

The Mirror's Gaze

David Wheldon

I met her by chance in a public house in Broad Street, Oxford; she was tall and slim. To be frank with you I mistook her at first glance for a young man; I think it was the narrowness of her hips and shortness of her hair. She wore black moleskin trousers with a prominent crease and a well-fitting black jacket, rather long; its lapels were of black satin. She was drinking whisky and water. She seemed entirely alone. She was sitting at a table beneath a window. Suddenly she reached into her breast pocket and took out a folded sheet of paper. She wrote a few words with a pencil and then replaced this piece of paper in her inner pocket. Aware that she was observed she looked up, her steady gaze traversing the bar. She was not a woman for glances. She quickly located me. There was a trace of open hostility in her stare. She sat back and rested her arms on those of her chair. She crossed her legs. She watched me for a while. Her gaze was very frank, and, if I am to be truthful, a little disturbing: she had the ability to make her appraisal of me visible while keeping her assessment quietly to herself. Suddenly she indicated the chair beside her with the flat of a long, rather slender hand. There was an unusual disparity in the length of her fingers.

I crossed the room and sat at right angles to her — this seemed the right place — aware of the intensity of her character.

I found out considerably later that she worked in the physical sciences; I won't detail her specialty; I wish to preserve her anonymity.

The room was rather quiet, it being out of term and a Monday night. It was the middle of winter — Epiphany fell the next day — and seasonable snow was falling outside. The atmosphere was meditative.

We didn't feel the need to speak for some time. It was an unusual sensation, sitting — companionably, I hoped — with someone unknown without a word being exchanged.

'Another beer?' she suddenly asked, seeing that my glass was empty.

'Thank you,' I replied.

She stood up and took our glasses to the bar.

I looked at her. She was very tall, and moved with natural elegance.

She returned with the glasses. 'What's your taste in literature?' she asked as she placed whisky and beer on the table.

And that started a conversation which lasted until closing time. She was very well read; her vocabulary was profound and she used it well. Her sentences were enunciated with a complex and exact syntax which I can't imitate. 'Have you noticed that most male writers don't know how to treat with the female psyche? And when they attempt to do so they tend to make a poor shadow? Think of Beckett. He has no idea of how the female might appear. The exceptions are few: perhaps Shakespeare and Defoe: and perhaps Hardy in his poetic, broken-hearted way.'

'A *Trampwoman's Tragedy*. And what a tragedy. I have heard that Hardy wove his poem from a local tale.'

'Do you know the poem?'

'I come from that part of the country. Here's the first verse—

*From Wynyard's Gap the livelong day,
The livelong day,
We beat afoot the northward way
We had travelled times before.
The sun-blaze burning on our backs,
Our shoulders sticking to our packs,
By fosseway, fields, and turnpike tracks
We skirted sad Sedge-Moor.*

I looked at her as I recited, examining her face — my speaking seemed to give me permission — her lips thin and pale, rather long, but not unattractive. Her mouth, when she talked, was less mobile than is the rule; perhaps she had been brought up in an old-fashioned household where to show one's teeth is seen as impolite. She was very perceptive of my gaze. 'The women portrayed by Walter de la Mare entranced me as a youth,' I said. 'I must read his stories again.'

'I'd not thought of him: he deserves better,' said my companion with some surprise. 'An extraordinary creator of character. Yes. Miss Duveen. Seaton's mother's step-sister. Extraordinary females. How could I have forgotten them? Unmourned Miss Duveen.' She turned to me, her manner earnest. 'Where do you live?'

'Headington,' I replied. 'Off Windmill Road. Margaret Road, in fact.'

'I live on the Old Road. Take a slight detour and have coffee and whisky with me.'

I accepted her kindness. When the landlord rang the final bell we took our leave, standing for a while on the pavement, watching the world transformed by snow; it covered the shoulders and the heads of the statues of the Sheldonian's philosophers. We walked together through the snowy streets of Oxford, over Magdalen Bridge, across the Plain, past the Warneford Hospital and so arrived at her flat at about eleven. The streets were very quiet.

Her flat was in a detached Art Deco house. She stood before her door, looking at me, wondering maybe how wise it had been to invite a stranger to her realm. Then she wiped her brogued shoes on the coir mat. She took a small collection of keys from her pocket, unbuttoning the leather pouch which protected her jacket from the sharpness of their wards. She unlocked the door and entered the room, reaching for the switch.

I wiped my feet, watched by her, until her posture lost its slight stiffness; she then allowed me into her rooms.

The first thing she said, as she lit the gas fire, was: 'I've enjoyed our evening. Our minds are similar: how surprised I was when we began to talk. We live in the same world. We could become friends. I'd like that. Thoughtful people are rare. It will have to be platonic, though. I'm generally regarded as something of a man-hater.' She paused reflectively. 'That's not altogether true, it seems. Your company— Well, I am surprised. Maybe I don't understand myself. Sit down, please.' She indicated an ancient club chair upholstered with cracked leather. She retained the position of her indicating hand for some time. I sat: I could feel the horsehair creak against my spine.

She pressed a switch on the table-lamp with a heavy shade, and, rising, walked to the door and extinguished the ceiling light. The room was now dimly lit. 'Whisky?' She looked over shoulders, back at me. The lamp was reflected in her eyes, preternaturally

bright, unadorned with cosmetic but naturally beautiful, strangely like a boy's.

'Please.'

She opened a cupboard. 'Lagavulin?' Her voice was almost a whisper.

'I would like that,' I said.

'Highland water? I'll give you the carafe; you can dilute it to your own satisfaction. I'm comfortable in your company,' she murmured, with slight surprise. 'Look round my room. It allows a kind of judgement of its occupant, and I'd like to hear what you have to say.'

I sat back in my chair. She placed the tumbler with an inch of dark whisky and the carafe side by side on the square mahogany table. She sat herself in my chair's companion, scrutinizing me.

And what could I make of her and the room she occupied, private and secretive? The world outside was muffled by snow; the traffic, such as there was, had become quite silent.

We sat in the stillness and the quiet. I was reluctant to look around myself at her room, her world as she had furnished and created it; my gaze in turn would be scrutinized by hers. Did she wish me as a mirror in which she could regard herself?

'Reflect,' she murmured, gazing at me above her glass. 'Show me my image; my form; myself as I am.'