

A DAUGHTER OF PAN

By STEPHEN MCKENNA

A sole executor to Marshall Gaunt, I was unexpectedly summoned to England in mid-winter by a telegram from his solicitors...

Even if, for once, he had not spoken ironically I felt confident that the announcement would not have to be made for another 20 years.

The solicitors, in a consolatory postscript, suggested that I should not have to endure many days of the English winter, as the estate was small and the will simple and precise...

I reflected, as I stepped into the train at Florence, that if the whole of my duties were likely to be this discreet balancing of claims between Mrs. Mountjoy and her dead brother's friends...

The funeral took place on the day after my arrival, but the coffin was already sealed and I could take no farewell of the white-checked face with the deepest, smoldering eyes...

"The truth is, Mr. Bandon," she concluded, "he never got over the war. To a man of his temperament, sensitive and emotional, it must have been a greater strain than to anyone else."

"I was careful not to show that I awakened any interest in her; cautiously and reverently I perambulated the studio, half choosing and wholly rejecting, twice paying little Bianca the insufficient tribute of a transitory cold glance...

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"I don't think so," said Mrs. Mountjoy. "For at least seven years I had not stirred the ubiquitous dust of the studio, and in a friendship of four times that duration I had been admitted only to the dining room, to a study and—once, at a season of sickness—to Marshall's own, old, shabby bedroom."

In the matter-of-fact disposal of Marshall Gaunt's useless effects I copied her own impatience and detachment; hurriedly we set aside the books that were to be forwarded to her own house in Surrey, unceremoniously we sorted the

neglected wardrobe and packed the clothes in shapeless bundles for his old school's mission in Rotherhithe. I, too, was anxious enough to escape from the gray lifelessness and the chill mists of Maida Vale in winter.

"I hoped that perhaps there might be some sketch," I said. "Anything he has left in the studio."

"What I was seeking had so far eluded me, even in the sanctity of Marshall's bedroom; perhaps it was destroyed, perhaps left behind unfinished in some unexplored corner of my own villa. I believed, nevertheless, that the faculty of self-torture which came to life when Marshall revealed himself as a sensitive and emotional would have preserved, for future mortification, the iron spike which he had bound into his flesh a year before.

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"For a wonder, he doesn't seem to have dated it," I said; and this lapse from candor was the last sacrifice of truth to friendship that I was compelled to make. "If you don't want to keep it—"

"You're most welcome to it," said Mrs. Mountjoy, stepping past me to lift the picture down from the ledge on which it was standing. As she drew it away from the wall there was a metallic clatter, followed by the sound of something round and light rolling over bare boards.

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an aesthetic judgment, I felt that Marshall had painted an indifferent picture of a girl who was unimpressing by almost every artistic standard. In the framework of her bones, in the moulding of her flesh and in the coloring of her hair and eyes, poor Bianca was innocent of all beauty; a great artist, seeing her curiosity and gratification in staring at her own portrait, seeing, too, the tenacity with which she gripped the chocolate box, and guessing, no doubt, the acquisitiveness with which she had seized it, might have painted her symbolically as a wolf in the early stages of domestication by food; but Marshall Gaunt would have been the first to admit that he was not a great symbolic artist.

"Hullo! I say, you've missed the time of your life!" he cried as he caught sight of me. "This picture... Don't try to think of polite things to say about it, because I know as well as you do that it's bad. But I've had great fun with this young lady. It's all right; she doesn't

meager little person, in her efforts to learn English, and—most of all—in her trick of following him with devoted eyes as he moved about the studio, Bianca began timidly to return his love; and the best excuse that I can make for my own blindness is that the idea of love between two such people was so fantastic that I refused to contemplate it.

"I might be refusing to this day if I had not had the proof forced upon my notice. The first picture had been followed by a second, the second by a third—that indifferent, unfinished portrait which I had carried back to Campitello from the studio in Maida Vale. One afternoon, as it neared completion, I observed a change in Marshall Gaunt's demeanor; a new elation was making him restless, and the restlessness reacted on Bianca until she, a patient sitter made perfect by her loving desire to please him, moved and fidgeted about beyond the limit of the most indulgent artist's toleration.

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Then he went back to his easel, and I saw his narrow, white face lighting to a smile as he painted in "A Daughter of Pan."

That was our first meeting, my own first warning; and, looking back on it all, I do not think that, if I had my time over again, I should act differently. Had Gaunt been a dissolute boy of 20 I might have counseled him not to lay up I knew him, he was a detached and rather cold-blooded man of more than 40, with a certain sense of responsibility and even stronger instinct for general fitness of conduct.

Had I enjoyed greater opportunities of observation I could not look back on those days so complacently, for I can see now that there were danger signals which I ought to have regarded. Little by little, in voice and manner, Gaunt showed anyone who cared to see that he was falling in love with Bianca; little by little, in the new concern for her

quarulous and brought that golden red light into Gaunt's restless eyes; and the fact that I had interrupted their scene filled me with misgivings for its end. Gaunt, at a little over 40, and Bianca at, I suppose, 17, had this in common, that sex had played little part in their conscious life. Gaunt, I believe, had experienced a romance in boyhood and had lived faithfully to its memory for 20 years; Bianca, I dare swear, had never before been kissed. If they had been overworked all day, that broken moment of embrace had maddened them.

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I was fortunate in reaching the divan in time to grip and drag back the brown, powerful little hand that was grasping a long knife, and had already pricked Gaunt's chest. Then I tried to make her drop it without cutting my fingers off.

with mingled invective, threats and entreaties. Above their tumult it was difficult for us to make our voices heard.

"What are they shouting about?" demanded Gaunt.

"She's explaining that she's tired of him and hates him and always has hated him and always will," I answered; "and he's threatening to murder you and her if you lay a finger on her. He's also reminding her of the vows they've exchanged and of his undying love for her. The rest can only be described as vulgar abuse on both sides."

"Well, I think he's lost of quite enough," said Gaunt with decision, as he marched to the door and joined eagerly and unintelligibly in the altercation.

For five minutes three angry voices held forth in two languages to the limit of lung capacity and with a rich accompaniment of pantomime. At the end, Gaunt turned on a heel and led Bianca back into the studio; the rejected lover bowed up into the studio; the rest can only be described as vulgar abuse on both sides.

"And it's time for you to be going, too," I told Bianca.

"What's she talking about?" asked Gaunt. "She wants her knife," I translated. "She says the other man will kill her at sight."

"O, will he?" drawled Gaunt. "Then I think I'll see her safe home." After one glance at the knife, he decided to leave it where it was. "Here, my child, I'm not going to rob you, but I think that's rather an unsafe thing to carry about; you'd better have something that shuts up even if it's not so useful as a weapon of defense. Explain to her, Bandon, that I want to effect an exchange."

"My services as an interpreter were hardly needed when once Gaunt had exhibited her delighted eyes a knife with two blades and a corkscrew, a spike, and saw, a file and the long steel hook traditionally designed for removing stones from a horse's hoof. She was turning it over with eager fingers and inspecting the inset silver name plate as they left the studio; I saw Bianca look up with a smile of rapture; and her ugliness was burnt away by the radiance of her eyes, revealing a new beauty underneath. Nevertheless, though I too realized this new beauty in her, it was a sinister beauty; and I was oppressed with what I must call panic fear because I was afraid without a reason.

When Gaunt returned an hour later, I could see that he would have preferred to be left in peace; but I felt that for all the disaster of his wound and his excited emotions, I must force him to look ahead before he committed himself irrevocably.