THE SOUTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

JANUARY 1961

VOLUME LXII NUMBER 1

THE SOUTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
CHARLESTON, S. C.

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WASHINGTON ALLSTON TO CHARLES SUMNER, 1841

Edited by Alston Deas

A letter of Washington Allston's which turned up in London a few years ago, and which has recently been presented to the Carolina Art Association, is of rather unusual interest. Written in the winter of 1841, a year and a half before his death, it discusses his paintings in general and refers specifically to one of his potentially finer ones which, unfortunately, was never completed.

This letter, written from Allston's home in Cambridge Port (now Cambridge), and addressed to Charles Sumner, is dated 19 December, 1841. In asking advice of Sumner, a close friend of Channing, brother of the artist's first wife, the writer presumably was on fairly firm ground. The young Boston lawyer had but recently returned from an extended European tour, during which he had not only improved his education in foreign languages, but had also established social contacts with numerous prominent figures both on the continent and in Great Britain. He was not to enter politics until some ten years later, and the urbane and polished traveller was popular in the most cultured circles of the city. No one at that time foresaw how he would develop those impassioned diatribes in behalf of the anti-slavery crusade which aroused such hostility in the South, and even alienated many of the better class of Bostonians.[1]

The editor does not know whether or not Sumner's reply to Allston's letter is included in the Dana collection of the artist's correspondence, but while it would doubtless make good reading, it would be of no importance as far as the principal matter at stake was concerned, since Allston and his client, Lord Morpeth, apparently reached a mutually satisfactory agreement without delay.

We quote Allston's letter in its entirety.

Cambridge Port, 19 Dec. 1841.

My dear sir,

I have lived so long out of the world, that I find myself somewhat astray from the current of its usages. In *my* time when in Europe a visit to an Artist was not expected to be returned. Now, as I consider Lord Morpeth's visit to have been rather to the *Artist* than the man, I am in doubt whether a return-call would not be like a bow out of place. I wish only to show him a becoming respect. Will you have the kindness to inform me what I ought to do?

I need not say how much pleased I was both with his Lordship and his visit. The simplicity of his manners must surprise some of our coun-

[1] *Dictionary of American Biography*, XVIII, 208-9.

on which American prosperity of the next decade was founded. Through a unity and solidarity achieved through the Party, the Federalists not only fought for the confirmation of the Treaty in the national capital but also sought to meet the challenge of its opponents on the local level. Rutledge's speech in opposition to the Treaty, though extreme and ill-timed, was based on a careful examination of the document, suggested some objectionable features such as those concerning the West Indian trade, and pointed to the obvious fact that, on the whole, it was heavily weighted in favor of Great Britain. Certainly, Rutledge's speech was a political indiscretion; however, the only serious charge that can be levied against him is that, although he had heretofore shown himself to be a statesman of great foresight, in this instance, he was guilty of taking a short-sighted view.

In order to achieve the unity and greater solidarity needed to put the Treaty through, the more ardent, extreme High Federalists sought to make support of it the ultimate test of loyalty to the Federalist party. Rutledge's speech on the Treaty seemed to them a betrayal of the administration, which had selected him for one of the highest positions in its power to confer. Thus, in the inextricable and inevitable mixture of good and evil which constitutes history, the party unity and party spirit, which had been ably and vigorously utilized to fight for the confirmation and public acceptance of the Treaty, was turned upon itself and used to destroy one of the ablest supporters of the Federalists.

try men who have formed their notions of an English nobleman from caricaturing novels. He does not oppress one with his condescension, but, with that true good-breeding which sits so gracefully on the better class of the English aristocracy, he puts you at ease in a moment, at the same time that his refined address leaves no opening for vulgar familiarity.

I am particularly gratified by the commission given me. My Pictures are my *children,* and I feel as if the desire of the Duke and Duchess of Southerland (*sic*) to have another picture from me were but an extension of the kindness with which they regard the one they possess. Titania's Court is one of my favourite compositions; and its destination could not be more to my mind. When the fulfilment of my present engagements shall have left me again free, I shall proceed with it *con amore.*

When I observed, during your visit, that, when my pictures were once finished, I had little solicitude about them (or something to that effect) I did not mean to be understood as not caring whether they were liked or not; besides being untrue, that would have been a piece of coxcombery which, I trust, is foreign to my character; I have called them truly my "children"—and I would not be such an unnatural parent. What I meant, and *intended* to express was simply this: that, whilst I could not *steel* myself against a cold look on my labours *during their progress*—more especially when near the completion—I was quite another man when they were ended, and before the public; in other words, that I could then meet criticism with sufficient firmness.

Believe me, dear sir, with sincere regard,

yrs,

WASHINGTON ALLSTON.

[*Addressed*] Charles Sumner Esqr, 4. Court Street, Boston.

Allston's brother-in-law, R. H. Dana, in his account of the visit, supplements the remarks of the artist:

> When Lord Morpeth was in Boston, in the winter of 1841, he called on Allston, and in the course of his conversation alluded to "Uriel in the Sun," and the great delight his sister, the Duchess of Sutherland, took in having possession of it, and added, "She requested me to say to Mr. Allston that, if she might be so bold, she would esteem it a favor if she could have another picture from his hand." And after examining various sketches, his Lordship added that if he might be allowed to dictate, he would suggest that it should be the "Court of Titania." To this Allston assented, and in taking leave said: "Do me the honor of presenting my

compliments to the Duchess of Sutherland, and say to her Grace, if you please, that my pictures are my children, and as she has treated one of them with so much kindness and courtesy, I shall be most happy to commit another to her care." [2]

Note how the artist relished the expression about his "children." It occurs both in his letter and in Dana's account.

The price agreed upon was the then huge sum of five thousand pounds, an amount which would have "disembarassed him and enabled him to finish 'Belshazzar;' would have taken him out of daily stress for money, and doubtless, prolonged his life, by the assurance of a peaceful independence. . . . But his conscience was imperious. He would accept the order only on condition that the Duchess would wait until he had finished his great picture. This was an indefinite postponement, for 'Belshazzar' was then more unfinished than it was when he brought it to America, over twenty years before." [3]

Had "Belshazzar," over which he spent so many frustrating years, been completed by the time of his death, his stipulation and delay might well have been more than justified, but as it turned out, neither this painting, nor that of "Titania's Fairy Court," ever passed beyond an unfinished state. Allston's artistic reputation and the history of art in America are both the poorer by this sad mischance.

[2] Jared B. Flagg, *The Life and Letters of Washington Allston* (N. Y., 1892), p. 349.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 349-50.