

An Obsession

by Joseph Gueron

The fall of 1922 brought unusually warm weather to the island of Rhodes. Alistair found himself spending his days at a sidewalk cafe, sipping ouzo, writing, and daydreaming.

Having lost his left arm in the battle of Verdun, and perhaps some of his sanity, even the simple act of lighting a cigarette proved to be a challenge for Alistair. However, his time in the trenches had taught him patience, a skill that would serve him well as he searched for a man who could help him locate a particular Tanagra figurine. This particular terracotta figurine, covered in a fading deep red tunic, with a bold gold belt, had a unique and exquisite beauty, which had captured the attention and praise of many archeologists and scholars.

Alistair first learned about the figurine, dating from the 4th century BC, during his last semester at Oxford, where after the war, he

had resumed his studies in History and Art . One of his tutors, Dr Carter, had participated in the early excavations at Schimatari , and spoke enthusiastically about the beautiful terracotta figurines discovered in Tanagra. One, in particular, depicting a young woman, dressed in a deep red tunic, with a bold gold belt around her waist, her arms crossed, had captured Dr Carter's imagination and heart.

Not surprisingly, Alistair's tutor had instilled in him the same passion for that particular red figurine, named by Carter "The Lady in Red". Upon graduation, Alistair decided to search for it, less as a tribute to his professor, but more as a way to avoid getting a desk job in London..

Following Dr Carter advice, Alistair took a ship to Naples to look for an antiquarian named Ben Ahmed. Unfortunately, after many days of searching, with pitiful results, he found out , both the statue and the shop owner had disappeared.

The new shop owner suggested he may have moved to Cyprus. Undeterred, Alistair continued his seeking journey to Cyprus, where finally he found Ben Ahmed. But he was too late. A wealthy olive oil merchant from Rhodes named Milos had purchased the “Lady in Red” figurine.

Fueled by a renewed resolution, Alistair embarked on a cargo ship whose destination was the island of Rhodes. While searching for Milos, Alistair would often close his eyes and imagine the beautiful Tanagra red figurine waiting for him. He had named her Helena; in his daydreams, she would come alive, smiling at him, undulating to the rhythm of an exotic melody. However, at night, his dreams would sometimes turn into nightmares, with Helena being held captive by an enormous Cyclop who would slowly devour her limbs.

A week passed, filled with both pleasant fantasies and dreams alternating with horrifying nightmares which would keep him awake.

When Alistair finally met up with Milos, he was in a feverish state, almost incoherent. Milos, surprised by the intensity of Alistair's obsession, saw an opportunity to profit from it. He decided to triple the original price, hoping to negotiate and walk away with twice the profit. To his disbelief, Alistair accepted the asking price without question.

Happy with his new acquisition, Alistair decided to stay in Rhodes. He rented a dilapidated old white house, with a blue door, and a great fireplace, on top of a hill, overlooking the sea.

Days turned into weeks as Alistair lived in blissful moments with his Helena. He would spend hours admiring her beauty, longing to experience the exquisite sensations her image projected.

Sadly, all he received was Helena's silence and unmovable indifference. Alistair, in pain, and overwhelmed by his unfulfilled

passion, would fall on his bed, feverish, weeping, panting, exhausted, longing for an indefinable experience of love never sated.

The only intrusion into Alistair's obsession with Helena was Milos, who shared his love for ancient Greece and appreciated the beauty of its Art and legacy. Their friendship grew as they shared meals, played backgammon, listened to some old Rebetiko music, and of course discussed the unique beauty of Helena.

One evening, after a particularly indulgent meal of lamb cooked with small artichokes and several bottles of retsina wine, Alistair, in a drunken stupor state, decided to enhance his experience with Helena and hopefully seduce her. He turned off the kerosene lamps, lit a fire in the fireplace , and placed Helena on a makeshift podium . He covered the podium with a beautiful soft red blanket, and surrounded it with lighted candles .

As the flames reflected on her face, Helena seemed to come alive in a way Alistair had never imagined before. Enthralled, he put an old scratchy record on the hand winded Phonograph and started a clumsy Sirtaki Greek dance, turning with graceful movements and almost losing his balance as he looked at Helena with adoring eyes. In the passion of the moment, he truly felt her dancing along, foolishly believing she was receptive to his puerile efforts of seduction.

As he was turning, following the beat of the music, one of Alistair's grand gestures hit one of the candles and caused it to tip over. Within seconds the red blanket covering the podium went up in flames. In his efforts to save Helena, Alistair used his jacket attempting to smother the flames, which quickly ignited the jacket, thus accelerating the spread of the fire. In minutes the whole room was engulfed on fire, filled with smoke, and the smell of burning flesh.

The walls reverberating with a cacophony of sounds resulting from the crackling of burning wood and the sizzling of flesh, mixed with the whimpers of the prone Alistair in agony, and the blair of the melting record emulating the painful groans of a dying wounded beast.

Hours later, Alistair's burned body, and barely alive, was discovered by his landlord.

Days passed before Milos could bring himself to visit Alistair at the hospital. He was met with a disfigured face and febrile eyes. Alistair, with a missing nose and a mouth without lips, attempted a puerile smile, pointing with his bandaged hand, to a small table where the terracotta figurine remained unscathed, save for a smudge of soot on her face and robe.

Overwhelmed by grief and rage, Milos grabbed Helena and smashed it against the foot of the bed. The impact shattered the terracotta figure, each piece a testament to the destruction of her beauty. As the head of Helena, rolled towards the foot of Alistair's bed her lips seemed to form a mocking smile.