

In a Pair of Eyes

By Lafcadio Hearn

There is one adolescent moment never to be forgotten,—the moment when the boy learns that this world contains nothing more wonderful than a certain pair of eyes. At first the surprise of the discovery leaves him breathless: instinctively he turns away his gaze. That vision seemed too delicious to be true. But presently he ventures to look again,—fearing with a new fear,—afraid of the reality, afraid also of being observed;—and lo! his doubt dissolves in a new shock of ecstasy. Those eyes are even more wonderful than he had imagined—nay! they become more and yet more entrancing every successive time that he looks at them! Surely in all the universe there cannot be another such pair of eyes! What can lend them such enchantment? Why do they appear divine? . . . He feels that he must ask somebody to explain,—must propound to older and wiser heads the riddle of his new emotions. Then he makes his confession, with a faint intuitive fear of being laughed at, but with a strange, fresh sense of rapture in the telling. Laughed at he is—tenderly; but this does not embarrass him nearly so much as the fact that he can get no answer to his question,—to the simple “Why?” made so interesting by his frank surprise and his timid blushes. No one is able to enlighten him; but all can sympathize with the bewilderment of his sudden awakening from the long soul-sleep of childhood.

Perhaps that “Why?” never can be fully answered. But the mystery that prompted it constantly tempts one to theorize; and theories may have a worth independent of immediate results. Had it not been for old theories concerning the Unknowable, what should we have been able to learn about the Knowable? Was it not while in pursuit of the Impossible that we stumbled upon the undreamed-of and infinitely marvellous Possible?

Why indeed should a pair of human eyes appear for a time to us so beautiful that, when likening their radiance to splendor of diamond or amethyst or emerald, we feel the comparison a blasphemy? Why should we find them deeper than the sea, deeper than the day,—deep even as the night of Space, with its scintillant mist of suns? Certainly not because of mere wild fancy. These thoughts, these feelings, must spring from some actual perception of the marvellous,—some veritable revelation of the unspeakable. There is, in very truth, one brief hour of life during which the world holds for us nothing so wonderful as a pair of eyes. And then, while looking into them, we discover a thrill of awe vibrating through our delight,—awe made by a something *felt* rather than seen: a latency,—a power,—a shadowing of depth unfathomable as the cosmic Ether. It is as though, through some intense and sudden stimulation of vital being, we had obtained—for one supercelestial moment—the glimpse of a reality, never before imagined, and never again to be revealed.

There is, indeed, an illusion. We seem to view the divine; but this divine itself, whereby we are dazzled and duped, is a ghost. Not to actuality belongs the spell,—not to anything that *is*,—but to some infinite composite phantom of what has been. Wondrous the vision—but wondrous only because our mortal sight then pierces beyond the surface of the present into profundities of myriads of years,—pierces beyond the mask of life into the enormous night of death. For a moment we are made aware of a beauty and a mystery and a depth unutterable: then the Veil falls again forever.

The splendor of the eyes that we worship belongs to them only as brightness to the morning-star. It is a reflex from beyond the shadow of the Now,—a ghost-light of vanished suns.

Unknowingly within that maiden—gaze we meet the gaze of eyes more countless than the hosts of heaven,—eyes otherwhere passed into darkness and dust.

Thus, and only thus, the depth of that gaze is the depth of the Sea of Death and Birth,—and its mystery is the World-Soul's vision, watching us out of the silent vast of the Abyss of Being.

Thus, and only thus, do truth and illusion mingle in the magic of eyes,—the spectral past suffusing with charm ineffable the apparition of the present;—and the sudden splendor in the soul of the Seër is but a flash,—one soundless sheet-lightning of the Infinite Memory.