### The Eye of the Beholder

Isaac Asimov

George and I were sitting on a bench at the boardwalk and contemplating the broad expanse of the beach and the sparkling sea in the distance. I was immersed in the innocent pleasure of watching the young ladies in their bikinis and wondering what they could get out of the beauties of life that was half as much as they contributed.

Knowing George as I did, I rather suspected his own thoughts to be considerably less nobly aesthetic than mine. I was certain that they would deal with the more useful aspects of those same young ladies.

It was with considerable surprise, then, that I heard him say, “Old man, here we sit drinking in the beauties of nature in the shape of the female form divine — to coin a phrase — and yet sure­ly true beauty is not, and cannot be, so evident. True beauty, after all, is so precious that it must be hidden from the eyes of trivial observers. Have you ever thought that?”

“No,” I said, “I've never thought that and, now that you mention it, I still don't. What's more, I don't think that you have ever thought that.”

George sighed. “Talking with you, old chap, is like swimming in molasses — very little return for very great effort. I have watched you observing that tall goddess there, the one whose wisps of fine textile do nothing to conceal the few square inches they purport to cover. Surely you understand that those are mere superficialities that she displays.'\*

“I have never asked for much out of life,” I said in my humble way. “I'll be satisfied with superficialities of that sort.”

“Think how much more beautiful a young woman would be, even a woman quite unprepossessing to the untutored eyes of one such as you, if she possessed the eternal glories of goodness, unselfishness, cheerfulness, uncomplaining industry, and con­cern for others — all the virtues, in short, that shed gold and grace on a woman.”

“What I'm thinking, George,” I said, “is that you must be drunk. What on earth can you possibly know about virtues such as those?”

“I am totally familiar with them,” said George haughtily, “be­cause I practice them assiduously, and to the full.”

“Undoubtedly,” I said, “only in the privacy of your own room and in the dark.”

Disregarding your crude remark [George said], I must explain that even if I did not have personal knowledge of these virtues, I would have learned of them through my acquaintance with a young woman named Melisande Ott, née Melisande Renn, and known to her loving husband Octavius Ott as Maggie. She was known to me as Maggie also, for she was the daughter of a dear friend of mine, now, alas, deceased, and she always considered me her Uncle George.

I must admit that there is a bit of me that, like you, appreci­ates the subtle qualities of what you call ‘superficialities.’  Yes, old boy, I know I used the term first but we will not get any­where if you are going to interrupt me constantly over triviali­ties.

Because of this small weakness in myself, I must also admit that when, in an access of joy at seeing me, she would squeal and throw her arms about me, my delight at the event was not quite as great as it would have been had she been more generously proportioned. She was quite thin and her bones were painfully prominent. Her nose was large, her chin weak, her hair rather lank and straight and pure mouse in color, and her eyes an undefinable gray-green. Her cheekbones were broad, so that she rather resembled a chipmunk that had just completed a fine collection of nuts and seeds. In short, she was not the type of young woman whose arrival on the scene would cause any young man present to begin breathing rapidly and striving to get closer.

But she had a good heart. She bore up, with a wistful smile, at the visible winces that shook the average young man who met her for the first time without warning. She served as bridesmaid for all her friends in turn with a fresh group of wistful smiles. She served as godmother to innumerable children, and as baby­sitter to others, and was as deft a bottle feeder as you could see in a long month of Sundays.

She brought hot soup to the deserving poor, and to the unde­serving as well, though there were some who said that it was the undeserving who more nearly deserved the visitation. She per­formed various duties at the local church, several times over — once for herself and once each for those of her friends who preferred the guilty splendors of the movie palaces to selfless service. She taught classes at Sunday school, keeping the chil­dren cheerful by making (as they thought) funny faces at them. She also frequently led them all in a reading of the nine com­mandments. (She left out the one about adultery, for experience had taught her that this invariably led to inconvenient ques­tions.) She also served as a volunteer at the local branch of the public library.

Naturally, she lost all hope of getting married somewhere about the age of four. Even the chance of having a casual date with a member of the opposite sex seemed to her to be a rather impossible dream by the time she had reached the age of ten.

Many a time she would say to me, “I am not unhappy, Uncle George. The world of men is sealed to me, yes, always excepting your dear self and the memory of poor Papa, but there is far more true happiness in doing good.”

She would then visit the prisoners in the county jail in order to plead for repentance, and for conversion to good works. It was only one or two of the crasser sort who volunteered for solitary confinement on those days on which she was due to arrive.

But then she met Octavius Ott, a newcomer to the neighbor­hood, a young electrical engineer with a responsible position at the power company. He was a worthy young man — grave, in­dustrious, persevering, courageous, honest, and reverent — but he was not what you or I would call handsome. In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, he was not what anyone in recorded his­tory would have called handsome.

He had a receding hairline — or, more accurately, a receded one — a bulbous forehead, a snub nose, thin lips, ears that stood well away from his head, and a prominent Adam's apple that was never entirely still. What there was of his hair was rather rust-colored, and he had an irregular sprinkling of freckles on his face and arms.

I happened to be with Maggie when she and Octavius met in the street for the first time. Both were equally unprepared and both started like a pair of skittish horses suddenly confronted by a dozen clowns in a dozen fright wigs who were blowing a dozen whistles. For a moment, I expected both Maggie and Octavius to rear and whinny.

The moment passed, however, and each successfully weath­ered the flash of panic they had experienced. She did nothing more than place her hand on her heart as though to keep it from leaping out of the rib cage in search of a more secure hiding place, while he wiped his brow as though to erase a horrid mem­ory.

I had met Octavius some days before and so I was able to introduce them to each other. Each held out a tentative hand as though not anxious to add the sense of touch to that of vision.

Later that afternoon, Maggie broke a long silence and said to me, “What an odd young man that Mr. Ott seems to be.”

I said, with that originality of metaphor which my friends all enjoy, “You mustn't judge a book by its cover, my dear.”

“But the cover exists, Uncle George,” she said earnestly, “and we must take that into account. I dare say that the average young woman, frivolous and unfeeling, would have little do with Mr. Ott. It would be a deed of kindness, therefore, to show him that not all young women are totally heedless, but that one at least does not turn against a young man for nothing more than his unfortunate resemblance to — to —” she paused as no compa­rable member of the animal kingdom occurred to her, so that she had to end lamely, but warmly, with, “whatever it is that he resembles. I must be kind to him.”

I do not know whether Octavius had a confidant to whom he could unburden himself in similar fashion. Probably not, for few of us, if any, are blessed with Uncle Georges. Nevertheless I'm quite certain, judging from later events, that precisely the same thoughts occurred to him — in reverse, of course.

In any case, each labored to be kind to the other, tentatively and hesitantly at first, then warmly, and at last passionately. What began as casual encounters at the library became visits to the zoo, then an evening at the movies, then dances, until what finally took place could only be described — if you'll excuse my language — as trysts.

People began to expect to see one whenever they saw the other, for they had become an indissoluble pair. Some of those in the neighborhood complained bitterly that to get a double dose of Octavius and Maggie was more than the human eye could be expected to endure, and more than one supercilious elitist in­vested in sunglasses.

I will not say that I was totally lacking in sympathy for these extreme views, but others — more tolerant and, perhaps, more reasonable — pointed out that the features on one were, by some peculiar chance, quite opposite to the corresponding features of the other. Seeing the two together tended to introduce a cancel­ing effect, so that both together were more endurable than either separately. Or at least that was what some claimed.

Finally there came a day when Maggie burst in on me and said, “Uncle George, Octavius is the light and life of my exis­tence. He is staunch, strong, steady, sturdy, and stable. He is a lovely man.”

“Internally, my dear,” I said, I'm sure he is all of these things. His outward appearance, however, is —”

“Adorable,” she said staunchly, strongly, steadily, sturdily, and stably. “Uncle George, he feels about me as I feel about him, and we are going to be married.”

“You and Otto?” I said faintly. An involuntary image of the likely issue of such a marriage swam before my eyes and I turned rather faint.

“Yes,” she said. “He has told me that I am the sun of his delight and the moon of his joy. Then he added that I was all the stars of his happiness. He is a very poetic man.”

“So it seems,” I said dubiously. “When are you going to be married?”

“As soon as possible,” she said.

There was nothing to do but grit my teeth. The announcement was made, the preparations were carried through, the marriage was performed with myself giving away the bride. Everyone in the neighborhood attended out of disbelief. Even the minister allowed a reverent look of astonishment to cross his face.

Nor did anyone seem to gaze gladly at the young couple. All through the ceremony, the audience stared at its various knees. Except the minister. He kept his eyes firmly fixed on the rose window over the front door.

I left the neighborhood some time after, took up lodgings in another part of the city, and rather lost touch with Maggie. Eleven years later, however, I had occasion to return over a matter of an investment in a friend's learned studies of the racing qualities of horses. I seized the opportunity of visiting Maggie, who was, among her other well-hidden beauties, a marvelous cook.

I arrived at lunch time. Octavius was away at work, but that didn't matter. I am not a selfish man and I gladly ate his portion in addition to mine.

I could not help but notice, however, that there was a shade of grief on Maggie's face. I said, over the coffee, “Are you un­happy, Maggie? Is your marriage not going well?”

“Oh, no, Uncle George,” she said vehemently; “our marriage was made in heaven. Although we remain childless, we are so wrapped up in each other that we are barely aware of the loss. We live in a sea of perpetual bliss and have nothing more to ask of the universe.”

“I see,” I said, my teeth rather on edge. “Then why this shade of grief I seem to detect in you?”

She hesitated, and then burst out, “Oh, Uncle George, you are such a sensitive man. There *is* one thing that does interpose a bit of grit in the wheels of delight.”

“And that is?”

“My appearance.”

“Your appearance? What is wrong —” I swallowed and found myself unable to finish the sentence.

“I am not beautiful,” said Maggie, with the air of one im­parting a well-hidden secret.

“Ah!” I said.

“And I wish I were — for Octavius's sake. I want to be lovely just for him.”

“Does he complain about your appearance?” I asked cau­tiously.

“Octavius? Certainly not. He bears his suffering in noble si­lence.”

“Then how do you know he is suffering?”

“My woman's heart tells me so.”

“But Maggie, Octavius is himself — well — not beautiful.”

“How can you say that?” said Maggie indignantly. “He's gor­geous.”

“But perhaps he thinks *you're* gorgeous.”

“Oh, no,” said Maggie, “how could he think that?”

“Well, is he interested in other women?”

“Uncle George!” said Maggie, shocked. “What a base thought. I'm surprised at you. Octavius has no eyes for anyone but me.”

“Then what does it matter if you are beautiful or not?”

“It's for *him,”* she said. “Oh, Uncle George, I want to be beautiful for *him.”*

And, leaping into my lap in a most unexpected and unpleasant way, she moistened the lapel of my jacket with her tears. In fact, it was wringing wet before she was quite through.

I had by then, of course, met Azazel, the two-centimeter de­mon I may have mentioned to you on occa — Now, old man, there is no need for you to mutter “ad nauseam” in that supercil­ious manner. Anyone who writes as you do should be embar­rassed at bringing up the thought of nausea in any connection whatever.

In any case, I called up Azazel.

Azazel was asleep when he arrived. He had a bag of some green material covering his tiny head and only the muffled sound of quick soprano squeaking from within gave evidence that he was alive. That, and the fact that every once in a while his little sinewy tail stiffened and vibrated with a tinny hum.

I waited several minutes for him to wake up naturally, and when that did not happen I gently removed his head-bag with a pair of tweezers. His eyes opened slowly and focused on me, whereupon he gave an exaggerated start.

He said, “For a moment I thought I was merely having a night­mare. I didn't count on *you!”*

I ignored his childish petulance and said, “I have a task for you to do for me.”

“Naturally,” said Azazel sourly. “You don't suppose I am expecting you to offer to do a task for me.”

“I would in a moment,” I said suavely, “if my inferior abilities were sufficient to do anything a personage of your stature and power would find of significant use.”

“True, true,” said Azazel, mollified.

It is truly disgusting, I might add, the susceptibility of some minds to flattery. I've seen you, for instance, go out of your mind with fatuous joy when someone asks you for an autograph. But back to my tale —

“What is involved?” asked Azazel.

“I wish you to make a young woman beautiful.”

Azazel shuddered. “I'm not sure I could bring myself to do that. The standards of beauty among your bloated and miserable species of life are atrocious.”

“But they are ours. I will tell you what to do.”

“*You* will tell *me* what to do!” he shrieked, vibrating with outrage. “*You* will tell *me* how to stimulate and modify hair follicles, how to strengthen muscles, how to grow or dissolve bone? Indeed! *You* will tell *me* all this?”

“Not at all,” I said humbly. “The details of the mechanism that such a deed would require are only to be handled by a being of your magnificent attainments. Allow me, however, to tell you the superficial effects to be achieved.”

Azazel was once again mollified, and we went over the matter in detail.

“Remember,” I said, “the effects are to be brought to fruition over a period of at least sixty days. A too-sudden change might excite remark.”

“Do you mean,” said Azazel, “I'm to spend sixty of your days supervising and adjusting and correcting? Is my time worth nothing in your opinion?”

“Ah, but you could then write this up for one of your world's biological journals. It is not a task that many on your world would have the ability or patience to undertake. You will be greatly admired as a result.”

Azazel nodded thoughtfully. “I scorn cheap adulation, of course,” he said, “but I suppose I have a duty to hold myself up as a role model for inferior members of my species.” He sighed with a shrill, whistling sound. “It is troublesome and embarrass­ing, but it is my duty.”

I had a duty as well. I felt I ought to remain in the neighbor­hood during the interval of change. My horse-racing friend put me up in return for my expertise and advice on the results of various experimental runnings, with the result that he lost very little money.

Each day I sought an excuse to see Maggie and the results slowly began to show. Her hair grew fuller-bodied, and devel­oped a graceful wave. Red-gold glints began to appear, lending it a welcome richness.

Little by little, her jawbone grew more prominent, her cheek­bones more delicate and higher. Her eyes developed a definite blue that deepened from day to day to what was almost violet. The eyelids developed just the tiniest oriental slant. Her ears grew more shapely and lobes appeared. Her figure rounded and grew almost opulent, bit by bit, and her waist narrowed.

People were puzzled. I heard them myself. “Maggie,” they would say, “what have you done to yourself? Your hair looks simply marvelous. You look ten years younger.”

“I haven't done *anything*”Maggie would say. She was as puzzled as all the others were. Except me, of course.

She said to me, “Do you notice any change in me, Uncle George?”

I said, “You look delightful, but you have always looked de­lightful to me, Maggie.”

“Maybe so,” she said, “but I have never looked delightful to me until recently. I don't understand it. Yesterday a bold young man turned to look at me. They always used to hurry by, shad­ing their eyes. This one *winked* at me, however. It caught me so by surprise, I actually smiled at him.”

A few weeks later I met her husband, Octavius, at a restau­rant, where I was studying the menu in the window. Since he was about to enter it to order a meal, it was the work of a moment for him to invite me to join him and the work of half another moment for me to accept.

“You look unhappy, Octavius,” I said.

“I *am* unhappy,” he said, “I don't know what's got into Maggie lately. She seems so distracted that she doesn't notice me half the time. She wants to be constantly socializing. And yester­day ...” A look of such woebegone misery suffused his face that almost anyone would have been ashamed of laughing at it.

“Yesterday?” I said. “What of yesterday?”

“Yesterday she asked me to call her —Melisande. I can't call Maggie a ridiculous name like Melisande.”

“Why not? It's her baptismal name.”

“But she's my Maggie. Melisande is some stranger.”

“Well, she has changed a bit,” I said. “Haven't you noticed that she looks more beautiful these days?”

“Yes,” said Octavius, biting off the word.

“Isn't that a good thing?”

“No,” he said, more sharply still. “I want my plain, funny-looking Maggie. This new Melisande is always fixing her hair, and putting on different shades of eye shadow, and trying on new clothes and bigger bras, and hardly ever talking to me.”

The lunch ended in a dejected silence on his part.

I thought I had better see Maggie and have a good talk with her.

“Maggie,” I said.

“Please call me Melisande,” she said.

“Melisande,” I said, “it seems to me that Octavius is un­happy.”

“Well, so am I,” she said tartly. “Octavius is getting to be such a bore. He won't go out. He won't have fun. He objects to my clothes, my makeup. Who on earth does he think he is?”

“You used to think he was a king among men.”

“The more fool I. He's just an ugly little fellow I'm embar­rassed to be seen with.”

“You wanted to be beautiful just for him.”

“What do you mean *wanted* to be beautiful? I *am* beautiful. I was always beautiful. It was just a matter of developing a good hairstyle and knowing how to fix my makeup just right. I can't let Octavius stand in my way.”

And she didn't. Half a year later, she and Octavius were di­vorced and in another half year Maggie — or Melisande — was married again to a man of superficial good looks and unworthy char­acter. I once dined with him and he hesitated so long at picking up the check, I was afraid I might have to pick it up myself.

I saw Octavius about a year after his divorce. He, of course, had not remarried, for he was as odd-looking as ever and milk still curd­led in his presence. We were sitting in his apartment which was filled with photos of Maggie, the old Maggie, each one more atrocious than the next.

“You must still be missing her, Octavius,” I said.

“Dreadfully!” he replied. “I can only hope she is happy,” “I understand she isn't,” I said. “She may come back to you.”

Sadly, he shook his head. “Maggie can never come back to me. A woman named Melisande may wish to come back but I couldn't accept her if she did. She isn't Maggie — my lovely Mag­gie.”

“Melisande,” I said, “is more beautiful than Maggie.” He stared at me for a long time. “In whose eyes?” he said. “Certainly, not in mine.” It was the last time I saw either of them.

I sat for a moment in silence, then I said, “You amaze me, George. I was actually touched.”

It was a poor choice of words. George said, “That reminds me, old fellow — Could I touch you for five dollars for about a week? Ten days tops.”

I reached for a five-dollar bill, hesitated, then said, “Here! The story is worth it. It's a gift. It's yours.” (Why not? All loans to George are gifts *de facto,)*

George took the bill without comment and put it in his well-worn wallet. (It must have been well-worn when he bought it, for he never uses it.) He said, “To get back to the subject. Could I touch you for five dollars for about a week? Ten days tops.”

I said, “But you *have* five dollars.”

“That is *my* money,” said George, “and no business of yours. Do I comment on the state of your finances when you borrow money from me?”

“But I have never —” I began, then sighed and handed over five dollars more.