

# Statuary

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It was with some trepidation that I accepted the key to the family mausoleum from my father. His usually cheerful expression was quite serious as he explained that upon the passing of my sixteenth year on this Earth, I was to learn more of our family history and responsibilities. All of my many questions were turned aside as I was dutifully informed I was to unlock the crypt, enter and read the inscriptions therin.

A groom had my horse ready and I rode forth, determined to enjoy the fine October day. As those Americans called it, the last gasp of Indian Summer.

Our modest estate had been in the family since the time of William the Conqueror and each generation had kept up with the times and improved upon the buildings and grounds. I smiled and waved at my mother as she puttered about the greenhouse. Her somber expression suggested she didn't envy my task.

The oldest thing on our property, by far, was the family mausoleum. The site was a small glen, hidden between two rock walls. It was as if some ancient giant had cleft the mountain in two, in order to allow a trickle of a stream to create a place of quiet splendor. Hundreds of years ago, a natural grotto on a ledge, high above the stream, had been enlarged and then enclosed with polished marble in the form of a Grecian temple. I had never been inside, and yet everyone knew that all the adult members of my family took turns, at least once a month, visiting it. They would never discuss their visits, other than to say it was their duty to maintain the property, and that one day, I would come to understand.

There was only one small door, but it was cast of solid bronze and showed the verdigris stains of age. As instructed, I used a few drops of light oil on the key and it easily slid into place and turned. The door was heavy, but the hinges too had been well-oiled and it opened without noise.

I was in a wide hallway, perhaps fifty feet long. The side walls had many rectangular openings, three high, for future tenants. The last third or so, the spaces were sealed with marble and had bronze plaques, each denoting a name as well as the birth and death dates of the occupants. A sudden chill overtook me. I resolved to finish this task as quickly as possible so that I might return for a glass of brandy and a fine dinner.

From a leather pouch, I withdrew the worn notebook I used for my studies. A touch of the pencil to my tongue and I dutifully copied down the names of my ancestors in the order I found them. It only took a few minutes to reach the chapel at the end of the hall.

That is when I saw her. A golden goddess in the Grecian fashion. The marble pedestal was set to my right, just out of line with the hall and centered in the chapel so that visitors would have to fully enter to view her. To my left, the room was open to the elements and had a gorgeous view, looking down the glen and the cultivated fields in the distance.

Entranced at the beauty of this fine bronze figure, I approached, wondering which one of my ancestors she had been. Only her torso was perched on the marble. She appeared to be set into the base so that her torso, from the lower belly up was displayed. She was nude, with large, high, firm breasts, wide hips and a slender waist. A wild mane of hair fell to her shoulders and her head was bowed, eyes closed. Her arms hung loosely at her sides and her hands rested on the marble top, fingers spread wide.

All this, I took in within the first few moments as I approached. Looking down, I realized her pedestal formed the headstone for a grave. Set into the low, slender crypt was another bronze plaque. This one held a name I knew. He had been my grandfather and a primary source of our current family fortune.

The man had been described to me as an inventor, chemist and fine mechanic during the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His many discoveries and careful investments were the basis of several large companies.

I dutifully noted his details in case father were to ask, then something occurred to me... All the rest of the bronze in this dreary place was dark green. The obvious signs of age were everywhere, except for the beautiful lady. Perhaps, our duty was to polish her? But that made no sense, since I had been given nothing with which to accomplish such a task and there were no cleaning supplies evident. How then, had she maintained such a golden sheen, glowing in the

reflected sunlight?

When I looked over the railing of the balcony, I saw a sheer drop of almost a hundred feet, to the rocky stream bed and forest below. After a few moments of enjoying the sunlight and the view, I heard a soft voice.

“You must be the next lord of the manor.”

Startled, I spun around, wondering who didn't know me in these parts. Besides, this was a locked and private place and no one had accompanied me. “Hello? Who's there?” I stepped back to the center and looked down the long, empty hall.

“My guess, is that this is your seventeenth birthday, young lord. Congratulations.” The voice was a soft and melodious whisper of wind.

Hairs on my arms and neck stood up and I whirled about, searching for the intruder. “Who goes there? Show yourself!”

A whisper of laughter echoed from the marble. “My, my, but you are a nervous one, aren't you?”

I stared, as I realized the golden goddess was smiling at me, and her arms were now folded under her breasts. Dumbfounded, my voice broke for a moment and I squeaked, “Who... What are you?”

“I am Lady Katrina.” Her smile faded and she nodded towards the grave in front of her. “I was his wife.”

My wits were slowly coming to grasp with the concept of a talking statue and I gave a nervous chuckle. “I must admit, you had me going for a moment there. A finely crafted automaton, indeed.” I raised my voice. “Alright now. You've all had your joke. Come out, come out, where ever you are!”

“Please. There is no need to shout. I am not a machine, well not much of one, anyway.”

“Then just what are you, m'lady?” Gaining courage, I continued. “The good lord at your feet has been dead for more than seventy years and you are obviously a lovely creature of less than thirty. You could not have known him, much less been his wife.”

“He was a fine chemist and a very jealous man. He was also a brute, who deserved to die. But that is why I'm here.”

“Impossible! Enough of this nonsense, who are you and how do I get you out of that

block of stone?"

"If you will be still for but a few moments, my fine young lord, I will explain everything. Come closer and give me your hand." She held out hers.

She guided my hand to the side of her breast, caressed herself and then pressed it hard, between her lovely globes. "Do you feel a heartbeat... Anything at all?"

I stood very still. Her touch was cold, as if she were bare metal and while she wasn't speaking, there was not the slightest movement beneath my hand. Suddenly afraid, I yanked away my hand and stepped back.

The smile on her face turned wry, then momentary anger and then a wave of sadness and she looked as if she would cry. "This is my punishment for murder, most foul."

"But, how?"

"He met me at a wonderful ball in a grand German Schloss. The lord of that manor had purchased some of your grandfather's machinery and they were trading alchemical recipes. When he saw me on the other side of the ballroom, he stopped in mid-sentence, walked over as if in a daze and stood in front of me, staring." She smiled at a fond memory. "I chided him for rudeness, he apologized and asked for a dance. That was the start of it. You see, I came with little dowry and no real title, but he professed his love and whisked me off to England. Over the next two years, his real personality came out. He would leave on business for months at a time and even when he was home, he had occasion only for a quick toss between the sheets and then back to his laboratory. I grew desperate for affection and when a neighbor introduced his son, a fine military officer, our flirtation grew first into a dalliance and then blossomed into a great passion."

Something about her tale sounded true, but I was withholding judgment at this point. I only nodded, still not sure if some ingenious engineer among my friends had arranged a fine prank.

"One day, my lord returned early and found us in bed. He was armed with a sword and my beautiful young soldier stood up, holding only our bedsheets. He was skewered like a pig, right in front of me. Considering the circumstances, no one would press any sort of charges and the staff and neighbors were even surprised he didn't kill me as well. It would have been better if he had."

She stared off into the distance for a long time, lost in her thoughts.

“I’m sorry to hear this sad tale - but how then did you come to this place?”

“As I mentioned, he was a chemist and so was my father, before he died, and my guardian at the Schloss. I learned much from them.” She seemed to take a deep breath before continuing. “After he murdered my lover, he locked me into a chastity device he had constructed and only removed it when he wished to use my body for his own pleasure. Before and after, he would beat me into submission and then leave me crying. That is when I determined I would kill him myself. Since I had no desire to rot in jail or decorate the gallows, I snuck into his laboratory, stole some chemicals and created a slow-acting poison that would look like a natural disease. It would have worked and actually, it did. The only fly in the ointment was that a few weeks before he died, he discovered my cache of poison.”

She ran her hands through her hair and shook the mane free. The gleaming tresses looked like spun gold in the brilliant light and settled quickly about her shoulders once more. My fear faded somewhat and I withdrew a vest flask of brandy to offer her some.

She shook her head. “I can neither drink nor eat, but please feel free to imbibe.” She waited until I took a couple of swallows before continuing. “Among some of the unusual recipes my husband had discovered, was one for creating a metal golem. He had created a store of very energetic metallic particles with an odd affinity for flesh. When they came into contact with living cells, they would consume and replace it with a simulacrum. This ancient golem would gain power and the ability to move only with sunlight. In the dark, it would sleep as if dead and in the light, it would gain a semblance of life. When he realized I had killed him, he could have had me arrested and hung. But instead, he beat me senseless and ordered the servants to carry me to his laboratory. Once strapped to his dissection table, he sent them all away so that my screams would go unheard. And scream I did... for several days. His needles injected me with the metallic venom, over and over. Until there was nothing left of my mortal body. Only my mind remains. Then, he wrapped me in dark cloth to prevent light from animating me and ordered a marble box at the foot of his sepulcher. The servants stood my frozen form up in it and then poured concrete around my legs. They were ordered to only work under dim candlelight, and to keep me darkly shrouded the rest of the time. When I next awoke, I was as you see me now and my loving lord and husband laid to his final rest. His son, by his first wife, had returned from a long holiday

abroad and knew of my condition. He was the first to speak with me and explained it was a just punishment for killing such a great man as his father. At first, only my wailing filled this hall. I was left alone for more than a year as I marked the seasons passing. When next he returned, I begged for death. He only covered me with a dark cloth so that I would sleep while another family member was interred. When the last mourner had left, he unveiled me and departed without another word. I think that I might have gone insane, but even that escape holds no fascination.”

Despite the late autumn warmth of the day, I was chilled to the core as I came to understand the Lady Katrina's situation. “What now, though? What is to become of you? Surely, a talented mason would be able to chip away the concrete that binds you to this place.”

“And then what, my fine young lord? To be an object of ridicule and amusement as I stumbled and crawled about in the sunlight? Frozen in dreamless sleep each night, my limbs are now only able to move briefly at midday. No. I have come to understand my place is here, to pass on what meager bits of wisdom as I may and enjoy the patient flow of the seasons. I feel no cold in winter, nor summer's heat. My only hunger is for a bit of company from time to time.” She smiled softly and my heart turned. “You will return, as do others from the family, and we will enjoy such nice chats.” She smiled whistfully. “During the winter, enough sunlight enters this chapel only for a short time, on cloudless days. The brilliance of a long summer means we may converse almost from dawn until dusk.”

I had to ask. “Do you long for death?”

“Are you a Christian?”

I nodded.

“Then you might understand why I am very hesitant to take my final exit. Who knows what lies beyond for a murderer?” A shadow crossed her face and she glanced aside. “Perhaps one day.”

Clouds from an afternoon storm covered the sun and as the light in the chapel dimmed, I watched her slow, bow her head and close her eyes. Once more, she was the golden goddess I had seen upon entering.

Shivering and cold to the depths of my soul, I crept from the mausoleum, carefully locking the door behind me.