The Daunt Diana

By Edith Wharton

I

"What's become of the Daunt Diana? You mean to say you never heard the sequel?"

Ringham Finney threw himself back into his chair with the smile of the collector who has a good thing to show. He knew he had a good listener, at any rate. I don't think much of Ringham's snuff-boxes, but his anecdotes are usually worth while. He's a psychologist astray among *bibelots*, and the best bits he brings back from his raids on Christie's and the Hotel Drouot are the fragments of human nature he picks up on those historic battle-fields. If his *flair* in enamel had been half as good we should have heard of the Finney collection by this time.

He really has—queer fatuous investigator!—an unusually sensitive touch for the human texture, and the specimens he gathers into his museum of heterogeneous memories have almost always some mark of the rare and chosen. I felt, therefore, that I was really to be congratulated on the fact that I didn't know what had become of the Daunt Diana, and on having before me a long evening in which to learn. I had just led my friend back, after an excellent dinner at Foyot's, to the shabby pleasant sitting-room of my *Rive Gauche* hotel; and I knew that, once I had settled him in a good arm-chair, and put a box of cigars at his elbow, I could trust him not to budge till I had the story.

II

You remember old Neave, of course? Little Humphrey Neave, I mean. We used to see him pottering about Rome years ago. He lived in two tiny rooms over a wine shop, on polenta and lentils, and prowled among the refuse of the Ripetta whenever he had a few coppers to spend. But you've been out of the collector's world for so long that you may not know what happened to him afterward. . .

He was always a queer chap, Neave; years older than you and me, of course—and even when I first knew him, in my raw Roman days, he gave me an extraordinary sense of age and experience. I don't think I've ever known any one who was at once so intelligent and so simple. It's the precise combination that results in romance; and poor little Neave was romantic.

He told me once how he'd come to Rome. He was *originaire* of Mystic, Connecticut—and he wanted to get as far away from it as possible. Rome seemed as far as anything on the same planet could be; and after he'd worried his way through Harvard—with shifts and shavings that you and I can't imagine—he contrived to get sent to Switzerland as tutor to a chap who'd failed in his examinations. With only the Alps between, he wasn't likely to turn back; and he got another fellow to take his pupil home, and struck out on foot for the seven hills.

I'm telling you these early details merely to give you a notion of the man's idealism. There was a cool persistency and a headlong courage in his dash for Rome that one wouldn't have guessed in the little pottering chap we used to know. Once on the spot, he got more tutoring, managed to make himself a name for coaxing balky youths to take their fences, and was finally able to take up the more congenial task of expounding "the antiquities" to cultured travellers. I call it more congenial—but how it must have seared his soul! Fancy unveiling the sacred scars of Time to

ladies who murmur: “Was this *actually* the spot—?” while they absently feel for their hatpins! He used to say that nothing kept him at it but the exquisite thought of accumulating the *lire* for his collection. For the Neave collection, my dear fellow, began early, began almost with his Roman life, began in a series of little nameless odds and ends, broken trinkets, torn embroideries, the amputated extremities of maimed marbles: things that even the rag-picker had pitched away when he sifted his haul. But they weren’t nameless or meaningless to Neave; his strength lay in his instinct for identifying, putting together, seeing significant relations. He was a regular Cuvier of bric-a-brac. And during those early years, when he had time to brood over trifles and note imperceptible differences, he gradually sharpened his instinct, and made it into the delicate and redoubtable instrument it is. Before he had a thousand francs’ worth of *anticaglie* to his name he began to be known as an expert, and the big dealers were glad to consult him. But we’re getting no nearer the Daunt Diana. . .

Well, some fifteen years ago, in London, I ran across Neave at Christie’s. He was the same little man we’d known, effaced, bleached, indistinct, like a poor “impression”—as unnoticeable as one of his own early finds, yet, like them, with a *quality*, if one had an eye for it. He told me he still lived in Rome, and had contrived, by fierce self-denial, to get a few decent bits together—”piecemeal, little by little, with fasting and prayer; and I mean the fasting literally!” he said.

He had run over to London for his annual “look-round”—I fancy one or another of the big collectors usually paid his journey—and when we met he was on his way to see the Daunt collection. You know old Daunt was a surly brute, and the things weren’t easily seen; but he had heard Neave was in London, and had sent—yes, actually sent!—for him to come and give his opinion on a few bits, including the Diana. The little man bore himself discreetly, but you can imagine his pride. In his exultation he asked me to come with him—“Oh, I’ve the *grandes et petites entrées*, my dear fellow: I’ve made my conditions—” and so it happened that I saw the first meeting between Humphrey Neave and his fate.

For that collection *was* his fate: or, one may say, it was embodied in the Diana who was queen and goddess of the realm. Yes—I shall always be glad I was with Neave when he had his first look at the Diana. I see him now, blinking at her through his white lashes, and stroking his seedy wisp of a moustache to hide a twitch of the muscles. It was all very quiet, but it was the *coup de foudre*. I could see that by the way his hands trembled when he turned away and began to examine the other things. You remember Neave’s hands—thin, sallow, dry, with long inquisitive fingers thrown out like antennae? Whatever they hold—bronze or lace, hard enamel or brittle glass—they have an air of conforming themselves to the texture of the thing, and sucking out of it, by every finger-tip, the mysterious essence it has secreted. Well, that day, as he moved about among Daunt’s treasures, the Diana followed him everywhere. He didn’t look back at her—he gave himself to the business he was there for—but whatever he touched, he felt her. And on the threshold he turned and gave her his first free look—the kind of look that says: “*You’re mine.*”

It amused me at the time—the idea of little Neave making eyes at any of Daunt’s belongings. He might as well have coquetted with the Kohinoor. And the same idea seemed to strike him; for as we turned away from the big house in Belgravia he glanced up at it and said, with a bitterness I’d never heard in him: “Good Lord! To think of that lumpy fool having those things to handle! Did you notice his stupid stumps of fingers? I suppose he blunted them gouging nuggets out of the gold fields. And in exchange for the nuggets he gets all that in a year—only has to hold out his callous palm to have that great ripe sphere of beauty drop into it! That’s my idea of heaven—to have a great collection drop into one’s hand, as success, or love, or any of the big shining

things, drop suddenly on some men. And I've had to worry along for nearly fifty years, saving and paring, and haggling and intriguing, to get here a bit and there a bit—and not one perfection in the lot! It's enough to poison a man's life."

The outbreak was so unlike Neave that I remember every word of it: remember, too, saying in answer: "But, look here, Neave, you wouldn't take Daunt's hands for yours, I imagine?"

He stared a moment and smiled. "Have all that, and grope my way through it like a blind cave fish? What a question! But the sense that it's always the blind fish that live in that kind of aquarium is what makes anarchists, sir!" He looked back from the corner of the square, where we had paused while he delivered himself of this remarkable metaphor. "God, I'd like to throw a bomb at that place, and be in at the looting!"

And with that, on the way home, he unpacked his grievance—pulled the bandage off the wound, and showed me the ugly mark it had made on his little white soul.

It wasn't the struggling, stinting, self-denying that galled him—it was the inadequacy of the result. It was, in short, the old tragedy of the discrepancy between a man's wants and his power to gratify them. Neave's taste was too exquisite for his means—was like some strange, delicate, capricious animal, that he cherished and pampered and couldn't satisfy.

"Don't you know those little glittering lizards that die if they're not fed on some wonderful tropical fly? Well, my taste's like that, with one important difference—if it doesn't get its fly, it simply turns and feeds on me. Oh, it doesn't die, my taste—worse luck! It gets larger and stronger and more fastidious, and takes a bigger bite of me—that's all."

That was all. Year by year, day by day, he had made himself into this delicate register of perceptions and sensations—as far above the ordinary human faculty of appreciation as some scientific registering instrument is beyond the rough human senses—only to find that the beauty which alone could satisfy him was unattainable—that he was never to know the last deep identification which only possession can give. He had trained himself in short, to feel, in the rare great thing—such an utterance of beauty as the Daunt Diana, say—a hundred elements of perfection, a hundred *reasons why*, imperceptible, inexplicable even, to the average "artistic" sense; he had reached this point by a long austere process of discrimination and rejection, the renewed great refusals of the intelligence which perpetually asks more, which will make no pact with its self of yesterday, and is never to be beguiled from its purpose by the wiles of the next-best-thing. Oh, it's a poignant case, but not a common one; for the next-best-thing usually wins. . .

You see, the worst of Neave's state was the fact of his not being a mere collector, even the collector raised to his highest pitch of efficiency. The whole thing was blent in him with poetry—his imagination had romanticized the acquisitive instinct, as the religious feeling of the Middle Ages turned passion into love. And yet his could never be the abstract enjoyment of the philosopher who says: "This or that object is really mine because I'm capable of appreciating it." Neave *wanted* what he appreciated—wanted it with his touch and his sight as well as with his imagination.

It was hardly a year afterward that, coming back from a long tour in India, I picked up a London paper and read the amazing headline: "Mr. Humphrey Neave buys the Daunt collection". . . I rubbed my eyes and read again. Yes, it could only be our old friend Humphrey. "An American living in Rome . . . one of our most discerning collectors"; there was no mistaking the description. I clapped on my hat and bolted out to see the first dealer I could find; and there I had the incredible details. Neave had come into a fortune—two or three million dollars, amassed by

an uncle who had a corset-factory, and who had attained wealth as the creator of the Mystic Super-straight. (Corset-factory sounds odd, by the way, doesn't it? One had fancied that the corset was a personal, a highly specialized garment, more or less shaped on the form it was to modify; but, after all, the Tanagras were all made from two or three moulds—and so, I suppose, are the ladies who wear the Mystic Super-straight.)

The uncle had a son, and Neave had never dreamed of seeing a penny of the money; but the son died suddenly, and the father followed, leaving a codicil that gave everything to our friend. Humphrey had to go out to "realize" on the corset-factory; and his description of *that* . . . Well, he came back with his money in his pocket, and the day he landed old Daunt went to smash. It all fitted in like a Chinese puzzle. I believe Neave drove straight from Euston to Daunt House: at any rate, within two months the collection was his, and at a price that made the trade sit up. Trust old Daunt for that!

I was in Rome the following spring, and you'd better believe I looked him up. A big porter glared at me from the door of the Palazzo Neave: I had almost to produce my passport to get in. But that wasn't Neave's fault—the poor fellow was so beset by people clamouring to see his collection that he had to barricade himself, literally. When I had mounted the state *Scalone*, and come on him, at the end of half a dozen echoing saloons, in the farthest, smallest *réduit* of the vast suite, I received the same welcome that he used to give us in his little den over the wine shop.

"Well—so you've got her?" I said. For I'd caught sight of the Diana in passing, against the bluish blur of an old *verdure*—just the background for her poised loveliness. Only I rather wondered why she wasn't in the room where he sat.

He smiled. "Yes, I've got her," he returned, more calmly than I had expected.

"And all the rest of the loot?"

"Yes. I had to buy the lump."

"Had to? But you wanted to, didn't you? You used to say it was your idea of heaven—to stretch out your hand and have a great ripe sphere of beauty drop into it. I'm quoting your own words, by the way."

Neave blinked and stroked his seedy moustache. "Oh, yes. I remember the phrase. It's true—it *is* the last luxury." He paused, as if seeking a pretext for his lack of warmth. "The thing that bothered me was having to move. I couldn't cram all the stuff into my old quarters."

"Well, I should say not! This is rather a better setting."

He got up. "Come and take a look round. I want to show you two or three things—new attributions I've made. I'm doing the catalogue over."

The interest of showing me the things seemed to dispel the vague apathy I had felt in him. He grew keen again in detailing his redistribution of values, and above all in convicting old Daunt and his advisers of their repeated aberrations of judgment. "The miracle is that he should have got such things, knowing as little as he did what he was getting. And the egregious asses who bought for him were no better, were worse in fact, since they had all sorts of humbugging wrong reasons for admiring what old Daunt simply coveted because it belonged to some other rich man."

Never had Neave had so wondrous a field for the exercise of his perfected faculty; and I saw then how in the real, the great collector's appreciations the keenest scientific perception is suffused with imaginative sensibility, and how it's to the latter undefinable quality that in the last resort he trusts himself.

Nevertheless, I still felt the shadow of that hovering apathy, and he knew I felt it, and was always breaking off to give me reasons for it. For one thing, he wasn't used to his new quarters—hated their bigness and formality; then the requests to show his things drove him mad. "The women—oh, the women!" he wailed, and interrupted himself to describe a heavy-footed German Princess who had marched past his treasures as if she were inspecting a cavalry regiment, applying an unmodulated *Mugneeficent* to everything from the engraved gems to the Hercules torso.

"Not that she was half as bad as the other kind," he added, as if with a last effort at optimism. "The kind who discriminate and say: 'I'm not sure if it's Botticelli or Cellini I mean, but *one of that school*, at any rate.' And the worst of all are the ones who know—up to a certain point: have the schools, and the dates and the jargon pat, and yet wouldn't know a Phidias if it stood where they hadn't expected it."

He had all my sympathy, poor Neave; yet these were trials inseparable from the collector's lot, and not always without their secret compensations. Certainly they did not wholly explain my friend's attitude; and for a moment I wondered if it were due to some strange disillusionment as to the quality of his treasures. But no! the Daunt collection was almost above criticism; and as we passed from one object to another I saw there was no mistaking the genuineness of Neave's pride in his possessions. The ripe sphere of beauty was his, and he had found no flaw in it as yet. . .

A year later came the amazing announcement—the Daunt collection was for sale. At first we all supposed it was a case of weeding out (though how old Daunt would have raged at the thought of anybody's weeding *his* collection!) But no—the catalogue corrected that idea. Every stick and stone was to go under the hammer. The news ran like wildfire from Rome to Berlin, from Paris to London and New York. Was Neave ruined, then? Wrong again—the dealers nosed that out in no time. He was simply selling because he chose to sell; and in due time the things came up at Christie's.

But you may be sure the trade had found an answer to the riddle; and the answer was that, on close inspection, Neave had found the collection less impeccable than he had supposed. It was a preposterous answer—but then there was no other. Neave, by this time, was pretty generally recognized as having the subtlest *flair* of any collector in Europe, and if he didn't choose to keep the Daunt collection it could be only because he had reason to think he could do better.

In a flash this report had gone the rounds and the buyers were on their guard. I had run over to London to see the thing through, and it was the queerest sale I ever was at. Some of the things held their own, but a lot—and a few of the best among them—went for half their value. You see, they'd been locked up in old Daunt's house for nearly twenty years, and hardly shown to any one, so that the whole younger generation of dealers and collectors knew of them only by hearsay. Then you know the effect of suggestion in such cases. The undefinable sense we were speaking of is a ticklish instrument, easily thrown out of gear by a sudden fall of temperature; and the sharpest experts grow shy and self-distrustful when the cold current of depreciation touches them. The sale was a slaughter—and when I saw the Daunt Diana fall at the wink of a little third-rate *brocanteur* from Vienna I turned sick at the folly of my kind.

For my part, I had never believed that Neave had sold the collection because he'd "found it out"; and within a year my incredulity was justified. As soon as the things were put in circulation they were known for the marvels they are. There was hardly a poor bit in the lot; and my wonder

grew at Neave's madness. All over Europe, dealers began to be fighting for the spoils; and all kinds of stuff were palmed off on the unsuspecting as fragments of the Daunt collection!

Meanwhile, what was Neave doing? For a long time I didn't hear, and chance kept me from returning to Rome. But one day, in Paris, I ran across a dealer who had captured for a song one of the best Florentine bronzes in the Daunt collection—a marvellous *plaquette* of Donatello's. I asked him what had become of it, and he said with a grin: "I sold it the other day," naming a price that staggered me.

"Ye gods! Who paid you that for it?"

His grin broadened, and he answered: "Neave."

"*Neave?* Humphrey Neave?"

"Didn't you know he was buying back his things?"

"Nonsense!"

"He is, though. Not in his own name—but he's doing it."

And he *was*, do you know—and at prices that would have made a sane man shudder! A few weeks later I ran across his tracks in London, where he was trying to get hold of a Penicaud enamel—another of his scattered treasures. Then I hunted him down at his hotel, and had it out with him.

"Look here, Neave, what are you up to?"

He wouldn't tell me at first: stared and laughed and denied. But I took him off to dine, and after dinner, while we smoked, I happened to mention casually that I had a pull over the man who had the Penicaud—and at that he broke down and confessed.

"Yes, I'm buying them back, Finney—it's true." He laughed nervously, twitching his moustache. And then he let me have the story.

"You know how I'd hungered and thirsted for the *real thing*—you quoted my own phrase to me once, about the 'ripe sphere of beauty.' So when I got my money, and Daunt lost his, almost at the same moment, I saw the hand of Providence in it. I knew that, even if I'd been younger, and had more time, I could never hope, nowadays, to form such a collection as *that*. There was the ripe sphere, within reach; and I took it. But when I got it, and began to live with it, I found out my mistake. It was a *mariage de convenance*—there'd been no wooing, no winning. Each of my little old bits—the rubbish I chucked out to make room for Daunt's glories—had its own personal history, the drama of my relation to it, of the discovery, the struggle, the capture, the first divine moment of possession. There was a romantic secret between us. And then I had absorbed its beauties one by one, they had become a part of my imagination, they held me by a hundred threads of far-reaching association. And suddenly I had expected to create this kind of intense personal tie between myself and a roomful of new cold alien presences—things staring at me vacantly from the depths of unknown pasts! Can you fancy a more preposterous hope? Why, my other things, my *own* things, had wooed me as passionately as I wooed them: there was a certain little bronze, a little Venus Callipyge, who had drawn me, drawn me, drawn me, imploring me to rescue her from her unspeakable surroundings in a vulgar bric-a-brac shop at Biarritz, where she shrank out of sight among sham Sevres and Dutch silver, as one has seen certain women—rare, shy, exquisite—made almost invisible by the vulgar splendours surrounding them. Well! that little Venus, who was just a specious seventeenth century attempt at the 'antique,' but who had penetrated me with her pleading grace, touched me by the easily guessed story of her obscure, anonymous origin, was more to me imaginatively—yes! more than the cold bought beauty of the Daunt Diana. . . "

"The Daunt Diana!" I broke in. "Hold up, Neave—*the Daunt Diana?*"

He smiled contemptuously. “A professional beauty, my dear fellow—expected every head to be turned when she came into a room.”

“Oh, Neave,” I groaned.

“Yes, I know. You’re thinking of what we felt that day we first saw her in London. Many a poor devil has sold his soul as the result of such a first sight! Well, I sold *her* instead. Do you want the truth about her? *Elle était bête à pleurer*.”

He laughed, and stood up with a little shrug of disenchantment.

“And so you’re impenitent?” I paused. “And yet you’re buying some of the things back?”

Neave laughed again, ironically. “I knew you’d find me out and call me to account. Well, yes: I’m buying back.” He stood before me half sheepish, half defiant. “I’m buying back because there’s nothing else as good in the market. And because I’ve a queer feeling that, this time, they’ll be *mine*. But I’m ruining myself at the game!” he confessed.

It was true: Neave was ruining himself. And he’s gone on ruining himself ever since, till now the job’s nearly done. Bit by bit, year by year, he has gathered in his scattered treasures, at higher prices than the dealers ever dreamed of getting. There are fabulous details in the story of his quest. Now and then I ran across him, and was able to help him recover a fragment; and it was wonderful to see his delight in the moment of reunion. Finally, about two years ago, we met in Paris, and he told me he had got back all the important pieces except the Diana.

“The Diana? But you told me you didn’t care for her.”

“Didn’t care?” He leaned across the restaurant table that divided us. “Well, no, in a sense I didn’t. I wanted her to want me, you see; and she didn’t then! Whereas now she’s crying to me to come to her. You know where she is?” he broke off.

Yes, I knew: in the centre of Mrs. Willy P. Goldmark’s yellow and gold drawing-room, under a thousand-candle-power chandelier, with reflectors aimed at her from every point of the compass. I had seen her wincing and shivering there in her outraged nudity at one of the Goldmark “crushes.”

“But you can’t get her, Neave,” I objected.

“No, I can’t get her,” he said.

Well, last month I was in Rome, for the first time in six or seven years, and of course I looked about for Neave. The Palazzo Neave was let to some rich Russians, and the splendid new porter didn’t know where the proprietor lived. But I got on his trail easily enough, and it led me to a strange old place in the Trastevere, an ancient crevassed black palace turned tenement house, and fluttering with pauper clothes-lines. I found Neave under the leads, in two or three cold rooms that smelt of the *cuisine* of all his neighbours: a poor shrunken little figure, seedier and shabbier than ever, yet more alive than when we had made the tour of his collection in the Palazzo Neave.

The collection was around him again, not displayed in tall cabinets and on marble tables, but huddled on shelves, perched on chairs, crammed in corners, putting the gleam of bronze, the opalescence of old glass, the pale lustre of marble, into all the angles of his low dim rooms. There they were, the proud presences that had stared at him down the vistas of Daunt House, and shone in cold transplanted beauty under his own painted cornices: there they were, gathered in humble promiscuity about his bent shabby figure, like superb wild creatures tamed to become the familiars of some harmless old wizard.

As we went from bit to bit, as he lifted one piece after another, and held it to the light of his low windows, I saw in his hands the same tremor of sensation that I had noticed when he first examined the same objects at Daunt House. All his life was in his finger-tips, and it seemed to

communicate life to the exquisite things he touched. But you'll think me infected by his mysticism if I tell you they gained new beauty while he held them. . .

We went the rounds slowly and reverently; and then, when I supposed our inspection was over, and was turning to take my leave, he opened a door I had not noticed, and showed me into a slit of a room beyond. It was a mere monastic cell, scarcely large enough for his narrow iron bed and the chest which probably held his few clothes; but there, in a niche of the bare wall, facing the foot of the bed—there stood the Daunt Diana.

I gasped at the sight and turned to him; and he looked back at me without speaking.

"In the name of magic, Neave, how did you do it?"

He smiled as if from the depths of some secret rapture. "Call it magic, if you like; but I ruined myself doing it," he said.

I stared at him in silence, breathless with the madness and the wonder of it; and suddenly, red to the ears, he flung out his boyish confession. "I lied to you that day in London—the day I said I didn't care for her. I always cared—always worshipped—always wanted her. But she wasn't mine then, and I knew it, and she knew it . . . and now at last we understand each other." He looked at me shyly, and then glanced about the bare cold cell. "The setting isn't worthy of her, I know; she was meant for glories I can't give her; but beautiful things, my dear Finney, like beautiful spirits, live in houses not made with hands. . . "

His face shone with extraordinary sweetness as he spoke; and I saw he'd got hold of the secret we're all after. No, the setting isn't worthy of her, if you like. The rooms are as shabby and mean as those we used to see him in years ago over the wine shop. I'm not sure they're not shabbier and meaner. But she rules there at last, she shines and hovers there above him, and there at night, I doubt not, steals down from her cloud to give him the Latmian kiss. . .