

Arresting Beauty

Heather Cooper grew up in a small village in northern Lancashire, and was educated at Lancaster Girls' Grammar School and the University of Durham. She also studied at the London College of Printing, and subsequently worked at the Westerham Press, Faber & Faber, and Eel Pie Publishing.

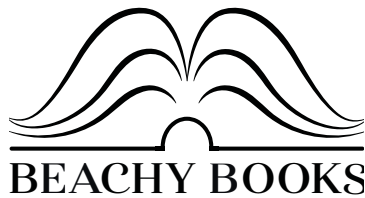
In 1981 Heather moved to the Isle of Wight, where her son and daughter were born. While living on the Island she has worked for the National Trust, in local government, and later in the NHS.

Heather's first novel, *Stealing Roses*, was published in 2019 by Allison and Busby. *Stealing Roses* and its sequel, *A Shape in the Moonlight*, have also been published in Germany by Goldmann. She contributed to *A Love Letter to Europe* published in 2019 by Coronet.

She now lives in Cowes with her partner.

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For Joshua and Rosalind

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Arresting Beauty is, however, a work of fiction, and any mistakes are my own.

ARRESTING BEAUTY

'I longed to arrest all beauty that came before me, and at length the longing has been satisfied.'

Julia Margaret Cameron in *Annals of My Glass House*

It's my wedding day, and Julia is taking my photograph.

The glass plate will be blank, at first. A transparent surface. Even when the developing solution is poured over it, nothing will change for a while. Then the faintest outline will start to appear—a blur, a smudge—then a shoulder, a face, a hand. The image of a ghost, with its white gown made dark and its dark hair made white.

It is only when the printing is done, though, that the true picture emerges. I thought it magical, at first, before I understood the process; and even then I always found it strangely moving to see the faces of people I knew captured forever. The line of a jaw, the set of the mouth, the gaze. A tangle of curls. Light gleaming in eyes that one day would close forever. That light will gleam still, on a rectangle of stiff paper, in shades of dull brown, a hundred years hence. People will look into those

eyes. They might even look into my own eyes. I wonder what they will see.

Julia thought, when she took me in—rescued me, as she would put it—that I was a blank plate, on which she would develop something beautiful. I was a project, an enthusiasm, one among so many. She overflows with enthusiasms, with benevolence of a particular kind; she will be generous to you whether you wish it or not. I think even her closest friends find this peculiarly oppressive. ‘Take this!’ she cries, pressing on them things she has decided that they will like. ‘Take this seed cake, this embroidered shawl, this piano! take this hideous plant, this volume of unintelligible poetry! take this life, because I have decided that it is exactly what you need, what you most desire!’

How could she know what life I most desired? How could I know myself? I was a child. I was ten years old. But I was not a blank sheet of glass; nor was I a clean page, waiting to be written upon. I was already there. It is just that she could not see me.

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You're a quick study, Mary Ryan.

Mammy always said that. *You're a quick study.* Oh, she was pleased with me when she realised how fast I learned! She didn't even have to tell me what to do, for I had already listened and observed her doing the things that meant we had something to eat, and made the difference between sleeping under a hedge and finding a bed. It's hard, though, for a woman, even a young and pretty woman, to stay looking lovely when she has nothing to eat but black bread and she drinks gin as though it were mother's milk. Her looks were fading fast, even then, under a layer of grime and weariness. But I'd seen how she bent her head and then lifted her dark soulful eyes, and how the rich people were occasionally moved by that look. I tried it out myself, and it worked.

I learned very quickly some subtle variations on this theme. For a respectable middle-class woman, walking home from church, perhaps, with her milk-faced daughters by her side, it was important not to be too Irish. If I changed my voice, sounded as though I too was a respectable English girl—and I could do it, easy enough, I was, as Mammy said, a quick study—if I looked modest, sweet, gentle, they might think: there but for the grace of God. My state was close enough to theirs for them to feel a little shudder of fear, and a few pennies was a cheap enough offering to their vengeful god. *And now abideth faith, hope, and charity, these three; but*

the greatest of these is charity. You could almost hear the words forming on their prim lips as they extended their fastidious little hands and dropped the coin into my grubby upturned palm.

The gentry, though; they were a different matter. They had no fear that they might ever find themselves sleeping in a ditch. We were a different race from them, altogether, on two counts: Irish, yes, but more significantly, poor. With them, the act had to be different. I had watched my mother often enough. Look at the woman first, then the man; dip your head, look up through your eyelashes. Twist a dark curl in your fingers as you gaze at them. You can be as Irish as you like, but whisper your words, make your voice a little low, let it come from the back of your throat. When they meet your eyes, let yourself smile, just a little, as though your smile was only for them. I could not have explained in words why I did all this, child that I was, but I knew it worked. Not every time, but more often than not. A man with his wife would bring out a coin, murmuring something about the deserving poor, and she would nod, and they would walk on as I scampered back to Mammy; but a man alone might give me silver, or even a sovereign. I would curtsy, peep up at him, smile again. If he put a finger under my chin, or tweaked my curls, I bore it, though I stepped away as soon as I could—still smiling, smiling, of course, lest he change his mind—but if he did more, if he placed a hand on my arm or on the back of my neck, Mammy was out from behind the trees like a jack rabbit, pulling me away, calling blessings on his head for a honest Christian gentleman, until the sovereign and I were safely out of reach.

When I saw Julia, I was flummoxed for a moment. I was used to knowing straight away how to categorise the people who strolled

on Putney Heath. Clothes, voices, the way they walked, the way they looked about them. But this woman—well, she certainly sounded like the grandest of the grand; you could hear her voice a hundred yards off, it carried so. The gentry always speak as though they are shouting. It's so the servants can hear them from the next room, I suppose. Or the foreigners. But when she got closer, I was confused, for although she sounded so la-di-da I saw she looked like a washerwoman, short and dumpy and all fusty trailing shawls, and her dress, a sort of deep crimson with a faint stripe, was bit grubby round the hem, and with odd fringes tacked on here and there in a random fashion. Then I thought: perhaps she's an actress. That's good; actresses are not often wealthy, but they can be sentimental, given to warm impulsive gestures. That could include giving money to little Irish girls with big dark pleading eyes. The man at her side—much older than her, her father, perhaps—now he looked kind, with his crumpled face and soft eyes and his long snowy beard. She was talking away to the old man, gesturing so that her shawls were slipping off her shoulders. It seemed like a certainty.

Mammy gave me a hard pinch on my arm, the pinch she always gave me when we saw a likely-looking one, the pinch that meant *go on, Mary, off you go*, and I trotted forward, smoothing my ragged skirt, pushing my hair behind my shoulders, standing at the side of the path so that I was not obstructing them but they could not fail to see me. I put my head on one side, parted my lips, lowered my eyelids.

'Spare a coin,' I said, 'sweet lady, a coin?'

She stopped, mid-sentence. A shawl fell onto the muddy grass beside me, a patterned shawl of reds and golds, and I stooped to pick it up. I had never felt such a thing against my skin before; it was like holding the down of thistles, it weighed nothing and yet I could have wrapped my chilled shoulders in it and never

felt cold again. When she reached for it I wanted to cling to it, but of course I could not. I smiled up at her, calculating that now she must give me something, for I had performed a service, and surely a shilling at least would come my way for that? The feel of the shawl had made me revise my first thoughts; she must be a toff after all, to have such a thing.

The old man was rooting in the pockets of his coat, and brought out a handful of change; it was coppers, I could see, but better than nothing. He tipped them into my hand, and I bobbed, and thanked him, and began to turn away.

‘Wait!’ she shouted, and she clutched at my arm. What now? Was she going to take the money back, while lecturing the poor old fellow on the inadvisability of giving to beggars, for it only encourages the poor and means they will never learn to shift for themselves? (I have heard that one often enough.) I sighed and began to draw the coins from my pocket, for I knew there was no point in running. They make a fuss, the crushers come, there are accusations and it ends with a night in a cell, and I tell you that even at ten years old I would rather have slept in a ditch than in a stinking freezing cage. Next thing Mammy was by my side, whining that we had not meant any offence, we had nothing to eat, and if the lovely lady and the kind gentleman could just see their way to helping a poor widow and her little child there would be blessings for them in heaven ... ‘Beauty!’ shouted the woman. ‘Beauty! Look, my love, look!’ (*My love?* Not her father, then. He must be twenty years older than she, but perhaps he is rich, I thought.) ‘Look at this face; did you ever see such an angel?’

He nodded benignly. I tried to step back, but her fingers were gripping my arm quite painfully.

‘Very pretty, indeed,’ he said vaguely. ‘Now, my dear, shall we get on? Tea will be on the table, I dare say, by now—’

She ignored him, and Mammy started up again. Yes, she had indeed been blessed with a beautiful little angel, and the lady was goodness itself to say so ... Mammy's words were, for once, quite lost, however.

'I must have this child! Yes, yes; look at her, those eyes! Oh, exquisite! You, my good woman, you are her mother, I suppose? Now let us talk; yes, you poor thing, you have fallen on hard times, I see, but beauty must not waste its sweetness on the desert air, and this child is a pearl from the dark unfathomed caves of ocean if ever I saw one ...'

Mammy had clearly met her match in terms of the gift of the gab she always claimed for herself, but she rallied now. She and Julia began to talk at each other, arms waving, eyes flashing, their voices trilling out over the heath so that other people strolling about turned to stare. There was nothing I could do, and at last I lost interest in following their discussion, or argument, or whatever it had turned into, and went to sit down upon a fallen log nearby. I pulled up some daisies and began to tear the petals off one by one. Eventually the old man, who had been standing helplessly by, his occasional bleat quite lost in the torrent of words, came to sit next to me on the log. It was quite peaceful, sitting there in silence, while the two women blathered on. I suppose he felt, after a while, that he should say something, and he asked me my name.

'Mary,' I said.

Silence fell again. I thought I should ask his.

'Charles.'

He got out a pipe and began to stuff it with tobacco. I went back to the daisies. I wondered if I would get anything to eat today, and my stomach growled at the thought. He fished a humbug from a waistcoat pocket, and offered it to me. It was a little furry, and with a few flakes of tobacco stuck to it, but beggars

can't be choosers. They really can't. I took the humbug, and began to suck it very, very slowly, in case that was all I was to get. Still they talked, on and on, and I had let the last sweet sliver of hard sugar dissolve in my mouth by the time they turned and beckoned. We both got up, the old man and I, like two obedient servants and walked over to them. Mammy had a gleam in her eye like I had not seen for a long time.

'Now, Mary,' she said, 'this sainted lady is to take us in, and I am to work for her, and you will learn to be a maid in a grand house! Now what do you say to that?'

At least someone asked me what I thought, even if it were a purely rhetorical question. No one asked the old man, I noticed.