"There's Peggy with that horrid cat again--the one-eyed cat from over the fence." I looked out as I heard the ejaculation, and there in truth coming down the garden path was Peggy bearing affectionately in her arms the one-eyed cat from over the fence. Peggy likes the animal in spite of its one eye. I am not sure that she does not like it all the more because of its one eye. I think she has an idea that if she nurses the cat it forgets that it has only one eye and recovers its happiness. She has a passion for all four-legged creatures. I have seen her spend a whole day picking handfuls of grass in the orchard and running with them to the donkey or the horse standing patiently in the neighbour's paddock, and when she hasn't animals to play with she will put a horseshoe on each hand and each foot, and then you will hear from above the plod-plod-plod of a horse going its daily round. But while she has a comprehensive affection for all four-legged things, her most fervent love is reserved for the halt and the blind.

It is only among children that we find the quality of charity sufficiently strong to forgive deformity. The natural instinct is to turn away from any physical imperfection. It is the instinct of the race for the preservation of its forms. We call these forms beauty and the departure from them ugliness, and it is from "beauty's rose," as Shakespeare says, that "we desire increase." If you shudder at the touch of a withered hand or at the sight of a one-eyed cat, it is because you feel that they are a menace to the established forms of life. You are unconsciously playing the part of policeman for nature. You are the guardian of its traditions when you blush at the glance of two eyes and shudder at the glance of one.

And yet it is not impossible to fall in love with the physically defective and sincerely to believe that they are beautiful. Take that incident mentioned by Descartes. He said that when he was a child he used to play with a little girl who had a squint, and that to the end of his days he liked people who squinted. In this case it was the associations of memory that gave a glamour to deformity and made it beautiful. The squint brought back to him the memory of the Golden Age, and through the mist of that memory it was transmuted into loveliness.

Nor is it memory alone that will work the miracle. Intellectual sympathy will do it, too. Wilkes was renowned for his ugliness, but he claimed that, given half an hour's start, he would win the smiles of any woman against any competitor. And when one of his lady admirers, engaged in defending him, was reminded that he squinted badly, she replied: "Of course he does; but he doesn't squint more than a man of his genius ought to squint." Nor was it women alone whom the fellow fascinated. Who can forget the scene when Tom Davies brought him into the company of Dr. Johnson, who hated Wilkes' Radicalism, and would never willingly have consented to meet him? For a time Johnson refused to unbend, but at last he could hold out no longer, and fell a victim to the charm of Wilkes' talk.

In the same way, Johnson believed his wife to be a woman of perfect beauty. To the rest of the world she was extraordinarily plain and commonplace, but to Johnson she was the mirror of beauty. "Pretty creature," he would say with a sigh in referring to her after her death.

And there, I fancy, we touch the root of the matter. The sense of beauty is in one respect an affair of the soul, and only superficially an aesthetic quality. We start with a common prejudice in favour of certain physical forms. They are the forms with which nature has made us familiar, and we seek to perpetuate them. But if the conventionally beautiful form...
is allied with spiritual ugliness it ceases to be beautiful to us, and if the conventionally ugly form is allied with spiritual beauty that beauty irradiates the physical deficiency. The soul dominates the senses. Francis Thompson expresses the idea very beautifully when he says:--

I cannot tell what beauty is her dole,
Who cannot see her features for her soul.
As birds see not the casement for the sky.

But there is another sense in which beauty is the most matter-of-fact thing. I can conceive that if the human family had developed only one eye, and that planted in the centre of the forehead, the appearance of a person with two eyes would be as offensive to our sense of beauty as a hand that consisted not of fingers but of thumbs. We should go to the show to see the two-eyed man with just the same feelings as we go now to see the bearded woman. We should not go to admire his two eyes, any more than we go to admire the beard; we should go to enjoy a pleasant sense of disgust at his misfortune and a comfortable satisfaction at the fact that we had not been the victims of such a calamity. We should roll our single eye with a proud feeling that we were in the true line of beauty, from which the two-eyed man in front was a hideous and fantastic departure.

Beauty, in short, is only a tribute which we pay to necessity. In equipping itself for the struggle for existence humanity has found that it is convenient to have two eyes and a stereoscopic vision, just as it is convenient to have four fingers on the hand and one thumb instead of five thumbs. Our members have been developed in the manner best fitted to enable us to fight our battle. And the more perfectly they fulfil that supreme condition the more beautiful we declare them to be. Our ideas of beauty, therefore, are not absolute; they are conditional. They are the humble servants of our necessity. Two eyes are necessary for us to get about our business, and so we fall in love with two eyes, and the more perfect they are for their work the more we fall in love with them, and the more beautiful we declare them to be.

I think that Peggy, nursing her one-eyed cat there in the sun, has not yet accepted our creed of beauty. She will be as conventional as the rest of us when her frocks are longer.

(The end)
A. G. Gardiner's essay: One-Eyed Cat

By A. G. Gardiner