

## SOME REMINISCENCES OF WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI

### I

#### EARLIEST YEARS

I WAS born in London, 38 Charlotte Street, Portland Place, on 25 September 1829. Charlotte Street has, since I wrote these pages, been renamed as Hallam Street. I have spoken elsewhere in some detail about my father, Gabriele Rossetti, as a poet and constitutionalist in Naples, and a political refugee in England, and about his marriage to Frances Mary Lavinia, second daughter of Gaetano Polidori. Here therefore I shall take these antecedents for granted.

I was the third of four children, being preceded by Maria Francesca (February 1827) and Gabriel Charles Dante (or Dante Gabriel, May 1828), and succeeded by Christina Georgina (December 1830), all born in the same house as myself. The very bed in which we were ushered into life continued to be used by my brother up to almost the date of his death, 1882. After his decease it was sold with the other contents of his house. More by accident than by intention I failed to retain it as a family relic, and who may now be in possession of it (if any one) I have no idea.

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At the time of my birth and early childhood our family was not in anything to be called poverty, but its means were narrowly restricted. My father lived by teaching Italian; he did likewise a large amount of literary work, but that hardly ever brought him in any payment at all. In fact, he would have been quite unable, in most instances, to meet the expenses of printing his books, and for this he had to depend upon the plan of subscription or the liberality of friends. A year in which he made a clear £300 was regarded as a very good year, and a rare one; generally I suppose the income of the household may have been from £220 to £280 a year. He was professor of Italian in King's College, London: this only yielded him a few fees, and added to his income nothing worth naming.

I have spoken above of "the liberality of friends." These were the Right Honourable John Hookham Frere, living in Malta, whom my father had known there between the date of his escaping from Naples and that of his settling in London, and Mr. Charles Lyell, of Kinnordy in Forfarshire. Mr. Frere, the author of the poem in octave stanzas *The Monks and the Giants* and translator of Aristophanes, was a high-minded man, profusely generous, and having ample means to draw upon. His bounty, though unsolicited by my father, kept flowing freely while the latter was in London: every now and then an order for £50 or £100 would arrive. Indeed, I think it more than likely that Frere, when he encouraged Rossetti to migrate from Malta to London, had engaged to keep an eye on his affairs and not leave him in the lurch at a difficult moment. He does not, however, appear to have been so directly concerned as Mr. Lyell in financing Rossetti's

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authorship ; nor, indeed, was he so keenly interested in the theme on which Rossetti wrote, the systematic interpretation of Dante's books, and of much literature besides, medieval and other. The first of my father's London labours, Dante's *Inferno* with a *Comento Analitico* (Analytic Comment), came out in 1826-7, and to this Mr. Lyell was merely a subscriber ; but he must have spent several hundreds of pounds upon the *Spirito Antipapale che produsse la Riforma* (Antipapal Spirit which led to the Reformation) and upon the *Mistero dell' Amor Platonico del Medio Evo derivato dai Misteri Antichi* (Mystery of the Platonic Love of the Middle Ages derived from the Antique Mysteries). These two works, seven volumes in all, were printed (the former alone *published* in England) in 1832 and 1840. Mr. Lyell (father of the celebrated geologist Sir Charles Lyell) was a great enthusiast for Dante, and was the author in 1835 of an English translation of his lyrical poems. By spending a small fortune on Rossetti's books he gratified his own likings as well as those of the Italian critic ; but this in no way detracts from his munificence, being only as much as to say that he entertained and indulged a generous enthusiasm, further manifested in the scores or hundreds of letters which he interchanged with Rossetti in discussing such matters of literature. In his later years—he died in 1849—he receded somewhat from his belief in Rossetti's system of interpretation, being, I think, a trifle provoked at the extremes to which it was pushed, and timorous as to the light in which he would himself be regarded as its promoter.

Charlotte Street, which forms a cul-de-sac close to No. 38, is one of the least-frequented streets in the Portland Place vicinity. It is dingy, and in my time

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was mostly unrespectable ; I fancy it is so still. Every now and then the decorous section of the inhabitants would make an effort to clear out offenders, but the effort lapsed, and the offenders remained or resumed. I remember the shop of a barber (at some little distance from our own dwelling) who must have posed as the local Figaro or Leporello, and whose shop-windows became increasingly conversant with coloured prints hostile to the cause of decency. Of No. 38 I recollect not much. It had a moderate frontage, with shallow inside space. By the end of 1835, when I was six years old, the family had outgrown the accommodation here existing, and we removed to another house, No. 50, at an annual rent of £60. Here we remained until the beginning of 1851.

My maternal grandfather, Gaetano Polidori—who, like my father, was a teacher of Italian and also an author, but not a political refugee—tenanted a couple of rooms in Wells Street, Oxford Street ; and the aspect of his sitting-room, in which I always observed a green-baize tablecloth and a lamp with japanned shades, is more present to my mental eye than anything in No. 38 Charlotte Street—if I except a curtain, veiling I suppose a dressing-room, which excited a certain sense of the unknown. My grandfather's family—wife, son, and daughter, not to speak of others who had ceased to form part of his establishment—did not live with him in London, but in an inconspicuous country-house or cottage-residence at Holmer Green, near Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire. Polidori himself was often there as well ; and, towards the same time when we quitted No. 38 for No. 50, he abandoned London and lived wholly at Holmer Green, relinquishing his work

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as a teacher. This arrangement continued till 1839, when all the Polidori family returned to London, settling at No. 15 (now 30) Park Village East, Regent's Park. Much of Park Village East was demolished recently, but No. 30 has not been interfered with.

Some of my earliest recollections appertain to the cottage at Holmer Green. I was there not often—perhaps three times after the period of unconscious infancy—three or four weeks in each instance. It was the only sort of countrifying that I got; for my father, and therefore my mother, never made any holiday, at the seaside or otherwise. I can recall being mounted on a pony by the local medical man, Mr. Tallent—an effort of equitation too seldom repeated in my over-sedentary career: he took a fancy to me, and, being a childless married man, had some inclination to adopt me, but this was not at all in accordance with my parents' ideas. The pigs and the pigstye at Holmer Green were objects of interest, also the good-natured large spaniel Delta; the spiders and earwigs and slugs in the garden were viewed with repulsion (though I was not brought up to have any foolish prejudices against animals harmless though possibly uncouth), and with some tremor the wasps which flitted about the parlour. My leading enjoyment was shared with Gabriel (he and I were, I think, only twice together at Holmer Green), and consisted of resorting to a pond in my grandfather's small grounds, and lying in wait for the frogs, and capturing and releasing them. I don't think I ever went far afield, but of course had some strolling acquaintance with the country in the neighbourhood. All this was before the era of railroads, and we used to go down and up by stage-coach to Uxbridge, Wycombe, Amersham, etc.

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My last stay at Holmer Green may have been in 1839, or perhaps 1838. I never revisited the spot till 1898; when (in company with Mr. Mackenzie Bell, the biographer of Christina Rossetti, and under the obliging escort of the then clergyman, Mr. Ffolliott) I found out the old house, and realized to myself the fact that a good deal of the country thereabouts is extremely pretty and pleasing.

Polidori and his family lived at Holmer Green on a modest though quite comfortable scale: there was no pretence at the standing of a "country gentleman," and very little intercourse with neighbours. The family—besides Polidori himself, aged seventy-two in 1836—was made up thus: his wife (who had been Miss Anna Maria Pierce), of a proportionate age, always confined to her bedroom or bed by an internal illness; his son, Philip Robert, who was weak-minded and "odd" (not insane nor imbecile), and had never been able to take up any vocation in life; and the youngest daughter, Eliza Harriet, constantly devoted to attending on her mother and managing the household affairs. She was a courageous, conscientious woman, not at all literary in her leanings (though a very rapid reader of such books as she thought entertaining), of strong character, by no means pliable and only partially amiable, cheerful and unconventional in habit of mind and address. She survived all her brothers and sisters, and died in 1893, aged eighty-three. Polidori had a good inkling of country occupations, and after a while he bought, at some small distance from Holmer Green, a piece of ground, Stony Grove, which he looked after every now and then. He worked with equal zest at literature and at manual crafts: translating Milton in a forenoon, and

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fashioning a table in wood-mosaic in the afternoon. One of the rooms in the cottage was made his carpentry. Here the smell of glue became very familiar to me ; varied by the smell of gunpowder, at moments when my grandfather, looking up from his cabinet-work, would see a wood-pigeon or other eatable bird within convenient range, and would point his gun out of a window at the mark. A loud bang ensued, and mostly—for he was not a bad shot—a bird at next day's dinner-table. He did not shoot game, not being either a licensee or a poacher. Often also he sent up two or three very savoury wood-pigeons to our London household. Polidori was a man alike solid in physique and in character, a scorner of all flimsiness and idle pretension, including some of the minor elegancies of life ; affectionate with his daughters, and quite as much so with his grandchildren. Christina was particularly fond of him : in fact I think she had more positive warmth of feeling for him than for her father. We four were the only grandchildren in those years ; later on there was a fifth, the daughter of Polidori's son, Henry Francis, a solicitor (or mostly a solicitor's articulated clerk), who preferred to anglicize his name into Polydore. This change was projected mainly as a bait for clients, but the clients never came.

My reminiscences must now revert to the newly entered London house, 50 Charlotte Street. Like No. 38, it was a smallish dwelling, but it afforded the accommodation needed for our family of six—two rooms on the ground floor, two on the first floor (not much used in our life from day to day), and five or six bedrooms on the second and third floors. There was a small back yard, but nothing approaching to a garden ;

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there was also the usual kitchen basement, with the characterless-looking railing so distinctive of the middle-class Londoner. Opposite us was a public-house, quietly enough conducted, and quite innocent of the flaring gaseous attractions of a gin-palace. Two or three "hackney-coaches" were constantly to be seen close to the public-house; possibly this indicated a "stand," but I think it was rather an adjunct of the tavern as a "house of call." The hansom-cab did not then exist; nor even was the term "cab" well acclimatized—my mother, in those early years, always said "a cabriolet." The hackney-coach of that epoch, sometimes a two-horse vehicle, was a lumbering and in the highest degree an unsmartened affair; its floor bare, or scantily supplied with musty or sippy straw. It rattled and jolted over roadways chiefly of slightly rounded stone and in a minor degree of the macadamized type; wood pavement, and still more asphalt pavement, were unknown in my opening years. Omnibuses (they were not then snipped into "busses" by ordinarily well-bred people) had come into use; we children were occasionally in an omnibus, but scarcely ever in other public vehicles, which counted as too expensive for the family pocket. I have seen such a personage as a watchman now and again, but the "new police" were already in activity as far back as my memory extends. Hats, not helmets, were for many years their head-gear. Of course, penny or halfpenny daily newspapers only came in long after the dates I am here speaking of. There were daily newspapers, but costing too much for us to take in. Our recourse was to a weekly newspaper, *Bell's Weekly Messenger*—of stiff Tory politics highly spiced with evangelical religion, sabbatarian and other.

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The one room in the house which was constantly used by the whole family was the front parlour or dining-room. Here was my mother, with the four children, and, when he returned from his daily round of teaching, my father, with his books and manuscript. At times, however, he used the front drawing-room for studying and writing. Naturally my mother had in the earliest years a nursemaid for her child or children; but I cannot remember any such person, nor any time when we were relegated to a nursery. Afterwards there was only one servant. The family life, within my recollection, was "one and indivisible"; father, mother, and four children, with the very frequent addition of two or three Italian *habitués* in the evening. Such a domestic arrangement was no doubt well adapted for sharpening our wits and "bringing us on," though it would have been trying to most parents and unwelcome to most visitors. With our father we always talked Italian, and thus we picked it up from our earliest years, and the like when we spoke to other Italians. With our mother we talked English. My father could indeed speak English fairly enough when he chose, but he never did choose *en famille*. Polidori, though with a certain degree of foreign accent, spoke it perfectly—he had been in England ever since 1790.

Next to the front parlour (for we used not to call it the dining-room) the apartments which I most frequented in my waking hours were the back parlour and, at a later date, a small room on the third floor which had been my father's dressing-room (I pretty often saw him shaving there), but which was eventually assigned to Gabriel for purposes of study or leisure, and I consorted there with Gabriel. Of this more anon, for it has not

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to do with my mere childhood. A recollection still vivid to me is this. In the back parlour, close to its single window, was a fixed basin with water-tap and plug ; all covered over by a solid flap, which, when put down, formed a seat amply wide enough for me to sit upon with tilted knees. Here I would frequently seat myself and read a book, neighboured by a squirrel in a revolving cage. I would read a page or two, and then, raising my eyes from the volume, watch the squirrel's rapid evolutions, pondering whether he enjoyed them, or merely couldn't help himself. Scott's *Ivanhoe* was one of the books I thus read, and could not but be an immense favourite ; there were very many others. These perusals began some few months after we had entered the house, which was at the Christmas of 1835 ; for, not having proved a very apt or rapid acquirer of the reading art under the loving tuition of my mother, I was not at that date able to read currently, and had to be coerced into the craft by my aunt Margaret Polidori, a middle-aged spinster, extremely nervous, but not wanting in rigour. Towards the middle of 1836 I was fully coached up, and became, what I have ever since continued, a voracious reader. Even before this date I knew a good deal of the contents of several books, either by clumsy reading on my own part or by hearing what my seniors read out. In manhood I far outstripped Gabriel as a reader, and still farther Christina. Maria could not be easily surpassed : in her fifth year she could read any ordinary book in English or in Italian. Gabriel also was quick in learning to read ; Christina more on the same level as myself.

Family life in No. 50 Charlotte Street was a simple affair ; I will try to throw myself back in reminiscence