

JOHN RUSKIN: THE FINAL YEARS

A Survey of the Ruskin Correspondence in The John Rylands Library

By ROBIN SKELTON, M.A.

LECTURER IN ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

I

A GROUP of most interesting letters from Ruskin to several of the friends of his later life, together with much Ruskiniana, largely concerning the foundation, running, and fate of the Guild of St. George was recently presented to the John Rylands Library by Mrs. H. D. Rawnsley of Grasmere, Westmorland. Ruskin's correspondents were Mrs. Fanny Talbot (1161),¹ her son Quartus (1163), and Miss Blanche Atkinson (1162). The letters to Miss Atkinson constitute, in their fund of opinions and in their revealing of a relationship not previously considered as important in Ruskin's life, a body of material too important for summary treatment in this survey. It is hoped that it may be possible to edit them for publication some time in the future. The letters to the Talbot family, however, though interesting, are only intermittently so. Their importance lies in the total picture they create, rather than in the details they give. Perhaps the same can be said of the correspondence between Mrs. Talbot and her fellow members of the Guild of St. George (1164 and 1166), and of the charming letters of Francesca Alexander to Mrs. Talbot (1165), many parts of which are to be found in another form in the different volumes of *Christ's Folk in the Appenines*.

It is therefore possible to survey the majority of this material in such a way as to present summarily the picture of Ruskin as

¹ References throughout are to Rylands English manuscripts. The Ruskin Correspondence comprises Eng. MSS. 1161-1166. I am indebted to the Ruskin Literary Trustees and to George Allen & Unwin Ltd. for permission to quote copyright material.

an old man which they build up for us at some length, and this is my endeavour in the present article.

II. *December 1874—February 1877*

We are introduced to Ruskin and Mrs. Talbot in the year 1875. Mrs. Talbot has made over a parcel of land near Barmouth to the Guild of St. George, and, as a consequence, receives the goodwill and gratitude of the Master. The note of cheerfulness and gratitude does not, however, persist. The atmosphere of depression and sickness hanging over Ruskin's head is soon perceptible. "Out of sorts and unable for my work this Xmas, and have been more like taking to my bed like Canon Kingsley than coming to begin St. George's work" (29.1.75/1161. 3). "The feeling of exhaustion is thus so complicated with quite inevitable future of sorrow or disappointment that I scarcely know how far to receive it as definite warning" (3.2.75/1161. 4). "So very ill this Spring" (20.7.75/1161. 8). This exhaustion and illness calls forth all the sympathy and advice which Mrs. Talbot has at her disposal, and results in Ruskin's writing to her many letters in which he examines his spiritual health. On 29 November 1875 he thanks her for her letter and her "most helpful warning", presumably against spiritualism, and goes on to say,

I hear facts about Spiritualism & have seen some which gave me—and still give—the deepest anxiety to know more of the new dispensation under which we live—but the sorrow which has made that change upon me you saw—is the very strongest quarrel I have against the danger. For I know that—if she *can* come to me, she will, without my dishonouring the love I bear her by impatience or mean methods of appeal; and if any *good* angel is to be sent to me, *she* will be sent . . . I seek no more than *all* may find—if God chooses to tell me, by dream—vision—or miracle—more than I yet know—He will do it at His own time and as he sees best and according to the degree in which I now obey what light he has given me (1161. 9).

It is the possibility of the return to him, in spirit form, of Rose de la Touche, that colours many of his letters at this time. His presentation of himself as a Man of Sorrows, and his revealing of different aspects of this, somewhat "romantic", side of his nature, make the reading of many of these letters at once a moving and an embarrassing experience. Mrs. Talbot, adopting the

role of, at one time the understanding and maternal nurse, and at another the sympathetic and reverent disciple, produces from Ruskin letters in which authoritatively expressed views of the state of the Ruskinian Crusade are mingled with personal and sentimental revelations. The profound rubs shoulders with the absurd, the clear vision of spiritual values with the neurotic obsessions of a sick man. Thus we read in a letter of 21 February 1876, Your warning is of profound interest to me, in its further proof of some great reality in all the evil of these things. Do not be in fear for me. I have passed through too much to be in danger now. I believed the worst the evil spirits could do against her and me was done while she lived. But if they come between us again, they will get no more victory than hitherto—*My dangers are in unbelief of—not in seeking—the other world* (1161. 11).

The personal and public explorations are fused together. It appears as if Ruskin were intent upon presenting the drama of his own difficulties to the public.

Nor do I quite see where I am being led, myself,—or I would tell you, and my other true readers, plainly. But I am sure the road is right—and that in following it, we shall more and more discern, where is the place of our rest.

Expositions of the Christian faith are frequent.

“*Che fece per viltate, etc.*”

“Who made, because of his vileness (or cowardice), the Great Refusal.” It was long supposed to have been written by Dante, of Pope Celestine V’s abdication of the Popedom. But later commentators . . . saw the true meaning. It is without any doubt to my own mind—said of the young man who “went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (15.3.76/1161. 12).

There are already indications that the confusion between the private Rose fantasy, and the public Christianity is growing dangerous. “Rose taught herself Greek, to read her New Testament—and used to call me by St. John’s name in Greek, though she never would in English” (17.4.1876/1161. 19). The power of faith is presented in slightly naive terms.

If Christians separated themselves from unbelievers, and lived commonly honest & faithful lives they would always have the former & latter rain in his season—and as much sunshine as they liked (11.5.76/1161. 24).

I am very like Habbakuk and Jonah in temper, and cry out when I’m hurt like any child—not in unreverence, but because I’m not afraid of God’s being angry with me for *that* in the least (23. 5. 76/1171. 25).

. . . the real government of the world—its storm, sunshine and terror or desolation, are all in relation to the soul of man (3.6.76/1161. 26).

These three passages are indicative of the position in which Ruskin found himself. Believing in his own mission to teach and to build a new Christian Community by means of the Guild of St. George, and comparing himself either directly or obliquely with biblical prophets who found themselves in direct personal contact with God, he cannot understand why he should be ill, or why he should have lost his Rose. Is the basis of his faith at fault? Doubt and guilt harass him even as he makes the strongest protestations of Faith, and teaches in letters and in published writings the true way of life, which he himself, as a living example, endeavours to practise. Perhaps the community, rather than John Ruskin, is at fault.

The question of miraculous answer to prayer lies as far as I know—at the root of all essential religious trial & difficulty—and assuredly, we are not ordered to ask for miraculous, but for our daily bread. But I believe miracles might still be wrought, if not only we ourselves deserved them but the Christian church deserved them. We all suffer for the faults and faithlessness of all (2.9.76/1161. 36).

There is, however, a feeling that Ruskin is himself a little apart from the normal ruck of humanity. He has been afflicted by “evil spirits”, as a person, rather than as one of a sick community. His breadth of mind and that very profundity of thought which makes so much of his work so valuable will not allow him to see his own tragedy as anything but significant on the highest dramatic and spiritual plane. The curious mixture of, perhaps defensive, byronic arrogance and very real misery, in several letters discussing his melancholy, has a most moving effect upon the reader.

All *natural* griefs, however great, fill, but don't break hearts; whatever *you* feel of sorrow, only makes you kinder and *more* capable of affection rather than less.

But a quite horrible, unnatural sorrow (that is to say not of the kind which human nature is meant to bear, like this of the death of my mistress in madness), does, where the heart has been wholly given, break it, wholly; so that there is no true life in it any more. I have plenty of sympathy & compassion left—but no love. . . . But you can't help me with affection—if the dead live—some day, also, I shall live again—but I am as dead as they, now (27.11.76/1161. 37).

The Rose de la Touche story has been told many times, and Ruskin's own version of it, which he sends to Mrs. Talbot in his next letter, three weeks later, tells us nothing that we do not

already know from other sources. Yet it is an important document, as showing us to what extent Ruskin was able to present the affair to himself dispassionately and justly, even while another part of his mind was searching for those "supernatural" explanations and interpretations that eventually led him to confuse Rose with St. Ursula, and to suffer a serious mental breakdown.

Dear Mrs. Talbot,

I am indeed grateful for this loving & lovely letter, and will take the regard you have given me trustfully—and lean on it, to do which is when I look into my mind the worst of the difficulties is that hardness in me.—I never can believe that people really care for me, I fancy they don't know themselves and will change.—and that no love but one's mother's, or true mistress's—is to be trusted. This feeling has been chiefly fired in me by the failure of Rosie's mother to me; she was my very dearest friend, while Rosie was young—and I loved her deeply—and went to her always for advice, and help—and amusement—and comfort—and when Rosie grew to be eighteen instead of eleven, and was brought to London to be "brought out"—I drew back out of the way quite properly and never thought of or hoped anything—But the child didn't like it, and questioned my cousin about me, and then came forward herself—and asked me "if I would stay put as we used to be for three years, and then ask her; being ready *then* to receive yes, or no?"

It may be a grave question whether I ought not at once to have refused and told her it was right that we should think no more of each other—with such hardness as might have made her think she could do as her parents wished without giving me much pain.

Were the time to return—I should do again just what I did—say that I was her servant in all things, always. Then she was very happy—and that went on for a while; but I insisted that she should tell her Father—She knew that to do so would be to separate us at once—and hesitating—showed my letter to some "friend"—who told the Father,—thus everything inducing him—himself a man of the strictest honour, though hard & selfish—to think *me* treacherous, and his daughter disobedient—His morals—and much more his friends'—were alike offended—and to my utter horror—the mother failed me also—They stopped all intercourse between us at once—Rosie did not care but said—"Wait—and it will be all right."

That went on for a year and a half—Then, when the father and mother found they made no progress, and that Rosie was just as steady to me as the first day, the mother got quite furious with rage—went to Perth, where the people connected with my former wife lived—got whatever they chose to say of me under their hand,—and brought all this to Rosie. The child had never been brought into any contact with evil or evil thoughts before:—she loved and trusted her mother—distracted herself—and therefore at last me—she gave me up: but, (not the sorrow, but) the *horror* of it—effectually broke down her life. For a year she remained silent to me—then gradually by Mrs. Cowper Temple's steady friendship and effort, (the *ψίλλυ* of Sesame and Lilies)—she was restored to me:—but not the same,—partly ashamed of *herself*—partly in

agony of conscience at what was now direct and resolute disobedience to her parents in holding any communication with me—and partly in fits of unconquerable doubt of *me*;—her brain gradually gave way—and one of the last scenes between us was long and vain pleading on my part that she would not send a letter to her Father full of *frantic* reproach.

We had—altogether—about three happy days together, before she died—but I had one entirely happy week at Chamonix, when she was writing me joyful letters as I was coming home to her in 1874; and stopped to see my poor old Chamonix guide and the places where I used to be with my Father & Mother:

I have never heard of or read, a story of so bitter tragedy;—the bride of *Lammermuir* is like it, but Rosie was a much more perfect and holy creature than Lucy Ashton.

So you see, I have not much of my old self left—but what I am, is faithfully & gratefully yours:

J. RUSKIN

Venice, 15 December 1876 (1161. 38).

After this almost entirely dispassionate relation of the story, the letters relapse into triviality, day to day remarks and notes of little consequence. But it seems that in early February 1877 Mrs. Talbot must have written another letter about Ruskin's feelings concerning Rose, and his reply, dated 18 February 1877 is one of the last he wrote before the well-known mental breakdown of that year occurred. The old theme of spiritualism, of Rosie's being near in spirit, is revived again, and the confusion between her and St. Ursula becomes, for the first time in this series of letters, pitifully obvious.

. . . Do you know—you are a very inconsistent Mama, to be anxious now because you think I have no clear sense of Rosie's being near me, when you said all you could to keep me from trusting to the only evidence I had of her being so! One reason that it fails from me is that I am never quite sure how far it is right to be still dependent on selfish affection and hope. But in the Christmas teaching, it was nearly all St. Ursula and very little of Rosie—and I do wonder why she leaves me so long without sign (18.2.77/1161. 42).

A severe illness follows, and there are no more letters from Ruskin to Mrs. Talbot for two months.

III. *May 1877—December 1884*

In March 1877 we have the second of Ruskin's letters to Quartus Talbot, the first having been written in 1874 (1163. 1) and having been concerned only with thanking him for a gift of land to the Guild of St. George. Ruskin, still in Venice, remarks that his life "is entirely contest with every form of

things active round me—how can it be cheerful? . . . Oh me what a brute you will think me—indeed I *am* one in Italy, it drives me wild with fury to open my eyes there—and I get more irritable from continual sense of failure of my drawing power—& memory of happy old days—thirty years ago ” (5.3.77/1163. 2).

Venice is always filled with sadness and nostalgia for Ruskin at this period. The Talbots' decision to join him there is met with enthusiasm. Quartus is told “ It *will* be good for me to see you all here, you affectionate things ” (26.3.77/1163. 3). And again a month later Ruskin writes “ I am so very glad you are coming ” (30.4.77/1163. 4). In May the Talbots are in Venice and the correspondence is reduced to notes concerning meetings. It is now that Ruskin begins the long series of chess games with Mrs. Talbot, that make up a great part of their later correspondence.

Little of great interest occurs in the correspondence for some months. In July, once more in Lancashire, Ruskin writes mostly about the Guild of St. George. Mrs. Talbot gives more money and is thanked. Optimism is expressed over the venture. “ I wish every rock in England were as well looked after as our *Rock* will be ” (17.8.77/1161. 52). In September Ruskin confesses to Mrs. Talbot that he is “ Quite unfit for work yet ” (5.9.77/1161. 53), and in November writes “ Neither my life nor my strength allow me to do the twentieth part of what I would ” (28.11.77/1161. 58).

Trouble occurs in the Ranks of St. George. Blanche Atkinson is scolded for her misdemeanours. People working for the Guild have problems which Ruskin must attend to. But in January 1878 Ruskin can write cheerfully to Quartus, “ The Board of Trade are about to sanction our Guild ” (1163. 7). Emotional demands are constantly being made on the ill and tired Master. The death of Quartus Talbot's wife, produces on the same day, letters to him and to his mother. To Quartus he writes

It is very lovely of you to write to me and to feel as if I could help you. I don't know if I can ; just now, but I have every hope that you will soon have the infinite comfort of knowing that she is not gone from you, but with you still, and with all who love her, when they need her most. and that she is gone before to “ prepare a place for you ”, I have lived myself in such convictions—

(rather let me say, perceptions,) for these last three years, and only so have been able to live or work at all.

Yet it is true that I have not known the bitterness of the actual loss of the near & possessed love—I only changed the sense of her being far away from me on earth, for her being near me in heaven. But I am sure you will have strength given you for your need. (19. 1. 78/1163. 8).

To Mrs. Talbot he confesses “. . . nor indeed can I ever say much concerning death—it is two horrible, *without* the other world—and too trifling *with* it ” (19.1.78/1161. 62).

The strain of writing on this subject, as well as the difficulties attendant upon his work on the Guild of St. George, took their toll of Ruskin, and it is not surprising to find him describing himself a little later as “ sorely overstrained with emotional work ” (8.2.78/1161. 64). Illness follows, once again, and on Easter Monday Mrs. Talbot is again reminded of his weakness and of his worry over the complexity of St. George’s affairs (1161. 66). It appears that Mrs. Talbot suggests they should meet, but this results only in another, and more emphatic statement of the situation. “ I am entirely unable to see my friends *at all* just now. I must keep quiet of all business and all emotion . . . above all, I must not be talked to or questioned about St. George, till my own time ” (8.5.78/1161. 67). In June, however, the friends do meet again, for a letter to Quartus says “ Very Joyful I shall be to see you with your Mother on Monday afternoon ” (16.6.78/1163. 9).

The correspondence for the next two years is sparse. Notes about St. George, the decision never to leave Brantwood again, comments on the setting up of the Ruskin Museum at Sheffield ; these compose the letters of the next sixteen months. And in October 1879, once again Ruskin expresses himself “ sadly tired ” after “ a week of responsibility & extreme excitement ” (1161. 72).

From this time onward the periods of ill-health increase in frequency. The letters of 1880-3 are mostly concerned with the gifts of Mrs. Talbot and others to the Guild of St. George, punctuated by casual notes on his writing activities and general state of health. Every now and again some query of Mrs. Talbot’s produces an interesting passage of explanation or opinion. His views on David Cox, for instance,

David Cox is a meritorious and honest painter of very small capacity—but very vigorous in manner, which has enabled the dealers to make him a fashion—and realise many thousands in commission on drawings not actually worth more than five or ten pounds each. A good, large Cox, for people who like this kind of thing—is worth thirty or forty guineas—All prices above that are absurd and iniquitous—and for museums or schools his drawings are perfectly worthless—and for most part mischievous.

I have just sent thirty lovely Prout pencils to Deford to be mounted. They belong to W Prouts son—and I hope to be able to buy them—perhaps I shall come to *you* about that! (2.12.79/1161. 73.)

Ruskin spends a good deal of time in acquiring objects of interest for the Ruskin Museum and the Guild of St. George. In February 1881 he receives some rough diamonds, which interest him extremely, and which he sends to the Museum, deciding also to write a mineralogical paper (1161. 79-80). Then illness strikes again, and on 1 April in a letter thanking Mrs. Talbot for helping him with his servant problem, he writes, “the illness this time has been a very solemn thing to myself. . . . I hope my strength has not been seriously broken by it . . . and that this second warning of my danger, in certain directions of effort, will be more useful to me than the first” (1.4.81/1161. 82). There are only two letters surviving of those written to Mrs. Talbot during the remainder of this year, both giving descriptions of his study for which she asked.

The spring of 1882 finds Ruskin with influenza, and in the autumn one of the few sizeable letters of this year tells us he is “recovering strength gradually”, presumably after another illness. It is in this letter that he remarks, concerning difficulties over some of the Guild cottages, “I did not calculate on the interference of Sanitary Commissioners; and in future, would much rather knock the cottages down altogether than pay for improvements under other peoples orders” (15.9.82/1161. 89). In the following spring once again he has to tell Mrs. Talbot “It is necessary to my very life that no additional excitements should be caused me; if I broke down *now*—I could never go on again. I never *dreamed* of my friends thinking of coming—they should hold their breath with fear—and now if ever—leave me to my task” (2.5.83/1161. 100).

He is not to be left quite untroubled by requests, however, for twelve days later he writes to Mrs. Talbot again in the same

strain, this time with a touch of desperation. "You may certainly send me your drawings to look at—but not just now—Remember simply that *any* day I may go mad, or fall paralysed—without having had the least warning of my danger—and don't at present add to my work" (14.5.83/1161. 103).

He cannot, himself, however, relax his interest in people and affairs. In November and December he writes about the school run by Mrs. Bunney, and announces his intention to write a *Fors* on the subject of schools (1161. 105-7). In January 1884 he returns to the subject, Blanche Atkinson having apparently annoyed him by interfering in the school's running. "I am writing a *Fors* which you must read before thinking of this matter any more. I wrote to Blanche positively that neither *Writing nor Arithmetic* were to be taught—Please don't let her interfere any more . . ." (7.1.84/1161. 108). Later in this month Ruskin and Mrs. Talbot begin the games of postal chess which take up so much space in the remainder of their correspondence.

Perhaps at this point Ruskin's attitude towards and ability in playing chess should be described. Mrs. Talbot almost invariably won the games they played, and when she did so, Ruskin would suggest that his mistake occurred at a certain point, and they would play out the game again after that move had been altered. At one time they were playing three games simultaneously. Ruskin also felt that the game could be made more complex and exciting by adding various restrictive rules, making certain pieces only able to move in order to "take" other pieces, and altering the formation of the "line of battle". His manner of playing had more impulse than calculation about it, and his general tendency was to overlook the obvious threat in order to explore the possibilities of an almost fantastic degree of subtlety being present in the motives behind an often quite innocuous move of his opponent. He threw a good deal of his teaching fervour and imaginative energy into these games, and in 1885 and 1886 the correspondence is almost completely conducted in small notes appended to a list of chess moves. Amusing contre-temps sometimes occur, when Ruskin misreads one of Mrs. Talbot's moves, or copies out half a game inaccurately. But it

does seem that this, more than perhaps any other aspect of the correspondence, gave Ruskin some relaxation, and helped him to fight the darkness that always threatened his mind. The letters are not, however, solely concerned with chess. Ruskin expresses annoyance at the press reports of one of his lectures (7.2.84/1161. 119), discusses his arranging of the minerals in the British Museum (26.3.84/1161, 125), and refers to the possibility of buying more drawings for the Guild (20.11.84/1161. 127).

Illness returns. In December 1884 he writes, "I was tempted by a deceptive feeling of strength into doing more than I was able at Oxford, and am now thrown down into a ditch of cold and misery in which I feel as if I were never to work more" (17.12.84/1161. 128).

Mrs. Talbot must have written by return, and probably, in an effort to distract his mind, introduced the subject of acting. Ruskin becomes quite animated, "Yes, I saw Wilson B. in Hamlet, and twice wrote to him begging him to change his treatment of it. But, while he has perfect power of understanding a not ungenerous Byzantine noble like Claudian, he is—and for ever will be incapable of understanding a syllable of the love or thought of Hamlet. I found he only misunderstood more and more as I told him, and had to give him up" (19.12.84/1161. 129). Two days later, he writes again, "I never saw Charles Kean in Hamlet—but can quite believe he was right and noble in it. He was a gentleman—and kept the classical traditions.

"I don't think it a finer play than many others—my favourites are the historical ones—but alas, now I scarcely read anything but French, in way of Comedy" (21.12.84/1161. 130).

In this letter also he thanks Mrs. Talbot for an offer of money. "Of course I won't accept that money. If other people won't help me, as well as you, after all you've done, I shall give up."

The letters for the remainder of the year give only details of his health, and of his loneliness at Christmas time, for, he says, he has no relations left, and is envious of the children's happiness. On 30 December (1161. 134), however, we first have news of a new project—*Praeterita*—and it appears natural in Ruskin to decide to begin his autobiography at this period. Nostalgia for

the past, and the sense of present frailty are so often expressed, and each time he tries to work with any real fervour on the Guild of St. George, he becomes tired and ill. Perhaps, one feels, only the past remains secure to him. Possibly the decision was accelerated by his thinking of the letters of Carlyle, to which Mrs. Talbot must have referred, for he writes,

Yes—you are so right about Carlyle—but he had partly become wandering in his mind when he resolved to publish those letters. Froude had been forced to promise and had no choice.

I finished Fors that I might have time for a business like autobiography, saying what good I know of myself and other people in a quiet way—noting my own principal known mistakes in my own business—bookwriting or the like—and leaving all domestic or personal distress to be guessed or gossiped of—by whoever likes to gossip or guess—being assured by me that it's none of their business—and that whatever they guess or say will always be wrong.

Throwing together some old diaries & the like—and burning useless stuff—is not a cheerful Xmas employment. (30.12.84/1161. 134.)

IV. *January 1885—February 1886*

Ruskin's decision to begin his autobiography, and to destroy all "useless stuff" evoked, as we might expect, an anxious query from Mrs. Talbot. She cannot bear to think of anything of the Master's being lost or destroyed. Ruskin reassures, and no doubt delights, her, by saying that he is "only destroying what is ridiculous—or useless—I've a good mind to send *you* some of the absurd ones—! poems and such like! to burn or not as you see good" (1.1.85/1161. 135). The response to this letter seems to have been immediate, for on 3 January Ruskin writes again, "I really must put up a packet of nonsense for you! I quite forgot how far you had seen through me already but cannot look for any today its so dark. I am sure I could not leave them to any one who has cared more kindly for me" (1161. 136). A few days later a packet is sent off. "Please do just as you feel or think about anything you know or wish to say—now—and hereafter about me. Just by way of a beginning of rubbish I've sent you the cover and most of the sheets of my first sketch book. 1831—when I was 12. It has some pencil scrawls at Dover and Canterbury and much MS. of my proposed Mineralogical dictionary! I have taken out some leaves which I mean to frame & preserve referring to the book only as *given* to you so that you can do just what you like with it—

I shall find some more amusing ones soon I doubt not.” (6.1.85/1161. 137.)

The St. George Guild Report of 1885 goes to the printers this month, and Ruskin tells Mrs. Talbot that he will let her help with the work in Italy if the public do not respond to his appeal for funds (14.1.85/1161. 142). Thackeray occurs as a topic later in the month, and Ruskin is, as usual, forthright.

Thackeray’s blasphemy is only deadly to those already not believing in Prayer—and is the deadlier, just because really good people don’t see the venom in it.”

The sentence, full written, would have been,

“ All night, Amelia,—poor fool—, was praying for George—much good her prayers could do him!—he lying all the while with a bullet through his heart. (18.1.85/1161. 144.)

“ Quarry ” (Quartus) Talbot is, we learn, to do some drawings for Ruskin—probably at Mrs. Talbot’s request. Ruskin says he wants “ any little easily packed bit of his window studies ” (24.1.85/1161. 147). There is the feeling that the jobs are rather for Quarry’s than for Ruskin’s benefit.

The questions and requests continue. Ruskin does not, however, lose his sense of humour. “ What a lovely innocent question you ask me about the scholars I am seeking—Pretty girls, beautifully dressed and exquisitely mannered, between the ages of ten and seventeen inclusive ” (30.1.85/1161. 150). There are no further references to this subject for some time. The correspondence continues with constant chess moves, and casual references to Ruskin’s activities and opinions—opinions eagerly sought after by his correspondent. “ I *know nothing* of this affair of Egypt . . . but *believe* the whole war to have been caused by British Shareholders ” (13.2.85/1161. 157). “ The Egyptian campaign is ‘ blockheadism ’ ” (15.2.85/1161. 158). Mrs. Talbot sends him £300, for which he thanks her (19.2.85/1161. 160). He tells her of his buying and then selling as too ambitious for his plans some Paros marble (21.2.85/1161. 161). He finds he is losing yet another game of chess (23.2.85/1161. 162) and once again retraces his steps (26.2.85/1161. 164). He confesses “ I’m getting on with other things better than my chess, but the chess amuses me greatly ” (9.3.85/1161. 170). He becomes waggish over the chess—“ Ever your puzzle wuzzled

J. R." (N. D./1161. 173). "Ever your affect. and analytical, Professor" (16.3.85/1161. 174). On 22 March he tells her that he has "resigned the Oxford Professorship for evermore, on the Vivisection Vote" (1161. 178). The correspondence of this period is trivial, friendly, and, perhaps more clearly than most makes clear to us the exact nature of the relationship between Ruskin and Mrs. Talbot. There is a somewhat qualified intimacy, a gratitude on Ruskin's part for much financial help, sympathy and encouragement, and on the part of Mrs. Talbot a very real affection mingled with a quite natural determination to remain one of the Master's closest disciples, and to learn from him all that is possible of his opinions and feelings, and also perhaps to shed some glory on her son by enrolling him in the ranks of Ruskin's helpers.

A new topic of correspondence occurs in April 1885. Francesca Alexander is not only a delicate artist in prose but also in pen and ink and pencil. Mrs. Talbot is given one of her drawings.

I send you for a 'birthday' present—the introductory drawing to the Madonna & Gipsy. The three others are all given to Oxford. This I had meant to keep at Brantwood—but I rejoice that you should have it, if it pleases you. It is not so good as the three others—else I should have photographed it—but the Madonna and child are lovely. If it disappoints you, I will send you something of Francesca's perfected work—though of less interesting subject.

The work that is getting on is the new issue of *Modern Painters* and the finishing of Oxford lectures but every day the *Autobiog* goes on in the morning—two pages this size—and its coming funny, and nice. (8.4.85/1161. 189).

Francesca's drawings are mentioned in several letters of this month, and Mrs. Talbot sends her some money, and receives a conventionally worded expression of thanks dated 22 April (1165. 1). Drawings appear to be, together with chess, the main interests of the correspondents now. Quartus Talbot, however, causes Ruskin some embarrassment.

First about that dear Quarry—of course I'll direct him and stimulate him all he likes—but I can't take more of his elaborate drawings in gift to St. G, and I'm as deep in employed draughtsmen properly paid as I can go—but I'll ask Quarry to do for me the things I want, and exhibit them—no matter who buys them, so that the things are drawn, of course old helmets are waste of time (30.4.85/1161. 210).

Send me Quarry's address and I'll give him some lovely work and lectures (3.5.85/1161. 212).

At this point Mrs. Talbot suggests that Ruskin should address her by her christian name.

Darling Mama —F

(You know I *can't* call you that! Its too like " Aunt F "—I think Talbot is very grand and nice? but I'll think of it. . . . I wont drive Quarry out of his rest—but I hope make it happier & him (4.5.85/1161. 214).

Quarry thinks of holding an exhibition.

Please let me write to Quarry, or you write yourself at once—that I say *you* are altogether right about exhibitions They're simply Satanic things—and I'm certain I can comfort him and set him to lovely works (5.5.85/1161. 215).

Ruskin leaves for London on 7 May and intends to meet Quarry there and look at his drawings. He assures the anxious mother,

You shall know all about Quarry's work as soon as I know myself (6.5.85/1161. 216).

Quartus Talbot has not, however, entirely driven *Praeterita* from Ruskin's mind. On 10 May he tells Mrs. Talbot,

It is my Father's Birthday and Ive written a short pretty preface to the autobiography which I think he will like and am sending to press the first revise of first chapter and written besides a bit about my old Tutor Gordon which I think *he* will like.

What an odd place the next world will be, if we do remember this one in it—I hope anyhow the trees will always be in fruit and bloom at once (10.5.85/1161. 220).

Ive been correcting the first sheet of autobiography—its only the Fors pieces arranged & retouched, but its very nice—The first number will be published 1st June—and then, if alls well at any rate monthly—and soon, perhaps at first fortnightly. There are to be three vols, 12 numbers in each. The first vol is done, and I'm getting on with second steadily (13.5.85/1161. 223).

Francesca Alexander writes a letter to Mrs. Talbot on the 15th of this month, describing how she has spent the money given to her " on Edwige's poor little sister, Raffaelina " and others, and telling various anecdotes of the kind to be found in *Christ's Folk in the Apennines*. She also expresses her feelings towards Ruskin.

I do not think that anything I can say about him is of much consequence, for he has been so good to me that I can only think of him as I would of one of my own family. He has done everything for me, he has even made me feel that my very humble work is not wasted ; and he is so kind to me about *everything*, that I am only afraid I shall take too much advantage of his goodness ; and yet he has never seen me more than two or three times ! But his kindness has changed all my life (15.5.85/1165. 2).

A few weeks later she writes again, and tells Mrs. Talbot of her working on some drawings for Ruskin. More anecdotes about Edwige and Pietro are told, and the *Roadside Songs* are referred to.

But you will read something more about her (Edwige) in the tenth number of the *Roadside Songs*, which is now being printed, and in which Mr. Ruskin has thought it best to put some other little stories about Edwige gathered from my letters (5.7.85/1165. 3).

In the meantime Quarry has been ill, and his anxious mother asks Ruskin for his opinion on his condition. The reply shows Ruskin yet again inclined to minimize Mrs. Talbot's rather dramatically serious view of events.

Yes, I did think Quarry showed how much suffering that illness must have caused him—but I did not think him “broken”, only worn, and for some time of course, clouded and slackened in heart—The cloud will pass,—the pace quicken again (17.6.85/1161. 245).

The constant necessity of writing letters seems at this point to be tiring Ruskin, but his plea,

“Won't postcards be more grand and scientific and Chess-Professional?” (19.6.85/1161. 246)

results in a decided “No”, so that in his next letter his “Dearest Fanny” is told,

“But what an extravagant girl you are—just fancy what a lot of half pence we might save and what good we might do”. (21.6.85/1161. 247).

Nevertheless, the letters for the next three weeks are shorter than usual, and concerned mostly with chess. The fine weather keeps Ruskin in the open air. He has

“No time yet to look at the Quarry position—weather so fine—always out” (27.6.85/1161. 250).

The chess continues to be played in almost daily letters. Sometimes the tone is whimsical, sometimes seriously interested. He is attracted by another possible variation of the game (11.7.85/1161. 259). He refers to the St. George Report of that year, hopes it will be “in everybody's hands with the *Praeterita* of 1st August” (13.7.85/1161. 260). One of the chess moves is lost in the post (15.7.85/1161. 262). Ruskin discovers he has

once again made a mistake in his play (16.7.85/1161. 263). This minor disaster is, however, followed by a more serious one.

My mistake in Chess is easily set right: I wish I could set right as easily the hurt to my leg caused by the fall of a pile of books of which I thought nothing, but which the Doctors, professional and unprofessional, of this house declare to mean a good deal of mischief (25.7.85/1161. 264).

Illness follows, and we have no more letters for a period of six months.

V. *February 1886—June 1889*

The correspondence re-opens on 8 February 1886 (1161. 265) with a letter thanking Mrs. Talbot for "the lovely cheque". Inquiries after his health follow by return of post, and he replies, I am very thankful to say I am nearly well again—up to my usual level, but last illness was the severest I ever had, and a warning when I did get well never to tire myself any more.

But I'm quite up to a little chess again (10.2.86/1161. 266).

The old relationship is taken up. Mrs. Talbot is assured that her letters are welcome, and there is some discussion of books. The next few letters reveal most clearly how assiduous a questioner and letter writer Mrs. Talbot is. Ruskin's every remark is taken notice of, is commented upon, so that the letters read almost as if they make up one side of a telephone conversation.

It is indeed a great delight to me also to be able to give you the pleasure you have in a little chat, and assuredly it is good for me to have the interest of chess to turn to when I can't work, and even French novels become flat (12.2.86/1161. 267).

You *should learn* French and read French novels (14.2.86/1161. 268).

How happy you are not to have read all Scott (16.2.86/1161. 269).

Which of Scotts have you not read? I'll look out the happy W. for you but can't today (18.2.86/1161. 270).

The chess games continue to provide another kind of continuity for the correspondence. Ruskin, perhaps conscious of his ill play, is careful to point out

"Of course we are only playing for study now—and will tell each other all mistakes" (16.2.86/1161. 269).

In spite of this mutual candour the game reaches its usual conclusion.

“ You certainly do well deserve your draw—but I have always played the game carelessly ” (28.2.86/1161. 277).

Other subjects also occur. Mrs. Talbot enquires about rents of the St. George cottages and is told,

Yes, by all means remit rents wherever it would be distressful—explaining that we only take it to keep their houses in repair and do what is otherwise helpful to them (24.2.86/1161. 273).

Mrs. Talbot asks Ruskin who he thinks are the greatest four singers, and Ruskin duly gives his opinions (20 and 25.2.86/1161. 271 and 274). This is followed by a question as to what is worth seeing in London at the time, as Mrs. Talbot is, presumably, thinking of going there for a few days. Obviously the continual seriousness of the correspondence has irritated and amused Ruskin, and he cannot resist being facetiously evasive. This results in another short “ telephonic ” series.

I should think everything in town worth going to—if I was only there!—anything that has a pretty girl in it and ends well is good enough for me! (27.2.86/1161. 276).

Its all as true as—the multiplication table—naughty or not—Did I ever set up for being good? If there’s a pretty girl in it—with nice short petticoats—and theyre happy ever afterwards,—anything’s good enough for me. Of course—on the ground of propriety—I do object to—or at least protest against—the modern fashion of having no petticoats at all—but if theyre really pretty without them I don’t mind (1.3.86/1161. 278).

You are really very charming not to be cross with me about those girls (4.3.86/1161. 280).

We cannot tell whether or not it is one of Mrs. Talbot’s letters about “ pretty girls ” that Ruskin shows to somebody, but he certainly does show one of her letters to a friend, and Mrs. Talbot is very cross. Ruskin, invariably candid, and unashamed, can hardly understand her annoyance.

. . . about that letter

What a fuss about nothing!

—Thinking aloud—of course you were—so am I always—neither of us need mind anybody seeing our letters—if we thought differently inside—we might (8.3.86/1161. 283).

Mrs. Talbot replies by return of post, and says how very much she likes *Praeterita*. Ruskin is gratified.

I am most thankful that you like this part of *Praeterita*—it is likely it should be the most useful thing I've done, being the most thoughtful & final—but it makes me very happy that my friends enjoy it (10.3.86/1161. 284).

After this the letters are concerned almost entirely with chess for some time. Occasionally Ruskin confesses to being over-tired. He reassures Mrs. Talbot concerning her questions. "Of course I don't let your questions bother me—What a life I should lead, if I did?!" (5.4.86/1161. 303). More chess variations are invented, and Ruskin writes confidently,

No, it certainly isn't Chess; but it's a much finer game and we shall have great honour in future days for inventing it.

There is a sadly prophetic note in this letter. Ruskin is still a very sick man.

I'm terrified every evening lest I should not sleep, and every morning lest I fall sick before sunset.

The chess amuses and relieves me—but *business*—you must do as if I were dead (21.4.86/1161. 313).

Occasional references to Christianity in the letters of the next few weeks remind us of some of the letters of 1876. But the seriousness is relieved, now and then, by whimsy and frivolity. Ruskin can no longer stand the strain of constant serious discussions. Thus he tells Mrs. Talbot that

"You will be surprised what Christianity means when I get it set down"

and signs himself, "your loving—Turk" (18.5.86/1161. 328). There is a reference to his habit of teasing in another letter of this month, in which he reassures Mrs. Talbot yet again concerning the chess.

But my dearest Fannie, did you doubt my liking to go on with chess!? I'm only too thankful to be able to amuse myself—and make you miserable with it! The way the enjoyment of teasing increases on me as I get old is something wonderful (24.5.86/1161. 334).

Towards the end of this month Mrs. Talbot apparently feels that a more serious note should be introduced into the correspondence. First Quarry is suggested as a theme, and then, once again, the theatre. Ruskin, properly sympathetic about and towards Quarry, refuses to be completely serious, insists on

mentioning once again, those "pretty girls" of whom Mrs. Talbot so much disapproves.

You never told me that of Quarry's father before!—I am very deeply touched by it. Let me be all to Quarry that I can be (29.5.86/1161. 339).

I am just a lump of covetousness—and for iniquity—the difference in the way I treat pretty girls and—any others is something quite awful (30.5.86/1161. 340).

Irving is no real actor, but a man of great energy, who always means something, and imagines he is acting, so that the audience imagine it too. He is a splendid puffer and stage tricker and has got an extremely taking and pretty and cleverish girl for stage property:—He has also some original if not deep, views of Shakespeare, and really tries to do the best he knows. Of the man himself I know nothing except that he acts no characters but wicked ones well. I never saw him act entirely well but in the horriddest part in all London play—the father in the Two Roses. I should like to see his Mephisto extremely, and there is no doubt of the well designed scenery.

I can't think why among our modern diabolic school—nobody writes a grand devil, like Byron's in Cain, which cant be acted because its Bible. A really sublime Devil, at Court, might bring things about more tremendous than one poor girls ruin and her brothers death. (31.5.86/1161. 341.)

Hell emerges, naturally enough, as a topic after this letter. Mrs. Talbot appears to have referred to some spiritual quality "shining through" pretty girls. Ruskin cannot resist shocking her yet again.

The warning story of the Fires is awful to me—for I shall not get off on any of your fine drawn notions of shining through. I like girls wholly for their pink shells,—and curls—and sparklings and softenings—and not a bit for anything "shining through" (1.6.86/1161. 342).

Ruskin promises to do all he can for Quarry (2.6.86/1161. 343) and later in this month is faced with Mrs. Talbot's own troubles, none of them very clear, and the task of finding a job for Quarry. The invitation to stay with Mrs. Talbot that appears to have been given is rejected on 25 June, for, Ruskin says,

I could not write Praeterita anywhere but here—because I have—it may be—to look through thirty volumes of diaries before I can write a single sentence—and not find what I want there—and think of it all the rest of the day (25.8.86/1161. 358).

We do not know how Ruskin helped, or if he did help, Mrs. Talbot, Quarry, and Quarry's wife Madeleine at this time, for after a letter of 29 June we have nothing else from Ruskin for

almost a year. Then in March 1887, he writes of the great earthquake of that year, which, it seems, Quarry has just escaped.

Indeed I am thankful for you : but so crushed and sickened by the event itself that I have scarcely been able to eat, or do anything since it happened.—all one's thoughts of the good and grace of the worlds making—buried in dust (3.3.87/1161. 362).

This is the only letter of 1887. There is only one in 1888 as well, and this is an unimportant note. In this year, however, Ruskin visits Italy again, and Francesca Alexander writes to Mrs. Talbot.

I want to tell you that I have had the great and unexpected pleasure this year of seeing our dear friend Mr. Ruskin. We were staying with our friends at Bassano, and, as we came down into Italy, they invited him also to their Villa, where he came, and stayed for more than a week. He seemed not so strong as I could have wished (though *mentally* quite well), but he liked the place, and the people ; and he gained all their hearts with his kind ways. He spoke with deep sorrow and feeling of your affliction, but we did not dare to dwell upon it much, to him (1.12.88/1165. 9).

We do not know the nature of Mrs. Talbot's affliction, but we do know that Ruskin at this time was himself a very sick man. In February 1889 he recovered his health a little, however, and Francesca Alexander writes to Mrs. Talbot,

The Good Lord has been very merciful to us, and given us back our dear friend in health, when we . . . at least I . . . hardly hoped for it ! We have had some very sad days ; but the attack has been milder than former ones, and the recovery free from the period of sadness and depression which has followed other illnesses ; so we may hope, I think, that better days are coming (11.2.89/1165. 11).

Mrs. Talbot asks Francesca Alexander about her first meetings with Ruskin.

When I first saw Mr. Ruskin I remember that he impressed me as of singularly pleasant and attractive appearance ; and have heard many others say the same. I cannot imagine that he should make a different impression on any one ! (5.4.89/1165. 12).

Mrs. Talbot's own " afflictions " increase in this year. In June her son Quartus dies. Ruskin writes a sad letter to her, sympathetic and generous as of old (11.6.89/1161. 364). A day or two later he writes again concerning Quarry's widow. After that there is silence. Ruskin again descends into the dark

places, and our only news of him in these letters is in the form of comments by Francesca Alexander.

This will be a very sad and sober Christmas for all of us, with our dear friend lying as he is ! (18.12.89/1165. 13).

The last news from our dear friend is somewhat better ; and I am beginning to hope a little, almost in spite of myself (31.5.90/1165. 15).

The following year he recovers sufficiently for Mrs. Talbot to visit him. Her correspondent is hopeful.

I am most thankful that he was well enough to receive your Visit, which must have been a great pleasure both to him and to you. He does seem to have recovered beyond all our hopes ; and Joanie writes us that he is now much better than in the summer (6.10.91/1165. 16).

The optimism is proved unjustified. There are no more letters from Ruskin in these files ; he can have written very few more in the remainder of his life, which, spent in mental darkness and sorrow, lasted so many more years.

VI. 1891-1903

The remainder of the papers in this collection are mostly concerned with the Guild of St. George and the difficulty of running it after Ruskin became incapable of attending to any of its business. One or two letters refer to an earlier period. John Bunney writes to Mrs. Talbot on 24 April 1878 (1166. 6) to ask her for a subscription in support of the plan to present Turner's Drawing of the Splügen Pass to Ruskin. There is a short and acid letter from Rawdon Brown, also to Mrs. Talbot, and a letter to Ruskin from Alex Macdonald concerned almost entirely with chess. There are also copies of all the chess games Ruskin played with Quarry at Barmouth in 1876 and at Venice in 1877. And there are copies of several of the reports of the Guild, and a copy of Blanche Atkinson's pamphlet, *Ruskin's Social Experiment at Barmouth*.

A lawyer would be required to sort out all the complexities of the Guild of St. George's business after 1890. The main occurrences are, however, clear, even to the layman. On 13 January 1891 Geo. Parker writes to Mrs. Talbot concerning the cottage at Barmouth which she gave to the Guild.

You know of course that we cannot trouble Mr. Ruskin about any business of any kind, tho' we know that he is better just lately there seems but little hope of his ever taking any part in Guild Management. We as trustees I think never had any word or mandate from him as to your cottages; whether it is better to leave such property in the hands of any minister I should have doubts as they would finally become the property of the denomination to which he happened to belong—if there were a Corporation or Board of Health at Barmouth willing to take charge it would be better—I am interested in the general question you have raised as I also made a small gift of land here to the Guild which is practically lying idle as far as furthering any idea of the masters is concerned & I sometimes ask myself what is to become of it (13.1.91/1164. 1).

Mr. Parker says he is seeing Mr. Thomson at Sheffield the following month. Having consulted Mr. Thomson, he writes again to Mrs. Talbot and tells her that the Trustees have “no power to act in anything likely to alienate the property of the Guild” (9.2.91/1164. 3).

Mr. Thomson and he are agreed upon this, but see no reason why the Guild itself should carry out Mrs. Talbot's wishes for the future of her cottage. Mrs. Talbot does not seem completely satisfied. A solicitor's opinion is sought, and Mr. Parker writes again in August to tell Mrs. Talbot that the legal view is that the “Trustees have no power to make a sale”. The letter continues to describe the situation, and to say that the writer hears

fairly good accounts of Mr. Ruskin but he cannot be approached on any business matters. The Trustees powers are very limited so that everything connected with the Guild is at a dead lock—we took some risks at Sheffield last year and the Museum there is now a great success. My piece of land here is almost as useless as you describe the plot at Barmouth . . . nothing of importance can be done while the master lives . . . (3.8.91/1164. 4).

The Barmouth property causes a good deal of discussion, and annoyance, before the matter is finally settled by Mrs. Talbot having it conveyed back to her in 1893. Mrs. Talbot is not, however, the only member to be in difficulties. The curator of the Sheffield Museum writes to Mrs. Talbot and points out that, although the Corporation undertakes the maintenance of the building, there is no money for making new acquisitions. Would Mrs. Talbot care to help with the purchase of a picture of St. Ursula? Mrs. Talbot refuses. The episode closes with a rather cool letter from the curator.

Geo. Baker also writes to Mrs. Talbot in 1893 about some of the Guild's funds.

I notice . . . that as you do not approve of what the Trustees have done at Sheffield you retain a somewhat large balance of revenue in your own hands ; this as long as the property belongs to the Guild I can hardly as Trustee consider quite satisfactory (15.8.93/1164. 6).

There is a copy of Mrs. Talbot's reply.

as to the balance you refer to—I hold it at Mr. Ruskin's request (16.8.93/1164. 19).

In 1900 the question arises as to whether or not the Guild should continue. After much argument it does so, but matters do not prosper. In December 1900 Egbert Rydings writing from St. George's Mile, Laxey, Isle of Man, tells Mrs. Talbot,

I am quite of your opinion "that—the whole concern is a total failure". . . . I have worked the Mile on the lines laid down by Mr. Ruskin when the Mile started 20 years ago and I find myself at least £200 poorer.

He points out that he is also "richer spiritually", but there is a feeling that the spiritual riches have been purchased at a somewhat exorbitant rate. He also joins with Mrs. Talbot in her opinion about Mr. Baker,

I am quite of your opinion about Mr. Baker. I believe his whole connexion from first to last with Mr. Ruskin has been for *self glorification* (10.12.1900/1164. 10).

Neither Mr. Rydings nor Mrs. Talbot can have been very pleased when it was decided the next year, after a circular demanding further discussion about the Guild's future and signed by Violet E. Wardle, Edith Hope Scott, Eveline Stapledore, Chas. C. Quayle, John E. Fowler, and others, had been sent to members, that Geo. Baker should become Master for a period of one year. There is a copy of the minutes of this, and other meetings, in the file, together with lists of the properties of the Guild, and several of the reports. But the final disintegration of the Guild as John Ruskin conceived it, need not trouble us here. Nor need we try to disengage the just from the unjust comments in the letters which we possess. It is only necessary to record the fact that like so many of his games of chess, his Guild of St. George ended in a muddle of misguided moves, and that the group of people united during the active portion of

his life by a common admiration of their Master, after his decline, split up into factions, and became both disillusioned and embittered.

Although so many new facts concerning the Guild, and concerning Ruskin's last years can be gathered from these papers in the Rylands Library, perhaps their greatest value is the total picture they present of human relationships, human comedies and tragedies, and the Decline and Fall of an absurd and magnificent Idea.