

The Wonderful Corot

By Edward Page Mitchell

I

On the twentieth of May, 1881 (said John Nicholas, in the smoking room of the Gallia), I spent the day and part of the night at the house of my good friend Scott Jordan, President of the Bloomsburgh and Lycoming Railroad. Jordan has a place in one of the charming suburban neighborhoods a few miles out of Philadelphia. His character deserves a word.

He is an intensely superstitious, intensely practical man—a type of a class much more numerous than people will readily believe. Half a dozen railroads, conceived, built, equipped, and run to the profit of their legitimate owners, bear witness to his honesty and sound business sense. If further evidence of his worldly judgment is wanted, it may be found in a safe full of marketable securities. In his power of managing men and handling complicated enterprises, Scott Jordan comes nearer to my idea of Thomas Brassey than does any other capitalist-contractor I know. His name on a Board of Direction is a guarantee of conservative, prudent, yet never timid management. I wish he would undertake the comptrollership of my modest finances, to the last dollar I possess. He is a companionable old gentleman, and likes to be considered as a man of taste. He is in the full sense a man of the world while concerned with the affairs of this world, yet he spends nearly half his life in another—a strange world where banjos play and bells ring without human hands, where ghostly arms are stretched forth from behind the curtains of the unknown, and dim forms belonging to every age of history meet face to face.

Jordan's house is the happy hunting ground of all the professional charlatans in the spirit-raising line. They fasten to him like leeches—the rappers, the test mediums, the healing mediums, the physical-manifestation people and the rope tiers, the clairvoyants, the controlled of every sort, male and female, young and old, prosperous and shabby.

Jordan has told me that these gentry cost him twelve or fifteen thousand dollars a year. When they come to his door he welcomes them as aids in his tireless investigation of truth. They live like princes in his establishment; every morning brings its honorarium for the performance of the night before. Jordan royally entertains his Egyptians and Greeks until he detects them in some piece of imposture cruder than usual. Then he talks to them like a grieved parent, ships them off with a free pass over one of his railroads, and is all ready to go through the same process with the next corner.

You will understand now, gentlemen, that I had looked forward with considerable interest to my visit to Jordan's house.

Although the family was entertaining several professionals, I found that I was the only social guest. I make this distinction, but Jordan never does. You can hardly help liking the old fellow the better for the magnificent old-school courtesy with which he treats the seediest humbug of the lot.

“It is they who condescend,” he is accustomed to say, somewhat pompously, “when they honor me with their company; for do they not bring with them the kings and great poets and artists and the wisest and best of every century?”

And if Jordan's testimony is accorded the same weight in this matter as it would have in any railroad suit in any court in Pennsylvania, the wisest and best of every century, from Socrates down to George Washington, have, in fact, visited his private cabinet.

At the dinner table I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. John Roberts and his brother William, the celebrated cabinet mediums; fellows with villainous faces. I was also presented in due form to Mr. Helder, a gentleman of consumptive appearance, who is said to possess remarkable developing powers; a fat lady whose name I have forgotten, but who practices medicine under inspiration of the eminent Dr. Rush; Mrs. Blackwell, the materializing medium, and her daughter, introduced as Mrs. Work, a young lady with black eyes, said to be a flower and modeling medium of rare promise. At no time did I see any Mr. Work.

I thought the flower and modeling medium looked at me with not unkind eyes during dinner. The behavior of the other professionals indicated suspicious reserve. They furtively watched me, as if trying to guess the depth of my penetration. I contrived to drop a few remarks that seemed to encourage them. Jordan was jovial, and wholly unconscious of all this byplay.

In my friend's library after dinner, there was the usual jugglery, with the gas turned halfway down. A small extension room, separated by a portiere from the library, served as a cabinet. William Roberts suffered me to tie him with a clothesline. He produced some of the commoner manifestations, and then declared that the conditions were unfavorable. At Jordan's urgent request, Mrs. Blackwell went into the cabinet. Hands and vague white faces were shown between the curtains. The lights were turned still lower. Mrs. Work touched the piano, singing in a very musical voice, "Sects wha hae" and "Coming through the Rye." The persistent repetition of these airs finally elicited a full-length figure in a cloud of white, and the apparition was pronounced to be Mary, Queen of Sects. Mary withdrew and reappeared several times. At last, as if gaining courage, she ventured forth from the cabinet, advanced a yard or more into the room, and curtsied. Jordan called my attention in a whisper to the supernal beauty of her face and apparel. In a reverent voice he inquired if she would permit a stranger to approach. A slight inclination of Mary's head granted the boon. I stood face to face with the Queen; she allowed my hand to rest lightly for a second upon one of the folds of mull that draped her form. Her face was so near mine that even in the dim light I could see her eyes shining through the eye holes of her absurd papier-mâché mask.

The impulse to seize Mary and expose the ridiculous imposture was almost irresistible. I must have raised my hands unconsciously, for the Queen took fright and disappeared behind the portiere. Mrs. Work hastily left the piano and turned up the gas. In the glance that she gave me I read a piteous appeal.

Jordan's face was beaming with satisfaction. "So beautiful," he murmured, "and so gracious!"

"Yes, beautiful," I repeated, still looking at the flower and modeling medium; "beautiful and uncommonly gracious!"

"Thanks!" she whispered. "You are generous."

Half ashamed of myself as the voluntary accomplice of vulgar tricksters, I listened with growing impatience to Jordan's ecstatic account of other materializations not less marvelous and convincing than this of Mary, Queen of Sects. The mediums had returned to the ordinary occupations of evening leisure. The younger Roberts and Mr. Helder were playing backgammon, conversing at the same time in low voices. The fat representative of Dr. Rush was asleep in her chair. Mrs. Work was crocheting. Her mother was sipping brandy and water—a necessary restorative, Jordan was careful to tell me, after the draft made upon her vital forces by the recent materialization of Mary. The situation would have been thoroughly commonplace had it not been

for occasional rattling detonations, or successions of sharp raps, apparently in the ceiling, in the partition walls, all over the furniture, and underneath the floor.

“They are playful tonight,” said Roberts, looking up from his backgammon board.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Work’s mother, as she stirred her brandy and water. “They are very fond of Mr. Jordan. They hover around him always. Sometimes, when my inner vision is clearer, I see the air full of their beautiful forms, following him wherever he goes. They love and reward him for his great interest in them and us.”

“Mr. Jordan,” said I, “do you never find yourself imposed on?”

“Oh, often,” he replied. “Frequently by wicked spirits; frequently by fraudulent mediums.”

“There are frauds in every profession, you know,” said Mrs. Blackwell.

“There would be no paste diamonds,” suggested Helder, “if there were no real diamonds.”

“And your repeated discoveries of imposture,” I persisted, “have not shaken your faith?”

“Why should they?” replied the railroad president. “Nine hundred and ninety-nine experiments with negative results prove nothing; but the one-thousandth case, if established, proves everything. Demonstrated once, the possibility of communication with disembodied spirits is demonstrated forever.”

A fusillade of raps in every part of the room greeted this proposition.

“I grant that,” said I. “Prove one instance of the interference of spirits in the affairs of men and you have established the whole case.”

“But you believe,” he rejoined, with a smile, “that the thousandth and absolutely authentic instance will never be proved; and meanwhile you reserve the right to explain away all such things as you have seen tonight by the hypothesis of jugglery.”

“I’m sure the gentleman doesn’t think that,” insinuated Mrs. Blackwell, who had now finished her brandy and water.

“Nevertheless,” continued Jordan, “the one-thousandth instance may happen, may happen at any time, and may happen to you. Come and see my pictures.”

I tried to keep a grave face while my host did the honors of a score or more of Raphaels, Titians, Correggios, Guidos, and what not, all painted in his own house by mediums under inspiration. Jordan’s old masters make a collection probably unlike any other on earth. When he demanded what I thought of the internal evidence of their authenticity, I was able to reply with perfect truthfulness that nobody could mistake them.

From this amazing trash I turned with feelings of relief to a landscape hanging in the hallway. “I moved it out here,” said Jordan, “to make room for that superb Carracci, ‘Daniel in the Lion’s Den’—the large canvas you particularly admired.”

I looked at the old gentleman to see if he was in earnest. Then I looked again at the glorious landscape.

Here was no painted fiction, but truth itself: A clump of rounded willows, seen by early morning light and seen again in the perfectly calm water of the canal or sluggish stream which they overhung; a skiff, resting partly on the water and partly on the wet grass of the nearer bank; beyond, an indistinct distance and the outline of a chateau tower with the conical Burgundian peak; a marvelous humid atmosphere of blue and mist, a soft light enveloping everything and caressing everything. No painted fiction, I say, but a window through which anyone having eyes might survey nature in her eternal truth.

I said: “That comes nearer to the supernatural than anything I have ever seen. It is worth all your old masters together.”

“You like it?” said he. “It is well enough, I suppose, though of a school for which I have no particular fancy. It was painted here about a year ago by a spirit who did not choose to identify himself.”

“Nonsense,” said I, for this passed all endurance, “Corot has been dead six years.

Jordan led the way back into the library. “Mrs. Work,” said he, “do you remember the circumstances under which the large landscape in the hall—the hazy green one—was painted?”

“Certainly,” replied the young lady, looking up from her needles; “I recollect very well. It was painted through me.”

In claiming the authorship of this wonderful work of genius, she used the matter-of-fact tone in which she would have acknowledged a stork and sunflower in crewel, or a sleeping pussy cat in Berlin wools.

“And you are an artist yourself—that is to say, when not in the trance state?”

“Oh, yes,” she replied, returning my gaze with unflinching eyes; and thereupon she produced from one of Mr. Jordan’s portfolios a preposterous bunch of lilacs in water color. Meanwhile, Jordan had been rummaging in his desk. He now brought forth an account book. “Here we have it,” he said, “all set down in black and white.” In the middle of a page of similar memoranda I read this item:

1880, May 15—Pd. M. A. Work for painting done under control; large view (trees, stream, boat, etc.). . . \$25.00

“All I can say, madam,” I exclaimed, turning to Mrs. Work, “is that Knoedler or Avery would have been most happy to pay you ten thousand dollars for that Corot, for Corot it is, and a masterpiece at that.”

“Good night,” said Jordan, a little later, when I rose to retire. “After what you have already experienced I need hardly warn you not to be disturbed by any noises you may hear in your bedroom.” A hailstorm of raps punctuated his sentence. “They hover, hover around,” Mrs. Blackwell was saying, as I left the library; “but in this house it is as guardian—”

I went to bed thoroughly bewildered. Was there, after all, behind this wretched jack-in-the-box jugglery something incomprehensible, unexplainable, unspeakable—something which the jugglers themselves understood no better than their dupes? When I thought of Mary, Queen of Sects, ogling me through her pasteboard mask, and of Jordan’s rhapsody over her unearthly beauty, the problem seemed too ignoble to engage an intelligent man’s attention for a single minute; but there was the Corot. The whole machinery of raps, bands, ropes, apparitions, guitars, Raphaels, Correggios, and Carraccis was almost childish in its simplicity; but there again was the Corot. Every train of logical thought, every analytical process led me back to the marvelous Corot.

One of three things must be true: The picture was a commonplace daub, like the old masters, and I was laboring under a strange delusion or hallucination in regard to its merits. Or, Mrs. Work and her accomplices had procured a Corot unknown to connoisseurs and had sold it for one five-hundredth part of its market value, to bolster up a petty deception. Or, the landscape was a marvel and the manner of its production a miracle. The first supposition was the most plausible, yet I was not disposed to accept it at the expense of my self-possession and judgment; no doubt daylight would confirm my estimate of the picture. The second supposition involved a degree of folly—disinterested and expensive folly—on the part of these precious mediums that did not tally with my observations of their character. To accept the third supposition was, of

course, to accept the theory of the spiritualists. Thus reasoning I fell asleep, and was awakened, about half-past two o'clock, by a muffled hammering directly beneath my bed.

Now, gentlemen, what followed passed very rapidly, but every incident is distinct in my memory, and I ask you to reserve judgment until you have heard me through.

The noise came from the room under mine. As nearly as I could judge, this was the library. Notwithstanding Jordan's advice, I determined to see what was the matter. I jumped into my trousers and cautiously proceeded toward the stairway. At the head of the stairs a door opened as I passed and a hand was laid upon my shoulder.

"Don't go down!" was eagerly whispered into my ear. "Don't go down! Return to your chamber!"

A white figure stood before me. It was the flower and modeling medium in her nightdress, her black hair all loose.

"Why should I not go down?" I demanded. "Are you afraid that I shall embarrass the spirits in their carpenter work?"

She spoke hurriedly and with evident excitement: "You believe it all a fraud, but it isn't. There's fraud enough, Lord knows, for mediums must live; but, then, there are things—once in a while, not often—that stun us."

"Tell me the truth about the Corot."

"As truly as I stand here, it was produced in the way we said—on my easel, with my brush held in my hand, yet not by me. I can tell you no more, for I know no more." The noise of pounding downstairs increased.

"And if I go down, shall I encounter one of the mysteries that you speak of!"

"No, but you will run into great danger. It is for your own sake I ask you not to go." By this time I was in the lower hall.

Downstairs I discovered the Roberts brothers holding a séance at Jordan's plate closet, while the developing medium, Mr. Helder, with a dark lantern in his hand, was developing the combination lock of Jordan's safe.

In my brief and not victorious struggle with the three rascals I must have received some hurt upon the head. My eyes were half blinded with blood. With a vague idea of shouting for help at the foot of the stairs, I staggered back into the lower hall, closely pushed by two of the mediums. I heard one of them whisper, "Hit hard! It's got to be done," and saw a heavy iron bar raised and aimed at my head.

At this moment I stood directly in front of the Corot. Even in the imperfect light, that wonderful glimpse of nature opened beside me like a window in the wall. In another instant the crowbar would have buried itself in my skull. Then there reached my ears a cry from the head of the stairs, where I had left the flower medium standing, "Jump! Jump into the picture! For God's sake, jump!"

Resting one hand upon the frame, as upon a window sill, I launched myself against the canvas. The weapon descended, but I was already beyond its range. I fell, fell, fell, as if falling through infinite space, yet partially borne up by invisible hands. Then I found myself upon the wet grass of the canal bank. I jumped into the skiff and hurriedly poled it across the stream; and then, having reached the other bank, I fainted dead away under the willows.

When I came to my senses I was lying in snowy linen in the Hôtel Dieu at Dijon, with a good sister to take care of me. Here is a translation of the entry in the hospital books:

1881, May 21—Received from Monsieur the Mayor of Flavigny an Unknown, found early this morning, unconscious, and only partially clad, on the bank of the canal of Burgundy, near the

limits of the arrondissement. Injuries—Severe scalp wound and slight fracture of the right parietal bone. Property—One pair of trousers, one nightshirt, pair slippers. Means of identification—None.

Gentlemen, that is the end of my statement of facts. I am now on my way back to America. I shall establish the interference of spirits in human affairs by affording conclusive evidence that a wonderful picture was painted by a dead artist; that this picture was used by the spirits in my behalf as a way of escape out of mortal danger, and that, by the most extraordinary instance of levitation on record, I was borne bodily more than three thousand miles in a few seconds.

Do not laugh just yet. To the scientific world and to all fair-minded investigators of the truth of spiritualism, I shall soon offer in the way of evidence:

1. The register of the Continental Hotel in Philadelphia for May 19, 1881. I stopped there on my way to visit Jordan. My name will be found under that date.
2. The testimony of Mr. Jordan and his family that I was with them at Bryn Mawr on May 20, 1881, up to eleven o'clock at night.
3. The duly attested record of my admission to the hospital at Dijon, France, on May 21, 1881.
4. The wonderful picture now in the possession of Jordan.

II

Dear Sir: In reply to your note of inquiry, I beg leave to say that our common friend, Mr. John Nicholas, has been under my care for more than a year, with the exception of two months spent in the Côte d'Or in charge of another medical attendant.

The facts in his unfortunate case are accurately set forth (up to a certain point) in his own narrative, as outlined by you. Mr. Nicholas' recollection is not trustworthy in regard to events happening after he had suffered a severe blow on the head in his encounter with thieves.

As to the value of his estimate of the merits of the picture upon which his delusion is founded, I cannot speak. I have never seen it. It may be well to say, however, that prior to his departure for France, Mr. Nicholas was in the habit of attributing the picture to an American artist, some years ago deceased. As he used to tell the story, it was not to Burgundy but to Wissahickon Valley that he was transported by levitation.

I also beg leave to say that this mania does not affect his sanity in all other respects; nor do I see reason to despair of his entire recovery.

Yours respectfully,
HORACE F. DANIELS, M.D.