

AN EXQUISITE OBSESSION

By Joseph Gueron

The fall of 1922 was unusually balmy on the island of Rhodes. For some days, Alistair had been sitting at a sidewalk cafe overlooking the port, drinking ouzo, writing and daydreaming. Having lost his left arm in the battle of Marne, even lighting a cigarette was challenging. During the long months in the trenches he had learned to be patient, and this helped as he waited for a man who could help him locate a particular Tanagra figurine, whose unique exquisite beauty had been praised by many.

Alistair had learned about the existence of the figurine on his last semester at Oxford, where he had resumed his studies in History after the war. One of his tutors, who had participated in the excavations of Mykonos, was enthusiastic about the exquisite beauty of a painted terracotta figurine from Tanagra, depicting a young girl combing her hair. He had seen the figurine in an antiquarian shop in Salonika, but could not afford the exorbitant price. The tutor did instill in Alistair his

passion for the figurine, and he decided upon graduation to search for it as a pretext not to get an office job.

Alistair took a ship in Naples, as his tutor had suggested, and went looking for an antiquarian called Ben Ahmed in Salonika; he had little expectation he would find the man. He was right, both statue and shop owner had disappeared. He continued to Cyprus, and found Ben Ahmed, but no statue. An olive oil merchant from Rhodes, named Milos, had bought it.

As Alistair went in search of Milos, sometimes he would close his eyes and imagine the exquisite beauty of the Tanagra figurine, the perfection of her tunic plaids, the delicate contour of her hand holding a comb. In his mind, the cold figure would become alive. She began filling his dreams with marvelous and mysterious dances. She would transform into a full-bodied young woman, swaying, dancing to the strange beat of an exotic melody. When he tried to embrace her, she quickly reversed to the small statue, cold and immobile.

Some nights the dream would become a nightmare. Helena, the name he had given her, was held captive in the large hands of an enormous Cyclops, who was getting ready to devour her. Alistair, paralyzed and impotent, was unable

to stop the giant from tearing each of her limbs with his bare teeth, blood running down his monstrous lips.

Thus a week passed, with alternating pleasant sensual dreams and horrible nightmares. When at last Alistair met with Milos, he was, almost incoherent, in a feverish state. Milos, surprised by the young man's obsession, had ambivalent feelings about it.

On one hand he wished he had the capacity of Alistair to experience such intense passion for beauty. He reminded him of his younger self, when he had been capable of being smitten by ideas, a poem, or a unique song. So far removed from his present self, dry and cynical, incapable of experiencing love or even warmth.

On the other hand, Milos realized he could take advantage of the young man's obsession and make a good profit. Thus, he decided he would triple the original price, so after the expected bargaining, he would walk away with twice the profit.

Milos reacted in disbelief when Alistair accepted the asking price without questioning, and suddenly he felt an unexpected fatherly tenderness for Alistair. He felt the need to protect the naïve young man from his own greed, to shake him and bring him down to reality.

Perhaps if he gave him some time to cool off, Alistair would get back to his senses. Milos began inventing dozen of difficulties in retrieving the statue. But Alistair refused to listen to any impediment. He countered any difficulty by increasing the price he was willing to pay. Milos, ashamed and concerned, just gave up.

The following morning, Alistair ran to Milo's office, holding with trembling hands a greasy paper bag full of British pounds in large denominations. He did not wait for Milos to count the money or even get him a box to carry his new possession. He only had eyes for the figurine. He took his jacket and tenderly wrapped it around the statue.

Walking rapidly through the steep narrow streets of the city, he held his precious cargo tightly against his chest. He had found a small apartment, over a grocery store in a dilapidated neighborhood, with a working fireplace and a magnificent view of the sea. The days passed by, as Alistair lived happy moments with his Helena. He would spend hours contemplating every inch of her, admiring the hermetic quality of her frozen smile, the promise of her pubescent breasts gracefully covered by the delicate tunic, the small hand holding the comb, a part of a small sensual foot emerging below the tunic.

Sometimes her beautiful face would become alive, expressing tenderness, sometimes love, sometimes passion. Alistair was breathless with desire, wanting to possess Helena, and experience in real life that world of sensations her image projected. Then, all would become calm again. Helena became again a static terracotta figure, mysterious with her eternal smile, and Alistair, pale and exhausted, would fall into his chair sighing.

The only intrusion he allowed into this hermetic world he had created around Helena was Milos; since they both shared a love for ancient Greece and appreciated the beauty of it's legacy.

In time the friendship between the two men grew. They would have dinner together or play chess. Sometimes Milos would share with Alistair memories of his youth in Adrianapolis, and the challenges of being a Greek young man under the Ottoman Empire. Alistair would talk about his experiences in the trenches, and his years at Oxford, feeling much older than his fellow student.

Sometimes they would finish the evening, admiring Helena, as they drank Metaxa, and savored the delicate traces of rose petals in that wonderful brandy. They would discuss her unique beauty, and the artistry of the artisan

who may have created such delicate figure more than 2000 years ago.

One night, after an extraordinary meal of slowly cooked lamb and baby artichokes, and having finished 3 bottles of the great local wine, Alistair wishing a good night, embraced Milos with great warmth, grateful for such wonderful dinner.

On his return, Alistair, somewhat tipsy, wanting to enhance his usual experience with Helena, decided to put the lights out and light a fire. He tuned his small noisy radio to BBC; the soulful exotic melody of Scheherazade filled the room. Then he covered a small wooden stool with a colorful silk scarf making a podium for Helena. He moved the stool close to the fireplace.

It was magical! Helena woke up from her dream; the flames, reflected in her luminous face brought her to life in a way never achieved before by his imagination. Alistair was enthralled; her lovely body swayed slowly following the undulating choreography of the flames with sensual abandon. Happy, Alistair danced along in ecstasy following with grand gesture the flow of the music, his eyes adoring Helena magical fiery dance. It was a moment of rapture.

Suddenly, during one of his grand gestures, his foot kicked one of the embers and flying sparks set the scarf on

fire. Alistair, focused on saving Helena, used his jacket to smother the flames. But the garment caught fire, rapidly engulfing the stool on fire, then the carpet. Alistair, crying in despair, threw himself on the flames to save the figurine. When the landlord entered the room, Alistair's burned body was covered in black smoke.

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Days passed before Milos had the courage to visit Alistair. His handsome face was now a mass of misconfigured flesh, with febrile eyes. Alistair smiled with a mouth without lips. Milos, in tears, cried,

"Why?"

Alistair pointed to a small table behind Milos back. When Milos turned he saw the figurine, diaphanous in her beauty, a small smudge of soot on her face.

Overcome with rage, Milos grabbed the figurine, raising it and looked at Alistair with questioning eyes. Alistair, tears flowing, turned his head towards the wall.

Milos forcefully hit the figurine against the foot of the bed; the force of the impact creating a spray of shattered pieces of beauty. Helena's head, still intact, fell, slowly rolling towards Alistair's bed foot, the shadow on her lovely lips forming a mocking smile.

THE END