

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI.

By Katharine (Tynan) Hinkson, in Ave Maria.

It is not so long since the *Ave Maria* quoted from that painful book, the diary of the late William Bell Scott, its most painful passage—that in which the most narrow and contemptuous of unbelieving Protestants tells how in Rossetti's last days he entreated, and entreated in vain, that a Catholic priest should be sent for. At that time, if I mistake not, there were by his bedside the odious Mr. Scott and one other male friend only. If his own folk were there, his dying prayer had not been heard so ignorantly and uncomprehendingly. However, the passage, painful as it was, must have had the effect of setting many pitiful souls to pray for the poor soul, who, at least by desire, was one with them in the communion of saints. Rossetti was by accident an Englishman and a latitudinarian. I have heard that it was a curious desire of his to look as bluffly Briton as possible; but how little his spirit was in accord with British ideas one sees in his poetry and art, where is to be found the highest expression of his inmost spirit. Rossetti was never in Italy in his life; nor, to the best of Mr. Bell Scott's opinion, did he ever enter a Catholic church. Yet he was as entirely a son of the South by nature as he was a Catholic, and it is as a strayed Catholic one thinks of him.

Of the four children of Gabriele Rossetti and Frances Polidori, the two sons, William Michael and Dante Gabriel, were to be Catholics; the daughters, Maria Francesca and Christina Georgiana, were brought up to their mother's religion. Gabriele Rossetti, professor of Italian at King's College, London, was an Italian refugee, with a fine stock of hatred for the Papacy, and a curious theory which explained Dante and the mass of great Italian literature to be part of a Masonic crusade against the Pope. Frances Polidori, on the other hand, was a conscientious Protestant, who had informed her Protestantism with a fervor inherited, no doubt, from generations of devout Italian Catholics. She was also a woman of great mind and heart, of singular dignity and sweetness of character. It is not surprising that her daughters, brought directly under her religious influence, should have laid hold upon religion with a fervor and intimacy little enough Protestant. The sons, on the other hand, left to themselves and their father's anti-papal views, grew up indifferent to forms of faith, and never identified themselves with their Catholicism.

The old Catholic spirit strove and worked in all four children. Maria Francesca died, an Anglican nun, in the House of Mercy at Clewer. Christina is still with us, and draws from her fervent soul a stream of religious poetry so spiritual and rich in unction that not Crashaw himself has surpassed it. She too, though of the world nominally, has lived as a nun—seldom seen, heard of only in her work, her life devoted to the duty of tending her mother and her two aged aunts; as much enclastered in Torrington Square, Bloomsbury, as though the veil was over her brows; and now, since those objects of her love have passed away, her service is given to the poor.

But it is not of Miss Christina Rossetti I treat as "A Strayed Catholic": it is of the younger and greater of the two brothers, who were named from Archangels. Rossetti's Catholic art has not even the accident of Protestant influence, which his sister's has. Indeed, all his art is Catholic, in a sense, even when it seems farthest away from grace. His whole inspiration was from the glamouring Middle Ages, before Protestantism had put Art in a strait-waistcoat. I am the

last to be unjust to our separated brethren; but, admirable conservators as they have shown themselves of the great relics in the Old World of Catholic splendor in art, they have originated little that is beautiful; and the wellspring of beauty is still far away, in the days when men labored for the service of the heavenly King; the spark of the Divine in them straining after an ideal for His sake that should humbly look upward and imitate the perfection of His works. It is curious how the best of modern literature and art goes back to those days. Pre-Raphaelism was the expression of the Catholic spirit in art, as later was the gold kernel that lay amid the husk of the Aesthetic Movement.

Gabriele Rossetti, to be near his college, lived in Bloomsbury, an unlovely part of London, which his children have not forsaken. At 88 Charlotte Street, Great Portland Place, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was born, on the 12th of May, 1828. Maria and William were his elders; Christina was younger than he. In that London house, among the strait, dark streets, the children grew up and manifested very early their bent toward literature. Miss Christina Rossetti has told me how they played at *brute-rimes*, making distichs which now would be very precious if one possessed them. There were more ambitious efforts. At five years old Rossetti wrote a drama called "The Slave," the *dramatis personæ* of which were two characters called respectively Slave and Traitor. At thirteen he produced a romance entitled "Roderick and Rosalba." In his school-boy days he further wrote "Sir Hugh the Heron," a tale in verse, which was privately printed by his grandfather, Gaetano Polidori a copy of which is now one of the treasures of the British Museum. At fifteen he began his education in art. He was a very precocious boy, full of opinions, as his affectionate letters to his mother in absence attest. He used to tell her everything—what he had seen, what he had read, the doing of birds and animals; and he inundated her with a great deal of criticism, being sure of her sympathy. At this time he was collecting prints to illustrate Walter Scott, Shakespeare and Byron.

Among his opinions one finds an enthusiastic outburst over the exhibition of cartoons for the Houses of Parliament. A year later his enthusiasm was for Gavarni, Tony Johannot, and Nanteuil. In poetry the "Colomba" of Prosper Merimee excited his admiration. Rossetti, boy and man, lived very much by admiration. To him criticism would seem, as it does to Swinburne, only worth doing "for the noble pleasure of praising." This faculty of appreciation often led him into extravagant estimates of the works of others. This generosity was the natural complement of his extreme sensitiveness. In his later years he became quite morbid as to criticism, and took on a suspiciousness which held him aloof from some of his oldest and most loving friends. This sensitiveness was intensified by Mr. Robert Buchanan's anonymous article, "The Fleshly School of Poetry"; and Rossetti's friends believe that the effect of the article, by inducing insomnia and the consequent habit of using chloral, hastened his death.

However, this is to look far ahead. In March, 1848, Rossetti wrote to Mr. Ford Maddox Brown, asking him to accept him as his pupil, he having been greatly struck with Brown's "Parisina" and "The Giaour." This habit of his of frankly expressing his admirations laid the foundation of some of his best friendships. Mr. William Bell Scott was another with whom his friendship began by letter writing. He became Mr. Brown's friend and pupil, and in the latter half of the same year he painted "The Girlhood of Mary Virgin." The following year he painted "The Annunciation," which is now the property of the English National

Gallery. "The Girlhood of Mary" is before me as I write. The models for St. Anne and the Girl-Virgin were Mrs. Rossetti and Christina; and when I saw them, after a lapse of nearly forty years, their very striking and noble faces had not passed from recognition as the younger faces of the picture.

Indeed another photograph on my wall, the heads of mother and daughter, painted thirty years later, are easily recognizable as the two in the picture. Christina, with her oval face, her great, drooping eyelids, her sad mouth, made an ideal model for one predestined to be the Mother of Sorrows. In the picture St. Anne and the Daughter sit side by side, embroidering a white lily. Over their heads float faint golden rings. A lily in a jar, which they are copying, stands on a pile of books, marked with the names of the virtues. A little angel stands by it, the long wings folded to two points. Outside we see St. Joachim nailing up the vine; and on a bar of the trellis is the Dove, haloed about with gold. Then there is the pleasant Eastern country of trees and quiet waters. The picture has wonderfully the austere simplicity of the old painters, it is instinct with the unction and the grace that are in Angelico or Bartolomeo. At the same time Rossetti wrote the sonnet which illustrates the picture, and full of the same still and rapt reverence:

This is that blessed Mary, pre-choic
God's Virgin. Gone is a great while, and she
Dwelt young in Nazareth of Galilee.
Upon God's will she brought devout respect,
Profound simplicity of intellect,
And supreme patience. From her mother's knee
Faithful and hopeful, wise in charity,
Strong in grave peace; in pity circumspect.

So held she through her girlhood, as it were
An angel-watered lily, that near God
Grows and is quick. Till, one dawn at home,
She woke in her white bed, and had no fear
At all—yet wept till sunrise, and felt awed:
Because the fulness of the time was come.

That "Pre-Raphaelitism" was already a bond between a gifted group of young painters is shown by a letter of Rossetti in 1849 to "Our Pre-Raphaelite Brother, James Collinson." Collinson was a contributor to *The Germ*, the famous little organ of the Brethren, which lived so short a time. He was a Catholic, a convert, and instinct with mysticism and spirituality. His poem in *The Germ*, "The Child Jesus," struck me much when I looked through Mr. William Rossetti's volume of that precious periodical. If my memory serves me, it was in the manner of an old mystery play, full of light and a quaint sweetness.

Eighteen hundred and fifty was the year of *The Germ*, the first number being published in January, the last in April. The potent Pre-Raphaelite Brethren, formulated, consisted of seven members, viz.: Holman Hunt, Millais, Rossetti, Woolner, James Collinson, F. Stephens, and William Rossetti. The contributors to *The Germ* were not confined to these, Miss Christina Rossetti contributed "Dream-land," "Dead Hope," and five other lyrics. Coventry Patmore, whose genius Rossetti fervently appreciated, sent his young admirer a poem for the new venture. Mr. Ford Maddox Brown contributed a sonnet. To the short-lived bantling Rossetti contributed more than his share. "Hand and Soul" was his prose contribution, and one may perceive a certain likeness between himself and the young painter who turned faint "in sunsets or at sight of stately persons." His poems in *The Germ* were six sonnets on pictures: "My Sister's Sleep," "The Sea Limits," "The Blessed Damsel," and the "World's Worth," so truly Catholic in its spirit.

After the death of *The Germ*, Rossetti went on writing with the one hand, painting with the other. In 1850 he met Elizabeth Siddall, the woman whose love and loss so terribly influenced his life. She was at that time a milliner's assistant in London, and was sitting to his friend Doverell. Soon Rossetti induced her to sit to him. From the first he went wild over her

beauty. She was very far indeed from being an ordinary artist's model. Her exquisite spirituality of face was responded to by much in the mind and soul. Rossetti soon discovered that she had an aptitude for art, and he set himself to teach her painting. She soon displayed a fine sense of color; and, inspired by the admiration the group of artists shed upon her, the beautiful creature began to make poems, which won also their enthusiastic praises. Her poems I have never seen, but her portrait of herself, in Mr. William Rossetti's possession, is remarkable. Though she flashes her color upon us as brilliantly as a poppy, she does no such justice, of course, to the spiritual aspect of her beauty as does Rossetti in the wonderful picture "Beata Beatrix," in which, after her death, he painted his memory of her. Miss Christina Rossetti has shown me another full length figure of her asleep in a chair, a sketch by her husband which gives one an idea of surpassing grace. Miss Rossetti, in speaking of her to me, dwelt on this grace. She and Mrs. Morris were brides of one year, and the artistic world was sore put to it to award the palm of beauty between those fair and dark women of almost weird loveliness.

Rossetti became engaged to Miss Siddall about 1853. The only cloud on his exuberant happiness was her very delicate health, and the fact that for want of money they were unable to marry. He was full of raptures over her. "Lizzie is looking lovelier than ever," he writes to Mr. Maddox Brown; "everyone adores her, and I have made sketches of her with iris stuck in her dear hair." At most inconvenient moments for other people he would fall in ecstasies over some accidental position of hers, and refuse to stir till he had sketched it. Or again she is designing with him illustrations for a book of Scotch Ballads. Allingham is editing for Routledges; and displaying, says this thorough lover, "far greater fecundity of convention and facility than mine." Sometimes he is wild with apprehension over her delicacy. In 1854 an eminent doctor declared that she had curvature of the spine. They were not married till 1860; and then when the marriage was approaching, it had to be postponed because of the bride's illness. Rossetti's letters at this period show great misery of mind. The marriage was again fixed for Rossetti's birthday, and had to be again postponed. Finally it took place on the 23rd of May, the unlucky month for marriages.

They were not long happy, poor things! After the birth of a baby, agonizing neuralgia seized on the delicate frame of the young wife. Laudanum was resorted to, to relieve her; and one unhappy night she took an overdose, and before her husband could bring help she was dead. They had been married only two years.

Henceforth her name is never mentioned in Rossetti's correspondence. All the world knows how he buried his poems in her coffin. Seven years later he was persuaded by his friends to recover them, and the story goes that the dead woman's hair had grown about them. However, that he buried his heart with her there is no doubt. For five years he wrote no more poetry; and from the day of her death the change set in which was to make him in time an almost solitary misanthrope. The year after her death he painted "Beata Beatrix"; the only important picture in which he had painted her during her lifetime was "The Princess Sabra."

In 1867 his miserable insomnia appeared. Two years later "Poems" was published, and suffered much from the Franco-Prussian war, which for the time being left men scant leisure for poetry. In "Poems" was included the exquisite "Ave," which praises God's Mother so well that one must