

## RUSKIN'S FRIENDSHIP WITH MRS. FANNY TALBOT <sup>1</sup>

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She's a motherly, bright, black-eyed woman of fifty with a nice married son who is a superb chessplayer. She herself is a very good one, and it's her greatest indulgence to have a written game with me. She's an excellent nurse, and curious beyond any magpie that ever was, but always giving her spoons away instead of stealing them. Practically clever beyond most women ; but if you answer one question she'll ask you six ! <sup>2</sup>

SO wrote John Ruskin about his generous friend and devoted admirer, Mrs. Fanny Talbot, to the Rev. J. P. Faunthorpe, Principal of Whitelands College for Schoolmistresses ; and this description sets a seal on the kind of friendship that existed between them. To Ruskin she represented the mother, the person to whom unflinching appeals could be made for sympathy, help and affection. More than that, he saw her as she was : a middle-aged mother with a married son. That conception of her enabled him to write freely to her without any fear that she, like so many of his younger women correspondents, would fall in love with him and become thereby an emotional liability. She was to him—as he wrote—*Mama Talbot*—good, kind and comforting. It is not so easy to define Mrs. Talbot's attitude towards Ruskin ; certainly she saw him as someone infinitely precious who needed care and cherishing, but it would be unwise to assume that her attitude was wholly maternal. At one stage in their correspondence Ruskin had occasion to explain gently to her that she could not help him with affection, that no one since Rose la Touche was dead could do that, but that he was grateful for her kindness and true friendship. Even in his later Brantwood days, he was a

<sup>1</sup> Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Ruskin Trustees and to their publisher, George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., for permission to include extracts from various unpublished letters quoted in this article.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters from John Ruskin to Rev. J. P. Faunthorpe, M.A.*, edited by Thomas J. Wise, Vol. II, lxxiv (London: Privately Printed, 1895).

little shocked by her suggestion that he should call her Fanny, and although—probably to spare her feelings—he did on two or three occasions address her as she wished, he quickly dropped into the old way of writing “Dear Mama Talbot” or “My dearest Mrs. Talbot”. So long as he could use such friendly salutations in his letters to her, he was happy and drew comfort from their relationship for he felt that he could remain with impunity her “poorly little John Ruskin” with full rights to be mothered by her letters.

It was the Guild of St. George which brought about their friendship, for Mrs. Talbot, like Blanche Atkinson, was an avid reader of *Fors Clavigera*. True, she had made slight acquaintance with Ruskin when her son, Quarry, had consulted him about his artistic powers; probably she learned much about him from his chess-playing friend, Alexander Macdonald, but the monthly *Fors* letters gave her, as they gave so many others, a new feeling of friendship with him. Unlike Blanche Atkinson, Mrs. Talbot did not seek him out by letter, instead she asked Macdonald to tell Ruskin of her wish to make a gift to his Guild of St. George of land and cottages in Barmouth. It may be that she was goaded by Ruskin’s taunt in the September *Fors* :

Not one of you, maid or mother, though I have besought you these four years (except only one or two of my personal friends) has joined St. George’s Company.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly her generous offer astonished Ruskin, whose emotions on learning of the gift ranged from incredulity to delight, and so the friendship was established on a note of great cordiality. At once this gift of land raised her to the level of patron, a position she shared with some degree of jealousy with George Baker, a wealthy Birmingham manufacturer; it also secured for her a life interest in Ruskin for she had thereby, as administrator of this property, the right to consult him on all matters pertaining to the Barmouth land. It is evident from the correspondence that Ruskin—especially when she caught him in moments of melancholy weakness after grave illness at Brantwood, or hard at work in Venice or at Oxford—always hoped that one day she would learn that he expected her to exercise her own judgement and authority in all matters related to the Guild’s Barmouth property.

<sup>1</sup> *Fors Clavigera*, 4, XLV, 165 (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.).

Mrs. Talbot, however, was long in learning that lesson ; indeed, she never learned it so long as he was strong in mind and body.

Naturally she constantly begged him to visit her and inspect the land, and Ruskin planned such a visit in the summer of 1875 on his way from Coniston to Oxford, but difficulties arose and she had to wait a whole year before the visit could take place. Meantime the friendship grew firmer through their frequent letters. Like a good friend, Mrs. Talbot concerned herself with his health and her concern grew the greater when she sensed Ruskin's increasing interest in spiritualism, which she attributed largely to Mrs. Cowper-Temple's influence. In some ways Mrs. Cowper-Temple and Mrs. Talbot played a similar role in his life ; he called them " Mama " in his letters, he liked to feel that they were anxious about his health, but of course Mrs. Cowper-Temple was the older friend. She was the beautiful unknown lady he noted with such enthusiasm on a youthful visit to Italy, and then she became a strong ally in his dismal attempt to secure the love of Rose la Touche. There is greater warmth in his letters to Mrs. Cowper-Temple, to whom he liked to remain " Ever your poor loving little boy ". Possibly the statement made by Ruskin in a letter to her, written in August 1875, gives best indication of his need :

It is so precious to me, to be thought of as a child and needing to be taken care of, in the midst of the weary sense of teaching and having all things and creatures depending on me—and one's self, a nail stuck in an insecure place.<sup>1</sup>

Of the two women there can be little doubt that Mrs. Fanny Talbot, with her stock of commonsense as well as her warmly sympathetic nature, could offer him the more secure place. Mrs. Cowper-Temple was emotional and excitable ; the story told of her by Arthur Severn in his unpublished autobiographical fragment illustrates perhaps her enthusiasm as distinct from her sense. From Severn's account it would appear that she arrived in Matlock in 1871 somewhat dramatically on learning of Ruskin's dangerous illness, and when admitted finally to his bedroom was instructed by him to buy a note-book in which to set down his thoughts. The excited lady immediately searched the shops and returned bearing a costly morocco leather gilt-edged note-book.

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, Library Edition, XXIV, xxi.

After lunch she climbed the stairs to his room in a dedicated manner ready to write down his every thought. A short time later she emerged trembling, and gazing up at Arthur Severn she told him in horrified astonishment that the only thing Ruskin had required her to set down in her expensive note-book was "Hellish abomination! Coleman's Mustard."

It was probably Mrs. Cowper-Temple's kindness of heart that caused her, when she witnessed Ruskin's grief at the death of Rose, to interest him in the work of Home and other spiritualists and to encourage him to look for consolation in séances held at Broadlands, her home. Mrs. Talbot foresaw disaster in such indulgences, and after lunching with him at Oxford on Wednesday, 25 November 1875, expressed herself forcibly in a letter to which he replied at some length :

I cannot enough thank you for your letter—both for its confidence, and its regard for me ;—nor less for its most helpful warning. I hear facts about spiritualism, and 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 guard 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. And meantime, I am clear that it is no part of my duty, perhaps not even permitted to me to follow out this frightful mystery that is tormenting or disturbing so many.—I *know* that so far as I myself see, I see rightly ; that what I recognise for noble and ignoble—for joy or sorrow,—is so, and may be shown to be so, to the good of all men.—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. I may be worn out—or broken—or blunted—or spoiled by earthly weakness and failure in watching—or—in temper of Prayer.—But I shall not—(I speak reverently)—be misled or maddened, or betrayed by false fire.<sup>1</sup>

The following month Mrs. Cowper-Temple invited Ruskin to spend a few weeks at Broadlands and while he was there she arranged for a series of séances to take place. On Tuesday, 14 December, he noted in his Diary that he had attended a séance held the previous evening in the drawing-room where he and Rose had once known great happiness, and confessed that he was overwhelmed by the evidence of the other state of the world provided by a medium named Mrs. Ackworth. It became a

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/10 (29.11.75).

general custom in the evening at Broadlands for Ruskin to consult a second medium, by name Miss Wagstaff, after she had been put in a trance by Mrs. Cowper-Temple. Bewildered by these experiences and burdened with a cold, he grew anxious about his health and his confused mental state but, as the séances continued and his cold improved, he gradually became convinced that he was a witness to the truth, previously hidden from him by his own blindness. George Macdonald joined the party at Broadlands on 21 December, and he made this comment in a letter :

There's a Mrs. A. here. I don't take to her much, but R. is interested. She has seen and described without ever having seen her Rose whispering to Ruskin. He is convinced.<sup>1</sup>

From this moment Rose took on a saintly aspect in Ruskin's mind and in its weakened, wilder state he came in time of illness to identify her with St. Ursula. He wrote at the beginning of 1876 to his friend, Charles Norton, to tell him of his experience at Broadlands, but he gave a fuller account to Mrs. Talbot in the hope that she would rejoice with him in his new-found happiness :

I owe it to your regard and affection to tell you this much—that only a little while after I answered you—"If any message is to be brought to me, *one* spirit will come bearing it"—that *one* came—in the house of the lady named in the preface to *Sesame and Lilies*—*φίλη*—(beside whom the shade I looked for was first seen)—who had been the chief friend to both of us to whom we went in all saddest times.

Well—since that day, all things have more or less worked together for good for me—and chiefly and markedly today—I cannot write more of myself—but the solemnity and sweetness of your letter—and its speaking of your separation for a time from your children, could not but open my lips—and heart.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Talbot hastily re-emphasized the dangers into which he was running and he replied :

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 believe 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* danger lies in unbelief of—not in seeking—the other world.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Talbot's hope that he would visit her in Barmouth was fulfilled in the summer of 1876. She wrote in June reminding

<sup>1</sup> *George MacDonald and his Wife*, Greville MacDonald (Allen and Unwin 1924).

<sup>2</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/11 (13.2.76).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 1161/12 (21.2.76).

him of his promise and describing the glories of Barmouth in June moonlight, but Ruskin explained that his work on the mineral catalogue for the Walkley Museum was likely to delay him for some time. He arrived at Dolgelly on 1 August, spent the night at a dismal inn, and informed Mrs. Talbot of his intention to travel to Barmouth the following day. It would appear from *Fors* that his train journey from Ulverston to Dolgelly was not only wearisome but tedious and unhygienic. Worst of all, at Ruabon he was required to share a carriage with two "cadaverous sexagenarian spinsters" who, according to Ruskin, preferred "breathing the richest compound of products of their own indigestion"<sup>1</sup> to opening a carriage window. He arrived in Barmouth on Thursday, 3 August, when the weather was at its loveliest despite a stormy summer. Among the Rylands Ruskin manuscripts is a rough pencilled account of this visit which Mrs. Talbot prepared for her friend and fellow Companion of the Guild, Canon Rawsley. She made this comment on his arrival :

It was in August '76, July it was to have been but was put off again and again—at last the day seemed particularly fixed then letter from Dolgelly : he had been quite obliged to stop there to revive old recollections of 40 years ago—and to write something of his journey for *Fors* whilst it was fresh in his mind—but he could be down by train next day. Suddenly in the afternoon some luggage appeared marked J.R. and his man saying they had driven from Dolgelly—but about 3 miles back he had got out of the carriage saying it was too beautiful, he must walk—and we must not wait dinner, he could not eat any—he would like tea better—and so at last he did arrive—and we could scarcely believe that we really had him in our possession—before he left us for the night at 10 o'clock.<sup>2</sup>

Unhappily Ruskin felt wretchedly sick and ill that night, but he soon recovered and was able to walk on the sea-shore, climb hills and drive in the country. It was not until Sunday that he visited the Guild property which must have utterly dismayed him, for he described it in his Diary as a dismal sight for heart and eyes. Mrs. Talbot's account of this visit explains his depression :

We went with him to all the Cottages—and introduced him to the tenants, at one of the very poorest a dark little place we found the father and mother both out at

<sup>1</sup> *Fors* 6, LXIX, 284.

<sup>2</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1164/21.

work—and a little heap of dirty children on the floor—the eldest a girl about 9—in charge of the younger ones—it greatly distressed him and he said we must find someone to take care of these children whilst their parents were at work—but of course that was impossible.<sup>1</sup>

A few days after his arrival his manservant, Downes, caught a chill and developed inflammation of the lungs. Mrs. Talbot made this comment on the crisis :

We thought he [Ruskin] would send him back—and telegraph for another to come—but came to us soon after saying he could not bear to send poor Downes away as it was the first time he had ever been with him—and it would so mortify him—our girls could do everything he wanted—and he could go on with his work as well here as at home if we could let him stay rather longer than he had intended—so it was arranged and he was with us for 10 days—instead of 4 or 5, poor Downes with nursing and poulticing was soon about again—and we were very thankful to him for getting ill.<sup>2</sup>

Downes's illness really disturbed Ruskin, and despite Mrs. Talbot's desire to please, he noted in his Diary that things were on the whole difficult and uncomfortable although, curiously, he made no mention of the Talbot household. In his depression his doubts centred on his Guild of St. George and on one occasion, while walking disconsolately on the hills after eating plum pudding at lunchtime, he contemplated abandoning the project. He was thankful when Downes was strong enough to travel to Oxford with him, and he sent this gay note to Mrs. Talbot :

I came away in acute anxiety lest you might not have seen my grey hat wave in reply to your handkerchiefs.—This sorrowful doubt partly embittered the lovely drive to Dolgelly—together with the telegraph wires which [and he drew the scene] are arranged so as to drop on the landscape every three seconds in this manner.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Talbot noted a difference in Ruskin's mood soon after his return from Barmouth and she received from Venice this reply to her anxious query :

Yes, I am very sad ; but not more than when I was with you—and I do no more than I am able for. Of course when I am with nice people I take all the joy I can and don't tell them what is beneath—or what is *not* beneath—for the sorrow tells more in making me hard and cold, than miserable.<sup>4</sup>

Sensing his innermost despair while at work in Venice she sent an affectionate letter which he greatly appreciated, but for a time he

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1164/21.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 1161/33 (n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 1161/36 (2.9.76).

could not reply because he felt unable to explain to one as warm and kindly as herself the real significance of a broken heart. This was the explanation he eventually gave :

All *natural* griefs, however great, fill, but don't break hearts ; whatever *you* feel of sorrow, only makes you kinder *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 on 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. I was very happy the other day, to be able to give a poor—(and quite ugly!) girl thirty francs, her family's savings for a month, which she had lost on the way to put into the bank—and was in an agony of distress such as one rarely sees—and I am very sorry for my gondolier who is ill, and I am profoundly grateful to *you* for your goodness to Downes.—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.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Talbot's sympathetic answer to this letter won further confidences from him :

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 fixed 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 just 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 pride—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."

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/37 (27.11.76).

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—distrusted 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 *φιλη* 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 Chamouni, when she was writing me joyful letters as I was coming home to her in 1874 ; and stopped to see my old Chamouni 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 Lammermoor 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.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Talbot now realized that his need, like the Ancient Mariner's, was to rest his burden on another for a short time, and she was eager to help him in any way. Her immediate action was to present a gift of valuable minerals to his Walkley Museum. He was delighted and sent a happy note of thanks from Venice. Next she sent a cleverly chosen paper-cutter with an agate-crested handle that fascinated him ; he assured her that study of the handle alone would provide him with inspiration enough to complete *Deucalion*. Such gay assurances did not satisfy Mrs. Talbot who was so uneasy in her mind about him that, in the spring of 1877, she made her son, Quarry, write from Italy, ostensibly to seek advice on perspective, but also to suggest a meeting in May. Ruskin brushed aside Quarry's suggestion that he was depressed and emphasized in clear, cold language his need for peace in order to complete the work that so oppressed him :

I shall be here, God willing in May ; (till the 10th perhaps later) but you need not be glad of that—for in Venice I stay only for the hardest work—if I had an hour to spare I should be off instantly—the place is a mere horror to me—dreadful

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/38 (15.12.76).

as the ruins of ones dearest home—I am not speakable to in it—or when I do speak—it is merely to make everybody miserable—if I can—and to growl at them if I can't—oh me, what a brute you will think me,—indeed I *am* one in Italy.<sup>1</sup>

An intermediary “delicious” letter from Mrs. Talbot mollified him and two weeks later Quarry learned of his change of heart :

It *will* be good for me to see you all here, you affectionate things,—come as soon as you can and stay as long ; but there's no spring here, yet ; and I fear it will be bleak & keen for a fortnight still at least.<sup>2</sup>

There can be little doubt that Ruskin was at first relieved to see Mrs. Talbot ; he enjoyed (when work permitted) his frequent games of chess in the evenings at her hotel. Sometimes they would breakfast together, but of course everything depended on the progress he made with his work. She received on Friday, 11 May, this charming invitation :

May I send my boat for you at  $\frac{1}{2}$  past 10 and would you float as far as the other end of the Grand Canal, with me,—for my work is thereaway, today—and I will send my boat back with you to St. James of the Rialto, where your own can be waiting. I've no other chance of ten quiet minutes.<sup>3</sup>

It would appear from his Diary that the day passed dismally for him ; he had a cold, felt bilious and his work left him with a feeling of infinite depression. Frequently he would cancel engagements he had made with her for fear of overtaxing his brain, but when the cold took stronger grip of him, he at once wrote anxiously for advice on the most effective treatment. The cold persisted, and apparently the sympathetic presence of Mrs. Talbot did not always bring comfort for he noted in his Diary that his feeling of loneliness was merely heightened by the kindness of others ; he also noted—although he made no mention of her—that he was being driven mad by perpetual interruptions to his work. Ruskin sensed a growing weakness in himself which alarmed him. Even when his work in Venice was successfully completed and he was safe home at Brantwood his feeling of physical weakness remained. In July he wrote frankly and somewhat wearily to Mrs. Talbot to explain his silence and to make known to her the strain under which he was working, and his belief that he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1163/2 (5.3.77).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1163/3 (26.3.77).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 1161/48 (n.d.).

Nevertheless he continued to send short notes in answer to her Barmouth news. During the early months of 1878 she sent generous donations to the Guild, as well as some sea-weeds of interest and some stuffed birds for him to paint while the cold weather kept him indoors. The month of March realized his fears and brought the terrible illness that aroused world-wide sympathy and interest.

During his illness full responsibility for his care lay with Joan Severn who found great comfort and consolation in the practical help given by Ruskin's distinguished medical friend, John Simon. He stayed at Brantwood during the early days of this illness, and on his departure Joan sent a daily report of Ruskin's condition, mood and even at times, a full account of his ravings, and when his condition worsened she appealed to Dr. Simon who quickly returned to advise Dr. Parsons, Ruskin's local doctor. Joan's letters to the Simons reveal the warmth of feeling that existed between the two families. The Simons were aware of her domestic difficulties; letters that passed between them show that the matter of Ruskin's will and his financial obligation to Joan were freely discussed. It is curious that at a time when Ruskin was too ill to be troubled about money matters she turned to Mrs. Talbot and borrowed a sum from her and not from the Simons. Letters offering help from many counties and countries were delivered at Brantwood. Like Gladstone and many others, Mrs. Cowper-Temple arranged for special prayers for his recovery to be offered in churches; she also made the somewhat unwise suggestion that the presence of a medium at his bedside might bring him relief. Mrs. Talbot on the other hand sent a letter of sound sense offering her services if necessary as a nurse, explaining that she was well experienced in sick nursing and adding somewhat wistfully :

How much I have envied you—and wished that I had any right to do any thing for him—and might help you in your privileged charge—but from a stranger—I know that is impossible—but if you *should* want a stranger's help—let me know and I will come to you at any time.<sup>1</sup>

When Ruskin had recovered sufficiently to write, he sent a note on Easter Monday to return the money she had so “tenderly

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS., Ruskin and Severn Correspondence (30.3.78). This collection has been too recently acquired for final arrangement.

and graciously ”<sup>1</sup> lent to Joan, and to warn her that his head was still too weary to be troubled with business or Guild affairs. In May he wrote again, this time to explain emphatically that his cure lay in solitude and that she must not contemplate visiting him. In the summer of 1879 she invited him to Barmouth and he refused vowing that he would leave Brantwood no more. She made a generous bequest to his St. Mark’s Fund and he wrote to express his gratitude and to assure her that the world would never come to an end if only it had in it six people as good as herself. He was supremely thankful for her trust and affection or, as he expressed it, for her “unceasing and overflowing” kindness to him no less than to the causes he fought for. One of the greatest services she rendered (to Ruskin certainly it was the most helpful) was her provision of one of her own trained servants at a time of crisis at Brantwood when the harassed Joan Severn contemplated leaving the house. Ruskin made this comment on the situation which must have caused him great distress :

In the first nervous fever of recovering this time, I wanted to be left quite alone—but have gradually come more back to my old self, and am not going to let Joan leave me at all events till the spring is past. It was not *her*—whom I wished for the moment to send away, but the various disturbing elements of *town* life which invade Brantwood when her kindness is there to receive them—and the illness, this time, has been a very solemn thing to myself (—you know I wrote you a line, when it was coming on)—and I must not make any more mistakes about those flowers on the balcony!<sup>2</sup>

In the turmoil of his wearied mind Ruskin believed that St. Ursula (whom he identified often in illness with Rose) had sent him flowers as a mark of favour, and he naturally confided in his friend Mrs. Talbot. It was as natural for him also to confide in her about Brantwood difficulties. It is known from Joan’s letters to the Simons that Ruskin frequently turned against his cousin in illness, imagined that she was trying to poison him, and that the men who restrained him in his violent moments were his enemies. Ruskin’s fears and suspicions were an obvious part of his illness, but his need for tranquillity and peaceful conditions in which to recuperate was no less obvious. There is every evidence to suggest that Joan welcomed the publicity her position in Ruskin’s

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS., 1161/66 (Easter Monday, 1878).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 1161/82 (1.4.81).

household gave her : she was eager to have a place in Victorian society, to be seen at Ascot, and to be friends with the most influential of Ruskin's friends and acquaintances—especially with the Duchess of Albany and the Simons. It may be that Ruskin's complaint to Mrs. Talbot about elements of London life at Brantwood when Joan was in residence there was well-founded.

The games of chess continued down the years and as advancing ill-health imposed heavier restrictions on him her letters brought a renewal of interest to long, weary days. He was now glad to give careful answer to her questions about authors, artists, Quarry's future as an artist, drawings worth buying, mutual friends, London exhibitions, new plays and old manuscripts. Interspersed with these answers were sincere expressions of gratitude to her for enabling him to carry out through the Guild of St. George and other projects his principles with her money. She was so much in his thoughts at this time that when, in the early hours of a December morning in 1882, he felt ill and distressed he wrote to her :

I am sitting up at  $\frac{1}{2}$  past four in the morning, because I can't lie down, or at least can't sleep, with relaxed sore throat. How I wish you were here, to make me do what I should—or do it for me, and flannel and gruel me to rights. What is the best rough & ready way of dealing with these throats that hurt one in swallowing. I've been plagued with them more or less all my life, but this, complicated with some other symptoms of cold has been more than usually tiresome & painful.<sup>1</sup>

When he felt better he presented the argument to her that only those who had suffered illness could fully appreciate the blessings of good health.

It is strange that Mrs. Talbot does not hold an important place in his Diaries ; she is named only a few times and never with any warmth of feeling. He may of course have identified her in his mind with his Guild of St. George and therefore associated her in some way with the dismay he felt at times with his venture. One notable entry made in Geneva on 15 September 1882, refers to "fretting" letters that depressed him ; obviously one of the letters that fretted him was from Mrs. Talbot reporting the interference of the Sanitary Commissioners in the Barmouth property. In his ill-health and weariness he felt the need for

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/92 (29.12.82).

freedom of anxiety from Guild matters, and yet those matters constituted for Mrs. Talbot her easiest road to him. Another possible route to Ruskin was of course through questions about art and contemporary artists. He was pleased when she showed interest in drawings made by Ward of Rouen Cathedral, and he sent a picture to her telling her that if she liked it she must send Ward a cheque for £20, the full market price. If on the other hand she did not wish to buy the picture, then it was to be sent to the Principal of Whitelands College for Schoolmistresses. In this way Ruskin hoped to win Mrs. Talbot's interest in the College. He always expected his friends to share his interest in educational establishments; he introduced Hallé and Burne-Jones to the staff and children at Winnington Academy, and he prevailed on Burne-Jones to design gay stained glass windows for the Whitelands College Chapel. Ruskin longed to bring colour to this worthy but rather dull educational establishment; he felt that life was pursued there at too earnest a level, that gaiety was required, and that the corridors needed pictures to make them "romantic". His generosity was great: rare books, pictures and minerals were among the gifts he carefully selected for the College. He was delighted to sense Mrs. Talbot's curiosity about the May Queen Festival which he had instituted there. The ceremony, as Ruskin planned it, was a simple one in which the students in a flower-decked hall elected a May Queen and crowned her with a garland of primroses and violets. Every year to commemorate the occasion he made arrangements for a specially designed gold cross to be presented to the queen (Ruskin as well as Arthur Severn and Burne-Jones designed some of these crosses); he also gave a set of his books to the queen for distribution among worthy students. Ruskin hoped by instituting this ceremony to foster simply an awareness of the joys of summer, dance and song. He intended that the students should have at least one festive day in the College calendar. He did not approve of the Principal's moral interpretation of the ceremony; he was afraid that Faunthorpe made too much fuss about the occasion and invited thereby unwelcome publicity. Faunthorpe's fears seem to have centred on the danger of the wrong type of student being elected, Ruskin on the other hand

wanted the queen to be gay and to look beautiful. He wrote in frank dismay after studying photographs of the ceremony one year :

I'm rather frightened of my queen. She looks to me between 35 and 38, and rather as if she would bring back the inquisition and trial by the rack.<sup>1</sup>

When Mrs. Talbot referred to Whitelands College he forwarded her letter to Faunthorpe explaining that she was the main support of the Guild of St. George and adding somewhat ruefully :

She never sends me a letter without a question in it needing the forenoon to answer.<sup>2</sup>

He suggested that some of the former May Queens should write and give her a detailed account of student life. He was pleased to learn later of Mrs. Talbot's delight in the queens' letters and assured her that the students would enjoy corresponding with her. A few days later he wrote again :

I should so like you to put the Queen's cross on, next time, unless Joanie can do it—if she is in London, and well it's such a crow for her—but if she can't, then please you do—none has a better right.<sup>3</sup>

Occasionally Mrs. Talbot met with the brusque side of his nature, but she seemed, happily for her, able to ignore his rebuffs and to persuade him to continue the correspondence. Probably her suggestion, made at the end of April 1883, that she should be present at his Oxford lectures brought his angriest reaction :

It is absolutely necessary—whatever the disappointment that *none* of my friends should at present add to the extreme difficulty and dangerous excitement of my work in Oxford. Also—were they to come—ten rooms like the Museum Theatre would not be enough for them—How many hundreds do you think there are in England now—who care for me—I say with fear and thankfulness—they may be counted by more than hundreds.

I am sending severest interdiction to those who care most for me—These lectures are for my pupils in Oxford—*not* my friends in England.

In *this* course more than all others—it is necessary to my very life that no additional excitement 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.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Talbot refused to be rebuffed, she made the simpler request that she might be permitted to attend his drawing classes as a

<sup>1</sup> *Letters to Faunthorpe*, I. xxix.

<sup>3</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/140 (10.1.85).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* II. lxxiv.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 1161/100 (n.d.).

pupil. By return Ruskin replied assuring her that he would look at any number of drawings she cared to send him, but that he would not accept her as a pupil. A few days later he was obliged to write in stronger terms :

You may certainly send me your drawings, to look at, but not just now—

Remember simply this—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.<sup>1</sup>

Such arguments appear to have carried little weight with Mrs. Talbot ; the following year, in November 1884, she wrote to ask him to sign some drawings and to advise her about a contemplated purchase of the Book of Job. Ruskin gave her the help she required, but when she proceeded to ask for a written criticism of the Book of Job he made angry protest :

I never give you an inch but you ask six—I have signed the drawings and highly approve of the book of Job—but can absolutely give no criticism. The prices are I should think fair, but don't buy what you don't care for.<sup>2</sup>

Doubtless Mrs. Talbot was partly responsible for his irritated entry in his Diary on 26 November when he complained that he was very angry with various people. It is strange that a woman of Mrs. Talbot's common sense could not realize the burden she was laying on her weary friend who did his best to explain his fears of illness, the dangers for him of over-exertion or even excitement, and the greater danger that lurked in a deceptive feeling of well-being. Moreover, to refuse her requests was an added strain for he was ever conscious of her kindness and her continued generous financial assistance to his Guild of St. George and his work in Italy. Indeed, in December he wrote to thank her for the precious work he had been able to do in Italy through her help, and then, as Christmas approached, he suggested that they began another game of chess by correspondence as a seasonable festivity. Christmas tended to worry him for, as he explained in a letter to Mrs. Talbot, he felt that the true sources of Christmas happiness had ended for him : that his relatives were dead, that he was alone in the world save for Joan Severn, that happiness for him rested only in his work and in being useful to others. Fortunately on this occasion Mrs. Talbot was able to

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/103 (n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1161/127 (n.d.).

grasp his meaning ; she did not irritate him with gay card or festive gift to intensify his feelings of loneliness, instead on Christmas Day he was gratified to receive from her a sheet of paper which gave, with her love, the next chess move. Ill with a cold, his depression grew and he frenziedly began to tidy his papers and to try to put things in order. He noted this fact in his Diary on Boxing Day and again on 28 December, as well as in a letter to Mrs. Talbot when he wrote :

I'm a little better but very bad yet,—never was so bad at Xmas before. I am getting things in order—and wondering what's the use of any of them.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Talbot succeeded in rousing his interest in the outside world again by her comments on Whitelands College and her questions about Carlyle and his wife. She wooed him into careful answer on his reason for finishing *Fors* :

I finished *Fors* that I might have time for a businesslike 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.<sup>2</sup>

He concluded the letter by telling her that his melancholy work of clearing up his papers was proceeding and that he was feeling a little better.

The new year, 1885, found him still at work on his dismal, self-set task which he interrupted to tell Mrs. Talbot of his intention to give her as a keepsake some of his early manuscripts. His decision was motivated not so much by his affection for her as by his awareness of her regard and friendship or, as he wrote :

I am sure I could not leave them to anyone who has cared more kindly for me.<sup>3</sup>

Three days later he informed her that he had posted the cover and most of the sheets of his first sketch book made when he was twelve. He noted in his Diary on 8 January that he had also sent Mrs. Talbot a recently discovered copy of two poems, *Glenfarg* and *The Sun*, which he had written at the age of eight and had presented to his Father on New Year's Day 1828. A few days later he sent her another "scrap" which she thankfully and

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/132 (n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1161/134 (n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 1161/136 (n.d.).

gratefully received. Their chess by correspondence continued ; in all she received sixteen letters from him in the month of January. There is evidence of a certain tension in his letter, written on 20 January, when she obliged him to defend his decision to employ Alessandri as an artist for his Guild of St. George and not her son Quarry. He was clearly embarrassed by her troublesome pertinacity and hastened to explain :

But *of course* Quarry could do better than *anybody* but Alessandri, only I didn't want to hamper him—and use his friendship in making him work at things he disliked, & so on—*Business* is very difficult between friends,—when I feel able to give him commissions worth having, it will be another thing.<sup>1</sup>

But Mrs. Talbot, who was not so easily deflected from her objective, successfully reinforced her argument with touching reference to Quarry's declining health, and so won from Ruskin the promise to set him to work as soon as practicable. When that agreement was made, she turned to events at Whitelands College where obviously she was now an accepted visitor, and received this tolerant answer to her curiosity about the Vice-Principal :

Miss Stanley is only a good sensible schoolmistress—no relation that I know of of any big-drum Stanley.<sup>2</sup>

Next she required him to tell her about the work of Albert Fleming, a well-known Lake District character, from whom she planned ordering some home-spun linen. It is pleasing to be able to record that although Ruskin's entries in his Diary for this period touch on bad dreams and the general discomfort of broken health he could still joke about his interest in girls :

[Fleming] is on the look-out for *old* women as—sharply as I for scholars of more tender age!<sup>3</sup>

While Mrs. Talbot could follow Fleming's interest in the old woman who was likely to have the crafts and skills of a former age to hand on, she could not accept without explanation his reference to his own quest for the younger scholar, and Ruskin sent this gay answer :

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/145 (n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1161/146 (22.1.85).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 1161/149 (n.d.).

—What a lovely innocent question you put to me about the scholars I am seeking.  
—Pretty girls, beautifully dressed and exquisitely mannered, between the ages of ten & seventeen inclusive.<sup>1</sup>

After such a reply Mrs. Talbot wisely concerned herself in her next letter with the high cost of Mr. Fleming's hand-spun linen, and again she received conclusive answer from him :

—Yes. I suppose the hand linen will always be narrow & dear. Breadth of shuttle-throw—price of Man's Work and Woman's. The Devil's work on the contrary is very broad—and extremely cheap.<sup>2</sup>

For his birthday on 5 February she sent him a letter which he appreciated because it made him realize that he was greatly loved and would be greatly missed ; at her instigation Quarry also sent a birthday letter. The game of chess continued to please him ; he made jocular reference to Joan's supervision of household expenditure when explaining why he had not written to remind her about a move in the game :

I would have tel[egraphe]d it to you—but Joan would have given it me hot—if she'd heard of it ! for wasting a shilling.<sup>3</sup>

Soon after St. Valentine's Day, maybe because of it, or maybe to celebrate the publication of his Report of the Guild of St. George, Mrs. Talbot sent him a cheque for £311 4s. 5d. On 17 February in a footnote in his Diary Ruskin referred to this cheque and quoted a sentence from her letter in which she explained that this amount represented her exact tithe. He wrote to her on the same day :

Indeed I shall not send it back ! it is a great joy to me. The first Museum gift I have had since the report came out—and the first entirely consenting and happy anticipation of it.—Of course in name or anything else, all shall be as you wish—but I am very very glad to be able to head the Mus. gifts column with it.<sup>4</sup>

A few days later he received a letter from her that reflected her own joy at the gift and he dictated this reply :

What a sweet YOU are! to be so happy in giving away 3 hundred pounds.—Heaven send I may be spared to give you welcome at the Inn Door and take you through the Jewel room.—All the same—I can't let your King come over my way, just now—<sup>5</sup>

and he made a chess move.

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/150 (n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 1161/155 (9.2.86).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 1161/160 (n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1161/153 (n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 1161/159 (17.2.86).

As the game proceeded during these tranquil months his letters reflect a certain happiness and satisfaction. He was pleased with the good progress he was making with the new issue of *Modern Painters*, with the Oxford lectures which he was hoping shortly to complete, and with the daily production of the two pages of *Praeterita* written in the early mornings. Especially he was enjoying his work of editing *The Roadside Songs of Tuscany* written by Francesca Alexander, whom he had lately met and whose true friendship was one of the great blessings of his old age. The source of Ruskin's admiration for Francesca lay in her vivid goodness, in her selfless work among the poor peasants of Tuscany. She devoted most of her time, energy and talent as artist and author to the work of helping the oppressed. To that end she sold her manuscript book, *The Roadside Songs of Tuscany*, to Ruskin for his Walkley Museum for £600; Ruskin himself believed the manuscript to be worth more and offered £1,000, but characteristically the Alexanders refused to accept more than they believed the book to be worth. During the years 1884 and 1885 Ruskin edited *The Songs* which he issued in twelve parts at various dates. It was natural that he should wish to introduce his patron Mrs. Talbot to his protégée, and so he sent her as a gift two of Francesca's drawings from the book. Mrs. Talbot's delight and enthusiasm were boundless; at once she asked innumerable questions about the artist's intention and meaning in her execution of the drawings, and Ruskin was thankful to be able to send her questionnaire on to Francesca herself for answer, then when he received her reply he carefully copied it out for Mrs. Talbot and posted it by way of introducing the ladies to each other. Some days later Ruskin rejoiced to learn that already Mrs. Talbot was planning to call on the Alexanders when next she visited Italy with Quarry and his wife.

Although Ruskin was ever able to interest Mrs. Talbot in the work of deserving artists, she was unable to rouse any lasting interest in Ruskin in the artistic powers of her ailing son. The correspondence suggests that Mrs. Talbot was often gravely concerned about her son's welfare; she was anxious about his health no less than about his inability to find any satisfactory remunerative outlet for his artistic energies and ambition. She

encouraged him to paint and hopefully presented his pictures to Ruskin for his Museum until at length Ruskin made polite protest about the number he was required to accept. Above all she longed for Quarry to be accepted by Ruskin as a promising young artist whose work he valued; unfortunately Quarry proved difficult too: he refused to be guided by Ruskin's advice, persisted in painting in oils and in selecting his own subjects for pictures. At times he was very depressed and his wild and bitter words agitated his mother who pathetically believed that Ruskin would be able to resolve his difficulties. After such an attack in the spring of 1885 she sent one of her son's pictures to Ruskin and asked him to criticize it, but Ruskin, who was never able to appreciate fully Mrs. Talbot's anxiety about her son, ignored the request for an evaluation of Quarry's powers with:

This is a quite amazing pic of Quarry's—what a wicked old humbug he is to talk of himself so and frighten his mama & me.<sup>1</sup>

and he went on to discuss Francesca's latest letter and to tell her how much he was enjoying the present "curiously exciting" game of chess. On this occasion Mrs. Talbot refused to allow the subject of her son to be passed over so lightly and Ruskin was obliged to reply somewhat insincerely:

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.<sup>2</sup>

His letter of greetings on May Day must have given her great pleasure although he made no mention of her son's work, but two days later he wrote asking for Quarry's address so that he could instruct him and set him some work to do. Unhappily the recalcitrant Quarry decided instead to hold an exhibition of his pictures at the Grosvenor Galleries which Ruskin was asked by Mrs. Talbot to visit. He paid two visits to the Gallery on 15 and 22 May. After his first visit he sent a short note in which he praised Quarry's talent for drawing, but indicated his disappointment that the pictures were not as good as the photographs, sent earlier by Mrs. Talbot, suggested. He wrote more

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/209 (n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1161/210 (30.4.85).

cautiously after his second visit and described Quarry's work as good but uncertain in aim. Mrs. Talbot, eager to help her depressed son to recover his interest in art, proposed that they meet in London to discuss the pictures and Ruskin agreed, but insisted that he and Quarry had a private meeting on the subject. They met on Thursday, 11 June, at the home of the friends with whom the Talbots were staying, and six days later, when he had returned to Brantwood, Ruskin made this comment :

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 blackened in heart—The cloud will pass—the pace quicken again.<sup>1</sup>

For the moment he had succeeded in laying aside the problem of Quarry and his painting.

Meanwhile the game of chess enchanted him, and his work progressed reasonably satisfactorily, but on 28 July she received a letter that gave indication of the shade that was to fall :

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.

They have laid me by for the present, leaving me at least more time to play chess.<sup>2</sup>

Unhappily even chess had to be laid aside and it was not until 9 February 1886 that she heard from him. His letter, which was written primarily to thank her for her cheque of £70 for the Guild of St. George, showed also his delight in being able to write and to receive letters again. Two days later he wrote to thank her for giving him news of Quarry and to ask her to give him the last chess positions of their game of July 1885. The only comment that he made on his illness was that it was the severest he had ever experienced and that it called for greater vigilance of the dangers of fatigue. Mrs. Talbot at first was afraid that even their slow-moving game of chess might weary him, but he quickly assured her that chess constituted his main interest now that work was temporarily banned, and that even French novels had lost their savour. Her questions no longer harried him ; he found pleasure in recommending novels, telling her about his four favourite singers Lablache, Rubini, Tamburini and Crisi, and naming

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/245 (n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1161/264 (25.7.85).

the stars of ballet that appealed to him, paying greatest tribute to the work of Taglioni. She defeated him when she sought his advice on the best play to see when on holiday in London for he had no specific recommendation to make, but he gaily informed her that he would be satisfied with any play in which a pretty girl was acting. Mrs. Talbot reacted in the usual way: she accused him of naughtiness and asked for a reasoned explanation of his view, but Ruskin merely supported more dogmatically than ever his opinion that an essential ingredient of a good play was a pretty girl. As Joan Severn was in London at the time he sought her advice on the subject and enclosed Mrs. Talbot's letter. This action startled Mrs. Talbot who received this surprised comment on her indignant protestations:

Naughty to show my letters to my di ma<sup>1</sup>—? but I couldn't keep anything to myself—now—or she'd be anxious! What was the harm?<sup>2</sup>

She was obliged to accept this view which was reinforced in a second 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 mind—we might.<sup>3</sup>

The chess continued to please him, but he developed another cold in April which with an exhausting cough and choking fits disturbed his nights for some time and added to the daily depression he experienced as he worked his way through old diaries. When he had recovered, the Severns went on holiday, and he remained alone at Brantwood feeling, as he recorded in his Diary, sad and sulky. In answer to Mrs. Talbot's consternation he replied on 14 April:

Alone?—Yes—quite alone—and as sulky as a bear—as the Two Bears together that ate up the wicked children.<sup>4</sup>

The game of chess proved unusually interesting and he wrote to express his enjoyment of it as well as to warn her of the delicate and dangerous state of his health. After that warning she

<sup>1</sup> The reference is to Joan Severn. Ruskin made frequent use of pet-names and baby-talk in letters to close friends.

<sup>2</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/282 (n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 1161/283 (n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 1161/309 (14.4.86).

wearied him no more with Guild affairs. Instead she questioned him about religious matters : versions of the Bible, St. Jerome, the Doctrine of the Trinity, the true meaning of Christianity. Ruskin was amused at Mrs. Talbot's account of her spiritual doubts ; he sent her works by writers such as Milner and Bede and teasingly called her a heretic. Nevertheless he was interested enough in her religious views to make special comment on the meaning of Christianity in Part VI of *Praeterita*. He wrote to her about it :

the 6th will certainly be interesting in a grave way, with the bit put in for your infidel sake, I don't mean written *for you*,—you needn't mind whether you care for it or not,—but *because of you*.<sup>1</sup>

It will be recollected that in *Praeterita*, Chapter VI, Ruskin referred to the number of intelligent and amiable people who were ignorant of the total meaning of Christianity because of their obsession with such issues as the amount of Christianity they accepted as truth, and the amount they were able themselves to believe. He proceeded to state in simple terms the true meaning of Christianity as he understood it. Naturally Mrs. Talbot longed to read this passage and she waited impatiently for its publication. In her excitement she wearied Ruskin who, having whetted her appetite with such promises as :

you *will* be surprised to see what Christianity means—when I get it set down.<sup>2</sup>

finally grew irritated and wrote somewhat coldly :

*Your* Christianity indeed !—when did I ever say I'd venture to say a word about *that* !—There's to be a definition of Christianity itself, somewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Despite his irritation he enjoyed the interest her letters brought, as well as the excitement their game of chess gave him. He wanted her to realize that he now had time for her queries and he apologized for his former attitude :

I am quite glad of chats *now*. I always felt like a brute for not *asking* you to talk—but when I had lectures and things to do—to time—the least addition to the burden told—Now it is no added burden—but a real added pleasure to have your vivid sympathy.<sup>4</sup>

Encouraged by this letter Mrs. Talbot renewed her attempts to

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/327 (17.5.86).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 1161/352 (n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1161/328 (18.5.86).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 1161/337 (n.d.).

interest Ruskin in her son. She abandoned her former tactics of trying to work a way through his sympathy by reporting depressing details about Quarry's health or prospects as an artist; instead she wrote giving some confidential information about his father. In his reply Ruskin did not divulge the nature of the information, but he was clearly gratified by her trust in him and he promised to assist Quarry. He received a second confiding letter from her to which he made this reply :

I am most thankful to know—and understand all this about Quarry, while I am still able to use the knowledge, and to be a little to him what I may by his Father's & mother's wish. I do not allow myself to think or feel much about anything just now. But I have great hope and comfort in your letter today.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Talbot's third letter on this matter carried the request that he should have another discussion with Quarry about his work, but Ruskin refused to lift his self-imposed ban on visitors, although he agreed to advise him by post. At the same time he complained bitterly about the number of letters he was daily obliged to write : on one occasion he reminded her that hers was the thirty-third letter he had written that day, on another occasion he had written sixteen letters before answering hers. Unabashed, Mrs. Talbot next suggested that he should visit her in Barmouth and complete *Praeterita* there ; when he patiently explained that a search through his thirty volumes of diaries was a regular routine for the production of even one sentence in *Praeterita*, and that such work could be undertaken only in his own home, he received by return of post yet another letter from her to which he made this aggrieved reply :

This is the eleventh letter today—two of the eleven being on grave business—one—painful—I have not got a word of books written today—and must get out. Of Quarry I am most thankful to hear as able to go south—but have not a grain of sand left in the hourglass for today.<sup>2</sup>

She had little mercy on his frail state of health—maybe because her need was great—and a few days after she received the above letter she wrote once more, this time to tell him of a great financial loss which she had sustained and to ask if he could find employment for Quarry as an artist. Ruskin was deeply grieved that

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/341 (31.5.86).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1161/359 (n.d.).

the most generous of his friends should suffer in this way and he wrote by return :

I can't play chess today for it has been a great sorrow to me to think that you, who have benefited the St. George's Guild of all my friends the most frankly and grandly, should—as if by the fierce enemy of all righteousness—be shortened in your own income and anxious to know what Quarry could do in painting.<sup>1</sup>

In stating his opinion of Quarry as an artist, Ruskin referred to his great and fine power, but stressed his lack of training. He explained that it was impossible in the present state of Guild finances to contemplate employing an untrained artist, but towards the end of the letter he tentatively proposed that Quarry should work in Italy under his direction on, possibly, the same scale of pay as Randal. Mrs. Talbot's eager acceptance of this plan brought from Ruskin a short note in which he stated that he must have more time before he committed himself, but grievous illness intervened and prevented him from ever coming to any decision on the matter.

Chess was over for him for ever now but Mrs. Talbot's kindness remained ; she sent him a message of affectionate greeting on his birthday, 8 February 1888, and he was able to write from Sandgate to thank her for her kind memory of him. The last two letters she received refer to her own sorrow, not his—the death in 1888 of Quarry, her son. Apparently Ruskin felt himself unable to sympathize with her at the time of her bereavement for it was not until the summer of 1889 that he sent her this somewhat inadequate letter :

I have never written since Quarry's death, because I could write no word of comfort to you, being, as I entirely believed, myself dying also, and not dying merely, but without hope of any world beyond, or sight, or salutation, of those gone before us,—or themselves always in heaven.

But all this spring, I have been steadily gaining, and you may have some momentary gladness in sharing my hope that I am yet to carry on, for a few years, in my old ways and works ; and that I look to my mama Talbot with a true feeling of dutiful gratitude for all she has been to me, and the resolve to be in such poor sort as I may, what Quarry would have asked me to be to her, after he was gone.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Talbot, who understood the reasons for his long silence, was thankful to have the opportunity to write to him again. In her letter she expressed her feelings of horror at the behaviour of

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/360 (27.6.86).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1161/364 (11.6.89).

Quarry's widow who had married again only a short time after his death. Characteristically she had a question to ask and a request to make, and in writing his last letter to her Ruskin gave her gentle answer :

14th June, 1889.

Dearest Mama Talbot

It is "too soon"—indeed! I have never been more sorrowfully amazed by woman's—what is it to be rightly called—*aspen* variableness—or *opal* variableness? I do not think Quarry could have loved her, if she had been heartless or hard—and when the flickering light of her was caught by him—or the gleam of the flickering leaf—I suppose it was enough for him—But he was himself so tender and so wise and strong—that how anyone could succeed him in a woman's heart utterly silences one for shame of—what any of them call their hearts—its really as if they hadn't got anything but . . .

Yes, send me, two at a time, Quarry's last drawings to see.—He *was* getting on! and—*you* need not be troubled as if his advance had ceased. I have myself got back to something like hope of being able to paint—in the sky—with ray of real sunset—on the real clouds.

I can't go on writing today for I was very busy yesterday and didn't sleep well, partly being too triumphant over a little bit of wicked fencing—with my dear friend Norton—buttons off the foils!—I'll write again tomorrow with Francesca's letter—not findable yet—You know—I can't keep Joan running about after me to pick things up all day!

Ever your lovingest

Quarry's—chess captive—

J. Ruskin.<sup>1</sup>

And on that warm and happy note of friendship the correspondence ceased, for the dire illness of August 1889 left him incapacitated for further sustained mental effort.

Mrs. Talbot's sense of loneliness and loss must have been intensified by the knowledge that Ruskin still lived, still needed help and attention, although he was abstracted from the outside world. Her affectionate regard for him apparently carried a natural resentment of those Companions on whom responsibility for Guild affairs now fell; particularly she resented George Baker and the authority that his position as trustee gave him. To Mrs. Talbot the Guild of St George could have only one Master, whose death brought its dissolution. In her mind even the Walkley Museum assumed a certain elegaic character, and she wrote emphatically to the Curator :

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/365 (14.6.89).

I cannot but regret that you think it desirable to *add* to the Ruskin Museum. It seems to me that all Mr. Ruskin himself placed there should ever be kept apart from everything else.<sup>1</sup>

Viewed in the light of these words her visit to Brantwood during the period of his life-in-death existence there may be regarded as a pilgrimage. Certainly her young hostess found her a dramatic figure and noted in a letter to her mother, Mrs. Severn :

No words can tell how brave Mrs. Talbot is. Everything here must be "fraught with sad memories" as novels say, and yet she is quite cheerful; only now & then one hears *such* a sigh. With all your preparation I couldn't help being took aback by her appearance, but her eyes light up as you say.<sup>2</sup>

Doubtless Mrs. Talbot sighed many times for John Ruskin in his tragic plight, but she had his 365 letters to guide her and, mindful of his teaching, she set about interesting herself in Ruskin-like projects: to that end she supported Canon Rawnsley and other public-minded citizens in the work of founding the National Trust, and she continued to give financial support to Francesca Alexander's great social work among the poor in Tuscany. She had gained from her friendship with Ruskin a new awareness of suffering and social obligation, a new understanding of art and literature; and as she pored over Ruskin's letters, which she bequeathed to Canon Rawnsley, she could re-assess the warmth of their friendship, reassure herself of his gratitude to her, and find especial comfort in his admission :

I never think of you or yours without what word or thought of blessing is in me.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1164/24.

<sup>2</sup> Ruskin and Severn Correspondence in the John Rylands Library. See p. 463 n. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Rylands Eng. MS. 1161/189 (8.4.85).