

The Black Ferry

By John Galt

I was then returning from my first session at college. The weather had for some time before been uncommonly wet, every brook and stream was swollen far beyond its banks, the meadows were flooded, and the river itself was increased to a raging Hellespont, insomuch that the ferry was only practicable for an hour before and after high tide.

The day was showery and stormy, by which I was detained at the inn until late in the afternoon, so that it was dark before I reached the ferry-house, and the tide did not serve for safe crossing until midnight. I was therefore obliged to sit by the fire and wait the time, a circumstance which gave me some uneasiness, for the ferryman was old and infirm, and Dick his son, who usually attended the boat during the night, happened to be then absent, the day having been such that it was not expected any travellers would seek to pass over that night.

The presence of Dick was not, however, absolutely necessary, for the boat swung from side to side by a rope anchored in the middle of the stream, and, on account of the strong current, another rope had been stretched across by which passengers could draw themselves over without assistance, an easy task to those who had the sleight of it, but it was not so to me, who still wore my arm in a sling.

While sitting at the fireside conversing with the ferryman and his wife, a smart, good-looking country lad, with a recruit's cockade in his hat, came in, accompanied by a young woman who was far advanced in pregnancy. They were told the state of the ferry, and that unless the recruit undertook to conduct the boat himself; they must wait the return of Dick.

They had been only that day married, and were on their way to join a detachment of the regiment in which Ralph Nocton, as the recruit was called, had that evening enlisted, the parish officers having obliged him to marry the girl. Whatever might have been their former love and intimacy, they were not many minutes in the house when he became sullen and morose towards her; nor was she more amiable towards him. He said little, but he often looked at her with an indignant eye, as she reproached him for having so rashly enlisted to abandon her and his unborn baby, assuring him that she would never part from him while life and power lasted.

Though it could not be denied that she possessed both beauty and an attractive person, there was yet a silly vixen humour about her ill calculated to conciliate. I did not therefore wonder to hear that Nocton had married her with reluctance; I only regretted that the parish officers were so inaccessible to commiseration, and so void of conscience as to be guilty of rendering the poor fellow miserable for life to avert the hazard of the child becoming a burden on the parish.

The ferryman and his wife endeavoured to reconcile them to their lot; and the recruit, who appeared to be naturally reckless and generous, seemed willing to be appeased; but his weak companion was capricious and pettish. On one occasion, when a sudden shower beat hard against the window, she cried out, with little regard to decorum, that she would go no farther that night.

'You may do as you please, Mary Blake,' said Nocton, 'but go I must, for the detachment marches tomorrow morning. It was only to give you time to prepare to come with me that the Captain consented to let me remain so late in the town.'

She, however, only remonstrated bitterly at his cruelty in forcing her to travel in her condition, and in such weather. Nocton refused to listen to her, but told her somewhat doggedly, more so

than was consistent with the habitual cheerful cast of his physiognomy, 'that although he had already been ruined by her, he trusted she had not yet the power to make him a deserter.'

He then went out, and remained some time alone. When he returned, his appearance was surprisingly changed; his face was of an ashy paleness; his eyes bright, febrile, and eager, and his lip quivered as he said:

'Come, Mary, I can wait no longer; the boat is ready, the river is not so wild, and the rain is over.

In vain she protested; he was firm; and she had no option but either to go or to be left behind. The old ferryman accompanied them to the boat, saw them embark, and gave the recruit some instructions how to manage the ropes, as it was still rather early in the tide. On returning into the house, he remarked facetiously to his wife:

'I can never see why young men should be always blamed, and all pity reserved for the damsels.'

At that moment a rattling shower of rain and hail burst like a platoon of small shot on the window, and a flash of vivid lightning was followed by one of the most tremendous peals of thunder I have ever heard.

'Hark!' cried the old woman startling, 'was not that a shriek?' We listened, but the cry was not repeated; we rushed to the door, but no other sound was heard than the raging of the river, and the roar of the sea-waves breaking on the bar.

Dick soon after came home, and the boat having swung back to her station, I embarked with him, and reached the Opposite inn, where I soon went to bed. Scarcely had I laid my head on the pillow when a sudden inexplicable terror fell upon me; I shook with an unknown horror; I was, as it were, conscious that some invisible being was hovering beside me, and could hardly muster fortitude enough to refrain from rousing the house. At last I fell asleep; it was perturbed and unsound; strange dreams and vague fears scared me awake, and in them were dreadful images of a soldier murdering a female, and open graves, and gibbet-irons swinging in the wind. My remembrance has no parallel to such another night.

In the morning the cloud on my spirit was gone, and I rose at my accustomed hour, and cheerily resumed my journey. It was a bright morning, all things were glittering and fresh in the rising sun, the recruit and his damsel were entirely forgotten, and I thought no more of them.

But when the night came round again next year, I was seized with an unaccountable dejection; it weighed me down; I tried to shake it off but was unable, the mind was diseased, and could no more by resolution shake off its discomfort, than the body by activity can expel a fear. I retired to my bed greatly distressed, but nevertheless I fell asleep. At midnight, however, I was summoned awake by a hideous and undefinable terror; it was the same vague consciousness of some invisible visitor being near that I had once before experienced, as I have described, and I again recollected Nocton and Mary Blake in the same instant; I saw—for I cannot now believe that it was less than apparitional—the unhappy pair reproaching one another.

As I looked, questioning the integrity of my sight, the wretched bride turned round and looked at me. How shall I express my horror, when, for the ruddy beauty which she once possessed, I beheld the charnel visage of a skull; I started up and cried aloud with such alarming vehemence, that the whole inmates of the house, with lights in their hands, were instantly in the room—shame would not let me tell what I had seen, and, endeavouring to laugh, I accused the nightmare of the disturbance.

This happened while I was at a watering-place on the west coast. I was living in a boarding-house with several strangers; among them was a tall pale German gentleman, of a grave

impressive physiognomy. He was the most intelligent and shrewdest observer I have ever met with, and he had to a singular degree the gift of a discerning spirit. In the morning when we rose from the breakfast-table, he took me by the arm, and led me out upon the lawn in front of the house, and when we were at some distance from the rest of the company, said:

‘Excuse me, sir, for I must ask an impertinent question. Was it indeed the dream or the nightmare that alarmed you last night?’

‘I have no objection to answer you freely; but tell me first, why you ask such a question?’

‘It is but reasonable. I had a friend who was a painter; none ever possessed an imagination which discerned better how nature in her mysteries should appear. One of his pictures was the scene of Brutus when his evil genius summoned him to Philippi, and, strange to tell, you bear some resemblance to the painted Brutus. When, with the others, I broke into your room last night, you looked so like the Brutus in his picture, that I could have sworn you were amazed with the vision of a ghost.’

I related to him what I have done to you.

‘It is wonderful,’ said he; ‘what inconceivable sympathy hath linked you to the fate of these unhappy persons. There is something more in this renewed visitation than the phantasma of a dream.’

The remark smote me with an uncomfortable sensation of dread, and for a short time my flesh crawled as it were upon my bones. But the impression soon wore off, and was again entirely forgotten.

When the anniversary again returned, I was seized with the same heaviness and objectless horror of mind; it hung upon me with bodings and auguries until I went to bed, and then after my first sleep I was a third time roused by another fit of the same inscrutable panic. On this occasion, however, the vision was different. I beheld only Nocton, pale and wounded, stretched on a bed, and on the coverlet lay a pair of new epaulettes, as if just unfolded from a paper.

For seven years I was thus annually afflicted. The vision in each was different, but I saw no more of Mary Blake. On the fourth occasion, I beheld Nocton sitting in the uniform of an aide-de-camp at a table, with the customary tokens of conviviality before him; it was only part of a scene, such as one beholds in a mirror.

On the fifth occasion, he appeared to be ascending, sword in hand, the rampart of a battery; the sun was setting behind him, and the shadows and forms of a strange land, with the domes and pagodas of an oriental country, lay in wide extent around: it was a picture, but far more vivid than painting can exhibit.

On the sixth time, he appeared again stretched upon a couch; his complexion was sullen, not from wounds, but disease, and there appeared at his bedside the figure of a general officer, with a star on his breast, with whose conversation he appeared pleased, though languid.

But on the seventh and last occasion on which the horrors of the visions were repeated, I saw him on horseback in a field of battle; and while I looked at him, he was struck on the face by a sabre, and the blood flowed down upon his regimentals.

Years passed after this, during which I had none of these dismal exhibitions. My mind and memory resumed their healthful tone. I recollected, without these intervening years of oblivion, Nocton and Mary Blake, occasionally, as one thinks of things past, and I told my friend of the curious periodical returns of the visitations to be as remarkable metaphysical phenomena. By an odd coincidence, it so happened that my German friend was always present when I related my dreams. He in the intervals sometimes spoke to me of them, but my answers were vague, for my reminiscences were imperfect. It was not so with him. All I told he distinctly recorded and

preserved in a book wherein he wrote down the minutest thing that I had witnessed in my visions. I do not mention his name, because he is a modest and retiring man, in bad health, and who has long sequestered himself from company. His rank, however, is so distinguished, that his name could not be stated without the hazard of exposing him to impertinent curiosity. But to proceed.

Exactly fourteen years—twice seven it was—I remember well, because for the first seven I had been haunted as I have described, and for the other seven I have been placed in my living. At the end of that period of fourteen years, my German friend paid me a visit here. He came in the forenoon, and we spent an agreeable day together, for he was a man of much recondite knowledge. Never have I seen one so wonderfully possessed of all sort of occult learning.

He was an astrologer of the true kind, for in him it was not a pretence but a science; he scorned horoscopes and fortune-tellers with the just derision of a philosopher, but he had a beautiful conception of the reciprocal dependencies of nature. He affected not to penetrate to causes, but he spoke of effects with a luminous and religious eloquence. He described to me how the tides followed the phases of the moon; but he denied the Newtonian notion that they were caused by the procession of the lunar changes. He explained to me that when the sun entered Aries, and the other signs of the zodiac, how his progression could be traced on this earth by the development of plants and flowers, and the passions, diseases, and affections of animals and man; but that the stars were more than the celestial signs of these terrestrial phenomena he ridiculed as the conceptions of the insane theory.

His learning in the curious art of alchemy was equally sublime. He laughed at the fancy of an immortal elixir, and his notion of the mythology of the philosopher's stone was the very essence and spirituality of ethics. The elixir of immortality he described to me as an allegory, which, from its component parts, emblems of talents and virtues, only showed that perseverance, industry, goodwill, and gift from God, were the requisite ingredients necessary to attain renown.

His knowledge of the philosopher's stone was still more beautiful. He referred to the writings of the Rosicrucians, whose secrets were couched in artificial symbols, to prove that the sages of that sect were not the fools that the lesser wise of later days would represent them. The self-denial, the patience, the humility, and trusting in God, the treasuring of time by lamp and calculation which the venerable alchemists recommended, he used to say, were only the elements which constitute the conduct of the youth that would attain to riches and honour; and these different stages which are illuminated in the alchemical volumes as descriptive of stages in the process of making the stone, were but hieroglyphical devices to explain the effects of well applied human virtue and industry.

To me it was amazing to what clear simplicity he reduced all things, and on what a variety of subjects his bright and splendid fancy threw a fair and affecting light. All those demi-sciences—physiognomy—palmistry—scailleology, etc., even magic and witchcraft, obtained from his interpretations a philosophical credibility.

In disquisitions on these subjects we spent the anniversary. He had by then enlarged the periphery of my comprehension; he had added to my knowledge, and inspired me with a profounder respect for himself.

He was an accomplished musician, in the remotest, if I may use the expression, depths of the art. His performance on the piano-forte was simple, heavy, and seemingly the labour of an unpractised hand, but his expression was beyond all epithet exquisite and solemn; his airs were grave, devotional, and pathetic, consisting of the simplest harmonic combinations; but they were

wonderful; every note was a portion of an invocation; every melody the voice of a passion or a feeling supplied with elocution.

We had spent the day in the fields, where he illustrated his astrological opinions by appeals to plants, and leaves, and flowers, and other attributes of the season, with such delightful perspicuity that no time can efface from the registers of my memory the substance of his discourses. In the evening he delighted me with his miraculous music, and, as the night advanced, I was almost persuaded that he was one of these extraordinary men who are said sometimes to acquire communion with spirits and dominion over demons.

Just as we were about to sit down to our frugal supper, literally or philosophically so, as if it had been served for Zeno himself; Dick, the son of the old ferryman, who by this time was some years dead, came to the door, and requested to speak with me in private. Of course I obeyed, when he informed me that he had brought across the ferry that night a gentleman officer, from a far country, who was in bad health, and whom he could not accommodate properly in the ferry-house.

‘The inn,’ said Dick, ‘is too far off, for he is lame, and has an open wound in the thigh. I have therefore ventured to bring him here, sure that you will be glad to give him a bed for the night. His servant tells me that he was esteemed the bravest officer in all the service in the Mysore of India.’

It was impossible to resist this appeal. I went to the door where the gentleman was waiting, and with true-heartedness expressed how great my satisfaction would be if my house could afford him any comfort.

I took him with me to the room where my German friend was sitting. I was much pleased with the gentleness and unaffected simplicity of his manners.

He was a handsome middle-aged man—his person was robust and well formed—his features had been originally handsome, but they were disfigured by a scar, which had materially changed their symmetry. His conversation was not distinguished by any remarkable intelligence, but after the high intellectual excitement which I had enjoyed all day with my philosophical companion, it was agreeable and gentlemanly.

Several times during supper, something came across my mind as if I had seen him before, but I could neither recollect when nor where; and I observed that more than once he looked at me as if under the influence of some research in his memory. At last, I observed that his eyes were dimmed with tears, which assured me that he then recollected me. But I considered it a duty of hospitality not to inquire aught concerning him more than he was pleased to tell himself.

In the meantime, my German friend, I perceived, was watching us both, but suddenly he ceased to be interested, and appeared absorbed in thought, while good manners required me to make some efforts to entertain my guest. This led on to some inquiry concerning the scene of his services, and he told us that he had been many years in India.

‘On this day eight years ago,’ said he, ‘I was in the battle of Borupknow, where I received the wound which has so disfigured me in the face.’

At that moment I accidentally threw my eyes upon my German friend—the look which he gave me in answer, caused me to shudder from head to foot, and I began to ruminate of Nocton the recruit, and Mary Blake, while my friend continued the conversation in a light desultory manner, as it would have seemed to any stranger, but to me it was awful and oracular. He spoke to the stranger on all manner of topics, but ever and anon he brought him back, as if without design, to speak of the accidents of fortune which had befallen him on the anniversary of that day, giving it as a reason for his curious remarks, that most men observed anniversaries, time and experience

having taught them to notice, that there were curious coincidences with respect to times, and places, and individuals—things, which of themselves form part of the great demonstration of the wisdom and skill displayed in the construction, not only of the mechanical, but the mortal world, showing that each was a portion of one and the same thing.

‘I have been,’ said he to the stranger, ‘an observer and recorder of such things. I have my book of registration here in this house; I will fetch it from my bed-chamber, and we shall see in what other things, as far as your fortunes have been concerned, how it corresponds with the accidents of your life on this anniversary.’

I observed that the stranger paled a little at this proposal, and said, with an affection of carelessness while he was evidently disturbed, that he would see it in the morning. But the philosopher was too intent upon his purpose to forbear. I know not what came upon me, but I urged him to bring the book. This visibly disconcerted the stranger still more, and his emotion became, as it were, a motive which induced me, in a peremptory manner, to require the production of the book, for I felt that strange horror, so often experienced, returning upon me; and was constrained, by an irresistible impulse, to seek an explanation of the circumstances by which I had for so many years suffered such an eclipse of mind.

The stranger seeing how intent both of us were, desisted from his wish to procrastinate the curious disclosure which my friend said he could make; but it was evident he was not at ease. Indeed he was so much the reverse, that when the German went for his book, he again proposed to retire, and only consented to abide at my jocular entreaty, until he should learn what his future fortunes were to be, by the truth of what would be told him of the past.

My friend soon returned with the book. It was a remarkable volume, covered with vellum, shut with three brazen clasps, secured by a lock of curious construction. Altogether it was a strange, antique, and necromantic-looking volume. The corner was studded with knobs of brass, with a small mirror in the centre, round which were inscribed in Teutonic characters, words to the effect, ‘I WILL SHOW THEE THYSELF’. Before unlocking the clasp, my friend gave the book to the stranger, explained some of the emblematic devices which adorned the cover, and particularly the words of the motto that surrounded the little mirror.

Whether it was from design, or that the symbols required it, the explanations of my friend were mystical and abstruse; and I could see that they produced an effect on the stranger, so strong that it was evident he could with difficulty maintain his self-possession. The colour entirely faded from his countenance; he became wan and cadaverous, and his hand shook violently as he returned the volume to the philosopher, who, on receiving it back, said:

‘There are things in this volume which may not be revealed to every eye, yet to those who may not discover to what they relate, they will seem trivial notations.’

He then applied the key to the lock, and unclosed the volume. My stranger guest began to breathe hard and audibly. The German turned over the vellum leaves searchingly and carefully. At last he found his record and description of my last vision, which he read aloud. It was not only minute in the main circumstances in which I had seen Nocton, but it contained an account of many things, the still life, as it is called, of the picture, which I had forgotten, and among other particulars a picturesque account of the old General whom I saw standing at the bedside.

‘By all that’s holy,’ cried the stranger, ‘it is old Crippington himself—the queue of his hair was, as you say, always crooked, owing to a habit he had of pulling it when vexed—where could you find the description of all this?’

I was petrified; I sat motionless as a statue, but a fearful vibration thrilled through my whole frame.

My friend looked back in his book, and found the description of my sixth vision. It contained the particulars of the crisis of battle in which, as the stranger described, he had received the wound in his face. It affected him less than the other, but still the effect upon him was impressive.

The record of the fifth vision produced a more visible alarm. The description was vivid to an extreme degree—the appearance of Nocton, sword in hand, on the rampart—the animation of the assault, and the gorgeous landscape of domes and pagodas, was limned with words as vividly as a painter could have made the scene. The stranger seemed to forget his anxiety, and was delighted with the reminiscences which the description recalled.

But when the record of the fourth vision was read, wherein Nocton was described as sitting in the regimentals of an aide-de-camp, at a convivial table, he exclaimed, as if unconscious of his words:

‘It was on that night I had first the honour of dining with the German general.’

The inexorable philosopher proceeded, and read what I had told him of Nocton, stretched pale and wounded on a bed, with new epaulettes spread on the coverlet, as if just unfolded from a paper. The stranger started from his seat, and cried with a hollow and tearful voice:

‘This is the book of life.’

The German turned over to the second vision, which he read slowly and mournfully, especially the description of my own feelings, when I beheld the charnal visage of Mary Blake. The stranger, who had risen from his seat, and was panting with horror, cried out with a shrill howl, as it were:

‘On that night as I was sitting in my tent, methought her spirit came and reproached me.’

I could not speak, but my German friend rose from his seat, and holding the volume in his left hand, touched it with his right, and looking sternly at the stranger, said:

‘In this volume, and in your own conscience, are the evidences which prove that you are Ralph Nocton and that on this night, twice seven years ago, you murdered Mary Blake.’

The miserable stranger lost all self-command, and cried in consternation.

‘It is true, the waters raged; the rain and the hail came; she bitterly upbraided me; I flung her from the boat; the lightning flashed, and the thunder—Oh! it was not so dreadful as her drowning execrations.’

Before any answer could be given to this confession, he staggered from the spot, and almost in the same instant fell dead upon the floor.