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TURBULENT TALES

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Table of Contents

THE KNEELING CUPID
BY ANCIENT CUSTOM
THE SCAPULARY
THE REMEDY
THE CONSTABLE OF CHARD
THE CATCHPOLL
LOADED DICE
CASANOVA’S ALIBI
THE OPEN DOOR
THE LORD OF TIME
THE DEATH-MASK
THE ALCHEMICAL EGG
THE GHOST OF TRONJOLLY
THE LUCK OF CAPOULADE
THE PASSPORT
THE RECOIL

THE KNEELING CUPID

Table of Contents

THE LISPING YOUNG exquisite in sulphur-coloured silk smiled tolerant disdain, whilst from the group behind him came sounds of a titter ill-suppressed.

“And so you pronounce yourself an artist, eh?” he said. “An artist! It is a rare and admirable thing to be. It needs courage that a man should pronounce himself one; great industry and achievement before others will so pronounce him.”

His irony was not to be mistaken. It brought a faint colour into the gaunt, sallow cheeks of the victim, a young man of not more than three-and-twenty, tall and vigorous, whose face, though bony and rugged, was yet handsome in a rough, masterful way. A thick mane of lustrous black hair curled about his brow and fell in short waves to the nape of his powerful neck; his great eyes, deep-set under a massive brow, glowed with the ever-smouldering fires of a nature passionate in all things. He was dressed in black, but with an elegance which proclaimed that his presence here in the great Cardinal’s antechamber was by no means his first experience of courts. Rich fur trimmed his close-fitting doublet and lined the ample surcoat so loosely worn; a chain of silver, massively wrought and of exquisite workmanship served him for a girdle and hung the heavy Pistoja dagger on his hip.

He would willingly have drawn it now, to sheathe the blade in the windpipe of that smirking young gentleman in yellow. But, though passionate, he could, within certain

limits, be patient, and prudently he dissembled the ferocious lust. He answered quietly: “Others have so pronounced me already—generously. But not perhaps more generously than my work deserved, Messer Gianluca.”

Gianluca Sforza-Riario, the fair youth in yellow, led a burst of laughter, which drew the attention of other clients thronging the long pillared gallery.

“You were well-advised, Messer Buonarroti, to come to Rome. Here you will certainly succeed. No artistic reticence will restrain you from bawling your wares in the market-place, and here success comes to him who bawls loudest, thus imposing upon the vulgar, undiscriminating herd. Oh, you will find men enough in Rome who, to their shame, are growing fat on art. The patronage of the ignorant enriches them. So may it fare with you, good sir.”

Still the young artist kept his temper, though his hands might itch.

“Sir, it is possible that you mistake my quality. It happens that until now I have had no patron but one, and he was not a man whom any could call ignorant—Lorenzo, the great Lorenzo de’ Medici. Had he lived, I should never have left Florence.”

“Lorenzo de’ Medici.” Gianluca’s eyebrows rose until they almost joined the yellow thatch above his shallow brow. “You will not tell me that Lorenzo de’ Medici knew anything of art?”

Young Buonarroti gasped for breath. “How, sir?”

“Ser Michelangelo, it is my desire to think well of you; but if you praise me the artistic perceptions of Duke Lorenzo you will render that impossible. A man of crude taste,

leaning to the meretricious, to ... to trivial things designed to trap the senses of ... of just such men.”

That was but the beginning. Continuing, the aesthetic Messer Gianluca delivered himself at great length and in the choicest terms of an address upon art, under which young Michelangelo felt himself grow faint with wonder. Such great contemporaries as Pinturicchio and Verocchio were tolerantly commended, which is to say that this critic damned them with faint praise; others as great were contemptuously dismissed—especially the prosperous ones, prosperity being in the eyes of Messer Gianluca the seal of worthlessness. Of the younger men the only one in whom he admitted possibilities was Leonardo da Vinci; but he confessed to grave misgivings concerning even him; he doubted if that young man’s talents would mature along praiseworthy lines; he feared that he might succumb to work for profit, and thereby damn himself eternally as an artist.

Nauseated, Michelangelo fled the gallery and the palace, and began to ask himself should he not flee Rome as well, cursing the evil hour which had brought him to this city of self-sufficient fools.

You know the story of his boyhood; how at the age of fourteen he was apprenticed for a term of three years to the great Florentine painter, Domenico Ghirlandajo; how before the end of that term he had been drawn from painting to sculpture, and how he had modelled a Laughing Faun which had caught the discerning eye of the Magnificent Lorenzo. The Duke had haled the lad out of the workshops of Messer Ghirlandajo and had installed him in the ducal palace. And

young Buonarroti, uplifted and stimulated by this splendid patronage, had justified his noble patron’s judgment. It was in this period of his adolescence that he produced his Centaurs, a work the consideration of which in after life caused him so profoundly to deplore that he should ever again have turned aside from sculpture to waste his time on painting. Yet it was during some of the time thus wasted that he painted the Sistine Chapel, and therein accomplished one of the artistic marvels of the ages. That, however, is a digression.

He was barely twenty when Lorenzo died. Piero de’ Medici, who succeeded him, discovered in crudest materialism all that he required of life. There was an end to the patronage of artists in Florence. Michelangelo found himself out of employment. Casting about him, he lent an ear to the tales of the great opportunities afforded by the Papal Court under the prodigal and lavish Borgia Pontiff, and of the great interest in art that was being quickened in Rome by the excavations which were daily bringing such treasures of antiquity to light.

Lured by these stories, Buonarroti set out for the eternal city, armed with a letter of introduction from Piero de’ Medici to Cardinal Sforza-Riario, who was widely famed as a dilettante, a collector, and a patron of the arts. Through the good offices of this exalted prince of the Church, Michelangelo hoped that he might reach even the foot of the papal throne.

So far, however, he had spent a month in vain solicitings, daily cooling his heels in the great man’s antechamber whilst hoping ever more desperately for the audience in

which he might present his letter, nauseated meanwhile by the atmosphere of the place and discussions upon art akin to that into which he had just been drawn. He began to realize that he was moving in a world of posturing dilettanti, of pretentious witlings, to whom mere performance in art was naught. True artistic greatness, perception and achievement, it seemed, were to be established only by a capacity for judging the work of others, and judgment usually was based upon standards that were wholly—almost it seemed deliberately—false.

Meanwhile, idleness and the wasted days began to fret him. Also he perceived that at this rate his meagre store of money would soon be exhausted. Therefore of late he had been turning his attention to immediate needs. He had modelled a dancing nymph, a thing of infinite grace and liveliness, although the subject was not perhaps one to which at that age he would naturally have turned. It afforded no scope for the vigorous anatomy which he loved to reproduce. The choice was entirely meretricious. He conceived that he fashioned something calculated to please these lascivious Romans, whose aesthetic sense had been emasculated by an excessive worship of smooth antiquities, particularly the Greek. He bore it—still in the clay, since in those days he had no workshop in which to effect the transmutation—to one Baldassare della Balza, who kept a shop on the Ripa Vecchia, overlooking Tiber.

Many times he had passed the shop, on his way to the Sforza-Riario place, in the Rione di Ponte, and invariably he had paused to study the sculptures exhibited, ancient and modern, in marble, in bronze, in lead, and some in baked

clay. But this was the first time that he ventured to cross the threshold in his quality as a sculptor.

He was well received, his nymph commending him to one as shrewd and critical as Baldassare della Balza. This dealer, an untidy, gabardined, elderly man with long, greasy locks of grizzled hair, straggling beard and a pendulous nose that betrayed his Semitic origin, avoided confinement to a ghetto simply by proclaiming himself a Christian, and was left in peace to pursue his trade by the tolerant Roman government of Borgia days.

“The work is good—very, very good,” he deliberately and generously pronounced it. “So good that I do not know a sculptor working now who could do better. And that is much to say, particularly to so young a man. But if I buy ...”—he spread his hands, and looked up with sorrowful eyes —“where shall I find me a buyer in my turn?”

To Michelangelo this seemed a foolish question.

“Surely among your patrons there will be some who know good work and desire to possess it. How else could you live and drive your trade?”

The little dealer answered him by a cackle of sardonic mirth. He swung round. From a shelf behind him he snatched a marble Hermes, standing some two feet high, and placed it on the table before the young artist.

“Is not that a thing of beauty?” he demanded. “Is it not good work?”

It was good work indeed, a figure not only of entrancingly graceful proportions but so full of arrested movement as to seem almost alive. Michelangelo’s admiring eyes devoured it, his long delicate fingers caressed it lovingly.

“Superb,” he murmured. “The work of a master, my friend.”

“Of one who will become a master,” the dealer corrected. “At present he is young, like yourself, able and eager, gifted with wit to invent, eyes to see, and fingers to reproduce—a great artist, a great craftsman. His name is Torrigiano. If he lives that name will one day be famous.”

“If he lives?” quoth Michelangelo.

“Just so. If he does not meanwhile die of starvation, as well he may. Eleven months has this lovely thing stood in my shop. To each of my patrons in turn have I shown it—to the great Cardinal Ascanio, to the Princess of Squillace, to the Lord of Mirandola, who has great taste and knowledge, to the young Duke of Gandia, to Cardinal Sforza-Riario, who prides himself upon his judgment and whose collection of sculpture is the greatest in Rome. I have implored them to offer me any price in reason. But ... this thing of beauty remains to grace my shop, whilst a hundred inferior things are sold, simply because they are old—antiquities dug out of the earth. I tell you, sir, there is no vision among these collectors. Men have gone mad in this matter of antiquities; they have lost all sense of real values. Over these remains of other days they wax lavishly and indiscriminately enthusiastic, and the work of young artists like yourself, even when it is as good as this your nymph or this noble Hermes, remains neglected and despised.” Contempt increased in Baldassare’s voice. “The truth is, they know nothing, these people, and their ignorance leers foolishly through their pretence of knowledge. I am sorry, my young sir. Your nymph is worthy to stand beside this Hermes; but it

would stand beside it just as idly. If I cannot sell the one, be sure that I could not sell the other."

Michelangelo departed sick at heart and in some indignation; he was angry with these empty, pretentious Romans; angry with himself that he should have left Florence merely to be lectured upon art by the fools who thronged the antechamber of the illustrious Sforza-Riario, that renowned patron of art who could pass indifferently by such a piece of work as the Hermes of Torrigiano. Clearly this man upon whose patronage Michelangelo had been depending could be no better than the rest, no better than those posturing clowns who chattered so glibly in his antechamber. To what end, then, he asked himself, did he remain in Rome? Above her gates for such as he should be inscribed the line of Dante's above the gates of Hell: 'Abandon every hope, O you that enter.'

Upon that bitter thought he suddenly checked, there in the narrow unpaved street. And then upon another thought that was born of it, he swung round, and went in great strides back to the shop of Baldassare.

"Sir," he asked, "has it never occurred to you in the pursuit of this trade of yours, that fools were born into the world to be turned to account by men of worth?"

Baldassare smiled gently as he rubbed his plump hands. "I have suspected it," he confessed. "Sometimes even I may have found my profit in it. What then?"

Instinctively Michelangelo drew nearer and lowered his voice. Anger and scorn vibrated in his every word. But of those emotions Baldassare took little heed. Emotion he knew to be unprofitable. To the actual matter of the young

artist’s utterance, however, his mind was entirely given, and as he listened he continued to smile and to rub his hands, occasionally nodding his approval.

“What a dealer you would have made had not the good God made you a sculptor,” Baldassare commended him when at last they parted, and than this the little Jew could hardly have bestowed higher praise upon him.

But since Michelangelo did not see eye to eye with him in this, he had no thought of quitting the precarious path of art for the more secure ways of trade; and as week succeeded week, he was still daily to be seen in the antechamber of Cardinal Sforza-Riario, awaiting that interview which it seemed would never be vouchsafed him. And almost daily was he baited by the Cardinal’s nephew and those other elegant loungers. But he had grown inured to their veiled taunts and open sneers. He smiled, and rarely troubled to strike back, nor was anger ever more than momentarily kindled in those great dark eyes of his.

One day a life-sized Antinous made its appearance—a new acquisition of the Cardinal’s of which he was so inordinately proud that he proposed for a season to leave it in his ante-room, where it could be more generally seen and admired than in the gallery set apart for his collection.

Michelangelo came to admire it with the rest, but soberly, without transports such as all were indulging. Messer Gianluca delivered to the young artist, and to all the others who stood respectfully listening, a lengthy and learned dissertation upon the aesthetics of the work.

In the end he turned to Buonarroti.

“And what,” he asked, with that faint sneering superior smile of his, “is your own judgment, Messer the sculptor?”

“It is very beautiful,” was the quiet answer. “Indeed its fault is that it is too beautiful.”

“Its fault?” Gianluca’s voice grew shrill. “Can excess of perfection be a fault?”

“Excess of perfection is always a fault,” Michelangelo dogmatized. “There is no vice so horrible as excess of virtue.”

“You deliver the treasures of your judgment in the form of paradoxes. Their meaning may well elude such humble wits as ours.” An approving purr commended the suavity of Messer Gianluca’s sarcasm.

“I’ll endeavour to be plain. This thing is beautiful, but as a woman is beautiful rather than a man. It is of an exceeding smoothness. The delineation of the anatomy is without force. The face is perfect; too perfect for significance; a man with so lovely a countenance may be a beast, or a fool, or both; he can hardly be aught else. Is that what the sculptor intended? I doubt it. The limbs lack vigour; the musculature is too vague; they are a woman’s limbs.”

“Ah, but listen, listen all, I beg!” shrilled Gianluca. “An artistic Daniel is delivering judgment. And his canon, it seems, is that art is to express only brawn and thews.”

Sycophantic laughter drowned Michelangelo’s answer, and drove him in anger from the place. For a whole day he fumed, fingering the hilt of his dagger, and in imagination enjoying the delight of thrusting the blade into Gianluca’s windpipe. Violence he swore was the only argument to use with these imbeciles, never suspecting how well Gianluca’s

mockery was serving him at that very moment. For the young man, flushed with the victory he accounted his own in that wordy encounter, went with the tale of it to his illustrious uncle. Into the ear of His Excellency—the title of Eminence had not yet come into use—he poured the absurd story of this presumptuous young Florentine who haunted the cardinalitial threshold in the hope of audience. He spoke almost with heat of the man's egregious vanity, of his effrontery, so great that he dared to pronounce an adverse judgment upon the matchless Antinous. Together uncle and nephew laughed over the man's ridiculous pretensions—as interpreted by Gianluca.

"Decidedly," said the Cardinal, "I must receive this fellow. It may be amusing, and it is possible that I may afford him artistic salvation."

And so when next, in accordance with his habit, the young Florentine lounged into that now too familiar antechamber, a chamberlain in black velvet advanced to inquire was he Messer Michelangelo Buonarroti of Florence, bearer of a letter to the illustrious Cardinal Sforza-Riario from Duke Piero? And when young Buonarroti, a little sceptical of this sudden conclusion of his purgatorial term, eagerly acknowledged the identity, he was respectfully ushered into a small room, with gilded walls and an ultramarine ceiling, lighted by a single window beside which there was a richly carved writing pulpit. At this was seated the illustrious Cardinal—a tall, thin man whose countenance derived asceticism from its startling pallor. The story ran that, present at the murder of Giuliano de' Medici in the

Cathedral of Florence, he had been permanently stricken white with horror.

His narrow eyes looked with assumed benignity upon this young sculptor, who bent the knee to him. He held out a white emaciated hand, on which glowed the sapphire of his rank, and Michelangelo humbly kissed it as his duty was.

“I have just learnt from my nephew Gianluca of the long trial of your patience here,” said a cold, level voice. “I should earlier have been informed of your presence.”

Michelangelo, mumbling amiabilities, proffered his letter. Motioning his visitor to rise, the Cardinal broke the seal, and spread the sheet. He reclined in his capacious, high-backed chair to read the commendations of Duke Piero, and as he read his thin lips curled a little. When he looked over the top of the sheet at the young artist, there seemed a certain wistfulness in his glance.

“His Magnificence here speaks of you as a young man of whose great talents his exalted father Lorenzo had a very high opinion.”

“I had the honour to work in the ducal palace for three years, Excellency.”

The Cardinal smiled a little and sighed. “You realize that from Florence—the Florence of Lorenzo de’ Medici—to curial Rome it is a far cry in matters of art; that what there may be accounted masterly is here often considered elementary, especially in these days when the antiquities that are being brought to light are serving us as a school for the education of our sense of beauty.”

With difficulty Michelangelo repressed a sneer. Here was the same cant that came to nauseate him on every hand.

Here, indeed, as he should have known, was one of the very fountains of that cant. He attempted no answer, but waited for the Cardinal to proceed.

“The Duke writes that you are both painter and sculptor.”

“As a painter,” the youth replied abruptly, “I may not be of much account. I do not think I am. There are many better.”

“Ah!” A smile distended the thin lips in that white face which Michelangelo was finding odious. “And as a sculptor?”

“As a sculptor I am not ashamed of what I do, and I am artist enough to know of what I should be ashamed. It is as a sculptor that I offer myself to your lordship, whose discrimination in art is so well and widely known. If here at the court of the Holy Father …”

A white hand waved him into silence.

“I have warned you, sir, that the standards here are high. You are still very young and will lack experience.”

“Artists, my lord, are created by God, not by experience. By this I mean that the artist is born.”

A momentary annoyance under that retort flashed from the Cardinal’s eyes. But at once he subdued it, and his answer was coldly smooth.

“I think the assertion has been made before. Or something like it: *Poeta nascitur, non fit*. Perhaps you remember. But come.” The tall figure, clad from head to heel in flowing scarlet, rose abruptly. “Whether or not it may lie in my power to find you employment, you shall not be utterly at the loss of the time you have spent here. Let me show you my collection of sculpture. It is the most perfect

and ample collection in Rome, which is to say in the world. To behold it is an education in itself, my friend. Come."

Familiarly now he took the young man by the arm, and conducted him to a door at the opposite end of the room, where an usher waited. The man opened for them, and they passed into a long gallery lighted along its length by tall windows that looked upon the inner courtyard of the palace. Facing these windows stood ranged along the gallery from end to end the treasures of sculpture which Sforza-Riario had assembled at the price of several princely fortunes. In all that collection there was little that was modern. It was composed almost entirely of pieces brought from Greece and of others excavated in Rome, in which the Greek influence was strong.

Slowly they moved along the gallery, the Cardinal discharging the office of showman, and discoursing at length upon the beauty of each work in turn, pointing out those subtle virtues of execution perceptible only to the initiate's eye. Here it was the fall of a drapery, there the vigour of a limb, there the modelling of a face, and there the liveliness of the attitude that he desired his guest to observe. And Michelangelo observed faithfully as he was bidden, swallowed his resentment of this patronage of himself, an artist, by one who in the world of art held no place save as a buyer. Since he offered no comment, the Cardinal began to assume that the young man's arrogance was being properly humbled.

"You are silent, my friend."

"I am listening to Your Magnificence," was the bland reply.

“Oh, and something more. Confess that you stand abashed in the presence of such beauty. And well you may, for I venture to assert that there is no man living to-day capable of producing any single piece that adorns this gallery.”

“There are certainly not many,” the sculptor agreed.

“There is none, my friend. None. Believe me. I know. Not for nothing have I devoted my life to the contemplation and study of art. What I tell you of art, you may believe.”

They had come midway down the gallery, and they were standing before a slim boyish figure in old marble that was stained and darkened by the salts of the earth in which it must have lain for centuries. It was less than life size, presenting a stripling whose limbs were just beginning to assume virility and strength. The figure was curiously poised, one knee touching the ground, the head tilted aside, the left hand clenched and held at arm’s length, the right in line with it but at the level of the cheek. About the lovely face—almost too virile for so young a body—the hair clustered in thick short curls.

Michelangelo’s eyes had quickened with sudden interest the moment they beheld it, and this the Cardinal had perceived.

“Aha!” he laughed. “You begin to profit, I see. You begin to discern perfection for yourself.”

The artist wheeled to face him, his eyes glowing, his face flushed. He found the dilettante’s insolence ludicrous.

“What ... what does it represent?” he asked.

“Cupid. A Kneeling Cupid. Not Cupid as any of your moderns would represent him, round, shapeless and

chubby; but a clean-limbed, active Cupid, a miracle, as you see, of grace and vigour. He is kneeling, you observe, in the act of taking aim. The bow has gone—lost. But it is not missed; almost, indeed, can you see it, so perfect is the poise of the arms, the expression of the hands."

"And your Excellency says that it is old, this—an antiquity?" quoth Michelangelo in a voice that was small as if awed.

The Cardinal stared at him, annoyed by his stupidity. A faint smile of disdain overspread his white face.

"Look at it," he commanded. "And take your answer from the figure itself. As your experience widens you will come to understand that no sculptor since Phidias could have wrought so lovely a thing. Consider it, examine it closely. I promise you that it will bear inspection." Sighing, he placed a hand upon the young man's shoulder. "When you, my young friend, can make something that is even remotely comparable with this, you may depend upon me to set your feet upon the road to fortune."

Again the young sculptor swung to confront the great patron, and his rugged face was pale under its tan.

"Your Excellency makes me that promise?"

His Excellency smiled his tolerance of this youthful impetuosity. "I have made it."

"Then by your gracious leave I shall claim its fulfilment at once."

The Cardinal looked down his nose.

Michelangelo answered the look. "I have at home a piece of clay that your lordship will confess to be no whit inferior to this marble."

Sforza-Riario permitted himself a gentle laugh. “You have in abundance the modern quality of assurance, young sir. Almost I might say, of effrontery. But I’ll indulge you. Bring me your clay, and let us see this modelling of which you boast so confidently.”

Michelangelo departed on that errand, and the Cardinal went to laugh first to himself and later with his nephew over the presumption of this young Florentine.

“I had thought,” he said, “to chasten and educate him by a display of my treasures. Instead …”

“They are all the same, these moderns,” answered Gianluca. “Ignorant, crude in their work and self-sufficient in their estimate of it. They need humbling.”

The Cardinal nodded. “It is a duty, and a duty that I shall not shrink from performing.”

“Let me be present,” pleaded Gianluca. But the Cardinal, having considered, shook his head. “That were too uncharitable.”

And so when the sculptor and a couple of lads he had procured to assist him came staggering under the burden of a figure swathed in sackcloth, the Cardinal was alone to receive him. Michelangelo begged, and the Cardinal indulgently consented, that he should uncover his figure in the gallery itself, alongside that of the Cupid with which it challenged comparison.

Smiling, the Cardinal accompanied him. Smiling, he stood by whilst Michelangelo, having dismissed his assistants, breathing heavily and perspiring freely, removed the sackcloth. But when the clay figure was suddenly revealed, the smile perished on the Cardinal’s white face. He craned

his neck; his brows were drawn together, and some three or four times his narrow eyes glanced from clay to marble and from marble to clay in a bewilderment that was tinged with anger. For saving that the material of which each was fashioned was different, no slightest difference was discernible between the two. In every line and lineament the marble was the very counterpart of the clay.

A dull flush suffused His Excellency's pallid sunken cheeks. His voice was harsh.

"What imposture is here?"

Michelangelo was no whit abashed.

"The imposture that was necessary to convince dilettanti that at least one artist lives who may measure himself against antiquity, who need not fear comparison with Phidias. It was Phidias Your Magnificence named, I think. No sculptor since Phidias, you said, could have wrought so lovely a thing. And yet, with these two hands I wrought it. I." And he laughed as he thrust forward those vigorous hands of his for the great man's inspection.

"You wrought it?" The Cardinal's voice shrilled upwards, whilst his shaking hand was pointing to the marble. "You—you fashioned that Cupid? Buffoon! Impostor! What are you saying? That statue has lain in the earth perhaps a thousand years. It was excavated ..."

"From Baldassare della Balza's garden, where I had buried it not even a thousand hours before. All the demand in Rome is for antiquities. There is no beauty save in antiquities. To live, therefore, I must supply antiquities. And I can supply them. There are dyes and salts that in a few days will act upon marble as would mother earth in the

course of centuries. The Cupid's missing bow I broke off when the modelling was completed. Does your Excellency still doubt? Then look at this." He tilted the clay figure and pointed to an inscription on the base—a single word in Greek characters. "Aggelos—for Angelo: Michael-Angelo. My signature for this occasion. You'll find the same upon the base of the marble if Your Excellency will look."

But His Excellency did not need to look. Evidence enough did he possess already, and in his deep mortification he appeared to shrink under the artist's smiling eyes. It was some time before he found his voice. At last, "I have been swindled," he choked, "swindled by that rascal Baldassare."

"Deceived, perhaps, my lord. Not swindled."

"What do you say? And the difference, then?"

"Why, to be swindled is to be brought by false pretences to pay for an object more than it is worth; and this Your Excellency has not done, whatever you may have paid. To be deceived is to be led to believe what is untrue. And here even the deception is no more than partial: it concerns only the age of the work, and not its merit, which is at least equal to the best among these pieces of antiquity."

The Cardinal gasped. "My God! Your modesty!"

"Truth," said Michelangelo, "is greater than modesty. And yourself has said that no sculptor since Phidias could have wrought so lovely a thing."

Sforza-Riario glared at him with unmistakable dislike. "You do not, by any chance, presume to amuse yourself? If you think that you have me at a disadvantage, let me warn you ..."

“Excellency!” the sculptor interrupted him. It was a cry of pained protest. “Could I conceive so base a thought? What grounds, even, could exist for it?”

“Grounds?” The Cardinal shook with passion. His very articulation was blurred: “Do you play the innocent? Are there not grounds enough in the mere fact that a sham has been imposed upon me? Upon a man of my acknowledged judgment?”

“In what, then, is your lordship’s judgment at fault? You perceived in this Cupid a work of such uncommon excellence as to be worthy of a place in your unrivalled collection; and so, naturally, you acquired it. If hitherto your collection has been confined to pieces from antiquity, that surely is only because in modern work you had found nothing worthy to stand beside them. But now, having discovered a sculpture which your lordship recognizes that no man since Phidias could have wrought, could you possibly have forgone its acquisition?” Almost slyly he added: “Is not that how your lordship will account to the world for an innovation which cannot but increase your lordship’s credit?”

Sforza-Riario was almost startled by this indication of a door for his escape from a situation which if published in its bald veracity must cover him with ridicule. He perceived how easily he might snatch triumph from this defeat. But because he perceived that at the same time he must procure an even greater triumph for this audacious young Florentine who had cozened him, the glance that pondered Michelangelo lost nothing of its malevolence.

When at last his sombre eyes shifted again to the Cupid, his Excellency assumed a musing tone. “What you say is certainly true. My judgment has nowise been at fault. Nor was it necessary to practise upon me this deception.” A little colour stirred in his pallid cheeks, and he spoke with a sudden vehemence which Michelangelo judged to be histrionic. “What I find it hard to forgive is that instead of bringing me your Cupid openly, like an honest man, you should have had recourse to this duplicity in order to draw my attention to your wares. That, sir, was an insulting lack of confidence in my judgment.”

“Your lordship does me less than justice. It was not I, but Baldassare, who sold you the piece. It was not to you that I bade him sell it, but to any who would buy. Alas, my lord! For three months now I have been in Rome, hoping for audience, and I had to choose between working and starving. So I did the work that Baldassare found saleable. When your lordship considers that starvation was my only alternative, you will not, of your great charity, publish me a swindler or allow the world to know what I was driven by necessity to do.”

The Cardinal’s keen eyes were veiled. His white face became void of expression. “It would be no less than you deserve,” he said.

“Surely, my lord, too harsh a punishment in its results. For it would render impossible the fulfilment of your lordship’s promise.”

“Promise? What promise, fellow?”

“Can your lordship have forgotten? Your words were that when I could make something comparable with this Kneeling

Cupid you would set my feet upon the road to fortune."

"And you have the audacity still to hope for that?" growled the prelate.

"Not if it should become known that I had any part in this fraud of Baldassare's. That is why I pray that it may not be known. It would make it impossible, for instance, for your lordship to present me to the Holy Father."

Sforza-Riario breathed noisily. Nor was he acting now. "To the Holy Father!" His lips writhed. "That is your price, is it?"

Michelangelo's dark eyes were opened wide in guilelessness. "My price, my lord? My price for what?"

"For your silence upon what has happened."

"My silence! O, my lord, should I, then, be so rash as to achieve my own ruin by speaking of it?"

Gloomily and at length the Cardinal pondered him. He conceived that he had to deal with craftily enshrouded blackmail; for it was not so much the ruin of the sculptor that would result from a full disclosure as the submerging in ridicule of his own cherished reputation as an authority upon art.

His compressed lips parted at last and forced a smile. "Enough!" He waved a delicate hand towards the Kneeling Cupid. "You have certainly fulfilled your part," he admitted on a sigh. "Tomorrow," he added abruptly, "I shall present you to His Holiness."

Michelangelo bowed low. "Upon the recommendation of so exalted a judge I cannot doubt that the Holy Father will find employment for my talents."

"That is assured, sir."

The Florentine bowed again. “Have I leave to go, my lord?”

Sforza-Riario waved him away. “Go. Go with God,” he said, much as he might have said, “Go to the devil.”

In the act of swathing his clay model Michelangelo paused. “One last favour, my lord. Would you tell me how much you paid Baldassare for that marble?”

The figure which the Cardinal mentioned betrayed the sculptor into a muttered oath. It had the effect of restoring to Sforza-Riario some of his lost humour. “I gather,” said he tartly, “that I am not the only one whom Baldassare has swindled over this.”

“That is so,” said Michelangelo. “But to take permanent advantage of me one must be exceedingly alert.”

“I can well believe it,” the great man sighed, and on that they parted, if not exactly friends, most certainly accomplices.

That evening Michelangelo took his way to the little dealer’s shop on the Ripa Vecchia.

“Olà, Baldassare you rogue, I have found you out. You sold the Kneeling Cupid to Cardinal Sforza-Riario for five thousand ducats. Don’t forswear yourself, you scoundrel. I have it from the Cardinal’s own lips. Don’t interrupt me. Our compact was to share equally in the spoil, and you swore to me that all you had was a thousand ducats. You deserve that I should strangle you, you thief. Instead I’ll trouble you for the two thousand ducats you owe me, and another thousand by way of compensation for the swindle.”

Baldassare, who would sooner part with blood than money, screamed in fury. “The devil take your Florentine

impudence! Am I to work for nothing, then?”

“You are to work for what was agreed; and so I’ll have my two thousand ducats and another thousand so as to teach you to be honest in the future.”

“Oho! Oho! That’s how you crow, is it? And what if I refuse? What then, eh?”

“In that case I shall go straight to Cardinal Sforza-Riario and confess the imposture we have jointly practised. You’ll be made to disgorge; you’ll certainly be gaoled; you may even be given the hoist; and you’ll probably be hanged.”

Baldassare was astute; but not astute enough to gauge human vanity as accurately as Michelangelo, or to perceive that this vanity afforded him a safe shield from any such reprisals. So for all that he gibbered and danced in rage, yet he yielded to this young sculptor whose feet had been firmly planted by his wits upon the road to that fortune which his talents merited.

BY ANCIENT CUSTOM

Table of Contents

The Sire Tristan de Belœil standing upon the threshold of Eternity considered perhaps for the first time since his birth, twenty-five years earlier, how much there was in life which could not be left without regret.

Well-born and well-dowered in fortune as in body, the world's best gifts had lain within his easy reach and there had been on his part no reluctance in making them his own, or niggardliness in using them.

The priest who had been sent to shrive him, and who had just departed, might be correctly informed in the matter of the Hereafter, which he had described in such alluring terms. But it seemed to the Sire Tristan that the priest took a good deal for granted; and for his own part he was content enough with the world of men, and would prefer to continue in it, postponing until much later the enjoyment of the delights of Paradise to which the hangman was to dispatch him in the morning.

He leaned on the stone sill of the solidly-barred window of his prison in the Gravensteen of Ghent, and contemplated the sunset. He was not likely to contemplate another, since only the powers of Joshua could postpone the doom which its circling would bring him in the next twelve hours. He took his head in his hands, thrusting his fingers deep into his golden mane, and so far forgot the admirable stoicism which had hitherto supported him as to permit himself a sob. Never had life seemed so sweet and desirable as now that by the justice of the great Duke of Burgundy he was to

be deprived of it. This justice, he held, had been too harshly administered by the Ducal Lieutenant. He was prepared to admit that a certain severity may be expedient in legislating for a subject people, especially when they are as stubborn and turbulent as those of Ghent who had given the Duke trouble almost from the very hour of his accession. But even a Ducal Lieutenant should not disregard the claims which the laws of honour make upon a gentleman of birth; and tolerance should be shown whenever these laws are in conflict with no less arbitrary ducal enactments. It was true that the Sire Tristan had grievously wounded a man, and equally true that deeds of blood were of all offences those which Ducal Lieutenants, operating so briskly with sack and cord throughout the Duke's wide dominions, were instructed to punish most rigorously. But, after all, this had been no act of brigandage or scoundrel violence. He had fought honourably with Conrad van der Schuylen, and it was monstrous that he should be required to pay for it by dying a felon's death.

Yet if the Ducal Lieutenant of Ghent—the wooden-faced Sire de Vauvenargues—had confined himself in his judgment to the naked fact and taken no account of its clothing circumstances, the fault was largely the Sire Tristan's own. He had stubbornly refused to inform the court of the grounds of the quarrel, arrogantly claiming that he was within his rights to engage in single combat whenever honour should demand it.

"How," the Ducal Lieutenant had asked him, not unreasonably, "are we to judge that honour demanded it in

this instance unless you disclose the grounds upon which you quarrelled?”

The Sire Tristan, however, would not yield the point. “It is a gentleman’s right to quarrel upon any grounds he pleases. The present grounds are such as I cannot publish without committing a disloyalty. It is in your knowledge that I did not fall upon Messire van der Schuylen unawares, like an assassin; therefore you cannot deal with me as with a common murderer.”

But the court showed him that it could. If he would not defend himself in what the court accounted proper terms, the court must assume that he had no proper defence. Van der Schuylen’s turn would come later when and if he recovered sufficiently to stand his trial. Perhaps he would be less obstinate. Perhaps he would have less cause so to be. Thus the Ducal Lieutenant, who thereupon proceeded calmly to pass sentence of death upon the Sire Tristan de Belœil as an example to all men who might be disposed to practise turbulence within the ducal dominions.

The Sire Tristan was sprung from a family of much consequence, and this family exerted itself vigorously, urging its ancient blood as a last plea why execution should be stayed until appeal could be made to the Duke’s Highness in person. But the Ducal Lieutenant met this plea with that monstrous falsehood of all time that in the eyes of the law all men are equal, and that, therefore, no appeal to the Duke could avail. Thereafter, an advocate had arisen in the grey justice chamber of the Gravensteen to offer on behalf of some person or persons unnamed to ransom the