The Face

Lennox Robinson

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Never in the daytime or in bright sunlight could you see it, but sometimes just before sunset when some sinking ray of the sun was reflected from the rock to the lake's dark surface, and always in moonlight and on clear starry nights then, lying flat on the top of the cliff and peering over you could see the face quite clearly.

It lay in the deep pool at the foot of the cliff, a few yards from the shore and apparently a foot or two deep in the water. First it appeared as a piece of white rock with a film of lakeweed floating across it, then gradually your vision cleared and you saw the pale features distinctly, the closed eyes and the long dark lashes, the curved eyebrows, the gentle mouth and the fair hair which half hid the white neck and which sometimes drifted like a veil across the face; below the neck the pool lay in deeper shadow, and no one had ever been able to tell the shape of the beautiful creature that lay there.

It was a precipitous climb down the face of the cliff and no one but Jerry Sullivan had ventured it, but as he touched with his fingers the water of the pool the face shivered away, and stretching his arm deep into the water it met nothing except a tendril of lake−weed. Only once had he climbed down because he was afraid that if he probed too deeply the face would disappear for ever for it was days after he touched the water before he saw it again; for the future he was content to gaze at it from above.

He had known it all his life. He could not have been more than six years old when his father had led him to the cliffs edge and shown him the sleeping face in the water. He had never been afraid of it as were some of the other boys, on the contrary when he was sent to drive the sheep from one hill to another he would contrive to pass the lake either coming or going, he would loiter there until the sun sank and risk a scolding when he got home; but hardly a week passed without his seeing the face.

Up among those lonely mountains he saw few women. There was only his mother, old now and grey, and a mile or two to the west the MacCarthy's cottage with the two girls Peg and Ellen, coarsely featured both with thick black hair, and the few other women he saw from time to time were either coarsely dark or foxy red. Was it any wonder that he turned from them to the fair face floating in the water? any wonder that as he grew older he judged every woman's face by that hard standard and found them all wanting.

His father died when he was eighteen years old and Jerry lived on with his mother, tilling the little bit of land, cutting turf on the side of the mountain, driving the sheep. It was a lonely, silent life for he was an only child−and his mother often urged him to take a wife, but he made the excuse that while she was there he wanted no other woman in the house, and though she remonstrated with him she was well co cutting turf on the side of the mountain, driving the sheep. It was a lonely, silent life—for he was an only child−and his mother often urged him to take a wife, but he made the excuse that while she was there he wanted no other woman in the house, and though she remonstrated with him she was well content to remain sole mistress of the cottage to the day of her death. He never told her of those hours he spent by the lake; hidden in a fold of the hills no one saw him go there, the neighbours shunned the place as haunted, and as the years crept by the face grew to be more and more particularly his own.

Fifteen years after his father's death his mother died, and when the funeral was over he climbed the mountain and stared for a long time into the water. It was a stormy winter evening and as the sun went down a pale young moon appeared. Never had the face been so clear, never had it looked more lovely. He had felt very lonely when the earth was thrown on his mother's coffin, now he felt quietly content. He had nothing left in the world to love except this face. It had no rival now, he could pour out all the love of his heart in adoration of it.

And so for three years it went on like this: more and more he shunned the neighbours, more and more time he spent by the lake. He began to neglect the farm, for what pleasure was there in working only for himself? and to the overtures of the match−makers he was either morosely silent or roughly violent. He spent now whole nights on the cliff; sometimes he thought he saw a stirring of the eyelids and the fancy grew in him that after sufficient concentration of devotion on his part the eyes would open; already the cheeks seemed less pale, the mouth had parted slightly, he thought he saw a gleam of white teeth.

He grew worn with watching. The woman in the water seemed to draw her vitality from him, and as her cheeks grew fuller his own grew thin, and as her face flushed his paled until one evening gazing down at those closed eyes he saw the lids stir and stir again and at last very slowly they opened. The eyes behind them were dazzlingly blue and they met his grey ones with a long comprehending look. Everything he had ever hoped to see in a woman's eyes was there, and half in terror, half in joy, he gave a cry and drew back from the cliff; when he looked again a second later the face had vanished.

He thought he would see it the next night, but he looked in vain. He was frantic. There had been weeks before when on account of the weather or some trick of light he had been unable to see the face, but always through those dark days he had been conscious that it was waiting for him in the water, ready to re−appear at any moment; now he was only conscious of a great blank, an emptiness, a desolation. He ran round the lake like a distracted man, he looked into other pools—in vain. With the opening of her eyes she had fled and the little lake was as deserted as a last year's nest.

It was three days later at the fair of Coolmore that he found her. She was standing with her back to the wall outside the post−office, and a little curious crowd was round her questioning her and touching her clothes. There was a strangeness, a foreignness about her, and when the village policeman came and began to question her the crowd gathered closer, but her replies were incoherent; she did not know her name or where she had come from or where she was going; she stood there lonely and aloof and her blue eyes kept searching every face piteously, like a blind man feeling with his stick for the pavement's edge. Then she lifted her eyes and beyond the fringe of the crowd they met Jerry's eyes. He again saw that look, he strode to her pushing the crowd away roughly to right and left, he put his arm into hers and led her to his house.

The priest married them and they lived in perfect contentment and happiness. She had been pale and fragile when he brought her home, but she grew every day stronger and more beautiful.

She knew nothing of housework or farmwork and learned but little, preferring to sit in the shadow of a rock in the field while Jerry worked and in the winter to crouch in the corner near the fire or sit in the window in the moonlight. He was quite content to have her so and gladly did the work of two; he liked the mystery of her, he liked to feel her different from the neighbours.

She never could tell him where she came from and he soon ceased to question her; he told her of the face in the water, but it seemed to awaken no memory in her mind, and yet sometimes, looking at her—especially when she sat in the moonlight—the texture of her body would seem to become fluidic, her face would appear as if floating, and behind it he would seem to see that other face with its closed eyes. That face had disappeared from the lake and he never went to the cliff now.

In the second November after their marriage when the moon was full a child was born to them, a child as fragile as a moon−ray, that lay in the cradle hardly stirring, never crying.

The fair of Coolmore was held ten days later and Jerry had to bring some cattle to it to sell.

Coolmore lay fifteen miles away across the mountain, and he got up very early in the morning, lit the fire, left food and drink for his wife, and started. Peg MacCarthy had promised to look in at her once or twice during the day and he knew she would want for nothing.

He sold his cattle, but there was a delay about payment and it was after four o'clock when he left Coolmore village. He walked quickly, the money was heavy in his pocket, his mind was strangely anxious about his wife

and he made the best pace he could. The evening grew colder and colder, yellowish−grey clouds came up from the north−east, the rushes in the lonely bogs bent to the wind, and as he reached the top of the pass it began to snow. It was early in the year for snow, but this was a heavy shower and the big flakes half blinded him as he pushed doggedly on.

But his boots grew clogged, he had to walk more and more slowly, and when he was three miles from home he determined to take a short cut across the hills which would shorten his road by half a mile. It was wild walking but he knew every foot of the path, it led him along the top of the cliff above the lake, and he stopped for a minute there to get his breath. The snow had ceased to fall, the sky was clearing, a few stars shone out and the lake lay black at his feet. Something— old habit perhaps—made him fall on his knees and peer over, and there in the pool below he saw the face. It was there just as it had always been with closed eyes and floating hair. He rose to his feet vaguely troubled. He had never seen it since his marriage.

Half a mile from his house he met Peg MacCarthy walking quickly towards him. "Thank God it's yourself, Jerry" she said. "The wife, God help me, is gone. I saw her just before milking time and she was sitting by the fire; I said you'd have a bad walk home and she said she wished she could go and meet you; then afterwards, and I sitting at my tea, a step passed on the road and now when I went to your house she's gone."

Hardly stopping to answer her he ran home. It was true, she was not there. The child lay quietly sleeping in its cradle. Then he thought of the face in the lake and he ran up the road and along the path and over the breast of the hill to the cliffs edge. The face was there still, and again as he had done years before he climbed down to the rock. He still saw the face, he touched the water, the face did not vanish, he plunged in his arms and drew his wife's body to the shore.

In the water the face had appeared living, out of it with the wet hair clinging about it it was cold and dead. Had she come to meet him and fallen in? He could see no hurt on her. Or had she fled from him back to the element to which she belonged? The wet form in his arms seemed less his than the woman in the water. Every impulse of his nature urged him to lay her back. He did so and she sank in the deep pool till only her face was seen.

He climbed the cliff and walked home. He felt strangely bewildered. He hardly grieved. Had he lost her or had he ever had her? Was this only the evening of his mother's funeral and had he, kneeling on that cliff, fallen into a dream and dreamed of the face's awakening, of the marriage, of the child? No, this last was real at any rate, and he took it from the cradle and held it in his arms and stood by the window looking out at the dying moon. And yet—was it only fancy—or, as the sickly moon sank did the child really grow lighter and lighter in his arms, and would he find when morning broke that he was only clasping a tangle of wet lake−weed wrapped in an old quilt?