

**DANTE GABRIEL
ROSSETTI**

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Dante Gabriel Rossetti by F. G. Stephens

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F. G. STEPHENS

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Proserpine.

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

By

F. G. STEPHENS

Author of "Flemish Relics," "Landseer," etc.



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DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

PAINTER AND POET

CHAPTER I

1828—1851.

NOWHERE in Time's vista, where the forms of great men gather thickly, do we see many shapes of those who, as painters and as poets have been alike illustrious. Among the few to whom, equally on both accounts, conspicuous honours have been paid, none is superior to Rossetti, of whose genius doubly exalted the artists say that in design he was pre-eminent, while, on the other hand, the most distinguished poets of our age place him in the first rank with themselves. As to this prodigious, if not unique, distinction, of which the present age has not yet, perhaps, formed an adequate judgment, there can be no doubt that with regard to the constructive portion of his genius Rossetti was better equipped in verse than in design.

It is certain that our subject looked upon himself rather as a painter who wrote than as a verse-maker who painted. It is probable that the very facility, which, of course, had been won with enormous pains, and was maintained with characteristic energy and constant care, of his literary efforts led Rossetti to slightly undervalue the rare gifts of which his pen was the instrument, while, as to painting, his hard-won triumphs with design, colour, expression, form, and visible beauty of all sorts seemed to him the aptest as well as the most successful exponents of the passionate poetry it was, by one means or the other, his object to make manifest. His mission was that of a poet in art as in verse, and, by devoting the greater part of his life and all his more

arduous efforts to the former means, he made it plain that, notwithstanding all obstacles, the palette served his purpose better than the pen. I refer thus emphatically to Rossetti's genius in its double form as well as to the inevitable division of his energies which attended that circumstance, because, while I wonder at his achievements and know how great were the powers he employed, I cannot help thinking that a less complex nature than his would have done still more than, so far as time and space allow, these pages have to report of and illustrate.

Gabriel Charles Dante was the elder son, and, his sister Maria Francesca being his senior, the second child of Gabriele Rossetti and Frances Mary Lavinia, his wife, born Polidori; she wrote some essays and educational books of value, and died several years ago. William Michael, third child of this union (born in 1829), is the still living accomplished writer on poetry and art, and the tenant of a high post in the Inland Revenue Department, Somerset House. The fourth child is Miss Christina Georgina Rossetti (born 1830) whose *Goblin Market* attests her to be one of the most distinguished poetesses of this century. Gabriele Rossetti was descended from an Italian family of good standing, whose original name was Della Guardia, and he was born in 1783 at Vasto d'Ammonè, in the Abruzzi, the son of one Nicola, who was connected with the iron trade of that town. Gabriele, a man of culture, whose specialty was in profound studies of Dante—whence one of the names of his elder son—removed to Naples, and held an honourable office as custodian of antique bronzes in the then Bourbon Museum of the capital. This post and all his other possessions were forfeited in 1821, when he joined in revolutionary movements against Ferdinand I, King of the Two Sicilies, which, by the aid of the Austrians, were defeated and the chiefs proscribed. Among them Rossetti took refuge at Malta in 1822, and, ultimately, in London, where he arrived in 1825, and in the next year married the above-named lady, who was a daughter of Signor Gaetano Polidori, a secretary of Count Alfieri, the Italian poet and supposed second husband of Louisa of Stolberg, Countess of Albany, wife and widow of Charles Edward Stuart, the besotted Young Pretender. The wife of Signor Gaetano was a Miss Pierce, an Englishwoman. Besides the lady who became Mrs. Gabriele Rossetti, Gaetano had for his son Dr. Polidori, one of Lord

Byron's physicians, with whom his lordship fell foul in a certain *Epistle to Mr. Murray*, and who, with other things in verse and prose, wrote a sanguinary novelette called *The Vampire*, which still retains its shadow of a reputation. Arrived in London Gabriele Rossetti maintained himself as a teacher of his native tongue, and succeeded so well in that capacity that the Professorship of Italian in King's College was offered to him and accepted in 1831.

As might be expected of one possessing so many accomplishments and whose career had been marked by so much courage, the professor was a man of striking character and aspect, so that when I was introduced to him in 1848, and his grand climacteric was past, and, as with most Italians, a life of studies told upon him heavily, I could not but be struck by the noble energy of his face and by the high culture his expression attested, while a sort of eager, almost passionate, resolution seemed to glow in all he said and did. To a youngster, such as I was then, he seemed much older than his years, and while seated reading at a table with two candles behind him and, because his sight was failing, with a wide shade over his eyes, he looked a very Rembrandt come to life. The light was reflected from a manuscript placed close to his face, and, in the shadow which covered them, made distinct all the fineness and vigour of his sharply moulded features. It was half lost upon his somewhat shrunken figure wrapped in a student's dressing-gown, and shone fully upon the lean, bony, and delicate hands in which he held the paper. He looked like an old and somewhat imperative prophet, and his voice had a slightly rigorous ring speaking to his sons and their visitors. Near his side, but beyond the radiant circle of the candles—her erect, comely, and very English form, and face remarkable for its noble and beautiful matronhood, and but half visible in the flickering glow of the fire—sat Mrs. Rossetti, the mother of Dante Gabriel. He too, leaning his elbows upon the table and holding his face between both hands so that the long curling masses of his dark brown hair fell forward, sat on the other side, his attenuated features sharply outlined by the candle's light.

It is certain that the scene which thus impressed my memory was not presented at No. 38, Charlotte Street, Portland Place, one of those then very "respectable," but dull, and now much deteriorated