

The Artist

A short story

Written by John Dallas (c. 1969)

“If we take our holidays out of the season only for the sake of empty hostels and deserted roads, it's no wonder we succeed!” muttered Paul, as he dropped his sodden saddlebags from numb hands in the corner of the bleak, little dormitory.

“I'm sure it's just as wet in Donegal in the middle of summer,” grumbled Timothy.

“Yes, but not so flaming cold with it!” was Paul's ill-phrased reply.

Certainly it had been bitter that day; forty-five miles over exposed mountain roads with driving rain on and off all morning, settling down to a thick, steady drizzle in the afternoon, and getting colder all the time. Then, as the three cyclists had reached the top of their climb and could look westwards to where the ocean was supposed to be, the drops had come straight into their faces, whipped up out of a dull, grey void by a tearing gale. The rest of the day's trip, though downhill, had not afforded them much respite, for the wind had done its best to blow them back over the top of the pass. There was no cover of any kind; just heather stretching away into the murk on either side of the slightly raised roadway. Even the heather, bent by the wind, had seemed to be waving them back into the comparative shelter inland. But the three young men had pressed on, disregarding the beckonings of the heather and the plucking of the wind at their protective clothing.

Their objective was an isolated youth hostel, whose red triangle was an eighth of an inch from the placid blue of the Atlantic Ocean, as seen by the disinterested eye of the cartographer. The road, or track, that led up to it was coloured an inappropriately light shade of brown on the map, for in reality its surface consisted of black, slightly peaty mud, which clung to the wheels of the bicycles and seemed to double their weight.

The hostel itself turned out to be a large, bare, ex-coastguard station perched high over the sea, whose only sign of welcome was the small, blue-and-white, triangular plaque placed high up on the landward-facing wall and bearing the familiar words “An Óige”. The warden emerged a long time after the first touch on the bell-push, which had struck an echo somewhere deep within the ground floor of the building. The Book was furnished with three stiff signatures by three chapped hands withdrawn with difficulty from sodden leather gloves; the dripping, muddy bicycles were stowed in a cob-webby ground-floor room haunted by the ghosts of ancient bikes, but dry, at least; and the guests were shown where everything was. The common-room was on the first floor on the seaward side and the dorms on the landward side, half-a-storey higher. The kitchen with its gas-rings was on the ground floor.

As the three entered their tiny dormitory, whose three bunk-beds would afford each a free choice of upper or lower berth, the curtains fluttered about the window. Marcus, who never spoke unless he had something special to say, grunted in a manner expressive of disgust and closed the window. Still the curtains fluttered. Marcus grunted in surprise, then said, “Ah-ha! Pane missing!” One of the eight panes of the small, low window was indeed missing, and a touring-bag and a cycling cape were commandeered to stop the gap. The curtains fluttered no more.

The beds having been made, Timothy made for the kitchen loaded down with tea, eggs, sausages and packets of dried soup; Marcus set about lighting the fire in the open hearth of the long, white-washed common-room; and Paul, having put a couple of tins of fruit and a tin-opener on the trestle-table next to the fireplace, went down after Timothy to turn on the gas at the cylinder, which he knew his friend would forget to do.

The three friends had a hearty meal, the more welcome because they were starved with cold as well as hunger. They washed their tin plates and left them ready for breakfast, and

then sat down by the now merrily flickering fire with their second half-pint apiece of strong, black tea. Timothy, who did not believe in too much molly-coddling and never wore leggings, had spread his sodden trousers over the back of a chair before the fire, and the shoes and socks of all three were steaming gently in the heat of the burning logs.

Conversation naturally turned to the day's journey; and what a day it had been! Looking back on it, they could see the bright patches: the rickety stone shed with three walls and a rusty tin roof, where they had taken their midday meal sitting on chopping-blocks among somebody's winter firewood, while the rain lashed in torrents outside; that glorious downhill stretch early in the day, which had coincided with a short, dry spell, so that the wind of their passage had almost dried their as yet only damp garments.

But every few seconds, a gust of near storm-force wind would rattle the window-sashes fit to shake the glass loose, and remind the hostellers that it had been a rough journey. Paul went to a window and looked out. He could see nothing in the blackness, save where a lamp in the warden's quarters below threw a quadrangle of light on coarse grass flattened by the force of the gale. Presently the lamp went out, and the vague light of the upstairs windows seemed only to intensify the feeling that there was nothing out there but an earth without form and void. With a shiver, Paul returned to the warm circle of firelight. Silence reigned for a time among the three young men, but the logs on the fire hissed and changed positions with light thuds, and the windows rattled in the heavy rain-squalls which pattered on the panes like light gravel. Marcus had lit his pipe, and was adding soft soughing noises to the sounds of the wood-fire. He was a reflective fellow, not too tall and fairly well-built, with fair hair, a ruddy complexion and a beard, full but short, the colour of dirty brass snare-wire. A picture of steadiness, he was, in spite of his youth.

Paul, sitting on a plain wooden bench before the fire with his feet on the edge of the hearth and his back against the table, was an athlete and looked it. He was slim, with long legs and broad shoulders and a boyish head. Not unintelligent, either.

Timothy's cooking was not his only artistic accomplishment. On hostelling trips, he always took along a tin whistle or a mouth-organ or both, and played each with great virtuosity. At home he was known as a gifted violinist. The other two liked to have him with them, for he had the poet's tongue for showing them the sheer beauty of everything they saw. You might say his tongue had the Midas touch. He was slightly built, with a thin face and deep, dark eyes and rather a lot of black hair. In spite of his slight build, Timothy was vigorous; he could keep up well with his heavier comrades, and his Spartan qualities at times surprised them.

This, then, was the garrison of the former coastguard station on the western bulwarks of Europe on that night when one would no more dream of showing one's nose outside than the mediaeval sailor would have dreamt of sailing out westward into that abyss which now seemed to yawn at the very foot of the stout walls of the lonely youth hostel.

The fire was burning brightly on the hearth, which was against the inner wall of the room, well towards one end, for the long common-room appeared formerly to have been two smaller rooms. Timothy took his tin whistle from his hip pocket and began to play reflectively, his body bent forward, his elbows on his knees, the firelight playing on his face.

Then the light went out. It was no wonder; the storm was fierce and the power-lines over the hills were exposed. The darkness closed in around the backs of the three relaxed figures. No words were exchanged among the group. Marcus was balancing his chair on its hind legs, his legs crossed and his left hand clutching his right elbow, his right hand holding his pipe. He was staring meditatively into the fire. Paul, bending over so that the clear light of the fire fell on his writing-pad, was making some observations on the day's journey. Timothy, with his whistle, seemed to utter for them all. He had a wonderful style of improvisation, something between Gaelic and Slavonic, always in a minor key. The

desolation around them, interplaying with the friendly warmth of companionship and blazing logs, was there now in his improvisations.

Marcus' pipe burnt itself out, and he tapped out the ashes on the unburnt end of a log in the fire. In doing so, he disturbed his own train of thought, and emerged from the realm of his mind into the tiny universe around the fire. Over the fireplace was a picture of some sort, much blackened by smoke. Marcus, who took an interest in anything graphic, unhooked the picture from the wall to have a better look at it in the firelight. As he held it up before him, grunting gently to himself, Timothy noticed a piece of paper stuck into the angle of the back of the frame. He stopped playing, reached out to pluck the paper from the crevice, and turned half round from the fire to look at it. It was a piece of foolscap drawing-paper with a head-and-shoulders portrait in soft lead-pencil on one side. Timothy looked at it, quiet and absorbed, for some time.

Marcus cleaned the glass of the large picture, and when he had studied it closely (it was a print of a hunting scene, with rather a lot of detail), he hung it on the wall again and said, "What you got there, Tim?" Timothy handed over the drawing slowly, keeping his eyes glued to it until the last possible moment. Marcus took it carefully and held it by opposite corners. He looked at it for a moment, and then gave a low whistle of admiration. Timothy and Marcus looked each other straight in the eyes, and each knew that the other's verdict was the same as his own: the drawing was exquisite. It represented a girl of eighteen or twenty, depicted almost full-face, but not quite. The features were beautifully drawn, the tones skilfully shaded. The girl represented was indisputably beautiful, and her head had a charming attitude. The bone-structure of her cheeks was delicate but firm, her lower jaw and her chin were narrow, the chin with just the hint of a dimple, the bridge of the nose was fine and the mouth small, with just enough lip showing. The hair was short, cut in an old-fashioned style, with the fore-lock sweeping down to the level of one firm, gently-curving eyebrow. The eye-sockets were sharply defined by the eyebrows and nose, and the eyes were the most remarkable part of the portrait. They gazed fixedly and meltingly out of the picture, straight into the eyes of the beholder. Somehow, the monochrome representation on the old sheet of paper, folded once across its length, seemed to live, to be capable of opening its delightful mouth and speaking softly.

Marcus thrust the paper under Paul's eyes. The latter laid down his pen and took the portrait in his hand. He was as impressed as the others. "No girl ever had a look like that when she was by herself," he declared. "It's something you'd rarely see in a photograph." "How d'you mean?" said Marcus.

"That's what my old Da would call a 'loving look,'" Paul replied. "She was longing for the artist to kiss her, and he drew her just as she was. Remarkable piece of work." And he set the paper down on the hearth so that they could all look at it. "You're right," said Timothy, "- or else the artist had a tremendous imagination."

Marcus picked the paper up again and examined it, front and back. "No signature," he said. "No autograph – nothing." He bent the paper so that the comparatively white inside was next to the yellowed outside. "Old, too," he pointed out. "From the girl's hairstyle – say – thirty years?" suggested Timothy.

Marcus grunted in partial agreement. "Bit less p'r'aps." "Let's see," said Paul, obviously trying to remember something. "Yes! I remember now. This building would have been a youth-hostel by then. It was acquired in 1935, as I remember."

"Good memory for a lad of twenty," commented Marcus, and laid the paper on the hearth again.

"Who do you think she was?" asked Paul, ignoring Marcus' remark. "She must have existed: nobody has an imagination as beautiful as that. And who drew the picture?"

"A genius," pronounced Marcus, melodramatically, but no-one disagreed with him.

Silence reasserted itself among the three human beings, and the fury of the storm raged about them. The logs fell together in the hearth, as if huddling together for fear of the weird howls and moans above them in the chimney. Marcus, without even grunting, comforted them with a few fresh logs.

Timothy spoke: "She probably sat at this very fireplace, perhaps even on such a night as this. Only she and her companion in the house, for the same reason that we are alone. Perhaps they were walking. He would have been sketching as they went, he would have had paper and pencils, perhaps even water-colours. The west of Ireland is a playground for landscape painters. Or perhaps they were cycling: cycling used to be more popular before the war, I believe, when bicycles were more common and lifts harder to get than nowadays. However they came, you can see them sitting here by the fire, in the intimacy developed by the loneliness of the road, drinking their tea out of the same mug, she poking the fire and his hand over hers on the poker; then she sitting writing a postcard, and he taking up his sketch-pad and pencil, and drawing her, and she looking up at him with the love in her eyes, and he smiling as he draws in the eyes in the portrait."

Timothy looked down at the dull paper with the grey shading on it, and his silence was deeper than the stillness of his tongue.

"And then they went away, off down the road, the pair of them riding close together with her head on his shoulder, and hardly an eye between them for the moors and rocks and ruined homesteads and the Atlantic waves. And the drawing was left here, to remind future venturers into this wilderness that beauty can thrive in such a place." Timothy stopped again, and the others sensed that he had finished. He had touched the secret. The artist and the subject might not have been in love before they set out, but the bleak journey and the isolation of the place would have caused them to draw closer together, and love, acting magnet-like only on objects brought close together, had taken over.

Marcus filled his pipe and lit it with a burning splinter from the fire. Timothy set his whistle to his lips again and played, low and melancholy. Paul warmed his hands at the flames of the fire. The portrait lay on the hearth looking at the three of them at once with that look which the model had meant for one man only, and that so many years ago.

The wind howled outside, the logs soughed and sang inside, and the windows rattled between. So they sat around the fire, Timothy, Paul and Marcus, with the dull old drawing seeming to flicker in the firelight, and they seemed like planets round a sun; a Mercury, a Mars and, let us say, a Saturn, with the beautiful Venus extending her radiant influence among them. Their faces were illuminated, but beyond their dark backs was only darkness and chaos.

And suddenly, out of this eternal gloom came a comet, a wandering star, a created light. The noise of the storm and the rattling of the windows had prevented the companions' hearing the door being opened, but now Timothy looked up over Marcus' head at a candle-flame, behind which hovered a ruddy face.

"Do I disturb your evening meditations, gentlemen?" inquired a mature, friendly Ulster voice.

"Not at all," said Paul, and Marcus grunted in agreement. "Take a seat," and Paul moved along his bench a little, picking up the portrait from the hearth as he did so, and slipping it, folded in two, into his writing-pad, which he laid on the table behind him. The stranger set his candle, in its flat enamel candle-stick, on the mantle-piece, and sat down beside Paul, extending a pair of raw hands to the fire.

"You young fellows haven't forgotten how to make a good fire, anyway," he declared appreciatively. The stranger was not himself a "young fellow". He was forty-five if a day. He was smallish, getting rather heavy, with round, ruddy cheeks, hazel eyes and curly, dark-brown hair. He wore a pair of tweed trousers; a thick Aran sweater, which showed a dark

shirt and a woollen tie; a combat-jacket, whose shoulders were rain-bespattered; and stout brown walking-shoes, which were still somewhat muddy, although they had obviously been roughly wiped.

Soon he had warmed himself sufficiently to remove the damp jacket, and sat there in much the same style of attire as the three younger men.

“I suppose you’re wondering what and our man like myself is doing in a *youth* hostel,” he said, by way of opening the conversation. The murmur which ran around the group meant “Yes; tell us.”

“Well, you see, I was a member of the Y.H.A. when I was your age and younger, and it kind of got into my system. So when I got too old-looking to be running in and out of the office every year to re-join, I took out life membership. I like to be able to use a youth-hostel when I’m out in the wilds fishing or painting.” He glanced down at the three pairs of light shoes still steaming very slightly before the fire and said, “You’d be on bikes, I suppose?” They nodded. “I used to be keen on cycling too, though I must confess I arrived here in a car tonight – but that kind of weather’s bad enough even in a car – eh?” And he jerked his head back towards the rattling window, where a rain-squall was just bursting like a bucketful of water flung at a shop window to wash it.

“Do you do much cycling?” the stranger asked, and listened interestedly to Paul’s answer: “Yes, but we don’t treat riding from A to B as an end in itself, more as a way of seeing the country. We reckon it’s the best way: If you go on foot you don’t get far enough, but if you hitch-hike, you can’t very well ask someone who’s lifted you to stop in the middle of nowhere when you want to look at a view or visit an ancient monument.”

“You’re right, too. And how far would you reckon on going a day?”

“About 45 to 50 miles on an average.”

“That’s fast enough for sightseeing. How are you loaded?”

“Touring bags on the back. Quite heavy!”

“Aye! You want to try distributing your load equally front and back in this hilly country. It seems to help you up the hills. There’s a scientific explanation, which I forget at the moment ... anyway, I always used touring bags on the back myself, and I’m still alive to tell the tale!” And he laughed good-naturedly at the serious turn he had given the conversation. Talk then ranged widely over cycling, hiking, hostelling, places worth seeing, places seen, the past, the present and the future. Finally the stranger seemed to recall something. “I’ve just realised!” he said. “I know your names from the register, but you don’t know mine. I’m Jack Megary from County Tyrone. Now which of you is which?”

The three boys introduced themselves. “Not that names really matter; it’s the friendship and companionship that count,” remarked Megary.

“Yes indeed,” muttered Paul, who had absolutely no memory for names (he even forgot his friends’ surnames when their parents answered the telephone), but who had no difficulty at all in recalling the most casual of acquaintances from the distant past.

“Of course, youth hostelling is full of strongly impressive characters without names,” said Megary, “But one particular case comes to me at the moment. I was hostelling in this region at the time – oh – about twenty years ago, just after the war.”

The three young men had found Megary to be an interesting talker, and settled themselves gladly to listen to his reminiscences.

“As I told you, I cycled quite a bit in those days. Well, one summer I decided to take it more leisurely and go hostelling on horseback. A friend of mine had connections with a horsey family, and I was fitted out with riding gear and a stout, old carriage-horse who could carry me and my luggage with ease, and was given a few instructions as to riding, feeding and grooming the beast.

“My progress was slow; I spent a couple of nights at each hostel, using the day between for sketching in the neighbourhood. I didn’t see many other hostellers, perhaps two to four a night, until I came to this hostel here. Well, when I arrived there was a party of cyclists here, six or eight of them, with two girls amongst them. It was a gay evening, I can tell you. One fellow had a concertina with him, and another could play the spoons. A Scotsman among them tied a towel round himself and did a Highland fling, here in this very common-room. We had songs and dances and stories and then more songs. The fellow with the squeeze-box was a marvel. He could play anything you cared to ask for. I think he was from Dublin. The group had apparently formed itself on the open road, for the members were all from different places; Dublin, Belfast, Aberdeen, I think, a couple of Welshmen, the two girls from Bristol.

“I remember I was very newfangled with my riding-boots and never took them off until I was getting into bed. I believe I had spurs on, too. Somebody calls out, ‘Let’s see what the cavalry can do!’ so I says to the Dublin fellow, ‘Give us a polka!’ and I slung my jacket over one shoulder like a Hussar and grabbed the better-looking of the two English girls and we polkaed up and down the cleared floor there in the best Viennese style. She danced like a flame. We kept it up until I was dead beat.

“Then things slowed down a bit. We formed a large semicircle about the fire for a sing-song. Now I have no voice at all for singing, so I took up my sketch-pad, with the intention of looking over the sketches I had done that day. I was sitting there on the edge of the hearth with my back to the wall. My dancing-partner was in a similar posture on the other side of the fire, for we had dropped there from exhaustion after our polka.

“I looked round the group. They were an interesting-looking lot, and the firelight played on their features, emphasising the character in them. I began to draw the group. I had never found it so easy to draw such a group in my life. The figures seemed to be hiding under the paper, ready to spring out at the touch of my pencil. Without doubt it was my best drawing up to that time. Each of the faces was a portrait. I have the drawing at home yet – I can remember all the characters, but not one single name. Would you believe that?”

“Do you not even remember the name of the girl you danced the polka with?” asked Paul.

“Never knew it,” replied Megary. “Of course, they all introduced themselves to me – but the names never registered. You know how it is when you’re introduced to a whole lot of people at once.”

Paul nodded. He knew how it was.

Megary was silent. The gay ghosts and the noise of their ceili had died in the long common-room, and the storm asserted its voice again.

“I suppose you only drew the one picture that evening,” said Marcus, and Paul and Timothy immediately knew what he was driving at.

“Now you come to mention it, I did do another drawing, but somehow it got lost,” said Megary. “Pity – I thought at the time it was even better than the group. I mentioned that the English girl was sitting on the opposite side of the fire from myself. Well, our minstrel set up a reel-tune, and the Belfast fellow and the Aberdonian started to show the rest of them how to dance. The girl stayed where she was, saying I’d danced the legs from under her. (Very pretty legs she had, too!) Well, the two of us were left by the fire, and she turned towards me and asked if I could draw her portrait. Nothing could have given me more pleasure, for as well as being a very attractive girl she had a perfection in her features which you rarely come across even, or especially, in beauty queens. I said I would do it in a minute, and pretended to be putting the finishing-touches to another sketch. In fact I was drawing her portrait without her knowledge, to catch the natural, unposed grace of her features. It wasn’t difficult, because she watched me with interest the whole time. Nobody could study that face of hers (even

covertly, as I did, so as not to let on I was drawing her) without being struck with the ... the perfection of it – I can't use any other word. The cheek-bones, the brows, the nose, the lips, the ears, the posture, the blonde hair, everything. The eyes, too. And there was something more than beauty; more than natural charm, even. I think I could have fallen in love with her then and there, and carried her off on my staid old charger, if I hadn't been paralysed by the thought that a woman of such absolute perfection is not for the likes of us poor mortals. A goddess like that, with the entire male world at her dainty, nimble feet, could not possibly have any interest in me, and the lack of hope killed my enterprise stone-dead. You know how it is." And a nod and a murmur ran round the little group.

"She was pleased with the portrait, but said I had flattered her. I swear that would have been impossible.

"Love hurts when you're young, and I spent the rest of the evening pining for her love, or at least her interest, without which the presence of a beautiful woman cannot be enjoyed to the full, but having convinced myself that I was too much her inferior to hope for this interest.

"The cyclists left next morning. Sharing the kitchen with her at breakfast-time was painful, too. True, she smiled and looked radiantly at me, but was she not always smiling, and even early in the morning did she not look beautiful anyway?

"I was staying on that day, intending to do some sketches of the coast, and so I stood there at the yard gate to say goodbye to my friends of an evening. They pushed their bikes out one by one, mounted beyond the gate, and rode off in a line. She was the last to leave, and I almost blurted out 'Wait!' but not quite, and she seemed to hesitate, then went on after her friend; and yet I thought she looked back wistfully, though I knew I was mistaken.

"I walked a great distance that day, but did no sketching. In time I got over it. Like all hostelling acquaintances, she drifted into and out of my sphere within 24 hours. That's the way it is, only in most cases, you never notice it."

He stopped. There was a lull in the storm, and the wind was sighing rather than howling. Paul reached behind him and drew the paper from between the leaves of his writing-pad. "We found this ..."

Megary unfolded it and said, "Where did you find it?" He had no need to say "It's mine." Marcus slipped his finger under the lower corner of the picture on the wall and moved it slightly. Megary nodded.

"Look at the expression," said Paul softly. Megary was looking. He let the drawing slip from his fingers, and it fell to the floor between his feet, the eyes looking lovingly up at him. He put his hands to his temples. "The most beautiful portrait I ever did, and I never saw what I was drawing!"

The stump of the candle that had heralded his arrival burnt itself out; the stacked logs, burnt through, collapsed in a shower of sparks, and a fresh rain-squall seemed to shake the old youth-hostel to its very foundations.

The End