

Conversation Pieces
Volume 58

Helen's Story

by
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Published by Aqueduct Press
PO Box 95787
Seattle, WA 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

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First paperback edition, October 2017
First Publication, Hardcover, March 2013, PS Publishing

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ISBN: 978-1-61976-134-6
Cover Illustration by Erika Steiskal
erikasteiskal.com

Original Block Print of Mary Shelley by Justin Kempton:
www.writersmugs.com

Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging,
Bellingham WA

Acknowledgments

A big thank you to those who have read and commented on *Helen's Story*, especially Gary Couzens, Denni Schnapp, Helen Callaghan, Al Robertson, Melanie Garrett, KD Grace, and Jack Calverley. I also enjoyed illuminating discussions on gender, Machen, and weird fiction with Allyson Bird, Joel Lane, and Gwilym Games from the Friends of Arthur Machen. I'm sad to note that Denni Schnapp and Joel Lane have passed away since the first printing in 2013, so this edition is dedicated to them. And of course, this book wouldn't have been possible without the inspiration of Arthur Machen's writing. My take could well send Mr Machen on some rotations in his grave, but I like to think that at least a few chuckles will accompany the spinning. To find out more about him, visit the FoAM website: www.arthurmachen.org.uk

I. Vanishing points

“What was in your dream, Helen? You must tell me,” demanded Dr Raymond.

“Leaves.” I mumbled the first thing that came to mind. But it wasn’t from a dream at all. I was desperate to go back to sleep.

“Wake up!”

If I’d been a normal child I would have cried and protested at being disturbed. Instead, I sat up straight and gazed at the wall in front of me. As always, I focused on the large portrait of my mother, Mary, a dark-haired beauty who inspired reverential tones from the doctor. She is dead and now she lives in Heaven, Dr Raymond always told me.

“Helen? Look at me.” Dr Raymond sat in the arm-chair by my bed, a notebook open across his knees and his pen poised. In the light from the candle on my bedside table his skin looked even more lined. I thought he was incredibly ancient, though he couldn’t have been more than forty at the time.

“I wasn’t going to sleep. I was looking at my mama.”

Since I couldn’t remember any dreams, I told him about my afternoon in the woods. “I fell into a big pile of leaves. There were so many of them it was like a bed. Then the leaves turned into little hands that tickled me.”

“I see.” Dr Raymond’s pen moved over the paper.

“And then . . . my friend came to play with me. He was small this time, like me. And he rolled in the leaves and tickled me too.”

“Did you like that?”

“Yes, I like being tickled. It makes me laugh.” I looked again at my mother’s portrait, wondering if she had ever laughed. Laughter was in short supply in Dr Raymond’s house.

“So it was a good dream,” Dr Raymond said with a heartiness that rang false.

Dr Raymond was my mother’s adoptive father. He always told me my mother was an orphan he found on the streets of London, who would have ended up in a workhouse or worse. She died shortly after I was born. He said little more than that. But from his air of disapproval I always assumed that her death had been my fault.

He said even less about my father, however much I pestered him. His most common response was: “I never met the fellow, and a good thing too.” When I was older he went so far as to say my father could have been a laborer in the area for a harvest. But he, the good doctor, had let “poor Mary” stay, and I had been allowed to stay as well.

Dr Raymond saw that I had food and clothing. When he spoke to me, he usually asked questions: “What dreams did you have, Helen? If you do not tell me, I will send you away to people who won’t look after you as well as I do.”

Other attention came in the form of a weekly examination: he measured my height, the length of all my limbs. He listened to my heart, made me stick out my tongue. I thought this was to be expected because he

was a doctor, though I'd been free of the usual childhood illnesses. But far from being pleased with my robust health, Dr Raymond often muttered as if that was another thing wrong with me.

In my earliest years he hired a wet nurse for me, but she didn't stay on. Another nurse, then a governess followed. They were sent away too. Whenever they began to care for me, off they went. But Dr Raymond himself would have flurries of fussing when he showered me with clothes and toys.

Once he brought a rocking horse from London. The wooden horse's lips were drawn back from the bit as if in pain, its eyes crossed and bewildered. At first I hesitated to sit on it in fear it would add to the creature's distress.

But I thanked him and smiled in the way little girls should when given gifts. It was a toy, after all. Don't parents give children toys when they are good? My last governess had read stories to me where that happened.

As I sat on the horse and rocked dutifully back and forth, Dr Raymond began stroking my hair. "I'm so sorry, Mary," he muttered.

"I'm Helen, Helen Vaughan. Mary is my mother and she is dead. Now she lives in Heaven," I informed him, though I was already having some doubts about where my mother might reside.



There had been an unfounded report of my own death many years ago. However, I continue to survive and thrive. I've gone by other names—Herbert, Raymond, and Beaumont among them. Now there's no reason I can't call myself Helen Vaughan again. In fact, if you look up that name on Google, you will come across many

of us. There's a chartered accountant, a math teacher, a "regeneration officer," even a policewoman called Helen Vaughan.

And you may also come upon a few lines about me in a review of an exhibition at a bar at the eastern end of Old Street:

"Among the repetitive installations and dour concepts, a most curious canvas by an unknown artist called Helen Vaughan lights up a quarter of a wall. It is a feverishly intricate and fantastic woodland scene that's nothing less than Richard Dadd writ large. Watch out for this one."

This was penned by Naomi Harris, top art critic, maker and breaker of careers and reputations. There's a picture next to her review. Bobbed black hair cut in angles so sharp you could slice your finger on them; red-lipsticked mouth lifted in a half-smile.

"Richard Dadd writ large." I like that. But Naomi Harris was describing an earlier work. Now my paintings are getting much bigger, filling entire walls. I've gazed at *The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke* at the Tate Britain; examined the creatures watching the fairy axe-man as he prepares to split an acorn. The figures of the fairy-folk are meticulously drafted, yet distorted. I'm always drawn to the two women in ball gowns on the left of the painting. They have tiny ankles and delicate wings, yet massive calves, as if they've been working out on some magical gym machine. One of them wears a garment like a pointy-cupped Gaultier bustier, the sort of garment once popularized by Madonna.

While I appreciate the comparison, Dadd's painting is so small you need a magnifying glass to see its details. In

the end, Dadd just didn't get it. If you really want to split that acorn, you have to think big.

I assume that Dadd did not work in the nude, as I do. The air currents brush my skin as I push paint around the canvas; they intensify my strokes. As I climb up and down the ladder, my legs tremble. My brush drips in my haste. Paint spatters my thighs, it turns to brilliant mud between my toes.

I'm relatively new to this, though I made my first efforts many years ago. An old boyfriend in Buenos Aires, an artist called Meyrick, first taught me the basics of perspective. I was fascinated by the concept of the vanishing point. As I remember Buenos Aires, I dash yellow and deep pink, viridian, and purple on the painting.

"What happens when you walk as far as the vanishing point?" I once asked Meyrick. "Do you vanish too?"

I'd been taught the vanishing point lies on the horizon. Now I think it can be anywhere. Perhaps I'll find it in the heart of this glade. I rummage through a toolbox filled with treasured objects. I take out a long bronze and gold pinion feather; stroke my arm with it for a moment. I glance toward a trunk in the corner where I keep my other artefacts.

I settle on a pressed leaf with five fronds, like a thumb and four fingers, scarlet veins of sap branching through the crinkled surface. I place the leaf on the canvas, dab linseed oil and glaze to anchor it. But my glazing has given the leaf a lift. Instead of pointing towards the grove, it leads my eye to the section on the right. This is still virtually blank: a space of undefined green.

I make random dabs and jabs with my brush to suggest a meadow there. I add winter brown to the green,

dotting in flowers of spring and summer, the rust reds of autumn... All seasons at once.

I empty my mind of everything but this fictitious field. I stare at it until the dabs of color take on their own life, catching light to suggest colors I've never known. The color-forms flow and coalesce. Are they flowers and plants, or something else?

And then I imagine a definite *someone* in this space.

It's Rachel, my friend Rachel, who was last seen walking in a field.

I sit down and keep looking. I think about where Rachel could have gone and what I can show of it.

The light in my studio starts to dim; shadows spread over the field. I look for traces of Rachel within those shadows.

Before I know it, hours have passed. *When you mature you'll lose the habit of measuring time*, my companion once told me. But I'm not entirely the same as him. I need to keep appointments. I must get ready to meet Rory at the Belfry to take my painting down from the exhibition.

In the shower I close my eyes. I let its stream bear me away to a reverie where I'm as fluid as the water running over me. I hear a missed melody of wind and reeds behind the spatter of the shower.

Is it my companion, appearing at last? Then I realize it's only my own humming.

I sigh as I dress, choosing close-fitting trousers and a billowing cotton shirt.

I used to pay much more attention to fashion. In that respect, he *was* right about losing track of time. Without my realizing it, my wardrobe has come to belong to another era. Now I prefer classic, ageless clothes. I don't even wear much make-up, just some lip gloss.

These days Shoreditch and Hoxton are no longer the dank districts I once knew. At night people drink and laugh outside pubs, and move in groups to the next club. Some say the area's ruined now: "The 'Ditch is dead!" So it may be. But if you go east, it's different. People come and go. It's a place where you can be anonymous *and* notorious. So I've settled into the top floor of a warehouse between Shoreditch and Bethnal Green, my living quarters and studio.

In the old days I loved my salons, the entertainments and explorations I hosted. But at the moment it's just me and my painting. Despite my history as a socialite, I'm no stranger to being alone. I grew used to it at an early age when I lived in Dr Raymond's house.

If he wasn't out seeing a patient, he'd shut himself in his laboratory or his library. His house was made of stone and it was always cold, even in the summer. Silence filled its rooms and corridors. If I dropped something or moved too quickly, it made a noise as loud and jarring as hunters' gunshots in the forest.

I only felt at ease in the meadows, along the banks of the river, and in the forest. I would lie on the grass and look at the line of mountains in the west. I watched the mist cling to them and rise. I listened to the doves and the drowsy hum of insects and breathed in the sweet scent of the grass.

Now I live in a city, as I have done on and off for many years. In the past I dallied with the likes of Lord Argentine, Lord Swanleigh, Mr Collier-Stuart, Mr Herries, Mr Sidney Crashaw of Stoke House in Fulham. But I have also haunted the streets of Soho and Shoreditch in a poorer era. In Buenos Aires I sought relief from the

well-heeled ex-pat milieu with forays into the barrios, shanties, and rural abodes.

I have been accused of snobbery, but that's yet another lie.

Unlike the area's other watering holes, the Belfry Bar is full of ancient sofas, second-hand tat, and frayed satin curtains. The walls are covered with graffiti and posters for gigs and rallies.

I make my way downstairs to the rooms for exhibitions and gigs. Most of the work is still up. There's an edifice of twigs, severed stiletto heels, bubble wrap, and a Wonderbra in a corner... *The Bubble Bursts*, by Hopi Harper. An installation involving Hoovers. A board of spiky cartoons; they're not bad. And an entire wall of photos from political demonstrations.

Then there's my painting. *Sprites*. Underwater weeds curl around each other like naked human bodies joined in ambiguous ways, white with a green sheen. A slender female figure lurks among the reeds and weeds. There are male and female figures around her, entwined in tangles of green hair, gleaming flesh, black eyes, and eager, swollen mouths.

"Do you have a feeling this painting doesn't belong here?"

I turn to face the woman speaking to me. Her hair isn't quite as smooth and sharp as it is in the photo, and her lipstick must have departed with her last G & T. But it is undoubtedly Naomi Harris. She looks about thirty-five, the age I appear to be.

"I'm the one who painted it. And yes, my work is on a different wavelength, but this was my first opportunity to exhibit."

“So you’re Helen Vaughan!” she exclaims in a throaty voice that makes me think she should be clothed in gold lamé and brandishing a cigarette at the end of a foot-long holder. “I’m Nao Harris.” She extends her hand, but starts waving it in sweeping movements before I can shake it. “I love that painting and it was *such* a surprise. I often come here because it’s just near my place, but it’s really a dive. And most of the work is...who wants to look at *cartoons* and pictures of *demonstrations*? But your painting is an exception.”

“Oh, thank...”

“I mean...” Nao takes a breath, narrows her delineated eyes, and looks upwards, as she does when she appears on *Late Arts Review*. “The twisted lines lead you into a maelstrom of barely registered dreams and nightmares,” she proclaims. “In the midst of muddy mundanity, this painting glows like a mysterious green emerald.”

“Thank you,” I murmur again as I begin to lift the painting off its hooks. “Say, would you mind helping me get this up the stairs?”

“Of course... How are you going to get it home?”

“I’ve arranged for someone to come around with a van. I don’t live far from here myself. But size will be a definite challenge for exhibiting my other paintings. They just keep growing, they’re murals really. It’s fortunate I have such a big place.”

I watch her register my “big place,” along with my accent. Perhaps she has me down as a trustafarian, though the only trust I draw on now is the one I set up myself.

The painting is awkward rather than heavy, but our exertions distract Nao from pressing for more information. We go out and wait in front of the bar.

Rory drives up in a mud-spattered white van. He's got on the same Iggy & the Stooges T-shirt he wore when he helped me move a few months ago. His ginger-and-grey hair is still in a ponytail. But this time his glasses are held together at the corner with duct tape instead of Blu-tack.

I first found his details on the noticeboard in a local café. "Paintings will be pampered, no sculptures shattered," it promised.

He comes out of the van to help me put the painting into the back. He's a big guy in his late forties, not in bad shape. He certainly does handle my painting with reverence as he puts it inside, where everything is immaculate and upholstered in thick velvet. He drapes a loose piece of velvet over the painting and arranges it so nothing is exposed. A dust cover goes over the velvet.

Nao watches our maneuvers with the same half-smile she wears in her photo. I give her a nod, then slide open the van door. Before I get in she wafts over. "Helen, ... here's my card. Maybe we can have a chat, or you could show me some more work."

"Of course. And here's mine..." I hand her a card I had printed recently.

"Helen Vaughan. Painter," she reads from it. "And this is your first exhibition? I'm sure I've heard that name before. Anyway, I'll be in touch."

As we pull away from the curb I settle into my seat. "Rory, I have to thank you for suggesting I enter the exhibition. As you see, I've made a very useful contact."

"Yeah, Nao Harris. I've seen her on *Late Arts Review* when I've turned it on after the pub. She must've been slumming."

“Funny, she seems to think that *I'd* been slumming when I exhibited there.”

“Yeah, well, when I first suggested you check out the Belfry, I wasn't entirely serious. I didn't think you'd really do it. Didn't think you were the type.”

“And what type am I?”

“Fucked if I know.” He says this with a smile. “I meet all sorts in this job, so I try to keep an open mind, and I'm always happy to be proved wrong.”

Rory helps me move the painting out of the van. The industrial lift comes clanking down, and we're just able to fit it in.

When we enter my flat, Rory gives a nod of appreciation. “Your place looks a lot bigger than the first time I saw it, and it has fantastic light.”

“It was still full of old junk. It makes a world of difference just clearing it out and putting in new windows. Let's just put the painting down there. I'll get your money.”

I open my handbag, find my purse, and count out his fee. When I look up, I see that he's staring at one of the new paintings. He steps back and tilts his head, taking it all in.

I wait. And Rory continues to gaze at the painting as if it's a crossword puzzle and he's just about to figure out a difficult clue. A curious reaction, not exactly what I'd hoped for.

“What do you think, Rory? I still have things to work out on that one...”

“It's very good, but I see what you mean. I'm a sculptor rather than a painter, but... I'm wondering if you adjust the line of the horizon... And the grass, there's a

quality that makes me think it's not *just* grass. Perhaps a few details can help there. And then that uhm, creature over there, move it around like so..."

For a moment I'm ready to snap at him to stick to removals and leave the painting to me. Then I remember Meyrick saying something similar many years ago.

So I thank Rory for the suggestion and show him out.

Immediately, I strip off and get to work again. Rory did pick up on something about the grass. Those blades of grass were little tongues against my skin as I stretched out on it. I haven't really shown that. And what about the angles and placement?

As I carry on, I see the range of this work take shape. Perhaps I should call the whole series *Helen's Story*, though I expect it to be a story about much more than me.

It's inspired by time I spent in Argentina, my earlier London life, areas of Wales where I grew up—the Usk valley, farmland villages and forests, the distant sea. But these places all meet at a certain point, and that's what I'm trying to show. That point—and how to get there.

These paintings will be too big for most galleries, so I'll have to bring an audience here. There must be an *atmosphere*. I'll invite more people to my salons, and not just the gentlefolk this time. There'll be more energy; this time the gatherings will work.

In order to summon *him* back, the unreliable bastard.