

BEAUTIES BLOOMING IN A DUNG HEAP:
THE CORSICAN SISTERS

In his Brantwood Diary, John Ruskin records calling on the Marshalls where he "saw Miss Catherine. The country can't be quite lost that has such creatures in it." Several days later Ruskin records, "Hunts and Corsicans to lunch and spend afternoon."¹ Joan Evans was unable to identify either "Catherine" or "Corsicans." The Hunts, however, are easily identified. They are Alfred and Margaret, Alfred a landscape painter, a disciple of Turner, and a protégé of Ruskin, and his wife Margaret, a popular novelist. The Hunts moved on the fringes of the Pre-Raphaelite crowd; they knew Morris, Holman Hunt, Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, Franz Hueffer, Burne-Jones, and Millais -- some well, others only slightly -- and Ruskin even stood as godfather to their middle daughter Venice, named after his Stones Of. The Hunts saw a good deal of Ruskin at Brantwood in the summer of 1873, even leaving Venice alone in the care of her godfather for several weeks. Through them Ruskin met the "Corsicans," the sisters Catherine and Reine Dausoigne. The little drama they took part in has been forgotten, yet their brief excursion into Victorian society illumines a corner of literary, artistic, and social history.

It is strange that the Corsican sisters should have been forgotten, for their story was a public one. References to it appear in print, intermittently, from 1869 to 1925, and the attitudes toward them range from the first response of their discoverer, the landscape painter and poet Edward Lear, who admired them as flowers blooming in a mud puddle, to the outrage of the Hunts' eldest daughter Violet, who saw them as victims of the egotism of artists, who pick and destroy such flowers, then cast them aside. Her 1925 story, "The Corsican Sisters," gives them their final revenge and marks their final public appearance. But no one has ever gathered together all the elements of their story. Although snatches of it were published, most of it is scattered in the unpublished papers of Violet and Margaret Hunt and in some unpublished letters of Ruskin and Holman Hunt.²

It all begins in 1869, with a passage in Edward Lear's Corsican Journal. In this volume Lear tells of travelling around Corsica searching out landscapes to paint and stopping at a squalid inn in the village of Vivario. There he finds as compensation for the poverty "a very jovial and pleasant landlady and two surprising daughters, the sudden appearance of whom from an inner chamber was astonishing. For not only were these two girls of extreme beauty, both in face and figure, but they were dressed in the best Parisian taste, their coiffure arranged with the utmost care, and altogether they were a very unexpected sight in so rude a mountain village."³ Lear noted this