

The Legend of the Marble Statue: Keller's Tableau and Cross

Towards the end of the 15th century Margrave Christoph left the old family seat of his ancestors, Hohenbaden Castle and moved into the "New Castle", which he had built on the hill just above the centre of the town of Baden. However at the "old castle", whose ruins we see towering out of the mountain forest, his mother was left with two maids of honor, a young nobleman, the required servants and a palace guard.

The young nobleman, a squire of the family of Baron von Keller had all the advantages that enabled him to easily win the favor of women, although his morals were rather loose. But more than any other woman, the lovely Clare of Tiefenau had ensnared his heart. This acquaintance had developed in the house of her father, who lived as Margrave Vogt at Kuppenheim, which was then still a city of moats, walls and towers. A convenient pathway, of which traces are still visible, led from the old Hohenbaden Castle to Kuppenheim through a dense forest. Our squire made this journey daily, under the pretext of hunting, in the morning or late evening hours, in order to see the lady of his heart, even if it were only for a few moments.

Once, as he was returning home by the light of a full moon and the horn of the castle guard was just announcing midnight, it suddenly appeared to him - just a few steps away from the path there sat a female figure shrouded in a veil. In his usual adventurous way, the young man walked boldly towards the apparition. But the closer he came to her the more vague her outlines became, gradually becoming just a hazy mist, and finally, as he reached out for her, disappearing completely. A slight horror overcame him. But since he was brave and reckless and thought of it as only a mirage in his imagination, he went again the following evening to the same location in order to be sure. This time, there sat the same figure, just as yesterday and on the same spot in the grass, only now she had pushed back the veil, was reclined, leaning on her hand, and an abundance of dark curly hair cascaded over her body. The squire hesitated for a moment, but then, inwardly scolding himself for worrying, went directly towards the lady with a chivalrous greeting - but lo and behold! - she melted away, just as yesterday, in a swirl of mist.

The next day Squire von Keller mentioned his adventure to the castle guard, a wise elderly man, and learned from him that in ancient times there had stood a pagan temple exactly at the spot where the vision appeared. As a result this place was notorious among the local population and no one from the area dared to go there at night.

The squire was neither gullible nor superstitious; however that which the castle guard told him stimulated his curiosity in a different way. The next day he returned to the mysterious place and started digging. He soon found a small, delicate, yet well-preserved ancient Roman altar. According to its Latin inscription it was dedicated to the nymph of this sacred grove. A few feet deeper he found a marble statue. The arms and the torso from below the breast were missing and seemed to have been deliberately smashed off; whereas there remained a beautifully-represented girl's head and neck. An expression of life's first springtime dreams seemed to play in the forehead and eyes, a veil covered only a small part of the lush curls that tumbled down to the youthfully swelling bosom. The squire set up the altar and the marble statue on the site where they were excavated, and thus the place earned the name "Keller's Tableau".

However, the lovely marble nymph stoked the flames of insane love in the breast of the youth, and despite everything uncanny and ghostly that shrouded the apparition in the forest, he was no longer able to control his heart. Instead, soon afterwards he wandered out again at midnight to the sculptures, just as the moon illuminated the area. There sat the virginal figure at the foot of the altar - the same one he had seen twice before. But this time she did not dissolve into a cloud as previously; rather the closer our adventurer came to her the more distinct became her form.

A courageous servant of the castle had, out of curiosity secretly crept after him and was now standing at some distance. He saw and listened as the squire began a conversation, with the maiden, but when the youth embraced her in his arms, the eavesdropper was overcome with such horror that he hastily fled back to the castle.

The next morning, Squire von Keller was found lying dead at the foot of the altar; the marble statue of the girl had disappeared. The squire's brother came to the fateful grove, smashed the altar to pieces, and erected in its place a shrine containing the symbols of salvation. And on the spot where the body of the unfortunate deluded youth had been found, a stone cross was erected. Today both monuments are still standing along the old road that leads from the ruins of the Old Castle to Kuppenheim.

“The Legend of the Marble Image: Keller's Tableau and the Cross”, Alois Scriber
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translated by L. Bracegirdle

The “marble statue” is one of the great sources of motifs from the romantic period. The best known is the short story “The Marble Image” (“Das Marmorbild”) by Joseph von Eichendorff.