

# REMINISCENCES OF G. F. WATTS

## CHAPTER I

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

A LONG time ago—so long ago it seems almost to belong to a previous existence—I was sitting one afternoon in Rossetti's studio watching him painting on the "Lady Lilith." My first master, not counting the schoolroom drawing master, was Ruskin, who was very kind to me. He had advised me, if I could get the chance of studying with Mr. Arthur Hughes, to do so. This delightful artist, belonging to the pre-Raphaelite school, consented to take me as a pupil. As part of my art education Arthur Hughes took me from time to time to Rossetti's studio, where I met the mother of the four distinguished sons and daughters, also the great Christina herself. On this particular afternoon the picture just completed, "The Beloved," was placed on an easel in the middle of the studio for a few friends to view. As I watched Rossetti painting on the "Lady Lilith" and listened as he talked to me about art, I thought I had never before heard any voice of the same curiously beautiful deep-toned quality. Strong and grave was the intonation, and though restrained and gentle, vibrating with temperament.

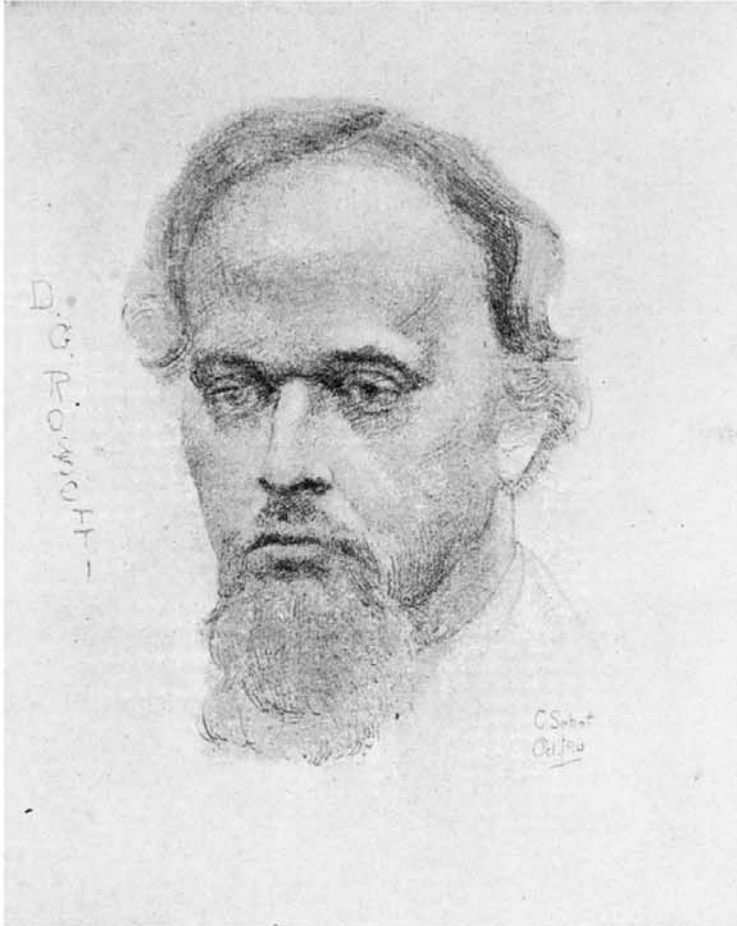
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Though no trace of a foreign accent could be discerned, probably it was his Italian origin which gave to the sound the particular ring it had. Rossetti's eyes and this voice and a long brown Noah's-Ark-like coat are what I remember as his most striking characteristics. The voice alone would have given distinction to the atmosphere in his studio. This seemed to me an enchanted chamber—the curious quaint beauty of the furniture and ornaments, the pictures in it which, like the voice of the painter, rang out a tune unlike all others; the garden, seen through a large window opening nearly down to the ground, a garden that might have been a hundred miles from London—indeed it felt to me still farther—away out of the world in a fairy-land, with queer animals disporting themselves therein, all seemed to centre harmoniously round the strong personality of the being who reigned there. Steeped with the glamour of the place, I sat very happily watching his brush and listening to his vibrating deep voice.

The door opened, and a party, consisting of one man and a few large ladies, came in to see the newly-finished picture. I remember the ladies were large because the man looked small in their midst, otherwise I have no recollection of their appearance. The one figure absorbed all my attention. Habited in a long sealskin coat it was small but in no wise insignificant—on the contrary, it was distinguished in appearance. The face was handsome, with a serious countenance suggesting a latent weariness and melancholy hidden under a crust of reserve. His words were few, but he gazed intently at the new picture. From something Rossetti had said when the party entered the room I had realised that this quiet self-contained personality belonged to Watts—Watts the painter and friend of my friend Mrs. Nassau Senior of the rippling golden hair; of Miss Senior,

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**DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI**

By Cecil Schott

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surrounded in her portrait by the beautiful sky and the grand laurel leaves, put in as the great Venetians would have painted them; of Miss Eden, with the long throat and rosy fair English colouring; the painter of yet another portrait which had bewitched me even more than all these, "A lady singing." I had met and greatly admired the original of the painting, Miss Russell, the sister of my father's private secretary, but when I saw her portrait on the walls of the Royal Academy I had quite lost my heart to it. It was not an important work, but it was so very much Watts, unlike any painting of other schools or individuals. It rendered that particular atmosphere and distinction of a modern English *lady* in a fervent yet restrained language of art. There was atmosphere and loose texture in the quality of the painting, noble truth in the drawing, and the special charm of spontaneity in the brush work. A silvery grey dress with one pink rose fastened to it echoing the fair pink on the cheek, made the colouring of the picture—a slight work of a great master—containing, however, the power of stamping itself on the memory as a thing of beauty, a very true test of greatness in a work of art. And yet another gem I remembered which helped to pile up the interest with which the figure in the sealskin coat inspired me. I had only then seen it once, on the walls of the Academy—the painting on panel called "Choosing," another of those pictures which once seen is never forgotten. A beautiful fair girl's head and a perfect throat stretching forward towards a branch of camellias; a hand slid caressingly under one of the deep pink flowers, the smooth enamel leaves painted as no one but Watts could paint leaves. These pictures were the only work I had then seen painted by the figure standing looking at Rossetti's picture, but these were enough to single him out as one apart from ordinary mortals. I was

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young, and art was my passion, so I felt greatly excited and interested in watching the perpetrator of these exquisite things. From the corner behind the canvas of the "Lady Lilith" I watched the party come and go.

Some years passed. Just before my marriage I had been seeing my friend Mrs. Nassau Senior frequently. She asked me whether I would not like to see Watts once in the old Little Holland House which was about to be pulled down. She gave me a note of introduction, and Mr. Barrington and I started one afternoon in June, 1868, to Melbury Road, then in the process of being made. The carriage had to drive over bricks and mortar and the roughest of ground to reach the old thatched porch of Little Holland House. The low building stood in melancholy isolation in the midst of this untidy confusion. Inside, except the work in the studios and the paintings by Watts on the walls, everything seemed to hang on its last thread. I suppose my mind was too full of other things at that moment, for I cannot even remember the pictures I saw that day, only that Watts was very kind and talked pleasantly, and would insist on seeing me to the porch, which I tried to prevent his doing by saying good-bye in the studio. Mr. Barrington had remained in the carriage, as he said he never knew what to say to artists about their own work. I did not know what excuse to make for his seeming indifference when Watts asked whether he would not come in.

We had been married five years when, after an illness I had had, we went at Easter to Freshwater. Our friend Mrs. Ritchie, then Miss Annie Thackeray, was staying there at that time.<sup>1</sup> Watts had built his house, The Briary,

<sup>1</sup> The memory of this visit to Freshwater still conjures up charming scenes. Osier-beds spread over with a bloom of juicy pink, and meadows decked with bright gold king cups where we sat on the bent trunk of a willow tree reading

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**MRS. NASSAU SENIOR**  
From Pencil Drawing by G. F. Watts

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

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and again my dear friend Mrs. Nassau Senior gave us a letter to him. There was illness at The Briary, but Watts met us outside and often walked with us in the lanes and on the downs. I can recall his figure now as he sauntered with us along the country roads in the soft grey hat he always wore and a loose cape flying in the wind. He was a much less formidable looking person than the Watts in Rossetti's studio.

It was at Freshwater he gave me my first lesson. I was painting a pretty thatched cottage in one of the lanes when he opened the little garden gate and stood over my easel. I remember his saying I had painted the old chimney of the cottage as the Venetians would have painted it—cleanly and frankly with no smudged edges. Besides desiring always to see the best in everything, Watts had a natural gift for doing so. This gave a very flattering tone to his criticisms, and these have at times unfortunately raised hopes never to be realised. It was not insincerity which made Watts say nice things which were excessive about the work he was shown; it was a genuine wish to discover anything that might be good in it, combined with an absence of the critical faculty. The mistake he made was, I think, that, having a habit of mind which depreciated his own work, he did not realise the weight which every word he spoke had in the minds of students, who not unnaturally exaggerated the value of the performances he had praised. I do not remember

“The Newcomes”; a poetical ball at Farringford, where the music was soft and low, and where I first saw the beautiful face of the poet's wife; and I still see a clear picture of Tennyson waltzing round to the dreamy music with a pretty young American lady, evidently greatly enjoying the dance; a picnic on the downs above the Needles, when Tennyson took me to the spot where, lying down on the edge of the turf, looking over straight down on the shore, you see waves of wonderful colour, emeralds, sapphires, and amethysts, flowing up to the wall of the white chalk cliff.



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being over-elated by Watts' kindness, for I had just got far enough to know that I could paint nothing as I wanted to paint it; and, being critical by nature, I had within myself my harshest fault-finder. But his sympathy with me in my small efforts certainly tended to make us friends. When we were leaving Freshwater, he asked us not to forget to come to see him in his studio in the new Little Holland House which he had built in Melbury Road. I had no difficulty in remembering to do so, for I felt he was already a friend. I took him the work I was doing, and we had long talks together, when he explained to me very exhaustively his views about his own art. He regretted often during these conversations not having any one to help him in achieving his aims, half suggesting that I might perhaps be able to do so. I did not take the matter up at the time, but after discussing it with Mr. Barrington, wrote and told Watts if I could in any way help him I should be proud to do so. In a letter dated April 7, 1876, L. H. H., Watts writes: "A thousand thanks for your offer. I don't know but what you might help me with some advantage to yourself, because any one who does help me must go profoundly into the matter, and if real study has any charms for you, why, perhaps, you might be willing to undergo some stiff and stern application; but, I can tell you, help to me in the works I have proposed to myself, and indeed have plunged into, would be no child's play. If you will come and see me any day between 2.30 and 5 we may talk over possibilities. Thornycroft the sculptor has commenced to build two semi-detached houses next door to me. He intends to live in one and let or sell the other. It strikes me this house might suit you." I went one day soon after receiving this letter to see him, and Mr. Barrington arranged to take the house that was being



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**MRS. NASSAU SENIOR**  
From the Painting by G. F. Watts

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built to which Watts referred in his letter. I felt this was indeed a delightful opportunity of entering into the highest precincts of art under the most helpful auspices. I wrote these, to me, most interesting facts to my friend Mrs. Nassau Senior, who replied: "What a comfort it is to me that you will be near Watts, to urge him to his noblest work and to stave off too many distractions (or should I say attractions)!"

I have always viewed our friendship with Watts as a legacy from this beautiful friend, of a nature so large, so generous and tender-hearted—one whose name will ever be associated with those who have most befriended young girls of all classes. In the full-length portrait which Watts painted of her she is represented as watering and bending over her flowers with loving care. He told me he had tried to suggest in this picture her beneficent gracious nature.

A dark day came—March 24th—which robbed our world of her bright, loving presence, and also that of another equally precious to his friends—moreover, a very shining light to the world beyond, one with whom we had lived for years—my brother-in-law, Walter Bagehot.

It was under these sad auspices we entered the life that promised to be so full of interest and work.