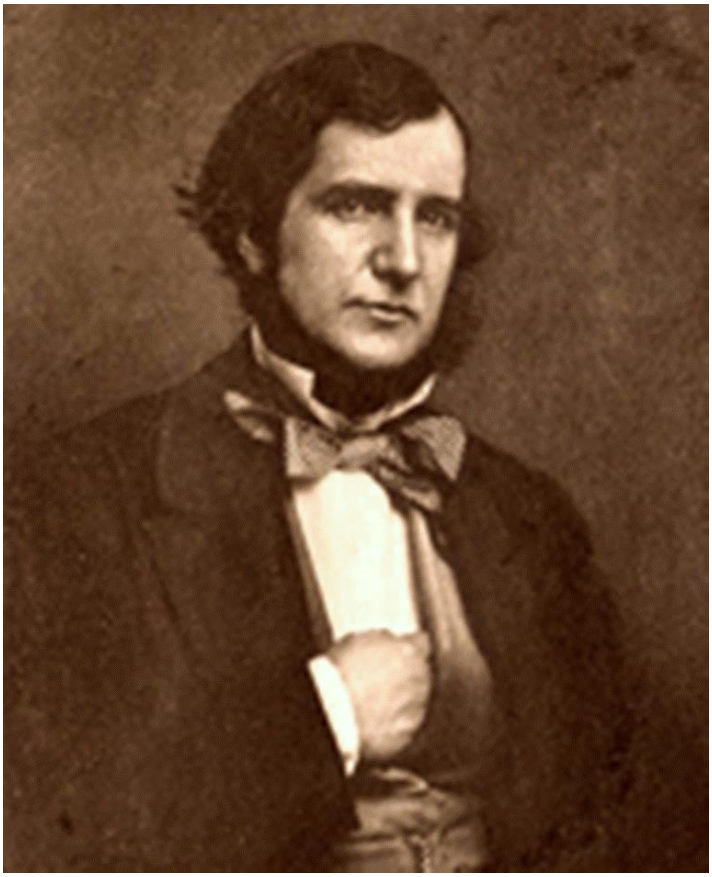


Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873)

Le Fanu was born in Dublin. His father was a Church of Ireland (ie. Protestant) clergyman with Calvinist leanings (the family's history included French Huguenot descent).

For a period of his childhood, the Le Fanus lived in County Limerick where his family was part of a small Protestant minority in a largely rural and increasingly activist Catholic world. Some of his father's income was derived from Tithes—money that local Catholics were forced to pay to support the local Protestant clergyman of the Church of Ireland. Protests against tithes by Irish Catholics led to the reduction of this source of income. Le Fanu's childhood experiences in Limerick gave him a lifelong love for Irish folklore and storytelling, but also a lifelong sense of anxiety about the potential consequences of the political empowerment of Irish Catholics. At times he seemed to be in cautious sympathy with nationalism, but as a newspaper owner he tended to remain silent on these issues or to follow a Unionist line.

Le Fanu came from a literary family. His great-uncle was the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, (the playwright whose 18th century comedies of manners such as *The School for Scandal* enjoyed great success in London and who would be an influence on Oscar Wilde).

Le Fanu studied law at Trinity College but never practiced.

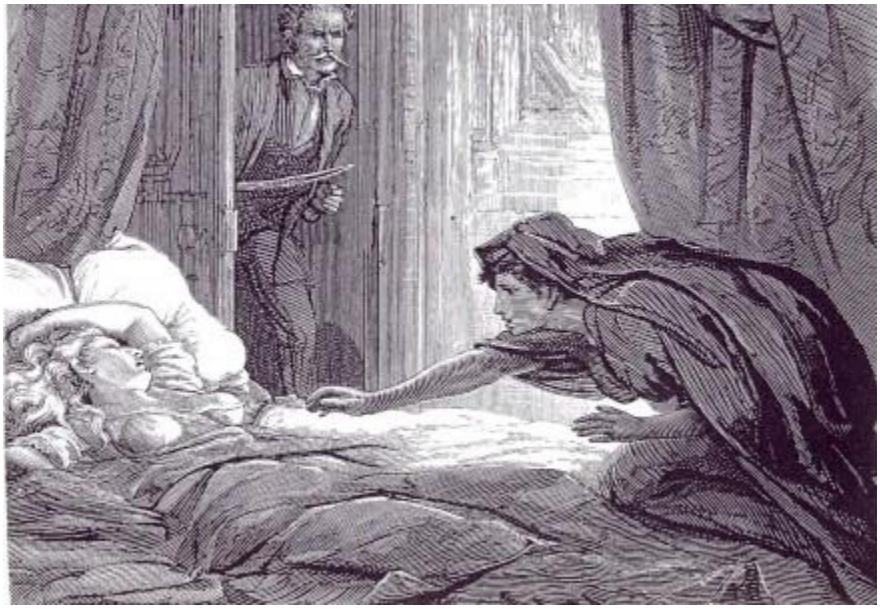
After leaving university, he became a journalist. He owned and edited various Dublin newspapers.

In 1844 he married Susanna Bennett. In 1856, after having children, they moved into her parents' house at 18 Merrion Square (very close to where Oscar Wilde had been born two years earlier, making the Wilde and Le Fanu families neighbors—Le Fanu was of the same generation as Wilde's parents). In 1858, Le Fanu's wife Susanna Bennett, who had suffered from mental illness, died in unclear circumstances. Before her death, she had dreamed that her dead father was standing at the foot of his bed, luring her to death with the words: "there is room in the vault for you, little Sue."

Susanna Bennett's death would prove a turning point in Le Fanu's life, and one that would lead him towards an obsessive interest in the occult. After a period of grief and trauma in which he did not write for three years, he began to write prolifically from his home in Merrion Square. He lived a reclusive life which gained him the nickname "The Invisible Prince." Local gossip had it that he worked in bed by candlelight and when he showed his face in town, it was to seek out books on Astrology and Demonology in obscure local bookstores. One contemporary commentator remarked in his obituary that "his handsome . . . face was wholly missed from society; and he was only known on the title page of his books." He wrote fourteen novels published in serial form in various publications, and he also wrote many short stories. Today, he is best remembered for his ghost stories, vampire tales, and other supernatural narratives.

Merrion Square, Dublin: Oscar Wilde's birthplace (1854) (left) and the home where Le Fanu lived with his wife and children beginning in 1856 (right).

CARMILLA



"If it was sad, the tone of mind which this induced was also sweet.

Whatever it might be, my soul acquiesced in it."

- **Serialized in 1871 in the journal *The Dark Blue*; published in Le Fanu's volume *In A Glass Darkly* in 1872**
- **An important influence on Stoker's *Dracula***

Below are some passages that help to ground Carmilla in Irish literature. They come from Robert Tracy's introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of Le Fanu's ***In a Glass Darkly****.*

"Many of his stories, supernatural or otherwise, portray the dispossessed Catholic gentry of Ireland after the Williamite triumph….Charles Le Fanu de Cresserons, Le Fanu's ancestor, had fought for William at the Battle of the Boyne (1690), and the family cherished a portrait of the king which he was supposed to have personally presented to de Cresserons. As Le Fanu contemplated his own class's loss of power in the aftermath of Daniel O'Connell's successful campaign for Catholic Emancipation (1829), and increasing Catholic political and economic power, he seemed to imagine the Ascendancy's future by examining the Catholic gentry's dispossessed past, to recognize that the Williamite revolution, which had given Le Fanu's family lands and prestige, was being altered by another revolution which would reverse the earlier one" (xvi-xvii).

"Carmilla" is an undead survivor from the late seventeenth century, that period that fascinated Le Fanu because of the Williamite victories in Ireland. Her portrait, as Mircalla, Countess Karnstein, is dated 1698" (xix).

"The story is set in Styria, on the borders of Austria and Hungary—traditional vampire territory. Laura, who tells the story, begins by stressing her English nationality. Though she has never been there, she thinks of England as "home." Her father, also English, has retired from the Austrian service. They speak English together, read Shakespeare to keep up the language, and drink tea in the English manner….This insistent Englishness, their social isolation, strongly suggest the lives of many Anglo-Irish landowners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The abandoned village suggests Ireland after the Great Famine of 1845-9. The people have been removed by what Laura's father calls the "infection" of superstition, their fear of vampires—a recollection of the fever that accompanied the Famine. Many have chosen exile" (xx).

"Carmilla is at once a vampire and an Irish banshee…a woman who dwells in one of the ancient burial mounds so common in the Irish countryside, a woman of the dead…a wailing spirit who foretells or announces and laments the deaths of family members" (xxii).

"Irish fairies [the sí] are more sinister than Shakespeare's Mustardseeds and Peaseblossoms. They crave human beings, especially children, but also young men and women, luring them away to live a kind of half-life under the earth. In some ways they live on—or through—these captives, as vampires live on blood" (xxii).

"Carmilla has affinities both with the traditional banshee and the sí" (xxiii).

"In her eagerness for a sexual relationship with Laura, Carmilla resembles the predatory si of Irish legend, as well as the Balkan tradition of the vampire" (xxiii).

"…as member of the ancient family who once owned a great local estate, Carmilla is a native of the terrain she haunts. She is one of the ancient lords of the land, whose descendants, reduced to peasant/tenant status, often haunted the Anglo-Irish estates confiscated from their ancestors, which they considered rightfully their own. Carmilla threatens the new English landowners with death, with a kind of demonic possession, sexually with a kind of double miscegenation—basic fears among the Anglo-Irish gentry as they saw their control of Ireland slipping away. Though Le Fanu himself was not of the landed gentry, he had relatives who were. He tended to respect and defend the landowning class as Ireland's natural rulers….Carmilla will destroy these pleasant, well-meaning people, or enthrall them, or drive them away. In Ireland, as in the vampire legend's basic element, the past survives to torment the present" (xxvii).

"The lethargy, almost apathy of Laura, the 'touched' victim, seems a kind of death-wish….Even after Carmilla has been exposed and destroyed, Laura thinks of her with 'ambiguous alternations,' and sometimes hears, listens for, her 'light step.' In Laura's failure to resist we can perhaps discern Le Fanu's deepest anxieties about his own class, and his fear that the revenants of Irish history can never be laid to rest" (xxviii).

RELIGION IN *CARMILLA*:

Carmilla at the funeral of the peasant girl, listening to the procession singing hymns:

"Don't you see how discordant that is?"… "You pierce my ears….Besides, how can you tell me that your religion and mine are the same; your forms wound me, and I hate funerals" (31). [she then feels a kind of physical suffocation seemingly induced by hearing the hymn]

The dwarf/wanderer:

"Will your ladyships be pleased to buy an amulet against the oupire [vampire], which is going like the wolf, I hear, through these woods,"…"They are dying of it right and left, and here is a charm that never fails; only pinned to the pillow, and you may laugh in his face" (35).

"These charms consisted of oblong slips of vellum, with cabalistic ciphers and diagrams upon them" (35).

Carmilla buys one first and Laura follows suit.

Laura's father shares his religious views:

"We are in God's hands, nothing can happen without his permission, and all will end well for those who love him" (36).

Carmilla disagrees with him, saying that the disease that is taking people's lives in the countryside comes from the Creator and from nature (36).

Laura doubts Carmilla's Christianity:

"I often wondered whether our pretty guest ever said her prayers. I certainly had never seen her upon her knees….If it had not been that it had casually come out in one of our careless talks that she had been baptised, I should have doubted her being a Christian" (45).

Laura and Carmilla debate the properties of the amulet:

Carmilla: "It has been fumigated or immersed in some drug, and is an antidote against the malaria."

Laura: "Then it acts only on the body?" (50)

Laura's father announces his intention to visit a priest and wants to take Laura with him (63).

The general speaks out about the "hellish arts" that took his niece's life (65). He talks about being instructed by a doctor to visit a priest (85). The priest is absent, so the General follows the instructions in the doctor's letter himself, but his niece dies anyway (85-86).

An official Inquisition is held into Carmilla's tomb. "The priest had performed solemn rites that night…" (91). Laura survives.

Do you think Le Fanu is suggesting that her fate differs from the General's niece's because a priest has performed the ritual?

PLOT SUMMARY OF CARMILLA

[I have called the heroine Laura from the start, but we don't learn that this is her name until quite late in the novella.]

Prologue: Note the use of a narrative frame, a frequent device in the Gothic novel. This prologue speaks of a note attached by Dr. Hesselius, We learn that this tale will appear as part of Dr. Hesselius's published Collected Papers. This is rather vague: we don't know who Dr. Hesselius is, but this frame seems designed to lend an aura of respectability and scientific credibility to the tale that follows. [If you read LeFanu's entire volume, *In A Glass Darkly*, you will learn more about Dr. Hesselius, an influence on the character of Van Helsing in *Dracula*].

I. An Early Fright

We learn that the story is set in Styria (a region of Slovenia).
The heroine's father is English and keeps up his English values and habits (like tea-drinking). He was married to a Styrian woman who died in Laura's infancy. In Laura's hyphenated identity (Anglo-Stryian) perhaps we can see parallels to Anglo-Irish identity.
The setting is an isolated castle/schloss, which is characteristic of Gothic novels.
The heroine is 19 years old, which is also characteristic of Gothic novels.
The title of the section, "An Early Fright," refers to Laura's first vision of Carmilla, which occurs in her childhood. She has the vision of a "solemn, pretty face" and the "sensation of two needles running into her breast (7)."

II. A Guest

We learn that Mademoiselle Rheinfeldt, who was meant to be Laura's playmate, has died.
A carriage crash occurs and the victims take refuge at the castle. They are a mother and daughter. The mother says she needs to go on an urgent errand and leaves her daughter (Carmilla) to recover in the schloss.

III. We Compare Notes

After Carmilla recovers, she and Laura get to know each other. Laura reveals that she recognizes Carmilla—that she had a vision of her many years ago. Carmilla says that she has had the same experience. Laura describes her simultaneous attraction and repulsion to Carmilla.

IV. Her Habits – A Saunter

We get more information about Carmilla. Her chief characteristic appears to be her languid physicality.
She rises late—at about 1 PM.
She drinks a cup of chocolate (hot chocolate) but eats nothing.
"a coldness, it seemed to me, beyond her years" (28).
She says she is of an "ancient and noble" family (28).

"Her home lay in the direction of the west" (28).
Carmilla delivers some simultaneously menacing and seductive lines:
"I live in your warm life, and you shall die, sweetly die—into mine" (29).
Laura speaks further of her ambivalence—her "adoration" and "abhorrence" of Carmilla (29).

Carmilla becomes very offended when they witness the funeral of a young girl: "how can you tell me that your religion and mine are the same?" (31).
The sound of hymns seems to physically pain her.

Arrival of the dwarf/wanderer who speaks of a vampire plague and sells them amulets to protect themselves.
The dwarf/wanderer also has the skills of a dentist and offers to file down Carmilla's pointed tooth. Carmilla is offended.

Laura's father reports on local deaths but dismisses the idea that something supernatural is going on, saying that peasants are just superstitious.

Carmilla starts talking to Laura about the romance of dying together.
The doctor comes and talks privately to Laura's father.

V. A Wonderful Likeness

Renovated family portraits arrive (they are from the mother's side of the family)
The one of Laura's ancestress Marcia Karnstein, from 1698, is the spitting image of Carmilla.
Because the grime and dirt has been removed from the painting, Laura can now see that the name of her ancestress is not Marcia but Mircalla (a variant of Carmilla).

Carmilla confesses her love to Laura: "I have been in love with no one, and never shall," she whispered, "unless it should be with you" (40).

VI. A Very Strange Agony

A mysterious illness has invaded the neighborhood.
Carmilla has more juicy/melodramatic lines:
"I am under vows, no nun half so awfully…you will think me cruel, very selfish, but love is always selfish" (44).
Carmilla remembers being at a ball years ago.
She tells Laura: "I was all but assassinated in my bed, wounded *here*" (45), she touched her breast, "and never was the same since"…"a cruel love—strange love, that

would have taken my life. Love will have its sacrifices. No sacrifice without blood" (45).
She is too tired to get up and lock her door (uh oh…)
Carmilla has been baptized, we learn, but she doesn't participate in family prayers at the schloss.
Carmilla comes in the night and penetrates Laura's breast with something that feels like two large needles. Laura wakes and sees a female figure standing at the end of the bed. Carmilla moves in a ghostly/special-effect fashion towards and then through the door.
Laura lies in bed "more dead than alive till morning" (47).

VII. Descending

The household reports that a ghostly female figure has been seen walking down the lime tree avenue.
Carmilla comes down and reports that she experienced a fright the night before. She describes an experience very much like the one Laura had, tricking her by trying to sound like a victim of a vampire herself. She says that she used her amulet.
They discuss the amulet and whether it only works against physical disease (malaria) or may have broader properties.
Laura describes the change coming over her as a result of Carmilla's visit by night. "I felt myself a changed girl"; "A strange melancholy…"; "Dim thoughts of death";…" "slowly sinking"… (50).

"If it was sad, the tone of mind which this induced was also sweet. Whatever it might be, my soul acquiesced in it"; "it discoloured and perverted the whole state of my life" (50).

Laura describes strange sensations in her sleep: a feeling like that of taking a bath, exhaustion and exertion, darkness, a female voice, a hand drawn along her cheek and neck, kisses to her throat, sobbing, strangulation, and convulsion.

She hears a voice: "Your mother warns you to beware of the assassin" (50). A light comes on and she sees Carmilla at the foot of the bed in a white nightdress, bathed in blood.

She thinks Carmilla is being murdered.

Carmilla vanishes.

VIII. Search

The household searches high and low for Carmilla, but there's no sign of her. Laura goes up to Carmilla's room after the search and finds her there.
Laura's father insists that it is easily explainable as a sleepwalking incident.

IX. The Doctor

We learn that our heroine's name is Laura for the first time.
The doctor examines Laura in her father's presence.
They find a small blue spot.
Laura's father won't tell her what's really going on.
He wants to take her to a priest in Karnstein.

X. Bereaved

The General (the man who had been the guardian of Mademoiselle Rheinfeldt, Laura's intended companion) returns, excoriating the "hellish arts" (65) to which his niece/ward has fallen victim
He is traveling to the Karnstein chapel to perform a "pious sacrilege" (66).

XI. The Story

Narrative-within-the-narrative: the General tells his story, set at a masked ball.
It is a very familiar story

XII. A Petition

The General's Narrative continues. Carmilla—called Millarca here—and her mother perform their trick on the general's niece (the mother says she has been called away on an errand and leaves Carmilla behind). Marcilla and the niece seem to fall in love.

XIII. The Wood-man

The wood-man in Karnstein gives some history on the town and how it came to be deserted. It was haunted by "revenants" (vampires). The tomb of Mircalla was removed during the vampire plague (82).

XIV. The Meeting

The General's narrative continues in the Karnstein chapel. When the story ends, Carmilla enters (en route to sleep in her coffin).

XV. Ordeal and Execution

The General, Laura, and her father find the tomb of Mircalla, Countess Karnstein.
They get the priest to perform rites.
They exhume the body, which is floated with blood.
They drive a stake through her heart and decapitate her.
It's all done officially by an "Imperial Commission"

CONCLUSION

Some closing remarks, including the comment that a vampire kills some of its victims immediately, but "woos" and "yearns for sympathy and consent" from others (94).

Laura and her father travel to Italy.

Laura remembers Carmilla alternately as a “playful, languid, beautiful girl” and a “writhing fiend” (96).