

MICHAEL ANGELO BUONARROTI

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The truest work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection.
—Michael Angelo.

AT last he was happy! And why shouldn't he be? For had not Michael begged and pleaded with his father to be allowed to join his playmate and work in the shop of Ghirlandajo? And just as often his father, who was the local podestà, had frowned on the boy's fond dreams. But now he had yielded.

In Ghirlandajo's workshop young Michael learns the rudiments of art. Presently he helps his master in the execution of the frescoes for a near-by church. Soon the pupil proves his superiority as a draughtsman to his teacher. And if we could look ahead three centuries, we might see similar circumstances that also caused a rupture.

Michael Angelo and Beethoven both are proud, uncompromising, and somewhat scornful students. They both seek aid from master minds, great in their own line, but inferior in fire and originality of genius. Just as the eaglet must some day leave the nest, so Michael Angelo at the age of sixteen henceforth sweeps the skies alone.

He gets an introduction to Lorenzo de Medici, who gives him a block of marble and a chisel. Soon he has struck out the Faun's mask. It is no inferior piece of prentice-work, but superb in its execution. To the end of his days Michael Angelo is never to produce an insignificant creation, and only such thoughts as he is to commit to the perishable materials of bronze and paper will be lost. In like manner the first sonnet composed by Dante is scarcely less precious than the last lines of the *Paradiso*.

The young impetuoso is not personally liked by his fellow artists. Imprudently he calls Perugino "goffo", tells Francia's son that his father makes handsomer men by night than by day, and yesterday even told the great Leonardo to his face that he could not finish the equestrian statue of the Duke of Milan!

In Lorenzo's palace the real education of Michael begins. At the table he listens to Ficino, Pico, and Poliziano, hears the arguments of Plato and imbibes the golden poetry of Greece from those who discovered the precious works. At the same time he hears the preaching of Savonarola, and his soul is touched;

he acquires that deep religious tone which will give majesty and terror to the Sistine.

Michael carves his first bas-relief—the *Battle of Hercules with the Centaurs*, and then leaves Florence. Meanwhile Lorenzo dies and his successor is Piero, who soon tumbles from his position of power and is driven from the city. Soon Michael deems it safe to return. Now he is secretly working on the *Sleeping Cupid* which, when finished, he buries. It is suddenly discovered, sold to Cardinal Riario, and receives universal acclaim as a genuine Greek, fifteen centuries old.

The youth journeys to Rome and executes the purest of all his statues—a *Pietà* in marble. Christ is lying dead upon His mother's knees. With her right arm she supports His shoulders; her left hand is gently raised as though to say, "Behold and see!" All that art can do to make death beautiful and grief sublime is achieved in this masterpiece. It is a sober and harmonious composition, combining the profoundest religious feeling with classical tranquillity of expression. To those who see and comprehend this *Pietà* in 1500, it is evident that a new power of portraying the very soul has been manifested in sculpture—a power unknown to the Greeks because it lay outside the sphere of their spiritual experience, and unknown to modern artists because it is beyond their faculties of execution and conception. For between the Greeks and our time lay the advent of Christ.

In 1501 Michael returns to Florence and creates the great statue of *David*, two unfinished medallions of Madonna in relief, the *Holy Family of the Tribune* and the cartoon of the *Battle of Pisa*. Henceforth no man's name, not even Leonardo's, stands higher in general esteem.

The cartoon *Battle of Pisa* shows a group of soldiers suddenly surprised by a trumpet call to battle, while bathing,—a crowd of naked men in every posture indicating haste, anxiety, and struggle. The bold and perfect drawing of the body gives an exquisite delight to all who behold it. Even Leonardo marvels at the artist's science. Indeed, the figures are sheer sculpture.

As a patriot, as a student of Dante, and as a disciple of the now deceased Savonarola, Michael hates tyrants. In one of his madrigals (he has recently begun to write poetry on the side) his great love of Florence is sung. During the siege of the city Michael takes part in defending it from the Medici. He is torn between two affections—this city and the hand that fed him and enabled his genius to flower. After the fall of Florence,

Michael makes peace with Pope Clement VII by consenting to finish the tombs of S. Lorenzo. The work irritates him, but soon Clement dies and Michael leaves.

A new Pope is elected. Julius calls Michael to him. A strong bond of sympathy develops, because of their community of temperament. Both aim at colossal achievements—large and simple, rather than luxurious and subtle thoughts. Both have the Renaissance trait of *terribilita*. Julius orders the sculptor to prepare his mausoleum. Michael asks: "Where shall I place it?" Julius replies: "In S. Peter's".

But the old basilica of Christendom is too small for the ambitious pontiff's sepulchre. Therefore Julius decrees that a new S. Peter's shall be built. By some strange quirk the planning and spoiling of S. Peter's fall to inferior artists. In his old age Michael is to crown it with the world's miracle, the dome. The mausoleum dwindles down to the statue of Moses, for his stupendous plans no sooner get under way than other work is thrust on him. The tomb was to be a mountain of marble, covered with figures wrought in stone and bronze. The majestic plans portray it as a pageant of the soul, triumphant over the limitations of mortality. Michael finishes only the *Moses* and the *Bound Captive*. He goes to Carrara, where he spends eight months selecting marble for the Pope's tomb. There he conceives the idea of carving the jutting headland—to transmute a mountain into a statue! Now the men load the marble on ships. Soon the quays of Rome are lined with blocks for the tomb. When the sculptor arrives, he finds his enemies have been at work. At first Michael is not allowed to visit the Pope, but when they do meet, Julius orders him to cast a bronze statue.

"But, Your Holiness, brass-foundry is not my affair."

"Get to work anyway, and we will cast your statue till it comes out perfect."

Michael does as he is bid, and the great statue is put up over the church door. Four years elapse. Julius loses his hold on Bologna, and his enemies destroy the statue. From the melt a bronze cannon is cast by the best gunsmith of the century.

The Pope commands Michael to employ his genius upon the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. In vain the sculptor reminds Julius of the months wasted in the quarries of Carrara. He pleads he is not a painter by profession, but Julius, having seen his cartoon, is adamant.

The difficulty of the new task arouses the artist's energy.

He has able helpers, but his conception is entirely his own. Before a year is up, a portion is uncovered for the public. (In four years it is all done.) How fast he works! The figure of Adam takes just three days, but Michael does not work continuously. Some days he will climb the scaffolding and apply only a few brushfuls of paint. At other times he locks the Chapel doors to elude the jealous curiosity of rivals, eats but little, and scarcely sleeps.

Julius climbs the scaffolding and asks impatiently:

"When will you make an end?"

"When I can," the painter answers drily.

At last the artist lays down his brush. The machinery is removed. The labours of four years now lie exposed to the populace. There is no luxury of decorative art; no gold; no paint-box vermilion, or emerald green, has been lavished here. Sombre and aerial, like shapes condensed from vapour, or dreams begotten upon the mists of dawn, the phantoms evoked by the sculptor through the space. Nine compositions, carrying down the sacred history from the creation of light to the beginning of sin in Noah's household, fill the central compartments of the roof. Beneath these are twelve prophets and sibyls. The intermediate spaces are filled with the figures of women and children, boys and young men, some naked and some draped—in tranquil posture. In these subordinate creations Michael deigned to drop the terrible style, in order to show how sweet and full of charm he could be. For grace of coloring, beauty of postures, and strength, the creation is without equal.

Michael cares little for inanimate nature. To him, man is the noblest work of God. Therefore a well-shaped hand, or throat, or head, a neck superbly poised on an athletic chest, the tendons of the ankle, the curves of a woman's breast, the contours of a body careless in repose, were all fit utterances by which man's thoughts rise near to God, and express sublime concepts.

Michael takes the idea of Sibyls from the Greeks, but adds Christianity to Pheidias. His work is pure sculpture—full of tactile values. That which distinguishes the birth of the free spirit in Italy from that in Greece twenty centuries earlier is the Sepulchre yawning in between.

Raphael comes to see the Sistine. How different he is from Michael! Raphael is widely acclaimed, has crowds of students, and lives like a prince. Yet he is willing to learn from the

solitary Michael, and henceforth his figures show evident signs of alteration, as for example, in his *Fire in the Borgo*.

Julius dies and his successor, Leo X, is unsympathetic to the austere Michael. This is an arid period, and he goes to the Carrara quarries. After four years he returns at the bidding of Giulio de Medici. He is commissioned to make a number of statues, but is soon interrupted and has to help to defend his native city against the Prince of Orange. However, two statues are finished. The *Duke of Urbino* is the most immovable of spectral shapes eternalized in marble; while the *Duke of Nemours*, more graceful and elegant, seems intended to present a contrast to this terrible and thought-burdened form. The allegorical figures stretched beneath the pedestals of the two dukes indicate phases of dark and of light, of death and life—*Night and Day*, *Twilight and Dawn*.

Duke Cosimo entreats Michael to return to Florence to finish the tombs of the Medici. He receives a curt reply in the negative. Because Michael was easily deterred from his work, many of his marbles are only just begun. The two medallion Madonnas, the *Madonna and Child* in S. Lorenzo, the *Head of Brutus*, the *Bound Captive* and the *Pietà* in the Duomo of Florence, are instances of masterpieces in the rough.

Michael imagines that the form dwells within the stone, and that the chisel just disencumbers it of superfluity. The marble mask is simply a veil or mantle, which, when removed, leaves the *Pietà*, the *Moses* and the *Dawn* with the highest polish possible for stone to take.

Now Michael is fifty-nine. Leonardo and Raphael have passed away. Correggio died this year (1534). Andrea del Sarto is dead. Nowhere except at Venice does Italian art still flourish; and the mundane style of Titian is not to the sculptor's taste.

The new Pope, Paul III, finds Michael in his *bottega* working on the tomb of Julius—for the mausoleum tragedy drags on. The statue of Moses is finished.

"That", said Paul, "is enough for one Pope. I want you in the Sistine Chapel."

Reluctantly the sculptor lays down the chisel and picks up his brush. For eight years he labours on a subject worthy of the times. For had not Michael as a youth listened to Savonarola? Italy had been scourged, Rome sacked, the Church chastised; and yet the world had not grown wiser. Vice was on the increase, and virtue grew more rare. God must be depicted

as an angry judge. At length the *Last Judgment* is completed. Its size arouses vulgar wonder, and its theme strikes terror into all who gaze upon it. Yet it is neither so strong nor so beautiful as the vault paintings of the Sistine. The freshness of the genius that created Adam and Eve has passed away, and hardened mannerism has taken its place. But its triumph is decided. The wall swarms with figures ascending and descending—men and women rising from the grave before the Judge, taking their stations among the saved or sinking with the damned. From those who view this awe-inspiring spectacle arises a general murmur of disapproval because all the figures are nude. The painter, however, steadily refuses to clothe the men and women.

Paul makes the sculptor the chief architect of the Holy See. He has to set a worthy diadem upon the mother-church of Christianity. Michael sets to work making sketches—beautiful drawings like the *Rape of Ganymede*. Meanwhile his thoughts turn more and more to piety. Many of his sonnets breathe an almost ascetic spirit of religion. These last years are his happiest. Wealth now belongs to him, but he continues to live like a poor man, dressing soberly and eating sparingly. He sleeps little, and rises by night to work upon his statues—wearing a cap with a candle stuck in front of it, that he may see where to drive the chisel.

Time has now softened his temper and removed the causes of discouragement. He has survived every rival, and the world is convinced of his supremacy. Princes court him, and his old age is twilight and splendid evenings of a toilsome day. But better than all this, he now enjoys both love and friendship.

Michael never married, but treasured the friendship of two women. His sonnets addressed to Vittoria Colonna show an inexpressibly pure and fervent worship of beauty—and these from a man long since past youth. Thoughts of Plato, Dante, and Savonarola pass through his mind.

Michael is dead now. He bequeathed his soul to God, his body to the earth, and his worldly goods to his kinsfolk. His corpse was transported to Florence, and buried in Santa Croce with great pomp and honour by the duke, the city, and the Florentine Academy.