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978-1-108-05206-1 - Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family-Letters: Volume 2

Edited by William Michael Rossetti

Excerpt

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THE FAMILY-LETTERS
OF
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI.

As in a gravegarth, count to see
The monuments of memory.

VOL. II.

I

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FAMILY-LETTERS.

A 1.

My brother, when he wrote this note, was in the fifteenth year of his age. My only object in preserving so boyish an affair is to show that he was then already exercising himself in drawing in a sort of way.

The "Bazaar" must have been patronized (I take it) by the family of the Earl of Wicklow, in which our aunt, Miss Charlotte Lydia Polidori, was then a governess. A "harp" could not now be copied off a "halfpenny"; but Irish halfpence bearing this device were at that time in frequent circulation in London.

Our aunt died in January 1890, at the great age of eighty-seven. She was a person of uncommon equanimity and amenity—none more so within my experience—and was an agreeable talker, though without marked intellectual gift. For unselfish complaisance she might be reckoned a model.

Only one letter from Gabriel earlier than this is in my possession. It is dated 10 January 1836, and is addressed to our Father. It is of course mere childishness. I ought not to thrust it upon the reader, and I shall not.

[50 CHARLOTTE STREET, PORTLAND PLACE, LONDON.]

1 February 1842.

MY DEAR AUNT CHARLOTTE,

I send you twelve drawings for the Bazaar, which I hope will not arrive too late for admission. Julian Peveril, the Turk, the Pygmy, the Brigand, Barnaby Rudge, the Butterfly, the Huntsman, the Harp, and the Shamrock, are

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copies. Quentin Durward, the Highlander, and the Dandy, are originals. The Huntsman and the Highlander are *intended* for Fitzjames and Roderick Dhu, from *The Lady of the Lake*.

I should have drawn some more, for I have remaining three cards and two pieces of cardboard; but I was fearful that they should reach you too late.

I hope that, should you answer this letter, you will favour me with a "full, true, and particular account" of the proceedings, how many and which of my drawings were sold, and the price which they fetched.

Having nothing more to say, I remain,

My dear Aunt Charlotte,

Your affectionate Nephew,

GABRIEL C. ROSSETTI.

P.S.—The Harp (but this is a strict secret) is copied off a halfpenny.

A 2.

In this letter my brother copied out the whole of Walter Scott's poem. I have omitted all except the first stanza. His coloured drawing of *The Cavalier* is still extant.

A music-master (a family friend, Signor Rovedino) was eventually called in for our elder sister Maria, whose destined career was that of a governess or teacher. She had a very fine voice and elocution in speaking, which might have developed into a good contralto voice in singing; but she (like all the family except our Father) had little musical aptitude, and never did anything in that way.

[50 CHARLOTTE STREET.]

Thursday 2 June 1842.

MY DEAR AUNT CHARLOTTE,

Perhaps you remember that, one day when you were admiring the drawings which I sent to the Bazaar, I said that I would draw you one. In fulfilment of this promise I send you the accompanying figure, hoping that it will meet with your approbation. It is pronounced by every one to be the

best figure I have ever drawn, and I trust that such will also be your opinion. It is intended as an illustration of the following verses by Sir Walter Scott:—

THE CAVALIER.

“While the dawn on the mountain was misty and grey
 My true love has mounted his steed and away:
 Over hill, over valley, o’er dale and o’er down,
 Heaven shield the brave gallant that fights for the Crown!”

* * * * *

P.S.—Mamma sends you her love, and wishes me to tell you that she has just been talking to Papa of procuring a music-master for Maria, and that he says he will *see about it* (?).

P.P.S.—The figure is *entirely original*.

B 1.

This letter must have been written about the time when my brother, had he returned to King’s College School after the summer vacation of 1842, would have been wending thither; but, instead of that, he relinquished ordinary school attendance, and began studying for the profession of painting. He had now just gone to Chalfont-St.-Giles in Buckinghamshire, where our maternal uncle Mr. Henry Francis Polydore, whom he accompanied, had lately settled, to practise as a solicitor. Chalfont was the village or townlet to which Milton retired during the plague of London. “Uncle Henry’s Swearing-book” was the volume which some client of his had from time to time to kiss, in taking an oath. Our uncle—who had turned his surname of Polidori into the Anglicized form Polydore for professional convenience—died in January 1885; a very strict devout Roman Catholic, and the most scrupulously conscientious of men—somewhat parsimonious (in proportion to his lifelong restricted means), and more than duly fidgeting to himself and others. He was a fairly diligent book-reader, without either ambition or aptitude towards authorship.

CHALFONT-ST.-GILES.
 Thursday 1 September 1842.

MY DEAR MAMMA,

We arrived safely at Chalfont at 12 o’clock yesterday. The village is larger than I expected. The first thing we did

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on our arrival was to demolish some bread and butter, of which I at least was much in want. We then, with considerable difficulty, opened Uncle Henry's trunks, and, after depositing a part of their contents in a chest of drawers, we sallied forth to reconnoitre. I saw Milton's house, which is unquestionably the ugliest and dirtiest building in the whole village. It is now occupied by a tailor. . . .

Yesterday I commenced reading *The Infidel's Doom*, by Dr. Birch, which valuable work forms part and parcel of Uncle Henry's library. However, I have abandoned the task in despair. I then began *The Castle of Otranto*, which shared the same fate, and am now engaged on Defoe's *History of the Plague*. This morning we deposited Uncle Henry's books (exclusive of the law books, which are in the parlour) in a closet in Uncle Henry's bedroom, which, in common with all the other closets in this house, possesses a lock but no key.

I do not think that I shall go to church on Sunday, for in the first place I do not know where I can sit, and in the second place I find that we are so stared at wherever we go that I do not much relish the idea of sitting for two hours the lodestone of attraction in the very centre of the aborigines, on whose minds curiosity appears to have taken a firm hold.

I have just had some luncheon, of which however Uncle Henry did not partake, asserting that he was unwell, and would take some pills for his luncheon. Milk is an extremely rare article here; so much so that it was with great difficulty that we obtained a pint this morning and half a pint yesterday, and it still remains in doubt whether we shall be able to procure half a pint this evening for tea. I "in longing expectation wait" the appearance of my dinner; for which however I need not yet look, since it is now nearly 3 o'clock, which is the nominal dinner-hour, but, the fire having gone out, Uncle Henry prophesies that it will not come till 4.

I remain, dear Mamma,

Your affectionate Son,

GABRIEL ROSSETTI.

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P.S.—I intend to make, for Maria's accommodation, a sketch of the church, which I think pretty, but which Uncle Henry condemns as exceedingly flat and ugly.

P.P.S.—I am sure that by this time you must be tormenting yourself because I forgot to take a Prayer-Book; however, you may set your mind at rest on that subject, since Uncle Henry's Swearing-book combines both Bible and Prayer-Book, out of which I can read the Psalms and Lessons on Sunday in case I stay at home.

C 1.

This letter is, so far as I know, the earliest that I ever received from my brother. I had now, succeeding him, left London to spend a few days with our uncle in Chalfont-St.-Giles. The opening observations, as to my discomforts with my uncle, will be rightly understood as mere "chaff." There was nothing to complain of in his modest (then bachelor) establishment. "A Philippic expression" means an expression of our other uncle Philip Robert Polidori—a rather odd not strong-witted person. My brother and I (for books, prints, etc., were then and for several years afterwards all in common between us) were at that time taking-in a serial edition of the *Waverley Novels*, and buying up prints to illustrate it—even, in some instances, prints which were not really intended for the *Waverley Novels*. About this period of his boyhood my brother's health was not strong, as is the case with so many growing boys. Reynolds was a good-humoured little print-seller on a small and dingy scale, close to St. Giles's Church, whose shop my brother and I haunted with spectral pertinacity for some years—spending pennies and sixpences as opportunity allowed.

[50 CHARLOTTE STREET.]

Wednesday evening, 28 December 1842.

MY DEAR WILLIAM,

I took up my pen, fully intending to commence by *hoping* that you found yourself comfortable at Chalfont-St.-Giles; but I rejected the idea almost as soon as formed, for sad experience has taught me that over the portal of "the

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lawyer" (to make use of a Philippic expression) might well be inscribed, in the words of the poet, "All hope abandon, ye who enter here." I make no enquiries as to the particulars of your sufferings and agony both in the $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles' walk to, and in the residence at, said Chalfont. I do not ask how you relished the "odours of Edom" which emanate (at least according to Uncle Henry) from your downy couch. . . . I do not, I say, ask all this, because I know that I shall have an opportunity of receiving answers to these enquiries, and as many more as I please to make, within a short time after you have perused this precious epistle. I would not mind staking any sum, if I had any sum to stake (for Heaven knows my Christmas-box has been long since landed safely on the classic shores of pot), that you and our mutual relative have ere this had recourse for amusement to the pages of Horace or Virgil. With the former the above-mentioned relative has disgusted me by constantly showing me that he does understand it, and then telling me that I do not. Of the latter we have my favourite poet's opinion—

"That Virgil's songs are good, except that horrid one
Beginning with *Formosum pastor Corydon*."

So said Byron—so say not I. The Eclogue which he seems to dislike is the very one by construing which from beginning to end (having learnt it at school in capacity of an imposition) I can defeat the malice of Uncle Henry when he defies me so to do.

I have already told you that my Christmas-box has taken up its residence at pot. I will now proceed to acquaint you with the means by which it found its way to that "undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns." To you probably this will be interesting news—to Uncle Henry it will be one continued nuisance. I well know his abhorrence of a long list of purchases.

I will begin, then, with the prints I have bought for my *Waverley Novels*—viz., a proof of *The Pass of Aberfoil—Stand*, which you already know, and for which I gave 9d. ;

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Leslie's *Charles and Lady Bellenden*, and *McIvor and the Grey Spirit* (1s. 6d. the couple); *Sir W. Scott in his Study* (4d.); a splendid engraving of *The Fortress*, which I suppose to be the Fortress of Man in *Peveil* (6d.); Gilbert's *Richard trampling on the Austrian Flag*, which, on a second inspection, I find to be not nearly so good as I expected, but which is nevertheless very good, like everything of Gilbert's (1d.); and lastly, Warren's *Escape*, from the *Protestant Annual*, which I intend to introduce into *The Pirate*, and of which, as well as of *The Widow Maclure's Son*, plenty of copies are to be had at the Publisher's in Oxford Street. I have purchased a proof of *The Shipwreck in Don Juan*, which you already know, and which I got (at Palsler's) for 1s., the original price being 1s. 6d.; also (at Reynolds's) a print of *The Widow* by Boxall (2d.); also a scene in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, which I have put into my Shakespear (3d.). I have likewise procured 4 parts of the *Shakespear* itself. I had almost forgotten to tell you of one more purchase which I have made—viz., *A Shillingsworth of Nonsense*, by the editors of *Punch*, which you have no doubt seen, and which is indeed a shillingsworth of the vilest twaddle that was ever written down. It possesses however one redeeming quality which, in my eyes at least, more than compensates for all its defects—it contains 48 splendid wood-engravings by Phiz.

So much for every one of my purchases, so much for every farthing of my money, and so much for *almost* every syllable of my letter; except that Mamma and all send you their loves, and that Dr. Locock, whom we visited again this morning, says that I must not recommence my studies till after New Year's Day; and so

Believe me,

My dear William,

Yours affectionately,

G. ROSSETTI.

P.S.—I forgot to tell you that, if you want to get splendid prints dirt-cheap, now's your time. Reynolds told me that

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he would have (to-morrow most probably) a set of Finden's engravings (either the *Tableaux* or the series of *Groups from Different Nations*; I believe the latter) for rather more than *three shillings*! I intended to have bought them myself, only I found after I had bought the *Shakespear* that my pockets were a vacuum.

B 2.

When this letter was written our Mother was at Hastings, along with our Father, in an endeavour—for a long while fruitless—to cure him of a severe attack of bronchitis.

No. 15 Park Village East, Regent's Park (now No. 30), was the residence of our grandfather Gaetano Polidori and his family. Our Uncle Henry had then abandoned Chalfont-St.-Giles, and was pursuing his profession at 15 Park Village East. The phrase about the "press of clients" sounds like and is irony. Mr. Leader is Mr. Charles Temple Leader, a Radical M.P. of those days, afterwards a conspicuous English resident in Florence. He is still alive, I think, at a great age. Sangioanni had taken, from a natural bent of genius, to the modelling of picturesque clay figures—brigands, contadini, Albanians, etc. "The Cavaliere" was the Cavalier Mortara, an exceedingly frequent visitor at our parents' house—brother of a Conte Mortara, a bibliophile of some name. The "Signora Carlotta" means our aunt Miss Charlotte Polidori.

50 CHARLOTTE STREET.
Sunday 2 June 1843.

MY DEAR MAMMA,

"Better late than never," as the cat said to the kitten when the latter relinquished the Wellington boot in despair. And now, having sent preliminaries to pot in one pithy and well-concocted sentence, I shall proceed forthwith to news.

Yesterday Aunt Margaret, William, and myself, betook ourselves in the afternoon to 15 Park Village East, having been thereunto invited. The first thing I did on my arrival was to enter the office of Uncle Henry. The air therein was