

The Shape of Fear

By Elia W. Peattie

Tim O'Connor -- who was descended from the O'Conors with one N -- started life as a poet and an enthusiast. His mother had designed him for the priesthood, and at the age of fifteen, most of his verses had an ecclesiastical tinge, but, somehow or other, he got into the newspaper business instead, and became a pessimistic gentleman, with a literary style of great beauty and an income of modest proportions. He fell in with men who talked of art for art's sake, -- though what right they had to speak of art at all nobody knew, -- and little by little his view of life and love became more or less profane. He met a woman who sucked his heart's blood, and he knew it and made no protest; nay, to the great amusement of the fellows who talked of art for art's sake, he went the length of marrying her. He could not in decency explain that he had the traditions of fine gentlemen behind him and so had to do as he did, because his friends might not have understood. He laughed at the days when he had thought of the priesthood, blushed when he ran across any of those tender and exquisite old verses he had written in his youth, and became addicted to absinthe and other less peculiar drinks, and to gaming a little to escape a madness of ennui.

As the years went by he avoided, with more and more scorn, that part of the world which he denominated Philistine, and consorted only with the fellows who flocked about Jim O'Malley's saloon. He was pleased with solitude, or with these convivial wits, and with not very much else beside. Jim O'Malley was a sort of Irish poem, set to inspiring measure. He was, in fact, a Hibernian Maeligcenas, who knew better than to put bad whiskey before a man of talent, or tell a trite tale in the presence of a wit. The recountal of his disquisitions on politics and other current matters had enabled no less than three men to acquire national reputations; and a number of wretches, having gone the way of men who talk of art for art's sake, and dying in foreign lands, or hospitals, or asylums, having no one else to be homesick for, had been homesick for Jim O'Malley, and wept for the sound of his voice and the grasp of his hearty hand.

When Tim O'Connor turned his back upon most of the things he was born to and took up with the life which he consistently lived till the unspeakable end, he was unable to get rid of certain peculiarities. For example, in spite of all his debauchery, he continued to look like the Beloved Apostle. Notwithstanding abject friendships he wrote limpid and noble English. Purity seemed to dog his heels, no matter how violently he attempted to escape from her. He was never so drunk that he was not an exquisite, and even his creditors, who had become inured to his deceptions, confessed it was a privilege to meet so perfect a gentleman. The creature who held him in bondage, body and soul, actually came to love him for his gentleness, and for some quality which baffled her, and made her ache with a strange longing which she could not define. Not that she ever defined anything, poor little beast! She had skin the color of pale gold, and yellow eyes with brown lights in them, and great plaits of straw-colored hair. About her lips was a fatal and sensuous smile, which, when it got hold of a man's imagination, would not let it go, but held to it, and mocked it till the day of his death. She was the incarnation of the Eternal Feminine, with all the wifeliness and the maternity left out -- she was ancient, yet ever young, and familiar as joy or tears or sin.

She took good care of Tim in some ways: fed him well, nursed him back to reason after a period of hard drinking, saw that he put on overshoes when the walks were wet, and looked after his money. She even prized his brain, for she discovered that it was a delicate little machine

which produced gold. By association with him and his friends, she learned that a number of apparently useless things had value in the eyes of certain convenient fools, and so she treasured the autographs of distinguished persons who wrote to him -autographs which he disdainfully tossed in the waste basket. She was careful with presentation copies from authors, and she went the length of urging Tim to write a book himself. But at that he balked.

“Write a book!” he cried to her, his gentle face suddenly white with passion. “Who am I to commit such a profanation?”

She didn’t know what he meant, but she had a theory that it was dangerous to excite him, and so she sat up till midnight to cook a chop for him when he came home that night.

He preferred to have her sitting up for him, and he wanted every electric light in their apartments turned to the full. If, by any chance, they returned together to a dark house, he would not enter till she touched the button in the hall, and illuminated the room. Or if it so happened that the lights were turned off in the night time, and he awoke to find himself in darkness, he shrieked till the woman came running to his relief, and, with derisive laughter, turned them on again. But when she found that after these frights he lay trembling and white in his bed, she began to be alarmed for the clever, gold-making little machine, and to renew her assiduities, and to horde more tenaciously than ever, those valuable curios on which she some day expected to realize when he was out of the way, and no longer in a position to object to their barter.

O’Connor’s idiosyncrasy of fear was a source of much amusement among the boys at the office where he worked. They made open sport of it, and yet, recognizing him for a sensitive plant, and granting that genius was entitled to whimsicalities, it was their custom when they called for him after work hours, to permit him to reach the lighted corridor before they turned out the gas over his desk. This, they reasoned, was but a slight service to perform for the most enchanting beggar in the world.

“Dear fellow,” said Rick Dodson, who loved him, “is it the Devil you expect to see? And if so, why are you averse? Surely the Devil is not such a bad old chap.”

“You haven’t found him so?”

“Tim, by heaven, you know, you ought to explain to me. A citizen of the world and a student of its purlieu, like myself, ought to know what there is to know! Now you’re a man of sense, in spite of a few bad habits -- such as myself, for example. Is this fad of yours madness? -- which would be quite to your credit, -- for gadzooks, I like a lunatic! Or is it the complaint of a man who has gathered too much data on the subject of Old Rye? Or is it, as I suspect, something more occult, and therefore more interesting?”

“Rick, boy,” said Tim, “you’re too -- inquiring!” And he turned to his desk with a look of delicate hauteur.

It was the very next night that these two tipling pessimists spent together talking about certain disgruntled but immortal gentlemen, who, having said their say and made the world quite uncomfortable, had now journeyed on to inquire into the nothingness which they postulated. The dawn was breaking in the muggy east; the bottles were empty, the cigars burnt out. Tim turned toward his friend with a sharp breaking of sociable silence.

“Rick,” he said, “do you know that Fear has a Shape?”

“And so has my nose!”

“You asked me the other night what I feared. Holy father, I make my confession to you. What I fear is Fear.”

“That’s because you’ve drunk too much -- or not enough.

“Come, fill the cup, and in the fire of Spring Your winter garment of repentance fling --
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“My costume then would be too nebulous for this weather, dear boy. But it’s true what I was saying. I am afraid of ghosts.”

“For an agnostic that seems a bit --”

“Agnostic! Yes, so completely an agnostic that I do not even know that I do not know! God, man, do you mean you have no ghosts -- no -- no things which shape themselves? Why, there are things I have done --”

“Don’t think of them, my boy! See, ‘night’s candles are burnt out, and jocund day stands tiptoe on the misty mountain top.”

Tim looked about him with a sickly smile. He looked behind him and there was nothing there; stared at the blank window, where the smoky dawn showed its offensive face, and there was nothing there. He pushed away the moist hair from his haggard face -- that face which would look like the blessed St. John, and leaned heavily back in his chair.

“Yon light is not daylight, I know it, I,” he murmured drowsily, “it is some meteor which the sun exhales, to be to thee this night --’ ”

The words floated off in languid nothingness, and he slept. Dodson arose preparatory to stretching himself on his couch. But first he bent over his friend with a sense of tragic appreciation.

“Damned by the skin of his teeth!” he muttered. “A little more, and he would have gone right, and the Devil would have lost a good fellow. As it is” -- he smiled with his usual conceited delight in his own sayings, even when they were uttered in soliloquy -- “he is merely one of those splendid gentlemen one will meet with in hell.” Then Dodson had a momentary nostalgia for goodness himself, but he soon overcame it, and stretching himself on his sofa, he, too, slept.

That night he and O’Connor went together to hear “Faust” sung, and returning to the office, Dodson prepared to write his criticism. Except for the distant clatter of telegraph instruments, or the peremptory cries of “copy” from an upper room, the office was still. Dodson wrote and smoked his interminable cigarettes; O’ Connor rested his head in his hands on the desk, and sat in perfect silence. He did not know when Dodson finished, or when, arising, and absent-mindedly extinguishing the lights, he moved to the door with his copy in his hands. Dodson gathered up the hats and coats as he passed them where they lay on a chair, and called:

“It is done, Tim. Come, let’s get out of this.”

There was no answer, and he thought Tim was following, but after he had handed his criticism to the city editor, he saw he was still alone, and returned to the room for his friend. He advanced no further than the doorway, for, as he stood in the dusky corridor and looked within the darkened room, he saw before his friend a Shape, white, of perfect loveliness, divinely delicate and pure and ethereal, which seemed as the embodiment of all goodness. From it came a soft radiance and a perfume softer than the wind when “it breathes upon a bank of violets stealing and giving odor.” Staring at it, with eyes immovable, sat his friend.

It was strange that at sight of a thing so unspeakably fair, a coldness like that which comes from the jewel-blue lips of a Muir crevasse should have fallen upon Dodson, or that it was only by summoning all the manhood that was left in him, that he was able to restore light to the room, and to rush to his friend. When he reached poor Tim he was stone-still with paralysis. They took him home to the woman, who nursed him out of that attack -- and later on worried him into another.

When he was able to sit up and jeer at things a little again, and help himself to the quail the woman broiled for him, Dodson, sitting beside him, said:

“Did you call that little exhibition of yours legerdemain, Tim, you sweep? Or are you really the Devil’s bairn?”

“It was the Shape of Fear,” said Tim, quite seriously.

“But it seemed mild as mother’s milk.”

“It was compounded of the good I might have done. It is that which I fear.”

He would explain no more. Later -- many months later -- he died patiently and sweetly in the madhouse, praying for rest. The little beast with the yellow eyes had high mass celebrated for him, which, all things considered, was almost as pathetic as it was amusing.

Dodson was in Vienna when he heard of it.

“Sa, sa!” cried he. “I wish it wasn’t so dark in the tomb! What do you suppose Tim is looking at?”

As for Jim O’Malley, he was with difficulty kept from illuminating the grave with electricity.