

FROM

The Collector's Apprentice

BY B. A. SHAPIRO



Paulien is aware that being banished to Paris with 200 francs in her pocket isn't the worst of circumstances. But the city is vast and crowded and lonely despite all the noise and hubbub, not at all the way she remembers it. She wishes she were back in Brussels, filled with hope for the future, standing with her arms held wide as the seamstress made the final adjustments to her wedding gown. She looks down at the diamond on her ring finger. There is still hope. It's a crazy mistake, which George will straighten out.

His telegram read: NOT AS IT SEEMS. STOP. GOING AFTER SWISS BANKER WHO STOLE ALL THE MONEY. STOP. WILL COME FOR YOU WHEN SUCCEED. STOP. LOVE ALWAYS.

It pours the day she takes a bateau along the Seine, and she's unaffected by either the Eiffel Tower or her walk down the Champs-Élysées. Even a visit to the Louvre, a place of worship to her, leaves her as cold as the classical sculptures there. She worries about her parents and her brothers, wonders how they're holding up, what they're doing. She's edgy and skittish, startles at every sound, searches every face for a sign of George or her father.

Clearly she needs something more absorbing than sightseeing. She decides she'll look for a position in a gallery like the one she had in London after she graduated from college, gain a little more experience before she goes out on her own. George spoke about starting a new company. Why not here? It doesn't matter to her if she opens her gallery in London or in Paris or in Brussels for that matter. She smiles as she imagines asking her father's advice on which artists she should choose for her first show.

True, Papa and Maman were the ones who cast her out. *He has destroyed everything we have been building for generations—and you brought him here, allowed him to do this to us, helped him!* She can still hear her mother's words. *It is all gone. What we had, what you and your brothers and your children would have had. Everything that we are. Our name. Our proud name . . .*

The memory almost doubles Paulien over. But Maman will soon discover that she's worrying herself for no good reason. George will find the corrupt banker who cheated him and stole everyone's money. Then her parents will see they were mistaken to believe that there never was a banker or that George is a crook and a con man of the worst sort. George would never swindle them, never swindle her, of this she is certain. Paulien dons the one stylish suit she managed to shove into her valise before she left, tilts her hat at a rakish angle, and sets out to find herself a gallery.

It's a breezy late summer day in the most enchanting city in the world, and her spirits rise. She steps onto the teeming streets. Fashionable women with strappy shoes and short dresses drink coffee and smoke cigarettes, heads pressed together inside the red-fronted Le Pure Café. Tiny tables and wicker chairs pack the sidewalks, shops dazzle with the latest button-up boots and brimmed hats. The *boulangeries*, the marble facades, the cascading flowers, the promenades.

From under the bright green awning of Les Deux Magots in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, a handsome young man with a thin mustache calls out for her to join him. She flashes him a smile and walks on. Between the carriages and carts, Paulien catches sight of a Studebaker Roadster dexterously dodging the bicyclists and pedestrians. It's the same model as George's, although in bright yellow rather than navy blue, and her eyes follow the car's path until it turns at the corner. Perhaps he will come today.

She strolls into a gallery called Arnold et Tripp at 8, rue Saint-Georges. The street name is a good sign. The proprietor is at least fifty, with a heavy beard and what sounds like a Polish accent. She introduces herself and tells him about her experience at the Whitechapel Gallery, her studies at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels and the Slade School of Fine Art in London, her childhood in a house with an extensive art collection.

He's happy to listen to her, but in the end he says, "I am so sorry, mademoiselle. As much as I would enjoy the company of a young woman as knowledgeable and beautiful as you, I have neither the resources nor the need." French men are such flirts. Even the old ones.

She moves on to Brame et Lorenceau, a gallery with connections to the Manet family. But there's no job there either. She speaks with Marcel Bernheim at Bernheim-Jeune and Henry Bing at Galerie Nunes et Fiquet with the same outcome. She stops by a gallery specializing in old masters—painters she appreciates but isn't drawn to—and then moves on to Boussod, Valadon et Cie, which sells only prints of the popular Salon artists. No luck.

The shadows lengthen, and Paulien starts back to her hotel. She passes the Durand-Ruel Gallery and almost doesn't go in, but then she recognizes a Cézanne on the far wall: the luscious brushstrokes; the turbulent, uncontrollable energy; the bevy of rare juxtapositions and color combinations. Home.

She steps into the hushed, musty-smelling gallery and approaches *Léda au cygne*. Cézanne. Her father's collection includes Cézanne's *Five Bathers*, which she fell in love with as a child: the vivid blues, greens, and yellows; the roughness of the tree bark; the soft, fleshy women frolicking in the sifting sunlight. There was something magical about the diminutive painting, just over two feet square, which soothed and touched her in a way she was too young to understand.

Paulien appraises the canvas in front of her, guessing Cézanne painted it sometime in the early 1880s. She isn't familiar with this particular picture, and although she prefers his more mature work, her heart slips. Those succulent blues against the yellow-orange of both the swan's beak and Leda's ringlets, the sexuality in every twist of their bodies, in every swirl of the fabric, the desire in the swan's grasp of Leda's wrist. She catches her breath. She misses George, wants him.

"I see you are admiring our *Léda*, mademoiselle." A deep voice interrupts her musings.

She turns to the stocky man with wide shoulders standing next to her. Although he's broadly balding, his unwrinkled skin hints that he can't be much more than ten years her senior. "I am."

“You are a devotee of Monsieur Cézanne?”

“Yes, but I prefer the work he did in the last decade of his life.” She figures she might as well be honest, as there surely are no jobs to be had in this tiny gallery. “When he began to construct objects with color instead of line.”

He bows slightly and then extends his hand. “Alexandre Busler,” he says. “And I most heartily agree with you.”

“I’m Paulien Mertens, and I suppose I’m a little surprised to hear you say that.”

“Not every art dealer is so entrenched in the past that he cannot see what is the future.”

She returns his bow. “I’m sorry if I mistook you for one of those.”

“Apology accepted.” M. Busler turns toward the Cézanne. “But this painting is not without merit, no?”

“No. Not at all. It’s moving, provocative. All these curves—her hip, her arm, the swan’s neck, even her hair and the back of her chair—flow so, so . . .” She wants to say *erotically* but substitutes, “Beautifully.”

His eyes crinkle with amusement. “Yes, they do. As you say, so *beautifully*.”

Heat rises along her neck, and Paulien curses her pale skin, which constantly undermines her. “What I really like is how you can see his ideas evolving. Like here.” She points to the face. “Her skin isn’t classically smooth and pearly—it’s blotchy. Made with thick brushstrokes. And with colors you wouldn’t think of as skin tones: greens, purples, oranges.”

M. Busler leans back and crosses his arms over his chest. “Would you like a cup of tea? Or perhaps something stronger?”

“Tea would be delightful, thank you.” Paulien unpins her hat. Perhaps there is a job here.

He ushers her into a small alcove at the side of the gallery and prepares tea while they talk about Cézanne, Van Gogh, Seurat, Picasso, and her favorite, Henri Matisse. About when post-Impressionism began and who began it. After half an hour, they’re Paulien and Alexandre.

“Listening to you,” Alexandre says, “I would guess you are an artist. But your fingernails are too clean.”

She smiles fleetingly. “Right now I’m looking for a position.”

He appears confused.

“As an assistant. In an art gallery.”

“But you are only a visitor to Paris, no? I hear from your accent that you are not French.”

“Belgian. From Brussels. But then I was in London for school and stayed after I completed my studies. And . . . and now I’m living in Paris. Or will be soon.”

“You would like to work here? At my gallery?”

“I would. Very much.” Then she plunges into a recitation of her qualifications.

“Why did you leave London?” he asks.

She can’t tell him the truth, so she says, “I didn’t like it there. All that rain. And the English . . .” Her mother once told her that no specifics were necessary to convince a Frenchman of anyone’s antipathy toward the British. “Well, you know how they are.”

“Indeed I do.” Alexandre stands and retrieves a pen and notebook from his desk. He gives them to her. “Please write down all your particulars, how I can reach you, the exact years you were at the Slade, worked at Whitechapel, anything else you think I should know.”

When Paulien finishes, she hands the notebook back and asks, “So you have a position?”

“I would not have said so before you walked in, but perhaps there is something we can do. Although it will not be full time and will pay next to nothing. At least not at the start.”

“That’s fine,” Paulien tells him. “It will be fine.”

Alexandre squints at what she’s written. “You are staying at Le Meurice?” he asks. “Why would you want a small position here if you can afford to stay there?”

“I, ah, I . . .” She’s unprepared for the question, looks down at her ring. “Well, you see, it’s that I’m going to be married. Soon. And my fiancé is, well, he’s quite well off. So . . .”

Alexandre glances at her quizzically and then down at the notebook in his hand. “Mertens, Mertens . . .,” he mutters. “Belgium.” Then he straightens up. “Aldric Mertens? Are you related to Aldric Mertens?”

Paulien is silenced by his harsh tone, by the cold glint of his eyes.

“You are the daughter,” Alexandre declares, disgust creeping into his

voice. “The one who was involved with that maggot Everard.” He glowers at her. “It is no surprise then that you are so knowledgeable about art.”

“Please, Alexandre, please let me explain. It’s not what you—”

“My brother is dead because of . . . because of . . .” He chokes on the words, and his face reddens. “Your father, a supposed friend, persuaded him to invest, and he lost everything. Josèphe could not bear the embarrassment, the failure. He . . . he left his wife a widow and three little boys . . . without a centime.”

Paulien jumps from her chair and takes a step toward him. “Oh no. No. I’m so sorry. So very sorry. That’s—”

Alexandre holds up his hands, and she stops. “You need to leave.” His voice is raspy; he’s close to tears. “And if you are smart, you will also get out of that hotel. Out of Paris. This city is smaller than it seems.”

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