

LEVER CHARLES JAMES

THE CONFESSIONS OF
HARRY LORREQUER —
VOLUME 3

Charles Lever

**The Confessions of Harry
Lorrequer — Volume 3**

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Charles James Lever

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CHAPTER XVIII.

DETACHMENT DUTY — AN ASSIZE TOWN

As there appeared to be but little prospect of poor Fitzgerald ever requiring any explanation from me as to the events of that morning, for he feared to venture from his room, lest he might be recognised and prosecuted for abduction, I thought it better to keep my own secret also; and it was therefore with a feeling of any thing but regret, that I received an order which, under other circumstances, would have rendered me miserable — to march on detachment duty. To any one at all conversant with the life we lead in the army, I need not say how unpleasant such a change usually is. To surrender your capital mess, with all its well-appointed equipments — your jovial brother officers — hourly flirtations with the whole female population — never a deficient one in a garrison town — not to speak of your matches at trotting, coursing, and pigeon-shooting, and a hundred other delectable modes of getting over the ground through life, till it please your ungrateful country and the Horse Guards to make you a major-general — to surrender all these, I say, for the noise, dust, and damp disagreeables of a country inn, with bacon to eat, whiskey to drink, and the priest, or the constabulary chief, to get drunk with — I speak of Ireland here — and your only affair, *par amours*, being the occasional ogling of the apothecary's daughter opposite, as often as she visits the shop, in the *soi disant* occupation of measuring out garden seeds and senna. These are indeed, the exchanges with a difference, for which there is no compensation; and, for my own part, I never went upon such duty, that I did not exclaim with the honest Irishman, when the mail went over him, "Oh, Lord! what is this for?" — firmly believing that in the earthly purgatory of such duties, I was reaping the heavy retribution attendant on past offences.

Besides, from being rather a crack man in my corps, I thought it somewhat hard that my turn for such duty should come round about twice as often as that of my brother officers; but so it is — I never knew a fellow a little smarter than his neighbours, that was not pounced upon by his colonel for a victim. Now, however, I looked at these matters in a very different light. To leave head-quarters was to escape being questioned; while there was scarcely any post to which I could be sent, where something strange or adventurous might not turn up, and serve me to erase the memory of the past, and turn the attention of my companions in any quarter rather than towards myself.

My orders on the present occasion were to march to Clonmel; from whence I was to proceed a short distance to the house of a magistrate, upon whose information, transmitted to the Chief Secretary, the present assistance of a military party had been obtained; and not without every appearance of reason. The assizes of the town were about to be held, and many capital offences stood for trial in the calendar; and as it was strongly rumoured that, in the event of certain convictions being obtained, a rescue would be attempted, a general attack upon the town seemed a too natural consequence; and if so, the house of so obnoxious a person as him I have alluded to, would be equally certain of being assailed. Such, at least, is too frequently the history of such scenes, beginning with no one definite object: sometimes a slight one — more ample views and wider conceptions of mischief follow; and what has begun in a drunken riot — a casual *rencontre* — may terminate in the slaughter of a family, or the burning of a village. The finest peasantry — God bless them — are a *vif* people, and quicker at taking a hint than most others, and have, withal, a natural taste for fighting, that no acquired habits of other nations can pretend to vie with.

As the worthy person to whose house I was now about to proceed was, and if I am rightly informed is, rather a remarkable character in the local history of Irish politics, I may as well say a few words concerning him. Mr. Joseph Larkins, Esq. — (for so he signed himself) — had only been lately elevated to the bench of magistrates. He was originally one of that large but intelligent class called in Ireland "small farmers;" remarkable chiefly for a considerable tact in driving hard bargains — a great skill in wethers — a rather national dislike to pay all species of imposts, whether partaking of the nature of tax, tithe, grand jury cess, or any thing of that nature whatsoever. So very accountable — I had almost said, (for I have been long quartered in Ireland,) so very laudable a propensity, excited but little of surprise or astonishment in his neighbours, the majority of whom entertained very similar views — none, however, possessing any thing like the able and lawyer-like ability of the worthy Larkins, for the successful evasion of these inroads upon the liberty of the subject. Such, in fact, was his talent, and so great his success in this respect, that he had established what, if it did not actually amount to a statute of exemption in law, served equally well in reality; and for several years he enjoyed a perfect immunity on the subject of money-paying in general. His "little houldin'," as he unostentatiously called some five hundred acres of bog, mountain, and sheep-walk, lay in a remote part of the county, the roads were nearly impassable for several miles in that direction, land was of little value; the agent was a timid man, with a large family; of three tithe-proctors who had penetrated into the forbidden territory, two laboured under a dyspepsia for life, not being able to digest parchment and sealing-wax, for they usually dined on their own writs; and the third gave five pounds out of his pocket, to a large, fresh-looking man, with brown whiskers and beard, that concealed him two nights in a hay-loft, to escape the vengeance of the people, which act of philanthropy should never be forgotten, if some ill-natured people were not bold enough to say the kind individual in question was no other man than —

However this may be, true it is that this was the last attempt made to bring within the responsibilities of the law so refractory a subject; and so powerful is habit, that although he was to be met with at every market and cattle-fair in the county, an arrest of his person was no more contemplated than if he enjoyed the privilege of parliament to go at large without danger.

When the country became disturbed, and nightly meetings of the peasantry were constantly held, followed by outrages against life and property to the most frightful extent, the usual resources of the law were employed unavailingly. It was in vain to offer high rewards. Approvers could not be found; and so perfectly organized were the secret associations, that few beyond the very ringleaders knew any thing of consequence to communicate. Special commissions were sent down from Dublin; additional police force, detachments of military; long correspondences took place between the magistracy and the government — but all in vain. The disturbances continued; and at last to such a height had they risen, that the country was put under martial law; and even this was ultimately found perfectly insufficient to repel what now daily threatened to become an open rebellion rather than mere agrarian disturbance. It was at this precise moment, when all resources seemed to be fast exhausting themselves, that certain information reached the Castle, of the most important nature. The individual who obtained and transmitted it, had perilled his life in so doing — but the result was a great one — no less than the capital conviction and execution of seven of the most influential amongst the disaffected peasantry. Confidence was at once shaken in the secrecy of their associates; distrust and suspicion followed. Many of the boldest sunk beneath the fear of betrayal, and themselves, became evidence for the crown; and in five months, a county shaken with midnight meetings, and blazing with insurrectionary fires, became almost the most tranquil in its province. It may well be believed, that he who rendered this important service on this trying emergency, could not be passed over, and the name of J. Larkins soon after appeared in the Gazette as one of his Majesty's justices of the peace for the county; pretty much in the same spirit in which a country gentleman converts the greatest poacher in his neighbourhood by making him, his gamekeeper.

In person he was a large and powerfully built man, considerably above six feet in height, and possessing great activity, combined with powers of enduring fatigue almost incredible. With an eye like a hawk, and a heart that never knew fear, he was the person, of all others, calculated to strike terror into the minds of the country people. The reckless daring with which he threw himself into danger — the almost impetuous quickness with which he followed up a scent, whenever information reached him of an important character — had their full effect upon a people who, long accustomed to the slowness and the uncertainty of the law were almost paralyzed at beholding detection and punishment follow on crime, as certainly as the thunder-crash follows the lightning.

His great instrument for this purpose was the obtaining information from sworn members of the secret societies, and whose names never appeared in the course of a trial or a prosecution, until the measure of their iniquity was completed, when they usually received a couple of hundred pounds, blood-money, as it was called, with which they took themselves away to America or Australia — their lives being only secured while they remained, by the shelter afforded them in the magistrate's own house. And so it happened that, constantly there numbered from ten to twelve of these wretches, inmates of his family, each of whom had the burden of participation in one murder at least, waiting for an opportunity to leave the country, unnoticed and unwatched.

Such a frightful and unnatural state of things, can hardly be conceived; and yet, shocking as it was, it was a relief to that which led to it. I have dwelt, perhaps too long upon this painful subject; but let my reader now accompany me a little farther, and the scene shall be changed. Does he see that long, low, white house, with a tall, steep roof, perforated with innumerable narrow windows. There are a few straggling beech trees, upon a low, bleak-looking field before the house, which is called, par excellence, the lawn; a pig or two, some geese, and a tethered goat are, here and there musing over the state of Ireland, while some rosy curly-headed noisy and bare-legged urchins are gamboling before the door. This is the dwelling of the worshipful justice, to which myself and my party were now approaching, with that degree of activity which attends on most marches of twenty miles, under the oppressive closeness of a day in autumn. Fatigued and tired as I was, yet I could not enter the little enclosure before the house, without stopping for a moment to admire the view before me. A large tract of rich country, undulating on every side, and teeming with corn fields, in all the yellow gold of ripeness; here and there, almost hid by small clumps of ash and alder, were scattered some cottages, from which the blue smoke rose in a curling column into the calm evening's sky. All was graceful, and beautifully tranquil; and you might have selected the picture as emblematic of that happiness and repose we so constantly associate with our ideas of the country; and yet, before that sun had even set, which now gilded the landscape, its glories would be replaced by the lurid glare of nightly incendiarism, and — but here, fortunately for my reader, and perhaps myself, I am interrupted in my meditations by a rich, mellifluous accent saying, in the true Doric of the south —

"Mr. Loorequer! you're welcome to Curryglass, sir. You've had a hot day for your march. Maybe you'd take a taste of sherry before dinner? Well then, we'll not wait for Molowny, but order it up at once."

So saying, I was ushered into a long, low drawing-room, in which were collected together about a dozen men, to whom I was specially and severally presented, and among whom I was happy to find my boarding-house acquaintance, Mr. Daly, who, with the others, had arrived that same day, for the assizes, and who were all members of the legal profession, either barristers, attorneys, or clerks of the peace.

The hungry aspect of the convives, no less than the speed with which dinner made its appearance after my arrival, showed me that my coming was only waited for to complete the party — the Mr. Molowny before alluded to, being unanimously voted present. The meal itself had but slight pretensions to elegance; there were neither vol au vents, nor croquettes; neither were there poulets aux truffes, nor cotelletes a la soubise but in their place stood a lordly fish of some five-and-twenty pounds weight, a massive sirloin, with all the usual armament of fowls, ham, pigeon-pie, beef-steak,

lying in rather a promiscuous order along either side of the table. The party were evidently disposed to be satisfied, and I acknowledge, I did not prove an exception to the learned individuals about me, either in my relish for the good things, or my appetite to enjoy them. *Dulce est desipere in loco*, says some one, by which I suppose is meant, that a rather slang company is occasionally good fun. Whether from my taste for the "humanities" or not, I am unable to say, but certainly in my then humour, I should not have exchanged my position for one of much greater pretensions to elegance and ton. There was first a general onslaught upon the viands, crashing of plates, jingling of knives, mingling with requests for "more beef," "the hard side of the salmon," or "another slice of ham." Then came a dropping fire of drinking wine, which quickly increased, the decanters of sherry for about ten minutes resting upon the table, about as long as Taglioni touches this mortal earth in one of her flying ballets. Acquaintances were quickly formed between the members of the bar and myself, and I found that my momentary popularity was likely to terminate in my downfall; for, as each introduction was followed by a bumper of strong sherry, I did not expect to last till the end of the feast. The cloth at length disappeared, and I was just thanking Providence for the respite from hob-nobbing which I imagined was to follow, when a huge, square decanter of whiskey appeared, flanked by an enormous jug of boiling water, and renewed preparations for drinking upon a large scale seriously commenced. It was just at this moment that I, for the first time, perceived the rather remarkable figure who had waited upon us at dinner, and who, while I chronicle so many things of little import, deserves a slight mention. He was a little old man of about fifty-five or sixty years, wearing upon his head a barrister's wig, and habited in clothes which originally had been the costume of a very large and bulky person, and which, consequently, added much to the drollery of his appearance. He had been, for forty years, the servant of Judge Vandeleur, and had entered his present service rather in the light of a preceptor than a menial, invariably dictating to the worthy justice upon every occasion of etiquette or propriety, by a reference to what "the judge himself" did, which always sufficed to carry the day in Nicholas's favour, opposition to so correct a standard, never being thought of by the justice.

"That's Billy Crow's own whiskey, the 'small still,'" said Nicholas, placing the decanter upon the table, "make much of it, for there isn't such dew in the county."

With this commendation upon the liquor, Nicholas departed, and we proceeded to fill our glasses.

I cannot venture — perhaps it is so much the better that I cannot — to give any idea of the conversation which at once broke out, as if the barriers that restrained it had at length given way. But law talk in all its plenitude, followed; and for two hours I heard of nothing but writs, detainers, declarations, traverses in prox, and alibis, with sundry hints for *qui tam* processes, interspersed, occasionally, with sly jokes about packing juries and confusing witnesses, among which figured the usual number of good things attributed to the Chief Baron O'Grady and the other sayers of smart sayings at the bar.

"Ah!" said Mr. Daly, drawing a deep sigh at the same instant — "the bar is sadly fallen off since I was called in the year seventy-six. There was not a leader in one of the circuits at that time that couldn't puzzle any jury that ever sat in a box; and as for driving through an act of parliament, it was, as Sancho Panza says, cakes and gingerbread to them. And then, there is one especial talent lost for ever to the present generation — just like stained glass and illuminated manuscripts, and slow poisons and the like — that were all known years ago — I mean the beautiful art of addressing the judge before the jury, and not letting them know you were quizzing them, if ye liked to do that same. Poor Peter Purcell for that — rest his ashes — he could cheat the devil himself, if he had need — and maybe he has had before now, Peter is sixteen years dead last November."

"And what was Peter's peculiar tact in that respect, Mr. Daly?" said I.

"Oh, then I might try for hours to explain it to you in vain; but I'll just give you an instance that'll show you better than all my dissertations on the subject, and I was present myself when it happened, more by token, it was the first time I ever met him on circuit; —

"I suppose there is scarcely any one here now, except myself, that remembers the great cause of Mills versus Mulcahy, a widow and others, that was tried in Ennis, in the year '82. It's no matter if there is not. Perhaps it may be more agreeable for me, for I can tell my story my own version, and not be interrupted. Well, that was called the old record, for they tried it seventeen times. I believe, on my conscience, it killed old Jones, who was in the Common Pleas; he used to say, if he put it for trial on the day of judgment, one of the parties would be sure to lodge an appeal. Be that as it may, the Millses engaged Peter special, and brought him down with a great retainer, in a chaise and four, flags flying, and favors in the postillions' hats, and a fiddler on the roof playing the 'hare in the corn.' The inn was illuminated the same evening, and Peter made a speech from the windows upon the liberty of the press and religious freedom all over the globe, and there wasn't a man in the mob didn't cheer him, which was the more civil, because few of them knew a word of English, and the others thought he was a play-actor. But it all went off well, nevertheless, for Peter was a clever fellow; and although he liked money well, he liked popularity more, and he never went any where special that he hadn't a public meeting of some kind or other, either to abolish rents, or suppress parsons, or some such popular and beneficial scheme, which always made him a great favourite with the people, and got him plenty of clients. But I am wandering from the record. Purcell came down, as I said before, special for Mills; and when he looked over his brief, and thought of the case, he determined to have it tried by a gentlemen jury, for although he was a great man with the mob, he liked the country gentlemen better in the jury box, for he was always coming out with quotations from the classics, which, whether the grand jury understood or not, they always applauded very much. Well, when he came into court that morning, you may guess his surprise and mortification to find that the same jury that had tried a common ejectment case, were still in the box, and waiting, by the chief justice's direction, to try Mills versus Mulcahy, the great case of the assizes.

"I hear they were a set of common clod-hopping wretches, with frize coats and brogues, that no man could get round at all, for they were as cunning as foxes, and could tell blarney from good sense, rather better than people with better coats on them.

"Now, the moment that Mr. Purcell came into the court, after bowing politely to the judge, he looked up to the box, and when he saw the dirty faces of the dealers in pork and potatoes, and the unshaven chins of the small farmers, his heart fell within him, and he knew in a minute how little they'd care for the classics — if he quoted Caesar's Commentaries itself for them — ignorant creatures as they were!

"Well, the cause was called, and up gets Peter, and he began to 'express', (as he always called it himself,) 'the great distress his client and himself would labour under, if the patient and most intelligent jury then on the panel should come to the consideration of so very tedious a case as this promised to be, after their already most fatiguing exertions;' he commented upon their absence from their wives and families, their farms neglected, their crops hazarded, and in about fifteen minutes he showed them they were, if not speedily released and sent home, worse treated and harder used than many of the prisoners condemned to three months imprisonment; and actually so far worked upon the feelings of the chief himself, that he turned to the foreman of the jury, and said, 'that although it was a great deviation from his habitual practice, if at this pressing season their prospects were involved to the extent the learned counsel had pictured, why then, that he would so far bend his practice on this occasion, and they should be dismissed.' Now Peter, I must confess, here showed the most culpable ignorance in not knowing that a set of country fellows, put up in a jury box, would rather let every glade of corn rot in the ground, than give up what they always supposed so very respectable an appointment; for they invariably imagine in these cases that they are something very like my lord the judge, 'barrin' the ermine;' besides, that on the present occasion, Peter's argument in their favour decided them upon staying, for they now felt like martyrs, and firmly believed that they were putting the chief justice under an obligation to them for life.

"When, therefore, they heard the question of the court, it did not take a moment's time for the whole body to rise en masses and bowing to the judge, call out, 'We'll stay, my lord, and try every mother's son of them for you; ay, if it lasted till Christmas.

"I am sure, my lord,' said Peter, collecting himself for an effort, 'I cannot sufficiently express my gratitude for the great sacrifice these gifted and highly intelligent gentlemen are making in my client's behalf; for being persons who have great interests in the country at stake, their conduct on the present occasion is the more praiseworthy; and I am certain they fully appreciate, as does your lordship, the difficulty of the case before us, when documents will be submitted, requiring a certain degree of acquaintance with such testimonials sufficiently to comprehend. Many of the title deeds, as your lordship is aware, being obtained under old abbey charters, are in the learned languages; and we all know how home to our hearts and bosoms comes the beautiful line of the Greek poet '*vacuus viator cantabit ante latronem.*'" The sound of the quotation roused the chief justice, who had been in some measure inattentive to the preceding part of the learned counsel's address, and he called out rather sharply, 'Greek! Mr. Purcell — why I must have mistaken — will you repeat the passage?'

"With pleasure, my lord. I was just observing to your lordship and the jury, with the eloquent poet Hergesius, '*vacuus viator cantabit ante latronem.*'

"Greek, did you call it?'

"Yes, my lord, of course I did.'

"Why, Mr. Purcell, you are quoting Latin to me — and what do you mean by talking of the learned Hergesius, and Greek all this time? — the line is Juvenal's.'

"My lord, with much submission to your lordship, and every deference to your great attainments and very superior talents, let me still assure you that I am quoting Greek, and that your lordship is in error.'

"Mr. Purcell, I have only to remark, that if you are desirous of making a jest of the court, you had better be cautious, I say, sir;' and here the judge waxed exceeding wroth. 'I say the line is Latin — Latin, sir, Juvenal's Latin, sir — every schoolboy knows it.'

"Of course, my lord,' said Peter, with great humility, 'I bow myself to the decision of your lordship; the line is, therefore, Latin. Yet I may be permitted to hint that were your lordship disposed to submit this question, as you are shortly about to do another and a similar one, to those clear-sighted and intelligent gentlemen there, I am satisfied, my lord, it would be Greek to every man of them.'

"The look, the voice, and the peculiar emphasis with which Peter gave these words, were perfectly successful. The acute judge anticipated the wish of the counsel — the jury were dismissed, and Peter proceeded to his case before those he knew better how to deal with, and with whom the result was more certain to be as he wished it."

To this anecdote of the counsellor, succeeded many others, of which, as the whiskey was potent and the hour late, my memory is not over retentive: the party did not break up till near four o'clock; and even then, our seance only concluded, because some one gravely remarked "that as we should be all actively engaged on the morrow, early hours were advisable."

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