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... AND FROM THIS STONE ...

by WINSTON REYNOLDS

The day had been a long one for Michelangelo Buonarotti, artisan and stonecutter, late of Tuscany, but now a part of the fury and frenzy of Rome, in the year of our Lord, 1497.

It had begun shortly after dawn when he had sleepily answered the fervent knocking on his chamber door. Guido, the servant, had excitedly told him that he was wanted by his master, Messr Jacopo Gallo to present himself at the palazzo this very day. There was a commission in the wind he suggested. A commission for a boy God to be carved from stone, from the finest marble that the quarries of Carrara could produce.

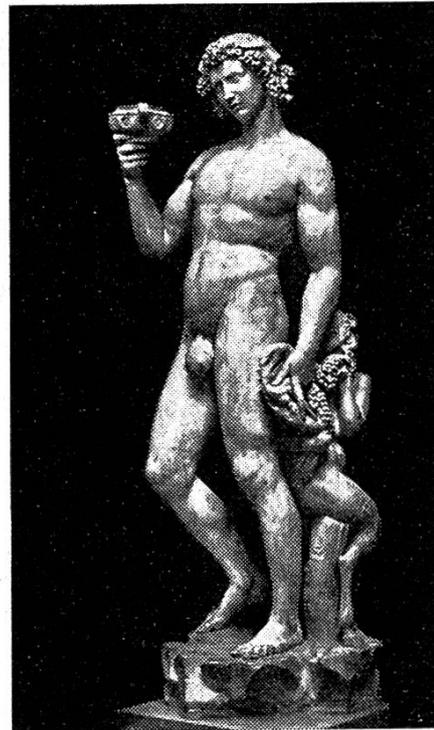
The young artist had dressed feverishly, his mind racing with all sorts of possibilities. After that unpleasant business of last year, when he had to implore and beg to get the monies due him for the Cupid, there had been little activity for him to turn his hand to. Now, with an important name to deal with, perhaps his luck would change. And so, it had gone. The interview with the wealthy banker, Gallo, and the signing of the commission itself.

Now, it was evening, and young Michelangelo found himself at his favorite tavern for relaxation and contemplation. As he sipped on his chilled vino bianco, he pulled out of his singlet, the signed commission. The words were clear enough: «said artist to be furnished a block of marble and from this stone to carve a marble Bacchus, ten palms in height, the form and aspect of which will correspond in all parts to the meaning of ancient authors.»

A Bacchus to be depicted as the embodiment of all young maleness, yet with a certain god-like quality which would underscore the conception. A youth of about eighteen, he decided. Scarcely four years younger than himself, but to have a sensuousness of body that would realistically portray an adolescent on the verge of drunkenness.

The Albergo Bianco Cigno was noisy this warm June evening. The small room was filled with customers, laughing, drinking, and taking their ease from the toils of the day. It had been a hot humid day in Rome, and now that the cooler air of the evening was beginning to make itself felt, a sense of relaxation and good cheer seemed to flow about the atmosphere. It was then that Michelangelo saw him.

For several evenings past, he had been there, this dark haired youth, with the full sensual lips, and startling clear eyes, yet there seemed to be an air of sadness about him and an aspect of not knowing or seeing the drinkers surrounding him. This particular evening, he sat off in a



corner, with a tankard beside him, his singlet opened to the breeze, with that same strange far away look in his eyes. Michelangelo had noted him before. His artist's eye had taken in the finely formed head, the well proportioned torso, the tapered waist, and the sturdy legs, encased in the dun colored hose. Slowly, the idea took form. That slackness of the nether lip that he noted, the hint of a tipsy smile, all were qualities he wanted in his new work, the Bacchus. Perhaps this youth could be the model he sought. He decided to approach the boy and sound him out.

The boy looked up as young Michelangelo approached his table. There was a questioning look in his eyes as he noted the stranger smiling as he walked toward him.

«Friend, pray be not disturbed, but I would ask if I might sit beside you to finish my wine.»

The young man nodded his head in assent.

«You are welcome», he said, and then added, «My own cup needs refilling.»

Michelangelo beckoned to the tavern wench who brought over a carafe of the chilled white wine and sat it before the two young men.

«I have noted you here of late. Always the same table, the same corner, and always alone.» As the artist spoke he looked at the perfectly proportioned features before him.

«I wish no company», the youth said. «I come to the tavern to find some measure of solace in the wine, and care not about passing time in some idle gossip». There was a hint of bitterness in his voice which did not escape his listener.

For a moment, neither spoke. Then Michelangelo began to outline his plan.

«I must tell you, good youth, that I am an artisan, a sculptor, and this very day I have been commissioned to create a marble figure. It is to be a representation of the Bacchus, and I would like you to be my model.» The words had come tumbling out in that quick and precise Italian that the artist spoke. For a moment, the lad said nothing. Then he replied.

«And ducats, good sir. There would be ducats?»

«Most assuredly, caro ragazzo, and fine food and lodging if you wish. Are you of Rome?»

The boy then told a familiar tale. Of how he had left the countryside of his native Campagna to seek his fortune, and had been apprenticed to a leather merchant, but the evil smells and distasteful surroundings had caused him to run away. He was a boy of the streets, with no family, and a daily quest to look for bread and a place to lay his head at night.

«I have lodgings near by,» said Michelangelo «Perhaps you would share them with me, while we work. Also I would have some clothing for you and there would be food. Not perhaps the rich fare of my patron, Messr Gallo, but good substantial food none the less, with an occasional roast or fowl.»

Michelangelo could see the boy was calculating in his mind, and then after taking a long draught of his wine he said: «Done. I'll go and be

your model for your stone God, and perhaps mend my fortune in the bargain. But your name, I don't even know your name.»

«Buonarotti. Of Tuscany. Michelangelo Buonarotti. Stone cutter and artisan, 23 years of age and in Rome since last summer.»

«I am called Stefano,» said the dark youth. «I know little of my family or their whereabouts, and care less. My years are a little uncertain, but I was born during the great drought of some 18 years ago or so.»

He had said all this with a touch of bitterness, yet, Michelangelo warmed to the boy and his dark personality and already there seemed to be an undefinable rapport between them.

«Perhaps we could go back to my lodgings now, and begin some preliminary sketches,» the artist suggested. «That is, if you are willing.»

«I am at your service, good friend. Do but lead the way.»

Minutes later found the pair on the streets. The tall powerful figure of the stone-cutter, the slighter, yet sturdy young boy of Campagna.

A short while later and they had arrived at the Via Perluzzo and had climbed the stairs up to the combination studio and living quarters of the artist.

Here Stefano found himself surrounded by model frames, blocks of stone, countless sketches strewn about, many large work tables and an overpowering sense of disarray and confusion.

Almost as if in a frenzy, the artist began making his preparations. Sketch pad and crayon, opening of the top windows so that the still remaining twilight might be caught, and the large candelabra for close-in light.

«Now, good friend, if you will lay aside your doublet and hose and stand upon that platform I am eager to begin whilst yet there is light.»

Even as he spoke the lad began to slip off his garments. There was no hesitancy or fumbling in his movements. In a moment he stood naked, a sturdy, finely muscled adolescent, with powerfully moulded legs and thighs, full chest and a somewhat rounded stomach. Almost defiantly he stepped upon the low platform.

Rapidly and skillfully, Michelangelo set to work. His practiced eye took in the naked form before him. His gaze traveled along the bronzed arm and shoulders down to the tapered waist and below, to the sex, with its suggestion of early maturity, and thence to the strong legs, quick evidence of this boy's peasant beginnings.

For a full thirty minutes he worked. Now and again the boy moved about restlessly, but the artist continued on his sketching. This would be it! Most decidedly. That look in the eye. That heaviness of lids, that gross nether lip, almost slack in aspect. Finally he stopped.

«Enough. You must rest. There is wine and bread and cheese about. Perhaps a bit of mutton.»

The boy slipped off the platform. Naked as he was, he sauntered over to the frame where his new friend had been working and with a curious intensity examined what he saw. From the sketches he looked at the young man standing beside him. Their eyes met. Stefano smiled.

«We shall be friends,» he said.

Moments later he was hungrily devouring some meat and cheese which Michelangelo provided.

«You may have a bed in the alcove,» said the young artist. I will sleep out here, and tomorrow we will seek out some garments for you.»

The youth continued to eat the simple fare, still naked, and Michelangelo was fascinated by the play of the living muscles as Stefano moved about, the skin smooth and tanned by the summer sun. Here was the young body in all its early promise, not yet a man, nor still a boy. There was no body hair except for the black tuft around the sex itself and a slight down upon the finely muscled legs.

After finishing his meal, Stefano lay stretched upon his pallet in the alcove, while Michelangelo busied himself with working over some of the sketches he had done. From time to time, the artist darted a glance at his new friend, and it was then that he noticed the boy had fallen asleep, uncovered as he was.

Rising, Michelangelo went over to the pallet and gazed down for a moment at the perfect nude figure below him. Then he took a coverlet and tenderly placed it over the sleeping form.

«Sleep well, my dear Stefano. Sleep well.»

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In the days that followed, Stefano and the artist became inseparable. They spent their hours together, walking along the dusty trails beside the Tiber, or browsing among the tiny shops near the Piazza Testuggini. Some days they ventured out into the country-side near Rome and on one occasion had slipped off their clothes and gone for a refreshing swim in a convenient stream they had spied in their wanderings. A subtle change had come over the boy. No longer did he seem morose or sullen, and the dour look which Michelangelo had first noticed in the tavern, was now replaced with a laughing, mischivious demeanor that reflected a happy, well-contented boy. They shared many experiences together, and Michelangelo felt himself drawn to this boy as he had to none other. There had been little time to form friendships in his short, but busy life, so far. During his stay in the studio of Ghirlandajo as a boy, there had been far too many absorbing distractions, and later, while in the patronage of Lorenzo di Medici, his pre-occupation with his work had precluded his becoming fast friends with anyone. And then there had been that sudden episode with the pupil Torrigiano, which had resulted in a bout of fisticuffs and Torrigiano had sent his fist smashing into the nose of the young artist, destroying the delicate cartilage there and leaving a mark that Michelangelo was to carry to his grave. Following this, Michelangelo had been wont to spend time by himself, with his own thoughts, his own visions, which he shared with no one. But now, all that was past. He had found a new friend, who pleased him. In Stefano he had found a companion who wanted to be with him, to learn from him, and to share with him each common experience.

And the work itself went on. Each day saw more progress on the block of marble from the quarries of Carrara. Some hours were put aside each day for work. It was then that Stefano would quickly shed his clothes and mount the platform and Michelangelo would begin his laborious task of chipping out of the block, a figure.

The boy himself marveled at how the figure seemed to emerge from the block and often would stand beside the sculptor as he worked relentlessly to transform the white stone into a figure, vibrant with life. He followed the sharp, yet precise attacks of the chisel as slowly the outlines of his own body began to take shape and form from out of the stone. And he felt a warmth and tenderness for his new friend that he could not express, a feeling unlike any others that he had had. Often, at night, as he lay upon his pallet in the alcove and watched Michelangelo finish up some detail of his work, he felt a great urge to be close to him, to take his hand, to feel his nearness next to him, and thus troubled by these strange thoughts he would fall asleep.

The hot summer of 1497 continued its fiery course, and Messr Gallo, the patron, decided to flee into the cooler air of the country-side, and had suggested to Michelangelo that he move his labors into the palazzo. Workmen had moved the tall unfinished block into the Galli home, and the young artist and his model had taken up lodgings there to finish the work. So it was, one particularly hot humid day, that as Stefano posed for his artist friend, he had become a bit bored and had begun to sip draughts of the cheap provincial wine. As the afternoon wore on, his languor became more pronounced. His eyes became heavy, his limbs relaxed from the effects of the raw wine. A warmth began to pervade his body, sending the blood coursing through his veins, extending its power down to his sex, where an uneasy stirring was becoming apparent. Opposite him, the artist, Michelangelo, continued chipping away at the marble, his attention now centered on that area below the stomach where the virile sex of this boy had been represented in full masculine maturity. Now, as he worked, his gaze leapt to the model and he saw at once what effect the wine had created. Yes! . . . of course! This was the touch that was needed! This suggestion of a turgid masculinity, a slight, yet noticeable lengthening of the maleness. Quickly he began to capture this fact and the chisel flew rapidly, converting the marble into a realistic representation of the living flesh. A space of time later, it was evident that no more work could be accomplished. Stefano had stepped down from the platform and walked uncertainly toward the artist. The chisel had stopped its work. From the marble likeness before him, the artist now turned to its living counterpart. He held out his arms and in an instant it seemed as if the very meaning of all creation had become apparent to him, and the boy himself suddenly realized what all those vague urgings that he had sensed while lying at night on his pallet really meant. Their bodies met and as Michelangelo held the nude figure against him, he seemed to be enveloping all he had been trying to express in the coldness of the stone. Time seemed to be suspended now, and only the beauty of this moment became important.

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Weeks passed, and word had been sent to Messr Gallo that the boy God was completed, and that worthy had decided to hold a great FESTA to celebrate the occasion and to unveil the new work to the assembled company. Accordingly, invitations were sent far and wide, to nobles and their ladies, to princes and the gentry to attend the gathering. Jacopo

Gallo had a reputation for being a host in the grand manner, and few indeed could match him in the magnificence of his generosity. And so it was, that Michelangelo, the young artist of Tuscany, found himself in new doublet and hose amidst the crowd that had gathered that balmy October evening in the palazzo. There had been whisperings and excited conversation about the new work and all were anxious to see it. The figure itself had been shrouded with a fine silk where it stood in the center of the garden. For a time, Michelangelo had been somewhat apprehensive about the reception the work would receive. Perhaps he had gone too far in his realistic portrayal of a drunken youth, the young God Bacchus, with the sly little faun beside him. Perhaps he would be censured for having depicted so realistically a healthy young male in the stirrings of sexual excitement. He had expressed these doubts to Stefano, who waited at home, but the boy had assured the artist that his fame would be twice-fold after the work had been seen.

With a grand flourish from the musicians, the unveiling was announced as ready to take place. The assembly gathered about the shrouded figure, and Michelangelo felt his heart begin to pound in excitement. His patron, Mssr Gallo smiled in his direction as he signaled the lackeys to draw the strings from the covering and expose the statue to the company. Slowly and tantalizingly, the material was removed. First, the magnificent head, with the touseled hair and the cluster of grapes on each side, then the wide splendid shoulders, and the upheld arm, holding the cup, then the magnificent full chest and rounded stomach, and finally the lower half of the figure. There was an involuntary gasp from the crowd as they saw what the artist had depicted, then almost like a thunder-clap itself, the applause began. It mounted and increased in intensity and now was coupled with shouts of «Bravo, bravo» as the group began to edge toward the marble stone like an ever increasing wave. The young artist felt himself surrounded by a shouting, wildly excited crowd. And it went further. Many of the assembly placed hands on the marble and marveled at its softness, and one or two could be seen actually caressing the stone, leaving no area untouched in their perusal. There was no doubt of the success of the work.

Messr Gallo, pleased at the reception, nodded his head in approval as he heard the guests exclaim to him of the VERISIMO of the work. Their excitement was also conveyed to the young artist who stood near his patron, sharing the enthusiasm of the occasion, and knowing that all the long hours of toil had not been in vain. And any misgivings he might have had about the realistic portrayal of a young, sexually stimulated adolescent were now erased by the evident acceptance of the work itself as a creation of artistic worth. Now, he only wanted to leave and tell Stefano of the triumph.

Before taking his leave, Michelangelo thoughtfully gathered up some of the delicacies from the long table, baked meats and fowl, and delectable cheeses and the like, knowing how much Stefano would appreciate a midnight feast.

As he walked along the narrow thoroughfare back to the lodgings, his mind kept leaping ahead to the excitement of conveying to Stefano how wonderful had been the reception. And he began to realize that

Stefano had become very dear to him. Stefano had begun to occupy his mind more and more of late and when he was away from him it seemed as if a vital part of his being was missing. And his mind went back to that wonderful night when Stefano had left his pallet in the alcove and had slipped in beside him in his own bed and how they had lain in each other's arms the night through.

Now he mounted the stairs to the studio loft with great haste, and flung open the door. Stefano, who was in the midst of undressing for the night looked up in startled surprise.

«Stefano, my dear Stefano, it was a complete triumph.» Michelangelo said excitedly. «The entire assembly roared their approval of the boy God.»

«I knew they had but to see the work to know that it was fine,» the boy replied.

«And I have delicacies for you from the table of Mssr Gallo,» added Michelangelo, at the same time opening the packet of food he had thoughtfully prepared before leaving the Galli palazzo.

The two sat at the wooden table, and the young artist watched with satisfaction as Stefano quickly began to taste of the roast fowl and meats, and to sample the variety of cheeses and other foodstuffs that now lay before him. A bottle of wine was brought forth and a toast was made.

«I drink to you, caro Stefano,» said Michelangelo, «to my inspiration for the beauty of my work.»

«And I, in turn, drink to Michelangelo Buonarotti, the supreme stone cutter of all Italy, and my friend.»

This last was said with such a tone of affection that Michelangelo could only grasp the youth in his arms and hold him against his chest.

«Caro Stefano, caro ragazzo,» he murmured, and their lips met in a warm embrace. The artist then began to push off the remaining garments that Stefano wore that he might better caress the warm flesh beneath. The youth was now naked before him and the look in his eyes bespoke of love and affection. As he came forward again into the waiting arms of Michelangelo, the artist spoke.

«Mssr Gallo has the cold marble figure for himself, but I, the living god himself, my Bacchus, my Stefano, my love.»

The two figures became as one and for Michelangelo Buonarotti the whole world of creation was fused into the ecstasy of this hour.

LETTERS

To: The Daily Telegraph, London, July 30th 1964

BLACKMAIL DANGERS TO HOMOSEXUALS, Legislation no answer

Once again the notion is being hawked around that the legalising of homosexual practices between adults would strike the weapon from the blackmailer's hand.

Is this true, or anything more than marginally true? I doubt it. It was not fear of the law that forced Harrow's most famous headmaster to resign or drove Castlereagh to suicide. Cory, author of the «Eton Boating Song» was in no danger of arrest when he was given 24 hours to pack his bags and clear out of Eton.