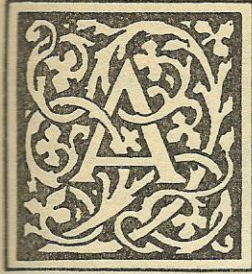


CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

My life is but a working-day,
Whose tasks are set aright:
A while to work, a while to pray,
And then a quiet night.
And then, please God, a quiet night
Where Saints and Angels walk in white.
One dreamless sleep from work and sorrow,
But reawakening on the morrow.

—*In Patience*

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As a study in heredity, the Rossetti family is most interesting. Genius seems so sporadic a stuff that when we find an outcrop along the line of a whole family we are wont to mark it on memory's chart in red. We talk of the Herschels, of Renan and his sister, of the Beechers, and the Fields, in a sort of awe, mindful that Nature is parsimonious in giving out transcendent talent, and may never do the like again. So who can forget the Rossettis—two brothers, Dante Gabriel and William Michael, and two sisters, Maria and Christina—each of whom stands forth as far above the ordinary, yet all strangely dependent upon one another?

The girls sing songs to the brothers, and to each other, inscribing poems to "my loving sister"; when Dante Gabriel, budding forth as artist, wishes a model for a Madonna, he chooses his sister Christina, and in his sketch mantles the plain features with a divine gentleness and heavenly splendor such as only the loving heart can conjure forth. In the last illness of Maria, Christina watches away the long, lagging hours of night, almost striving with her brothers for the right of serving; and at Birchington-on-the-Sea, Dante Gabriel waits for death, wearing out his friends by insane suspicions, and

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only the sister seems equal to ministering to this mind diseased, plucking from memory its rooted sorrow.

In a few years Christina passes out, and of the four, only William is left; and the task of his remaining years is to put properly before the world the deathless lives of his brother and sisters gone.

Gabriel Rossetti, father of the illustrious four, was an Italian poet who wrote patriotic hymns, and wrote them so well that he was asked to sing them elsewhere than in Italy. This edict of banishment was followed by an order that the poet be arrested and executed. The orders of banishment and execution appear quite Milesian viewed across the years, but to Rossetti it was no joke. To keep his head in its proper place and to preserve his soul alive, he departed one dark night for England. He arrived penniless, with no luggage save his lyre, but with muse intact. Yet it was an Italian lyre, and therefore of small avail for amusing Britons. Very naturally, Rossetti made the acquaintance of other refugees, and exile makes fast friends. It is only in prosperity that we throw our friends overboard. He came to know the Polidori family—Tuscan refugees—proud, intellectual and rich. He loved one of the daughters of Signior Polidori, and she loved him. He was forty and she was twenty-three—but what of that! A position as Professor of Languages was secured for him in King's College. He rented the house at Thirty-eight Charlotte Street, off Portland Place, and there,

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on February Seventeenth, Eighteen Hundred Twenty-seven, was born their first child, Maria Francesca; on May Twelfth, Eighteen Hundred Twenty-eight, was born Dante Gabriel; on September Twenty-fifth, Eighteen Hundred Twenty-nine, William Michael; on December Fifth, Eighteen Hundred Thirty, Christina Georgiana. The mother of this quartette was a sturdy little woman with sparkling wit and rare good sense. She used to remark that her children were all of a size, and that it was no more trouble to bring up four than one, a suggestion thrown in here gratis for the benefit of young married folks, in the hope that they will mark and inwardly digest. In point of well-ballasted, all-round character, fit for Earth or Heaven, none of the four Rossetti children was equal to his parents. They all seem to have had nerves outside of their clothes. Perhaps this was because they were brought up in London. A city is no place for children—nor grown people either, I often think. Birds and children belong in the country. Paved streets, stone sidewalks, smoke-begrimed houses, signs reading, "Keep Off the Grass," prying policemen, and zealous ash-box inspectors are insulting things to greet the gaze of the little immigrants fresh from God. Small wonder is it, as they grow up, that they take to drink and drugs, seeking in these a respite from the rattle of wheels and the never-ending cramp of unkind condition. But Nature understands herself: the second generation, city-bred,

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is impotent. ¶ No pilgrim from "the States" should visit the city of London without carrying two books: a Baedeker's "London" and Hutton's "Literary Landmarks." The chief advantage of the former is that it is bound in flaming red, and carried in the hand, advertises the owner as an American, thus saving all formal introductions. In the rustle, bustle and tussle of Fleet Street, I have held up my book to a party of Americans on the opposite sidewalk, as a ship runs up her colors, and they, seeing the sign, in turn held up theirs in merry greeting; and we passed on our way without a word, ships that pass in the afternoon and greet each other in passing. Now, I have no desire to rival the flamboyant Baedeker, nor to eclipse my good friend Laurence Hutton. But as I can not find that either mentions the name "Rossetti," I am going to set down (not in malice) the places in London that are closely connected with the Rossetti family, nothing extenuating ❧ ❧

London is the finest city in the world for the tourist who desires liberty as wide as the wind, and who wishes to live cheaply and live well. In New York, if you want lodgings at a moderate price, you must throttle your pride and forsake respectability; but they do things different in Lunnon, you know. From Gray's Inn Road to Portland Place, and from Oxford Street to Euston Road, there is just about a square mile—a section, as they say out West—of lodging-

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houses. Once this part of London was given up to the homes of the great and purse-proud and all that. It is respectable yet, and if you are going to be in London a week you can get a good room in one of these old-time mansions, and pay no more for it than you would pay for a room in an American hotel for one day. And as for meals, your landlady will get you anything you want and serve it for you in the daintiest style, and you will also find that a shilling and a little courtesy will go a very long way in securing creature comforts. American women in London can live in this way just as well as men. If you are a schoolma'am from Peoria, taking your vacation, follow my advice and make your home in the "Bedford District," within easy reach of Stopford Brooke's chapel, and your London visit will stand out forever as a bright oasis in memory's desert waste. All of which I put in here because Larry Hutton forgot to mention it and Mein Herr Baedeker did n't think it worth while.

When in London I usually get a room near the British Museum for ten shillings a week; and when I want to go anywhere I walk up to the Gower Street Station, past the house where the mother of Charles Dickens had her Young Ladies' Establishment, and buying a ticket at the "Booking-Office" am duly set down near the desired objective point. You can go anywhere by the "Metropolitan," or if you prefer to take Mr. Gladstone's advice, you climb to the top of an Oxford

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Street bus, and if you sit next the driver you have a directory, guide and familiar friend all at your service.

¶ Charlotte Street is a narrow little passage running just two squares, parallel with Portland Place. The houses are built in blocks of five (or more), of the plainest of plain bricks. The location is not far from the Gower Street Station of the Metropolitan Railway, and only a few minutes' walk from the British Museum. Number Thirty-eight is the last but one on the east side of the street. When I first saw it, there was a sign in the window, "Apartments," and back of this fresh cambric curtains. Then the window had been cleaned, too, for a single day of neglect in London tells its tale, as does the record of crime on a rogue's face. I paused and looked the place over with interest. I noted that the brass plate with the "No. 38" on it had been polished until it had been nearly polished out of sight, like a machine-made sonnet too much gone over. The steps had been freshly sanded, and a little lemon-tree nodding in one of the windows made the rusty old house look quite inviting. A stout little woman with a big market-basket, bumped into me and apologized, for I had stepped backwards to get a better look at the upstairs windows. The stout little woman set down her basket on the steps, took a bunch of keys from a pocket under her big, white, starched apron, selected one, turned to me, smiled, and asked, "Mebbe, Sir, you was n't looking for apartments, I dunno?"

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Then she explained that the house was hers, and that if I would step in she would show me the rooms. There were two of 'em she could spare. The first floor front was already let, and so was the front parlor—to a young barrister. Her husband was a ticket-taker at Euston Station, and did n't get much since last cut-down. Would I care to pay as much as ten shillings, and would I want breakfast? It would only be ninepence, and I could have either a chop or ham and eggs. She looked after her boarders herself, just as if they were her own folks, and only took respectable single gentlemen who came well recommended. She knew I would like the room, and if ten shillings was too much I could have the back room for seven and six.

I thought the back room would answer; but explained that I was an American and was going to remain in London only a short time. Of course the lady knew I was an American: she knew it from my hat and from my foreign accent and—from the red book I had in my hand. And did I know the McIntyres that lived in Michigan?

I evaded the question by asking if she knew the Rossettis who once lived in this house. "Oh, yes; I know Mr. William and Miss Christina. They came here together a year ago, and told me they were born here and that their brother Dante and their sister, too, were born here. I think they were all writin' folks, were n't they? Miss Rossetti anyway writes poetry,

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I know that. One of my boarders gave me one of her books for Christmas. I'll show it to you. You don't think seven and six is too much for a room like this, do you?"

I inwardly noted that the ceilings were much lower than those of my room in Russell Square and that the furniture was old and worn and that the room looked out on an army of sooty chimney-pots, but I explained that seven and six seemed a very reasonable price, and that ninepence for breakfast with ham and eggs was cheap enough, provided the eggs were strictly fresh. ¶ So I paid one week's rent in advance on the spot, and going back to Russell Square told my landlady that I had found friends in another part of the city and would not return for two days. My sojourn at Number Thirty-eight Charlotte Street developed nothing further than the meager satisfaction of sleeping for two nights in the room in which Dante Gabriel Rossetti was born, and making the acquaintance of the worthy ticket-taker, who knew all four of the Rossettis, as they had often passed through his gate.

Professor Rossetti lived for twelve years at Thirty-eight Charlotte Street; he then moved to Number Fifty in the next block, which is a somewhat larger house. It was here that Mazzini used to come. The house had been made over somewhat, and is now used as an office by the Registrar of Vital Statistics. This is the place where Dante Gabriel and a young man named

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Holman Hunt had a studio, and where another young artist by the name of William Morris came to visit them; and here was born "The Germ," that queer little chipmunk magazine in which first appeared "Hand and Soul" and "The Blessed Damozel," written by Dante Gabriel when eighteen, the same age at which Bryant wrote "Thanatopsis." William Bell Scott used to come here, too. Scott was a great man in his day. He had no hair on his head or face, not even eyebrows. Every follicle had grown weary and quit. But Mr. Scott was quite vain of the shape of his head, for well he might be, since several choice sonnets had been combed out of it. Sometimes when the wine went round and things grew merry, then sentimental, then confidential, Scott would snatch off his wig to display to the company his fine phrenological development, and tell a story about Nelson, who, too, used to wear a wig just like his, and after every battle would take it off and hand it over to his valet to have the bullets combed out of it.

The elder Rossetti died in this house, and was carried to Christ Church in Woburn Square, and thence to Highgate. His excellent wife waited to see the genius of her children blossom and be acknowledged. She followed thirty years later, and was buried in the same grave with her husband, where, later, Christina was to join them.

Frances Mary Polidori was born at Forty-two Broad

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Street, Golden Square, the same street in which William Blake was born. I found the street and Golden Square, but could not locate the house. The policeman on the beat declared that no one by the name of Rossetti or Blake was in business thereabouts; and further he never heard of Polly Dory. William Michael Rossetti's home is one in a row of houses called Saint Edmund's Terrace. It is near the Saint John's Road Station, just a step from Regent's Park, and faces the Middlesex Waterworks. It is a fine old house, built of stone I should judge, stuccoed on the outside. With a well-known critic I called there, and found the master wearing a long dressing-gown that came to his heels, a pair of new carpet slippers and a black plush cap, all so dusty that we guessed the owner had been sifting ashes in the cellar. He was most courteous and polite. He worships at the shrine of Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau, and regards America as the spot from whence must come the world's intellectual hope. "Great thoughts, like beautiful flowers, are produced by transplantation and the commingling of many elements." These are his words, and the fact that the Rossetti genius is the result of transplanting need not weigh in the scale as 'gainst the truth of the remark. Shortly after this call, at an Art Exhibition, I again met William Michael Rossetti. I talked with him some moments—long enough to discover that he was not aware we had ever met. This caused me to be rather

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less in love with the Rossetti genius than I was before. ¶ The wife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti died, aged twenty-nine, at Fourteen Chatham Place, near Blackfriars Bridge. The region thereabouts has been changed by the march of commerce, and if the original house where the artist lived yet stands I could not find it. It was here that the Preraphaelites made history: Madox Brown, Burne-Jones, Ruskin, William Morris and the MacDonalds. Burne-Jones married one of the MacDonald daughters; Mr. Poynter, now Director of the National Gallery, another; Mr. Kipling still another—with Rudyard Kipling as a result, followed in due course by Mulvaney, Ortheris and Learoyd, who are quite as immortal as the rest.

At this time Professor Rossetti was dead, and William Michael, Maria, Christina and the widowed mother were living at One Hundred Sixty-six Albany Street, fighting off various hungry wolves that crouched around the door. Albany Street is rather shabby now, and was then, I suppose. At One Hundred Twelve Albany Street lives one Dixon, who takes marvelous photographs of animals in the Zoological Gardens, with a pocket camera, and then enlarges the pictures a hundred times. These pictures go the round world over and command big prices. Mr. Dixon was taking for me, at the National Gallery, the negatives from which I made photogravures for my Ruskin-Turner book. Mr. Dixon knows more in an artistic and literary

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way than any other man in London (I believe), but he is a modest gentleman and only emits his facts under cross-examination or under the spell of inspiration. Together we visited the house at One Hundred Sixty-six Albany Street.

It was vacant at the time, and we rummaged through every room, with the result that we concluded it makes very little difference where genius is housed. On one of the windows of a little bedroom we found the word "Christina" cut with a diamond. When and by whom it was done I do not know. Surely the Rossettis had no diamonds when they lived here. But Mr. Dixon had a diamond and with his ring he cut beneath the word just noted the name, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti." I have recently heard that the signature has been identified as authentic by a man who was familiar with Rossetti's handwriting ❧ ❧

When the firm of Morris and Company, Dealers in Art Fabrics, was gotten under way, and Dante Gabriel had ceased to argue details with that pre-eminently sane man, William Morris, his finances began to prosper. Morris directed and utilized the energies of his partners. He marshaled their virtues into a solid phalanx and marched them on to victory. No doubt that genius usually requires a keeper. But Morris was a genius himself and a giant in more ways than one, for he ruled his own spirit, thus proving himself greater than one who taketh a city.

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In Eighteen Hundred Sixty-two, we find Dante Gabriel throwing out the fact that his income was equal to about ten thousand dollars a year. He took the beautiful house at Eighteen Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, near the little street where lived a Scotchman by the name of Thomas Carlyle, and in the same block where afterwards lived George Eliot, and where she died. He wanted his brother and sisters and his mother to share his prosperity, and so he planned that they should all come and live with him; and besides, Mr. Swinburne and George Meredith were to come, too. It was to be one big happy family. But the good old mother knew the human heart better than did her brilliant son. She has left on record these words: "Yes, my children all have talent, great talent; I only wish they had a little commonsense!"

So for the present she remained with William, her daughters, and her two aged unmarried sisters in the plain old house in Albany Street. But Dante Gabriel moved to Cheyne Walk, and began that craze for collecting blue china that has swept like a blight over the civilized world. His collection was sold for three thousand five hundred dollars some years after—to pay his debts—less than one-half of what it had cost him. Yet when he had money he generously divided it with the folks up in Albany Street. But by and by William, too, got to making money, and the quarters at Number One Hundred Sixty-six were abandoned for something

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better. ¶ William was married and had taken a house of his own—I don't know where. The rest of the household consisted of the widow, Mrs. Rossetti, Miss Charlotte Lydia Polidori, Maria and Christina—and seven cats. And so we find this family of five women living in peace and comfort, with their books and pictures and cats, at Thirty Torrington Square, in a drowsy, faded, ebb-tide mansion. Maria was never strong; she fell into a decline and passed away. The management of the household then devolved on Christina. Her burdens must have been heavy in those days, or did she make them light by cheerful doing? She gave up society, refused the thought of marriage, and joined that unorganized sisterhood of mercy—the women who toil that others may live. But she sang at her work, as the womanly woman ever does. For although a woman may hold no babe in her arms, the lullaby leaps to her tongue, and at eventide she sings songs to the children of her brain—sweet idealization of the principle of mother-love.

Christina Rossetti comes to us as one of those splendid stars that are so far away they are seen only at rare intervals. She never posed as a “literary person”—reading her productions at four-o’clocks, and winning high praise from the unbonneted and the discerning society editor. She never even sought a publisher. Her first volume of verses was issued by her grandfather Polidori unknown to her—printed by his own labor

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when she was seventeen and presented to her. What a surprise it must have been to this gentle girl to have one of her own books placed in her hands! There seems to have been an almost holy love in this proud man's heart for his granddaughter. His love was blind, or near-sighted at least, as love is apt to be (and I am glad!), for some of the poems in this little volume are sorry stuff. Later, her brothers issued her work and found market for it; and once we find Dante Gabriel almost quarreling with that worthy Manxman, Hall Caine, because the Manxman was compiling a volume of the best English sonnets and threatening to leave Christina Rossetti out.

Christina had the faculty of seizing beautiful moments, exalted feelings, sublime emotions, and working them up into limpid song that comes echoing to us as from across soft seas. In all her lines there is a half-sobbing undertone—the sweet minor chord that is ever present in the songs of the Choir Invisible, whose music is the gladness as well as the sadness of the world.

I have a dear friend who is an amateur photographic artist, which be it known is quite a different thing from a kodak fiend. The latter is continually snapping a machine at incongruous things; he delights in catching people in absurd postures; he pictures the foolish, the irrelevant, the transient and the needless. But what does my friend picture? I'll tell you. He catches pictures only of beautiful objects: swaying stalks of

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goldenrod, flights of thistle-down, lichen on old stone walls, barks of trees, oak-leaves, bunches of acorns, single sprays of apple-blossoms. Last Spring he found two robins building a nest in a cherry-tree: he placed his camera near them, and attaching a fine wire to spring the shutter, took a picture of Mr. and Mrs. Robin Redbreast laying down the first coarse straws for their nest. Then he took a picture every day for thirty days of that nest—from the time four blue eggs are shown until four, wide-open mouths are held hungrily for dainty grubs. This series of photographs forms an Epic of Creation. So, if you ask me to solve the question of whether photography is art, I'll answer: it all depends upon what you picture, and how you present it. ¶ Christina Rossetti focused her thought on the beautiful object and at the best angle, so the picture she brings us is nobly ordered and richly suggestive.

And so the days passed in study, writing, housework, and caring for old ladies three. Dante Gabriel, talented, lovable, erratic, had gotten into bad ways, as a man will who turns night into day and tries to get the start of God Almighty, thinking he has found a substitute for exercise and oxygen. Finally he was taken to Birchington, on the Isle of Thanet (where Octave found her name). He was mentally ill, to a point where he had through his delusions driven away all his old-time friends. ¶ Christina, aged fifty-one, and the mother, aged eighty-two, went to take care of him, and they

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did for him with all the loving tenderness what they might have done for a sick baby; but with this difference—they had to fight his strength. Yet still there were times when his mind was sweet and gentle as in the days of old; and toward the last these periods of restful peace increased, and there were hours when the brother, sister and aged mother held sweet converse, almost as when children they were taught at this mother's knee. Dante Gabriel Rossetti died April Ninth, Eighteen Hundred Ninety-two. His grave is in the old country churchyard at Birchington.

Two years afterward the mother passed out; in Eighteen Hundred Ninety, Eliza Polidori died, aged eighty-seven; and in Eighteen Hundred Ninety-three, her sister Charlotte joined her, aged eighty-four. In Christ's Church, Woburn Square, you can see memorial tablets to these fine souls, and if you get acquainted with the gentle old rector he will show you a pendant star and crescent, set with diamonds, given by the Sultan during the Crimean war, "To Miss Charlotte Lydia Polidori for distinguished services as Nurse." And he will also show you a silver communion set marked with the names of these three sisters, followed by that of "Christina Georgiana Rossetti."

And so they all went to their soul's rest and left Christina alone in the big house with its echoing halls—too big by half for its lonely, simple-hearted mistress and her pets. She felt that her work was done, and feeling

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so, the end soon came. She died December Twenty-ninth, Eighteen Hundred Ninety-four—passing from a world that she had never much loved, where she had lived a life of sacrifice, suffering many partings, enduring many pains. Glad to go, rejoicing that the end was nigh, and soothed by the thought that beyond lay a Future, she fell asleep.

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