

The Portrait of Helena

By Graeme Moore

I bring a cautionary tale surrounding the fate of a friend by the name of Arthur Tottam. A military man who met his wife, Helena, at a young age. She was a beauty beyond compare. Their romance was cut short by the beckoning of wartime trumpets. Years passed and Arthur brought home a temper and a fondness for drink. Distance had made him obsessive and controlling. He locked Helena away in his manor, freeing her only briefly for moments spent in high society. Though older now, her beauty remained imprinted on her very soul, her features untouched by the withering of age. Eyes piercingly blue, hair falling in auburn ringlets down the sides of her face. It was no surprise then, as her body became marred by injury, that the rumours of their origin spread. At first small injuries, a cut across the cheek, a scar along the lip, a bruise on the arm. They were waved away in polite conversation as the comeuppance of clumsiness. But as they mounted so too did the inquiries. First a nail pulled from a finger, then a chunk of the hair wrenched from the side of the skull. But Helena remained adamant, refusing help from others and even referencing her husband's love for her in the form of a portrait he had commissioned in her likeness. Others worried that his obsession grew, but she would hear no word against him.

Not long after its completion, Arthur invited me to see the portrait. I arrived and after our meal we adjourned to his smoking room. Entering I saw the portrait resting above the mantle. Helena gazed back. The likeness was picturesque. The artist had captured her essence. She sat stoically in a long-backed leather chair, the rest of the room consumed by darkness. Beside her on a small table rested a simple lamp and a red-spined book.

“What do you make of it?” Arthur slurred.

“Perfection, it is her soul in paint.”

“Yes, good. It is beautiful. She should be grateful.”

The conversation fell to stony silence. I finished my cigar and excused myself shortly after. I doubt he even recognized my departure. The glass carafe once filled to the brim with a deep amber liquid now held only dregs.

The painting stayed with me: the eyes, the hair, the expression. They burrowed into my mind, turning my thoughts always to Helena. It was to my horror when her body was discovered. Carried out by police the rumours canvassed the corpse with their mutterings. How had it happened, what had been done? No matter where the conversation turned, the result was always the same: Arthur was to blame. But no proof could be found. Her refusal to implicate him in previous wrongdoings acted as a barrier to any blame being laid at his feet. Even in death, her words defended his cruelty. He became all the more reclusive following her demise. Time, the greatest salve to injustice, wiped her from the collective memory.

But I could not move on. My thoughts were fixated on the painting. Her eyes, her face, her hair. She had been wronged and I was adamant I would find out why. I wrote to Arthur and requested his leave to visit in the coming days. I explained that I was in the process of selling my residence. While my solicitor inquired on my behalf, I hoped that a friend would do me the kindness of opening his home to me. The response, while curt, was agreeable.

Within a day's time I had moved into his manor. The space was oppressive. The lack of candlelight left each room dank and cold. The only areas that continued to be lit were the smoking room and the two rooms

dedicated to myself and Arthur. Each night we would dine on simple foods. Arthur barely ate. He spent the majority of his time drinking. In the first days and nights of my visit he would deplete entire bottles of his preferred brown ichors before stumbling through the halls.

As time passed, I began excusing myself early in the night to patrol the hallways searching for some clue of Helena's death. I would investigate until I heard the hulking mass of my host trudging down hallways towards his bedrest. After a fortnight of searching I found nothing. I decided that the only way to truly discern the cause of her demise would be an interrogation. I planned the conversation in advance. It would be easier to ply the information if he were already deep in his libations. I prepared an extravagant meal to be served with an endless supply of his favourite spirits. Afterward we would adjourn and I would ask him full in the face of what had happened.

The night came and went without issue. The meal was consumed, the drink imbibed. We made our way into the smoking room and sat under her gaze. I had not looked at the portrait in days and yet I could perceive some change in it. The eyes looked sharper, the skin pulled taught framing an anger which had been absent before today. I turned to Arthur and spoke

"She was beautiful, no?"

"Hmph."

"The artist was a master."

"At least this one knows its place..."

"What do you mean Arthur?"

"The portrait is mine, it knows where it should be, how it should look, it knows its place. Above the mantle. The other one. Got what it deserved."

The admission was short but clear.

"I have received word from my solicitor. My new home will be prepared in three days' time. I will depart."

An answer didn't come. It seemed as though the confession had been all the man could muster. I glanced up at the portrait. The eyes gazed defiantly downward at Arthur. I shook my head as I took my leave. Making my way to my bed chambers for the evening I changed quickly before laying down to rest. I was awoken suddenly hours later by a bone chilling scream piercing the silence of the halls. I rose and searched frantically for the source. I discovered it in the smoking room. Peering through the gap in the door I saw Arthur prostrate on the floor in supplication before the fire, clutching desperately at his forefinger. I pushed through the door. The finger spurted blood. It looked as though something had wrenched the nail from the finger. Arthur rocked back and forth. I walked through the room collecting cloth and alcohol. I soaked the rag and wrapped the finger in the tincture. His screams burst forward anew. Collecting him we rose, and I returned to him to his bedchambers where he slumbered still clutching the finger. I returned to the smoking room and checked the space near his seat for any sign of the nail. I found no sign of it. Confused, I returned to my bed chambers.

The following morning, I was awoken early by a hammering at my door.

"Henry, open your door please."

After pausing a moment to compose myself I walked over and unlatched the lock.

"Yes Arthur, are you alright?"

He pushed through the doorway and threw himself down on the bed. Rising his eyes darted back and forth from me to the door frame.

"Did you see her?"

"Her who?"

"Helena."

I was confused.

"Do you mean the portrait?"

"No, you fool, the woman."

"Arthur... Helena is gone. She passed weeks ago."

"No... no she was there. Clear as day. She was before me just as you are before me now. She tore the nail straight from my finger."

"Arthur, the drink has taken your mind."

He stood up angrily.

"She was there dammit."

With that he stormed from the room.

I rushed after him and watched as he scrounged for evidence of the nail. I surmised that it had perhaps fallen through the floorboards. He rushed from the room returning shortly after, hefting a shovel. He drove the spade through the wood splintering off chunks in his fury. He dug through the refuse below searching desperately for any sign of the nail. Soaked in sweat and cradling his newly injured finger he swore into the open room. Nothing had been unearthed. Throwing a rug on the manor's newest scar he marched to the nearby decanters. He imbibed deeply of the brown liquids within, barely pausing to catch his breath. Suddenly he bellowed

"TONIGHT SHE WILL RETURN. WE WILL HOLD ARMED VIGIL IN THIS ROOM."

He grabbed the shovel and mimicked a rifle being fired into the nearby portrait. I dared not question him. Night fell swiftly. A fire blazed before us as we waited, monitoring the shadows for any sign of movement.

As the hours passed the heat and drink took effect. I dozed in the chair beside Arthur who had been taken by dreams long before. As the darkness enveloped my mind I was abruptly drawn out by the same shriek as the previous night. I jumped from my chair hefting my pistol. Arthur lay on the floor clutching the side of his head. Blood flowed out from the holes between his fingers. I pulled the hand away. His ear had been ripped from his skull. Blood mixed with hair and dirt on the newly excavated floor. Arthur screamed relentlessly. I rushed to grab bandages checking the room for any sign of the perpetrator. Still nothing.

When he finally calmed, I asked what had happened.

“SHE RETURNED. PULLED MY EAR STRAIGHT FROM MY HEAD.”

“Arthur, your wife is gone.”

He looked at me incredulously. I returned the gaze.

“I can’t remain here, she will return, she will kill me I tell you.”

I shook my head but said “you can come to my estate. We must only remain here one more evening.”

He looked terrified but agreed. As he took his leave I paused to look back at the portrait. It was the strangest thing, but it looked as though something rested on top of the red spined book. I shook my head, refusing to let the night's events unwind my reason. I would take Arthur to an asylum. It was clear the murder of his wife had caused his mind to snap. The final day passed quickly. I collected my belongings and sent them in a coach to my new abode. I explained to the driver that I would be arriving early on the morrow and that a separate carriage should be arranged to go to the asylum.

The manor creaked, seemingly aware of the impending departure. Marching through the hallways I plodded the familiar path to the smoking

room. Entering I gazed upon the portrait one final time. Helena looked newly revitalized in the light. My eyes seemed to deceive me, but I could perceive strands of thin black hair newly resting on the book. I frowned and looked closer. They seemed to be covering something fleshlike. Closer and closer I approached the painting, spying something else previously unseen positioned between Helena's fingertips. A small clear item like a shard of mirror. As I came right underneath the painting, I saw them both for what they truly were. A fingernail clasped in her fingertips and an ear blanketed in thin black hair. I shifted my gaze to Helena's face. A smile spread across the lips. The piercing blue eyes stared directly at me. I jumped back in shock and fled from the room.

Evening arrived and I heard something faint float by outside my room. Down the hallway a door unlatched. Arthur's pleading echoed throughout the decaying manor. Morning dawned. I collected my things and walked towards the exit. I paused at the doorway to the smoking room. I glanced inside at the portrait only for a moment. A head had appeared in the painting resting in Helena's lap. I met the coachman outside and explained that there would be no need for the carriage to the asylum.