

Poem: Sprite (Spirit) of the Creek

Note name changes: Falconis (Farley); Fredro (Fisher); Warlof (Worrall)

DRAINED flagons proclaim that 'tis time to give o'er,
The hour for departure is come,
The hostess complacently pockets the score,
The stirrup-glass presses the lip, at the door,
And the rider spurs forward for home.

Doors, windows, and gateways, securely made fast,
Tired inmates prepare for repose;
The day's toil and bustle are over and past,
An air of calm silence succeeds the rude blast,
That from jovial carousal arose.(1)

But ere his soft pillow, the weary host prest,
The fleet, clatt'ring steps of a steed
His threshold approaches;—he starts—half undrest—
A fearful forboding just enters his breast;
For ill news mostly travels with speed.

"Ope the door!" cried a voice, in wild tones of affright,
"And grant me admittance, I pray!
O, grant me admittance, till morning's blest light
Shall hence chase the phantoms that wander tonight,
In death's most appalling array!"

Through the half-opened portal, with frenzied like air
Falconis(2) now furiously springs;
From his brow rolls the cold drop, erect is his hair,
Exhausted and trembling he sinks on a chair,
Whilst around fearful glances he flings.

Dismay blanched his cheek, for each tributary vein
Sent its stream to the citadel heart;
That fortress alarmed, to support it they drain
Their channels; nor back call those currents again,
Till by safety allowed to depart.

All that kindness with cheering assurance could do,
From the panic-struck group, standing by,
Was lost on Falconis, till calmer he grew ;
Yet, a glance of mute horror at intervals flew
From his staring, or wild rolling, eye.

Now, stout was the heart of Falconis, and bold ;
Nor weak superstition dwelt there ;
And hideous that object must be to behold,
That could daunt his fierce spirit, his blood curdle cold,
Or stamp on his cheek palid fear.

And, hideous, in sooth, was the object that scared
And turned him from homeward that night;
In shuddering amazement his hearers all stared,
Whilst, with half-lessened terror, Falconis declared
He had met with a murder'd man's Sprite.

'Twas on the rude structure that spans the deep creek,
The horrible figure appeared;
On its pale, ghastly visage, was seen the red streak,
And sunken its eye-balls, and hollow its cheek,
And crimsoned with blood was its beard.

Through the wide gaping wound, the assassin had made,
Issued brains, mixed with streams of dark gore;
Deep gashes more hideous still rendered the shade,
And well might Falconis's heart feel dismayed,
Though fear it ne'er cherished before.

'Twas the spectre of Fredro, (Frederick Fisher) who long had been lost
To his friends, his dependents, and home;
False rumour gave forth that the seas he had cross'd,
Resolved on beholding once more that lov'd coast,
Whence fortune had doom'd him to roam.

His absence did many with wonder regard,
Through leaving behind him his wealth;
For, with him had industry met its reward,

Snug dwellings and acres acknowledged him lord,
And these blessings were gilded by health.

But, the man of all others, he trusted and loved,
For whom his regard knew no end,
In a dark guilty moment by Satan was moved
(Vile lucre his object, as afterwards proved,)
To spill the life's blood of his friend.

'Twas over the wine-cup, as cheerful they sate,
The hell-inspired thought filled his mind;
The day's toil was over, the hour drawing late—
O, hour of destruction ! by all-ruling fate
To murder's fell purpose consigned!

Night's murkiest mantle the pale moon o'erspread,
When Fredro, unconscious of harm,
Stept forth from his threshold; a blow on the head
His defenceless scull shatters—the victim falls dead,
'Neath false, treacherous Warlof's fierce arm!

From the red reeking spot then the body he bore,
(Unhallowed and lone was the grave)
On the creek's reedy margin he covered it o'er;
No track marked the spot, though odd blotches of gore,
Slight traces of violence(4) gave.

But means beyond human were wisely decreed
To bring the foul act to the light;
Falconis's words to a search quickly lead ;
The Agents of Justice with promptness proceed,
To the spot where appeared the dread Sprite.

Here one join'd the band, as though sent from on high,
To follow the blood shedder's trail;
An instance most strange of those chances, whereby
The foul crime of murder gets bared to the eye,
And height'ning with interest the tale.

'Mid the wild sable sons of Australia, but few

With Gilbert(5) (a Chief) could compete;
Unerring his aim, when his barbed spear flew,
Nor less so, when air-cleaving boom'rang he threw,
To lay the wing'd prize at his feet.

The footstep of bandit o'er forest or plain,
Through brushwood and deepest ravine,
Or devious, or straight, he ne'er followed in vain;
Which shewed as if instinct itself held the rein,
And guided, where track was unseen.

With strange power of vision and keenness of scent,
Few objects could hide from his view;
Thus gifted, his aid to the searchers he lent,
And seemed as a being by Providence sent,
To take up the spectre seen clew.

(Man's natural gifts are designed to provide
For the wants his bare frame should create:
Hence, by just distribution, is freely supplied
To the untutored savage, what's wisely denied
To man, in his civilized state.)

Each darksome recess 'twixt the timbers that prop
The bridge is examined with care;
The creek's stagnant waters they traverse—they stop!
The eagle-eyed Chief sees a scum on the top—
And all for dread tidings prepare.

A thrilling forebodement around quickly flies
As the Chief smells to part of that scum—
Which something near hidden had caus'd to arise;
"'Tis whitefellow's fat!"—such the phrase he applies—
His hearers with wonder are dumb.

Quite close to that spot was the mangled corpse found;
A spectacle ghastly to see;
On the victim's bared scull gaped the wide-mouthed wound,
Through which the seared life a quick passage had found
To a mansion more peaceful to flee.

False statements and dealings exposed, loudly plead,
And fix upon Warlof(6) deep guilt;
Stern Justice awards him the homicide's meed;
For "He, who man's blood spills," (as Heaven has decreed)
"By man shall his own blood be spilt."

Condemned and in fetters the culprit behold!
(Even pity recoils from his doom)
By agonised conscience upbraided and told
That the friend of his bosom he slaughtered for gold;
Whilst fiends point his way to the tomb.

From the scaffold the murderer's spirit has fled,
The Fountain of Mercy to seek :
To appease Fredro's ghost was his guilty blood shed;
And ne'er, from that time (as by neighbors 'tis said)
Has been seen the dread SPRITE OF THE CREEK.

(1) The scene which the Author has essayed to depict in the commencement of the poem, took place in the year in 1827, at the principal (if not the only) "hostelry" in the town of Campbelltown; a locality merely distinguishable, at that period, by the appearance of a church, a school-house (which "contrived a double debt to pay" by becoming the fount whence justice was hebdomedally distributed throughout the district of Airds); and half a dozen scattered dwellings — in fact, the 'township' itself could lay claim only to the two "Government Establishments" aforesaid, with an equal number of domiciles. The "Harrow Inn", kept by Mr. John Patrick, was then "in its most high and palmy state," as "a house of entertainment for man and beast;" it was the focus of all holiday sports; the delightful retreat to which the happy bridegroom led his blushing and newly-made bride; the house of decorous lamentation whither the mourning train repaired for the laudable purpose of moistening the grief produced by having seen the earth close over the remains of some relative or old acquaintance; the nursery, to which the fond parents hurried with their "precious little-un" after the baptismal benediction had been pronounced, and where — in the cozy little room, behind the bar — the "young stranger's" health was sure to be drunk "five fathoms (balls) deep" by gossips, shipmates, and friends; nay, more, it was within, the tidy parlour of the "Harrow" that "Lawyer Horseley, the coroner," assembled his "twelve good men and true," to initiate an enquiry touching the death by violent means of one Frederick Fisher, whose body, in an advanced state of decomposition, was to be seen in an adjoining room; and which enquiry ended in the committal of one George Worrall, for the murder of the said Fisher;

— thus, from the cradle to the grave, "mine host", or "King John", as he was sometimes designated, had a supply of customers; but past is his fame; for on that very spot, where once he triumphed, now he is forgot. Years have rolled by since "honest, saucy, Jack Patrick departed for "that undiscovered country;" and the "Harrow Inn" is only spoken of as a thing that was'.

(2) The late Mr. John Farley, a substantial settler, whose farm lay about three miles distant from the Township, in the direction of Appin and Illawarra; and who necessarily had to cross the bridge (subsequently alluded to) on his route home. Whatever conclusions may be drawn from the singular revelation made by this person, no man, to whom he was known, has ever regarded him as given to indulge in speculation of a visionary nature on any head whatsoever; he was a fair specimen of the "John Bull breed," fearless, frank, unpolished, and mixing a rough independence of character with real kindness of disposition, stood well in the estimation of the settlers around: at his decease, his widow (a woman of unimpeachable and most exemplary character) became possessed of real and personal property to a very considerable amount.

(3) Frederick Fisher, an Englishman, holding a ticket-of-leave for the district of Airs, and possessing habits so frugal, or, as some of said, penurious in their nature, that, in the capacity of Sheriff's Bailiff, which office he held for some time in Sydney, he managed to amass sufficient to enable him to purchase a piece of land fronting that laid out for the township of Campbelltown, on which he built a two-storied brick house, and laid the foundation for building a second edifice on the identical spot where now stands the commodious Hotel of Mr. Hurely. Fisher had also a small farming establishment, in the management of which he was joined by a person named Worrall; and it is worthy of special remark, that in point of disposition of mind and outward demeanour, the latter was regarded by the neighbours as being far more friendly than his partner, who, to what appeared to be a natural selfishness, united an irascibility of temper, by no means likely to win him either the esteem or kind regard of those with whom he had any dealings, or into whose company he chanced to fall while pursuing his ordinary course of life. Some months prior to Fisher's final disappearance, he had a scuffle at the "Harrow" with a person named Brooker, whom he stabbed with a knife, and for which he was committed to prison to take his trial under "Lord Ellenborough's Act." The wound being deemed at the time highly dangerous, it was confidently anticipated not only by the inhabitants of the District, but also by the accused party, that nothing less than a capital conviction would be the result; followed, as a matter of course by the confiscation of whatever property the offender (a prisoner of the crown) was possessed. To avert the latter evil, and, perhaps, moved by those natural yearnings that cause even the most wretched to cast an eye towards the future, Fisher, while in gaol, awaiting trial, made over the whole of his property, 'real and personal,' to his friend and partner, George Worrall; but, lo!

when the awful moment to decide the fate of the accused arrived, the aspect of affairs took a change; Brooker, when questioned as to the cause and origin of the affray, generously admitted certain provoking circumstances on his side, which so far lessened the weight of the charge, that the verdict given was followed by the lenient sentence of six months' imprisonment; thus was the ill-fated "Fredro" only released from one state of fearful jeopardy; to be subjected to another far more direful in its effect; for, having, after the expiration of his sentence, returned to Campbelltown for the purpose of resuming possession of his property, he was on a sudden, found to have disappeared; and although floating rumours and suspicions led to a search being made throughout the neighbouring creeks and scrub, nothing transpired that could satisfactorily account for his non-appearance, until the mysterious occurrence upon which the poem is founded took place.

(4) This passage has merely a reference to some spots of blood discovered on a fence, near the residence of Fisher, by two lads who had been out on a fishing excursion and were returning that way home.

(5) "Alas! poor Yorrick!" says Hamlet. Alas! poor Gilbert! says the reader's very humble servant. This "Sable Son of Australia," whose mortal career, like that of the "pale faces" already noted, has come to a close, was Chief of the Liverpool, or Bunbury Curran tribe, which usually encamped on the estate of the late Dr. Redfern, situate about midway between Campbelltown and Liverpool. Here the eagle-eyed hunter, with his 'gins', Polly and Kitty (the latter a half-caste princess), might have been often seen, basking in the sun, as well as in the good graces of the master and mistress of the establishment; and here, also, has Gilbert been seen ere now, strutting with an air of pomposity, derived from a cast-off livery coat and a sort of baton, which he wielded, as an attaché to Paddy Haddigaddy, the district constable. The singular facility with which this individual could detect and follow the track of a runaway, or trace the spot where stolen property was "planted", rendered him a most valuable auxiliary to the constabulary of the district; whilst a long intercourse with the inhabitants placed him far above the generality of his race in the scale of civilization.

(6) The primary cause for attaching suspicion to Worrall arose for his having tendered in payment to a mercantile house in Sydney, a note of hand, or acceptance, purporting to bear the signature of Fisher, but which signature on close examination was discovered to be a counterfeit; with this transaction others of a doubtful complexion also linked themselves, and Worrall was apprehended and lodged in Liverpool Gaol; there being, at that period no place of confinement in Campbelltown; he underwent two or three examinations before the magistrates, (W. Howe, Esq., of Glenlee House, the Rev. Thomas Reddall, of Smeeton Villa, and Captain Brooks, of Denham Court,) but it was

not until the body of the murdered person was found, and the coroner's jury had pronounced their verdict, that George Worrall stood full committed, charged with the crime of wilful murder. When brought to trial in 1827, before Chief Justice Forbes and a jury; (at that period usually formed of military officers) he put in a plea of "not guilty;" but the evidence produced, though, on the main, purely circumstantial, conveyed to the jury so strong an impression of the prisoner's guilt, that a verdict in accordance with that impression was returned, and the last awful fiat of the law was not far in its rear. Throughout the whole of the trial, and while the Judge was addressing him, previously to pronouncing those words which were to consign him to ignominy and the grave, the demeanour of Worrall was calm and collected; but when His Honor came to that part of his painful duty which requires him to say "hanged by the neck," the culprit's jugular vein was perceived by those near him to swell on the instant to a frightful extent, in which state it continued until he was removed from the bar. Whether so extraordinary an affection of that vessel resulted from what may be termed 'sympathetic instinct' or was caused by powerful internal efforts to suppress the emotions consequent on so awful a state, it is for those better versed than the Author in the doctrine of Physiology to decide.

Source: National Library of Australia <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/59764633>