

MEMORIAL DISCOURSE

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Jospeh Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873)

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Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, whose memory we honour to-day, was described on his father's side from a distinguished and ennobled Huguenot family, the Le Fanus of Caen, in Normandy, who, on the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, had been deprived of their estates and had settled in England. It is estimated that 600,000 Huguenots fled from France to escape the persecution which, in varying degrees of intensity, they suffered from the Middle of the 16th to the middle of the 18th century. Of these about 70,000 found a home in the British Isles, and the remainder sought refuge in Switzerland, Prussia, Denmark, Sweden and other countries.

After the Revolution of 1688 great numbers of French refugees came over to Ireland, both from England and the Continent, and in 1692 the Irish Parliament passed an Act conferring on "all Protestant strangers and foreigners" complete freedom in the exercise of their religion. Three French churches were established in Dublin, and churches also sprang up in Cork, Waterford, Carlow, Kilkenny and Portarlinton. These "strangers and foreigners" threw themselves with enthusiasm into the industrial life of the country, as craftsmen, bankers, merchants and manufacturers. An unusually large proportion of belonged to the higher classes, many of whom entered the learned professions and the army; and not a few of the alumni of our University bear Huguenot names, such as La Touche, Le Fanu, Crommelin, Bouhereau, Fleury, Maturin, Saurin, Joly, Le Froy. The Huguenots who settled in Ireland have long since been absorbed in the general population, and the French churches which they established have disappeared, but few will deny that the introduction of this new and valuable racial material has been of great and lasting benefit to our country. In Dublin, the Lady Chapel of St. Patrick's Cathedral is the only building remaining in which the Huguenots at one time held their services, and the small cemeteries in Cathedral Lane, in Peter Street, and in Merrion Row now constitute their only visible memorial.

One of the most distinguished descendants of these Huguenot colonists was Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, poet and novelist, who was born at No. 45 Lower Dominick Street, Dublin, on August 28th, 1814. He was one of the many brilliant men whom the Church of Ireland has given and continues to give, to the world, his father being the Rev. Thomas Philip Le Fanu, Curate of St. Mary's, Dublin. His mother, a gifted and talented woman, was the daughter of Doctor William Dobbin, a Fellow of Trinity College and Rector of Finglas and St. Mary's. Some members of the Le Fanu family had served with distinction under William III, and our novelist's grandfather, Joseph Le Fanu, who had previously secured an appointment as Clerk of the Coast in Ireland, had married Richard Brinsley Sheridan's favourite sister, Alicia, from whom our novelist no doubt inherited a large share of his genius.

In May 1815 our novelist's father was chosen by the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Whitworth, to be Chaplain and Superintendent of Morals at the Royal Hibernian Military School, in the Phoenix Park, near Chapelizod. Chapelizod was a place well calculated to kindle the imagination of a young poet, not merely because of its picturesque and romantic setting, and of its legendary associations with Tristan and Isolde, but also because of the military pageantry of which the neighbourhood was so frequently the scene. There were then about four hundred boys, sons of soldiers, at the Hibernian School, and these boys, vieing with the veterans of Waterloo, took part in each Regimental March Past in the military reviews which were held on the adjoining Fifteen Acres. The house known as the "King's House," famous because King William had occupied it and held his Court there after his victory at the Boyne, and because it had served as the residents of many Viceroys, including Ormond, Essex, Clarendon and Tyrconnell, was still standing in the little village. It was being used at the time as quarters for the officers of his Majesty's Regiment of Artillery, a fact to which Le Fanu makes reference in his novel, "The House by the Churchyard." This neighbourhood was also the scene of more than one duel, in which our novelist's father often acted the part of peacemaker.

In 1823 the Rev. T. P. Le Fanu was promoted to the Rectory of Abington, Co. Limerick, but he remained at the Hibernian School, until he was appointed Dean of Emly in 1826, when the family went to live at Abington. Young Le Fanu was educated at home, where he was taught English and French by his father, and classics and science by a private tutor, an eccentric, elderly clergyman named Stinson. He was also given the free use of his father's well-stocked library. At an early age he began to display remarkable talent in composition. The following lines, which he wrote when he was scarcely fifteen, show a depth of imagination and of feeling unusual in one so young:

Oh! lovely moon, so bright and so sincere,
Rolling thy silver disk so silently,
Full many an ardent lover's eye, I ween,
Rests on thy warning crescent pensively;
And many an aged eye is fixed on thee
That seeks to read the hidden things of fate;
And many a captive, pining to be free,
Welcomes thy lustre through his prison gate,
And feels while in thy beam not quite so desolate.

Le Fanu, as a boy, although strong and active, took no part in the field games and sports in which his younger brother excelled, but was of a retiring and dreamy disposition. That he had his wits about him when they were wanted, however, is shown by an anecdote told by his brother. He was habitually late for morning prayers, which greatly distressed his father, the Dean. One morning he appeared when breakfast was almost over, and his father, holding his watch in his hand, said in his severest tones, "I ask you, Joseph, I ask you seriously, is this right?" "No, sir," said Joseph, glancing at the watch, "I'm sure it must be fast."

At Abington, where his parents were much beloved by the peasantry, who frequently sought their aid and advice, young Le Fanu had many opportunities of obtaining that intimate knowledge of the humours and tragedies displayed in his Irish stories and poem. As he himself said: "In my youth I heard a great many Irish traditions, more or less of a supernatural character, some of them very peculiar, and all, to a child at least, highly interesting."

His choice of theme for his early verse was influenced largely by his mother, who as a girl had been an enthusiastic admirer of Lord Edward Fitzgerald and other United Irishmen, and it is noteworthy that though Le Fanu was the son of a Dean of the Established Church, and though he was later the editor of a Tory newspaper, nevertheless when he wrote verse he frequently wrote like a rebel.

In October 1832 Le Fanu entered Trinity College, where he enlarged his knowledge of English literature and the classics, while at the same time he pursued his legal studies at the King's Inns, his intention then being to practise at the Irish Bar. He also became a member of the College Historical Society, which at this period met outside the walls of the College owing to restrictions placed upon it by the Board. Among unusually gifted contemporaries Le Fanu took the highest place as a debater in the Society, and was awarded a medal for oratory. It is interesting to note that he was elected President of the Society on the same night that Thomas Davis was elected Auditor, and that when he was unable to deliver an address at the close of the session, Davis was chosen to read a paper in his stead. On the restoration of the Society to College in 1843, Le Fanu was elected an honorary member.

Le Fanu took his B.A. degree in 1837, and a couple of years later he was called to the Bar. His friends considered that he had high prospects as a barrister; but he never made any serious attempts to practise, and devoted himself instead to literature and journalism. In January 1838 his first published story, "The Ghost and the Bonesetter," appeared in the "Dublin University Magazine," which had been founded five years earlier, and of which, in 1861, he became both owner and editor, and in this periodical most of his poems and many of his novels first saw the light. He also contributed stories to "Temple Bar," to "All the Year Round," and to other English magazines.

In 1839 Le Fanu purchased "The Warder," and becoming soon afterwards proprietor of the "Evening Packet" and the "Dublin Evening Mail" he amalgamated the three journals into the "Evening Mail," which was issued daily. He also continued, with Isaac Butt as a colleague, to edit "The Warder" as a weekly reprint. As a journalist Le Fanu was noted for the vigour and pungency of his writing. He was always a strong advocate of the Conservative policy, but in everything that he wrote he exhibited a genuine love of his country, and a warm appreciation of its people. He took an active interest in the University Elections, and some humorous and satirical electioneering squibs came from a pen.

In 1844 he married Susan Bennett, daughter of George Bennett, Q.C., and of the marriage were born two sons and two daughters. Bennett lived at No. 18 – now number 70 – Merrion Square, and when he died he left his house to his son-in-law, and in this house most of Le Fanu's novels were written.

Shortly after leaving college, on his brother's suggestion that he should compose an Irish "Young Lochinvar," Le Fanu wrote "Phaudrig Crohoore," which is one of the best of our

Irish ballads, full of fire and incident. It has been set to music by Charles Villiers Stanford as a Cantata, and is frequently performed by choral societies.

“Shamus O’Brien,” the second and more widely known of Le Fanu’s Irish ballads, is more perfect in structure and more picturesque in its scene painting. It describes, with wonderful effect, and with a familiar knowledge of scene and character, the capture, trial and escape of a hero of the Irish Rebellion in 1798. The tragic intensity of the piece is relieved by many quaint and amusing humorous touches. “Shamus O’Brien,” which, like “Phaudrig Crohoore,” is written in the Southern Irish idiom, is a capital piece for recitation, and Samuel Lover did much to popularise it both at home and in America by introducing it into his entertainments. It has been made the subject of a fine opera by Stanford. A point which is, perhaps, worthy of note is that at the time when “Shamus O’Brien” appeared, nationalist feeling in Ireland was deeply stirred by the Young Ireland movement, and it was this movement which also inspired John Kells Ingram to compose that great battle-hymn of the people, “Who Fears to Speak of Ninety-Eight?”

Le Fanu’s two longest poems, both written in his later years, “Beatrice” and “The Legend of the Glaive,” are undoubtedly his finest, full of imaginative power and dramatic conception. In “Beatrice” he has given us a verse drama packed with all the horrors of a Greek tragedy. In “The Legend of the Glaive” he weaves with rare skill into one lovely web such different materials as an old Scandinavian legend, and charming scenes from Irish peasant life, throwing over all a most enchanting supernatural glamour. Alfred Percival Graves, in his introduction to the Poems of Le Fanu writes: “The lurid terror of these narratives is happily relieved by interludes of such haunting beauty of colour and sound, that we cannot but lament the lateness of this discovery of his highest artistic self. Indeed our literature can ill afford to lose lyrical drama with such a stamp of appalling power as is impressed on “Beatrice” or old-world idylls so full of Gaelic glamour as “The Legend of the Glaive”.

But although these two are undoubtedly Le Fanu’s best poetical compositions, it is as the author of “Shamus O’Brien” and “Phaudrig Crohoore” that he will probably be remembered chiefly by Irishmen. These place him in a unique position amongst the writers of Irish ballad poetry, and will ever be reckoned with the songs

*Which always find us young
And always keep us so.*

They appeal to us because of the truthfulness, born of association and sympathy, with which he depicts the character and habits of the Southern Irish peasant, and because of the skill with which in lines like

*The sweet summer moon over Aherlow dreams
And the Galtees, gigantic, loom cold in her beams*

he reconstructs for us the country so well known to him and so well loved by us.

It is, however, as a novelist that Le Fanu is best known to the reading public. That he was a born story-teller is apparent from the short stories which he contributed to the “Dublin University Magazine,” and which were afterwards published as the “Purcell and which were afterwards published as the ‘Purcell Papers.’ In many of these he first displays those wonderful powers over the mysterious, the grotesque and the horrible which are such

characteristics of his novels, and he also shows considerable versatility in the invention of plot and the portrayal of character. His short stories of Irish peasant life belong to another class. In such tales as "The Ghost and the Bonesetter," "The Quare Gandher," "Jim Sullivan's Adventures in the Big Show" and "Billy Malowney's Taste of Love and Glory," he provides us with most amusing pictures of the habits and superstitions of the peasantry.

Le Fanu's first excursion into the wider domain of fiction was the publication in 1845, when he was thirty years of age, of "The Cock and Anchor," a novel in which he depicts the life of old Dublin with much colour and fidelity. The book shows great narrative power, and is full of interesting scenes and exciting incidents. A certain want of unity, however, and a pervading spirit of gloom, detract somewhat from its merits. It is still, nevertheless, one of his most popular novels, especially with lovers of old Dublin.

Two years later Le Fanu published "The Fortunes of Colonel Torlogh O'Brien," which deserve a high place amongst Irish historical romances. The story gives an interesting picture of Irish politics and the lawlessness prevailing throughout the country during the period of the Revolution of 1688, and introduces a variety of characters typical of the times. We are given a graphic description of the Battle of Aughrim, and glimpses of some important historical personages, such as Sarsfield, Tyrconnell, and the last of the Stuarts.

Both of these novels were, commercially speaking, comparative failures, and Le Fanu did not again turn his thoughts to fiction until some years after his wife's death in 1858. In 1863 he published "The House by the Churchyard," which T.W. Rolleston considered the most interesting of all his novels – "a wonderful mixture of sentimentalism, humour, tragedy, and romance." The scene is laid in the quiet little village of Chapelizod, which, as Mr. Francis MacManus says, he invests with "a Macbeth atmosphere of devil's darkness." Pleasant scenes of social life among the officers and their families and friends in the village serve to brighten the dark side of the story.

In the following year – 1864 – two further works were published, "Wylder's Hand" and "Uncle Silas," which at once placed Le Fanu in the front rank of popular novelists. These show him to be, above all, an adept in the delineation of character. On the publication of "Wylder's Hand," Charles Lever, in a letter of congratulation to Le Fanu, wrote: "The two women are beautifully drawn, and the touches of Nature in your blackest characters attract the sympathy of the reader to individuals who if handled by an inferior artist would have repelled by their cold rascality."

It was, however, in "Uncle Silas" that Le Fanu displayed his greatest capacity as a writer of sensational romance. This novel is an elaboration of his short story, "A Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess," which appeared as one of the "Purcell Papers" in the "Dublin University Magazine" twenty years earlier. It is a marvel of mystery and suspense, and the sense of impending tragedy haunts the reader from first to last. The plot is cleverly constructed, and the incidents are thrillingly told. The characters, however, are its chief merit. Uncle Silas, the central figure is a veritable masterpiece of character painting. Many editions of "Uncle Silas" have been published, and an unabridged version, with a brief introduction by Lady Longford, has found a place in the Penguin Series. Le Fanu, though he was interested in the theatre, and as a child had been noted for his wonderful action in juvenile theatricals, never apparently thought of adapting his novels for the theatre, but a dramatised version of "Uncle Silas" was at one time staged by Lawrence Irving and Seymour Hicks, and a dramatised version by Lady Longford has been performed at the Gate Theatre, Dublin. The

book has been adapted recently as a film. One of his shorter stories, "Carmilla," was adapted for the theatre by Lord Longford and was played at the Gate Theatre; and two others. "Ulpor de Lacy" (re-named "The Avenger") and "The Watcher," were dramatised by Lady Longford. The former was performed at the Gate Theatre some years ago, and the latter, it is interesting to note, is being played at present for the first time at the same theatre.

Le Fanu's reputation was now well established, and until his death in 1873 many more novels and short stories came from his pen. The chief features are almost always the same – great narrative and descriptive power, mystery, suspense, crime, death, sensational incidents, characters drawn in the minutest detail, and supernatural elements which fill the reader with feelings of terror.

Considering the consistently high quality of Le Fanu's writing, and the fascination of his subject matter, it is strange that one hears so little about him and his books nowadays. No doubt the morbid gloominess with which he has tinged so many of his works has detracted from the proper appreciation of his merits. Of his novels and stories, T. W. Rolleston has written: "In 'Uncle Silas,' in his wonderful tales of the supernatural, such as 'The Watcher,' and in a short and less known but most masterly story, 'The Room in the Dragon Volant,' he touched the springs of terror and suspense as perhaps no other writer of fiction in the language has been able to do. His fine scholarship, poetic sense, and strong yet delicate handling of language and incident give these tales a place quite apart among works of sensational fiction."

Amongst Irish novelists of the 19th century Le Fanu probably ranks next to Lever. But their writings are widely different in character. Le Fanu's great strength lies in his wonderful imaginative power; Lever's in his skill in vigorous narrative. Le Fanu seems to take a delight in painting the dark and gloomy side of life; Lever's buoyant exuberance of spirits animates every page of his books. Le Fanu keeps our attention to the end by exciting a curiosity amounting to anxiety; Lever sweeps us along from cover to cover in a whirlwind of ceaseless action – duels, battles, drinking, love-making, practical jokes and droll songs.

Few writers have equalled Le Fanu in the skill with which he introduces the supernatural into the atmosphere of very ordinary surroundings, and forces us, even against our better judgement, to accept the most fanciful creations of his imagination. He rivals Wilkie Collins in his use of atmosphere, in the ingenuity of his plots, and in his mastery of suspense. Words written by John Buchan of Edgar Allan Poe might also be aptly applied to Le Fanu: "He had in the highest degree the constructive imagination which can reproduce a realm of fancy with the minute realism of everyday life."

Le Fanu was an amazingly versatile writer – stirring ballads, sweet lyrics, old world legends, amusing anecdotes, historical romances, political pamphlets, sensational short stories which of their kind have no equal, and novels, some of which after the lapse of nearly a century still hold among those whose opinion is worth having, an honoured place in the field of literature – all came from the same pen.

An interesting account of Le Fanu's method of work at his home in Merrion Square during the closing years of his life has been given by his son. He wrote mostly by candle-light, in bed, at night, using copy-books and scraps of papers, and sustaining himself with copious draughts of strong tea. He always breakfasted in bed, and at mid-day he resumed work in the dining-room at the back of the house, at a small table which, incidentally, had been the

favourite possession of his grandfather, Richard Brinsley Sheridan. He took his exercise in the little garden which opened off the dining-room, pacing up and down the path with pencil and copybook in hand. He rarely went into the city, and then usually to an old bookshop, where he might be seen immersed in some work on ghosts and demonology.

Up to the time of his wife's death in 1858, he was one of the brightest ornaments of Dublin society, but after this he was seldom seen by his friends, and was nick-named "The Invisible Prince." In the end he became a recluse. The late T. P. Le Fanu, nephew of our novelist, has suggested that in the description of Austin Ruthyn in "Uncle Silas" there are touches which vividly recall his uncle as he was in his later days, and his favourite room at the back of his house in Merrion Square: "Many old portraits, some grim and pale and others pretty and some very graceful and charming, hanging from the walls... His beautiful young wife died... This bereavement I have been told changed him, made him more odd and taciturn than ever... He ultimately became, I was told, a Swedenborgian... He was now walking up and down this spacious old room... It was his wont to walk up and down thus... He wore a loose black velvet coat and waistcoat. It was the figure of an elderly rather than an old man, but firm and with no sign of feebleness." His nephew also suggest that the concluding words in which the novelist describes the character of Austin Ruthyn might also be fitly applied to the novelist himself: "He was a man of generous nature and powerful intellect, but given up to the oddities of a shyness which grew with years and indulgence and became inflexible with his disappointments and afflictions."

A sketch of Le Fanu's personal character is given in a brief memoir which appeared in the "Dublin University Magazine" after his death: "He was a man who thought deeply, especially on religious subjects. To those who knew him he was very dear. They admired him for his learning, his sparkling wit and pleasant conversation, and loved him for his manly virtues, his noble and generous qualities, his gentleness, and his loving, affectionate nature."

Le Fanu was a man of ceaseless energy and his labours during the last ten years of his life must have been immense, as in addition to his journalistic work, and his editing of the "Dublin University Magazine," he wrote almost a score of novels and numerous short stories and poems. His last novel, entitled "Willing to Die," was finished only a few days before his death. He died at his house in Merrion Square on February 7th, 1873, in his fifty-ninth year. The last lines of one of his poems provide us, I venture to suggest, with what he, in his modesty, would have considered a suitable epitaph:

*He did in his allotted hours –
What fellows sometimes shirk –
In this enormous world of ours,
His halfpenny worth of work.*