. Graver," whispered Anne Sheckleton, clasping her wrists in her trembling fingers, "is she *very* ill?"

"Well, ma'am, she *is* ill."

"But, oh, my God, you don't think we are going to lose her?" she whispered wildly, with her imploring gaze in the nurse's eyes.

"Oh, no, please God, ma'am, it will all be right. You must not fuss yourself, ma'am. You must not let her see you like this, on no account."

"Shall I send for him now?"

"No, ma'am; he'd only be in the way. *I*'ll tell you when; and his man's here, ready to go, any minute. I must go back to her now, ma'am. Hish!"

And Mrs. Graver disappeared with a little rustle of her dress, and no sound of steps. That solemn bird floated very noiselessly round sick beds, and you only heard, as it were, the hovering of her wings.

And then, in a minute more, in glided Miss Sheckleton, having dried her eyes very carefully.

And now came a great knocking at the hall door, echoing dully through the house. It was Doctor Grimshaw, who had just got his coat off, and was winding his watch, when he was called from his own bed-side by this summons, and so was here after a long day's work, to make a new start, and await the dawn in this chamber of pain.

In he came, and Miss Sheckleton felt that light and hope entered the room with him. Florid, portly, genial, with a light, hopeful step, and a good, decided, cheery manner, he inspired confidence, and seemed to take command, not only of the case, but of the ailment itself.

Miss Sheckleton knew this good doctor, and gladly shook his hand; and he recognised her with a hesitating look that seemed to ask a question, but was not meant to do so, and he spoke cheerfully to the patient, and gave his directions to the nurse, and in about half an hour more told good Anne Sheckleton that she had better leave the patient.

So, with the docility which an able physician inspires, good Anne Sheckleton obeyed, and in the next room—sometimes praying, sometimes standing and listening, sometimes wandering from point to point, in the merest restlessness—she waited and watched for more than an hour, which seemed to her longer than a whole night, and at last tapped very gently at the door, a lull having come for a time in the sick chamber, and unable longer to endure her suspense.

A little bit of the door was opened, and Anne Sheckleton saw the side of Mrs. Graver's straight nose, and one of her wrinkled eyes, and her grim mouth.

"How is she?" whispered Miss Sheckleton, feeling as if she was herself about to die.

"Pretty well, ma'am," answered the nurse, but with an awful look of insincerity, under which the old lady's heart sank down and down, as if it had foundered.

"One word to Dr. Grimshaw," she whispered, with white lips.

"You *can't*, ma'am," murmured the nurse, sternly, and about to shut the door in her face.

"Wait, *wait*," whispered the voice of kind old Doctor Grimshaw, and he came into the next room to Miss Sheckleton, closing the door after him.

"Oh, doctor!" she gasped.

"Well, Miss Sheckleton, I hope she'll do very well; I've just given her something—a slight stimulant—and I've every confidence everything will be well. Don't make yourself uneasy; it is not going on badly."

"Oh, Doctor Grimshaw, shall I send for him? He'd never forgive me; and I promised her, darling Margaret, to send."

"*Don't* send—on *no account* yet. Don't bring him here—he's better away. I'll tell you when to send."

The doctor opened the door.

"Still quiet?"

"Yes, sir," whispered Mrs. Graver.

Again he closed the door.

"Nice creature she seems. A relation of yours?" asked the Doctor.

"My cousin."

"When was she married?"

"About a year ago."