

Giving up Five Thousand Dollars a Year to Become a Sculptor

“MY life?” queried F. Wellington Ruckstuhl, one of the foremost sculptors of America, as we sat in his studio looking up at his huge figure of “Force.”

“When did I begin to sculpture? As a child I was forever whittling, but I did not have dreams then of becoming a sculptor. It was not till I was thirty-two years of age. And love,—disappointment in my first love played a prominent part.”

“But as a boy, Mr. Ruckstuhl?”

“I was a poet. Every sculptor or artist is necessarily a poet. I was always reaching out and seeking the beautiful. My father was a foreman in a St. Louis machine shop. He came to this country in a sailing ship from Alsace, by way of the Gulf to St. Louis, when I was but six years old. He was a very pious man and a deacon in a church. One time, Moody and Sankey came to town, and my father made me attend the meetings; I think he hoped that I would become a minister. Between the ages of fourteen and nineteen, I worked in a photographic supply store; wrote one hundred poems, and read incessantly. I enlarged a view of the statue of Nelson in Trafalgar Square, London, into a ‘plaster sketch,’ ten times as large as the picture, but still I did not know my path. I began the study of philosophy, and kept up my reading for ten years. My friends thought I would become a literary man. I wrote for the papers, and belonged to a prominent literary club. I tried to analyze myself. ‘I am a man,’ I said, ‘but what am I good for? What am I to make of this life?’ I drifted from one position to another. Every one was sorry to part with my services, for I always did my duties as well as they could be done. When I was twenty-five years of age, the girl to whom I was attached was forced by her mother to marry a wealthy man. She died a year afterwards; and I ‘pulled up stakes,’ and started on a hap-hazard, reckless career. I went to Colorado, drifted into Arizona, prospected, mined, and worked on a ranch. I went to California, and at one time thought of shipping for China. My

experiences would fill a book. Again I reached St. Louis. For a year, I could not find a thing to do, and became desperate.”

“And you had done nothing at art so far?” I asked.

“At that time, I saw a clay sketch. I said to myself, ‘I can do as well as that,’ and I copied it. My second sketch admitted me to the St. Louis Sketch Club. I told my friends that I would be a sculptor. They laughed and ridiculed me. I had secured a position in a store, and at odd times worked at what I had always loved, but had only half realized it. Notices appeared in the papers about me, for I was popular in the community. I entered the competition for a statue of General Frank R. Blair. I received the first prize, but when the committee discovered that I was only a bill clerk in a store, they argued that I was not competent to carry out the work; although I was given the first prize model and the one hundred and fifty dollars accompanying it.”

“But that inspired you?”

“Yes, but my father and mother put every obstacle in the way possible. I was driven from room to room. I was not even allowed to work in the attic.” Here Mr. Ruckstuhl laughed. “You see what genius has to contend with. I was advanced in position in the store, till I became assistant manager, at two thousand dollars a year. When I told the proprietor that I had decided to be a sculptor, he gazed at me in blank astonishment. ‘A sculptor?’ he queried, incredulously, and made a few very discouraging remarks, emphasized with dashes. ‘Why, young man, are you going to throw up the chance of a lifetime? I will give you five thousand dollars a year, and promote you to be manager if you will remain with me.’

“But I had found my life’s work,” said Mr. Ruckstuhl, turning to me. “I knew it would be a struggle through poverty, till I attained fame. But I was confident in myself, which is half of the battle.”

“And you went abroad?”

“Yes, with but two hundred and fifty dollars,” he replied. “I traveled through Europe for five months and visited the French Salon. I said to myself, ‘I can do that, and that;’ and my confidence grew. But there was some work that completely ‘beat’ me. I returned to America penniless, but with a greater insight into art. I determined that I would retrace my steps to Paris, and study there for three years, and thought that would be sufficient to fully develop me. My family and friends laughed me to scorn, and I was discouraged by everyone. In four months, in St. Louis, I secured seven orders for busts, at two hundred dollars each, to be done after my return from France. That shows that some persons had confidence in me and in my talent.

“O, the student life in Paris! How I look back with pleasure upon those struggling, yet happy days! In two months, I started on my female figure of ‘Evening,’ in the nude, that is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I finished it in nine months, and positively sweat blood in my work. I sent it to the Salon, and went to Italy. When I returned to Paris, I saw my name in the paper with honorable mention. I suppose you can realize my feelings; I experienced the first flush of victory. I brought it to America, and exposed it in St. Louis. Strange to say, I rose in the estimation of even my family. My father actually congratulated me. A wealthy man in St. Louis gave me three thousand dollars to have my ‘Evening’ put into marble. I returned with it to Paris, and in a month and a quarter it was exhibited in the Salon. At the World’s Fair, at Chicago, it had the place of honor, and received one of the eleven grand medals given to American sculptors. In 1892, I came to New York. This statue of ‘Force’ will be erected, with my statue of ‘Wisdom,’ on the new Court of Appeals in New York.”

We gazed at it, seated, and clothed in partial armor, of the old Roman type, and holding a sword across its knees. The great muscles spoke of strength

and force, and yet, with it all, there was an almost benign look upon the military visage.

“There is force and real action there withal, although there is repose.” I said in admiration.

“Oh,” said Mr. Ruckstuhl, “that’s it, and that is what it is so hard to get! That is what every sculptor strives for; and, unless he attains it, his work, from my point of view, is worthless. There must be life in a statue; it must almost breathe. In repose there must be dormant action that speaks for itself.”

“Is most of your work done under inspiration?” I asked.

“There is nothing,—and a great deal,—in so-called inspiration. I firmly believe that we mortals are merely tools, mediums, at work here on earth. I peg away, and bend all my energies to my task. I simply accomplish nothing. Suddenly, after considerable preparatory toil, the mist clears away; I see things clearly; everything is outlined for me. I believe there is a conscious and a sub-conscious mind. The sub-conscious mind is the one that does original work; it cannot be affected by the mind that is conscious to all our petty environments. When the conscious mind is lulled and silenced, the sub-conscious one begins to work. That I call inspiration.”

“Are you ever discouraged?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Continually,” replied Mr. Ruckstuhl, looking down at his hands, soiled with the working clay. “Some days I will be satisfied with what I have done. It will strike me as simply fine. I will be as happy as a bird, and leave simply joyous. The following morning, when the cloths are removed, I look at my previous toil, and consider it vile. I ask myself: ‘Are you a sculptor or not? Do you think that you ever will be one? Do you consider that art?’ So it is, till your task is accomplished. You are your own critic, and are continually distressed at your inability to create your ideals.”

Mr. F. Wellington Ruckstuhl is forty-six years of age; neither short nor tall; a brilliant man, with wonderful powers of endurance, for his work is more exacting and tedious than is generally supposed.

“I have simply worked a month and a quarter on that statue,” he said.

“Certain work dissatisfied me, and I obliterated it. I have raised that head three times. My eyes get weary, and I become physically tired. On such occasions I sit down and smoke a little to distract my thoughts, and to clear my mind. Then my sub-conscious mind comes into play again,” he concluded with a smile.

Mr. Ruckstuhl’s best known works are: “Mercury Teasing the Eagle of Jupiter,” which is of bronze, nine feet high, which he made in Paris; a seven-foot statue of Solon, erected in the Congressional Library, at Washington; busts of Franklin, Goethe and Macaulay, on the front of the same library; and the eleven-foot statue of bronze of “Victory,” for the Jamaica soldiers’ and sailors’ monument. In competition, he won the contract for an equestrian statue of General John F. Hartrauft, ex-Governor of Pennsylvania, which he also made in Paris. It is considered the finest piece of work of its kind in America. Besides this labor, he has made a number of medallions and busts; and with the completion of his statue of “Force,” he will have made a wonderful record.

“Art was in me as a child,” he said: “I was discouraged whenever it beckoned me, but finally claimed me. I surrendered a good position to follow it, whether it led through a thorny road or not. A sculptor is an artist, a musician, a poet, a writer, a dramatist,—to throw action, breath and life, music and a soul into his creation. I can pick up an instrument and learn it instantly; I can sing, and act, so I am in touch with the sympathies of the beings that I endeavor to create. You will find most sculptors and artists of my composite nature.

“There,” said Mr. Ruckstuhl, and he stretched out his arm, with his palm downward, and moved it through the air, as he gazed into distance, “you strive to create the imagination of your mind, and it comes to you as if sent from another world.”

“You strive.” That is the way to success.