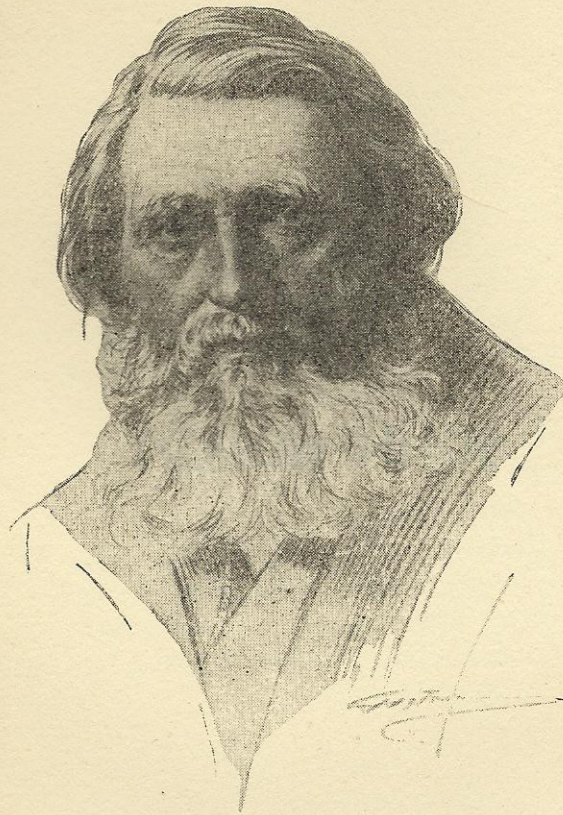


JOHN RUSKIN



JOHN RUSKIN

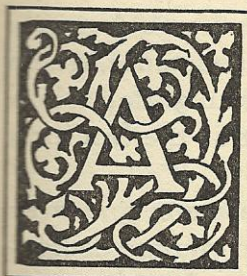
Put roses in their hair, put precious stones on their breasts; see that they are clothed in purple and scarlet, with other delights; that they also learn to read the gilded heraldry of the sky; and upon the earth be taught not only the labors of it but the loveliness.

—*Deucalion*



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## JOHN RUSKIN



T Windermere a good friend told me that I must abandon all hope of seeing Mr. Ruskin; for I had no special business with him, no letters of introduction, and then the fact that I am an American made it final. Americans in England are supposed to pick flowers in private gardens, cut their names on trees, laugh boisterously at trifles, and often to make invidious comparisons. Very properly, Mr. Ruskin does not admire these things. Then Mr. Ruskin is a very busy man. Occasionally he issues a printed manifesto to his friends requesting them to give him peace. A copy of one such circular was shown to me. It runs, "Mr. J. Ruskin is about to begin a work of great importance, and therefore begs that in reference to calls and correspondence you will consider him dead for the next two months." A similar notice is reproduced in "Arrows of the Chace," and this one thing, I think, illustrates as forcibly as anything in Mr. Ruskin's work the self-contained characteristics of the man himself.

Surely if a man is pleased to be considered "dead" occasionally, even to his kinsmen and friends, he should not be expected to receive with open arms an enemy to steal away his time. This is assuming, of course, that all



## JOHN RUSKIN

individuals who pick flowers in other folks' gardens, cut their names on trees, and laugh boisterously at trifles, are enemies. I therefore decided that I would simply walk over to Brantwood, view it from a distance, tramp over its hills, row across the lake, and at nightfall take a swim in its waters. Then I would rest at the Inn for a space and go my way.

Lake Coniston is ten miles from Grasmere, and even alone the walk is not long. If, however, you are delightfully attended by "King's Daughters" with whom you sit and commune now and then on the bankside, the distance will seem to be much less. Then there is a pleasant little break in the journey at Hawkshead. Here one may see the quaint old schoolhouse where Wordsworth when a boy dangled his feet from a bench and proved his humanity by carving his initials on the seat.

¶ The Inn at the head of Coniston Water appeared very inviting and restful when I saw it that afternoon. Built in sections from generation to generation, half-covered with ivy and embowered in climbing roses, it is an institution entirely different from the "Grand Palace Hotel" at Oshkosh. In America we have gongs that are fiercely beaten at stated times by gentlemen of color, just as they are supposed to do in their native Congo jungles. This din proclaims to the "guests" and to the public at large that it is time to come in and be fed. But this refinement of civilization is not yet in Coniston, and the Inn is quiet and homelike. You may go to bed



## JOHN RUSKIN

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when you are tired, get up when you choose, and eat when you are hungry.

There were no visitors about when I arrived, and I thought I would have the coffeeroom all to myself at luncheon-time; but presently there came in a pleasant-faced old gentleman in knickerbockers. He bowed to me and then took a place at the table. He said that it was a fine day and I agreed with him, adding that the mountains were very beautiful. He assented, putting in a codicil to the effect that the lake was very pretty. Then the waiter came for our orders.

"Together, I s'pose?" remarked Thomas, inquiringly, as he halted at the door and balanced the tray on his finger-tips.

"Yes, serve lunch for us together," said the ruddy old gentleman as he looked at me and smiled; "to eat alone is bad for the digestion."

I nodded assent.

"Can you tell me how far it is to Brantwood?" I asked.

"Oh, not far—just across the lake."

He arose and flung the shutter open so I could see the old, yellow house about a mile across the water, nestling in its wealth of green on the hillside. Soon the waiter brought our lunch, and while we discussed the chops and new potatoes we talked Ruskiniana.

The old gentleman knew a deal more of "Stones of Venice" and "Modern Painters" than I; but I told him how Thoreau introduced Ruskin to America and how



## JOHN RUSKIN

Concord was the first place in the New World to recognize this star in the East. And upon my saying this, the old gentleman brought his knife-handle down on the table, declaring that Thoreau and Whitman were the only two men of genius that America had produced. I begged him to make it three and include Emerson, which he finally consented to do.

By and by the waiter cleared the table preparatory to bringing in the coffee. The old gentleman pushed his chair back, took the napkin from under his double chin, brushed the crumbs from his goodly front, and remarked: "I'm going over to Brantwood this afternoon to call on Mr. Ruskin—just to pay my respects to him, as I always do when I come here. Can't you go with me?"

¶ I think this was about the most pleasing question I ever had asked me. I was going to request him to "come again" just for the joy of hearing the words, but I pulled my dignity together, straightened up, swallowed my coffee red-hot, pushed my chair back, flourished my napkin, and said, "I shall be very pleased to go." So we went—we two—he in his knickerbockers and I in my checks and outing-shirt. I congratulated myself on looking no worse than he, and as for him, he never seemed to think that our costumes were not exactly what they should be; and after all it matters little how you dress when you call on one of Nature's noblemen—they demand no livery.

We walked around the northern end of Coniston Water,



## JOHN RUSKIN

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along the eastern edge, past Tent House, where Tennyson once lived (and found it "outrageous quiet"), and a mile farther on we came to Brantwood.

The road curves in to the back of the house—which, by the way, is the front—and the driveway is lined with great trees that form a complete archway. There is no lodge-keeper, no flowerbeds laid out with square and compass, no trees trimmed to appear like elephants, no cast-iron dogs, nor terra-cotta deer, and, strangest of all, no sign of the lawn-mower. There is nothing, in fact, to give forth a sign that the great Apostle of Beauty lives in this very old-fashioned spot. Big boulders are to be seen here and there where Nature left them, tangles of vines running over old stumps, part of the meadow cut close with a scythe, and part growing up as if the owner knew the price of hay. Then there are flowerbeds, where grow clusters of poppies and hollyhocks (purple, and scarlet, and white), prosaic gooseberry-bushes, plain Yankee pieplant (from which the English make tarts), rue and sweet marjoram, with patches of fennel, sage, thyme and catnip, all lined off with boxwood, making me think of my grandmother's garden at Roxbury.

On the hillside above the garden we saw the entrance to the cave that Mr. Ruskin once filled with ice, just to show the world how to keep its head cool at small expense. He even wrote a letter to the papers giving the bright idea to humanity—that the way to utilize caves



## JOHN RUSKIN

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was to fill them with ice. Then he forgot all about the matter. But the following June, when the cook, wishing to make some ice-cream as a glad surprise for the Sunday dinner, opened the natural ice-chest, she found only a pool of muddy water, and exclaimed, "Botheration!" Then they had custard instead of ice-cream. We walked up the steps, and my friend let the brass knocker drop just once, for only Americans give a rat-a-tat-tat, and the door was opened by a white-whiskered butler, who took our cards and ushered us into the library. My heart beat a trifle fast as I took inventory of the room; for I never before had called on a man who was believed to have refused the poet-laureateship. A dimly lighted room was this library—walls painted brown, running up to mellow yellow at the ceiling, high bookshelves, with a stepladder, and only five pictures on the walls, and of these three were etchings, and two water-colors of a very simple sort; leather-covered chairs; a long table in the center, on which were strewn sundry magazines and papers, also several photographs; and at one end of the room a big fireplace, where a yew log smoldered. Here my inventory was cut short by a cheery voice behind:

"Ah! now, gentlemen, I am glad to see you."

There was no time nor necessity for a formal introduction. The great man took my hand as if he had always known me, as perhaps he thought he had. Then he greeted my friend in the same way, stirred up the fire,



## JOHN RUSKIN

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for it was a North of England summer day, and took a seat by the table. We were all silent for a space—a silence without embarrassment.

"You are looking at the etching over the fireplace—it was sent to me by a young lady in America," said Mr. Ruskin, "and I placed it there to get acquainted with it. I like it more and more. Do you know the scene?" I knew the scene and explained somewhat about it ❧ ❧

Mr. Ruskin has the faculty of making his interviewer do most of the talking. He is a rare listener, and leans forward, putting a hand behind his right ear to get each word you say. He was particularly interested in the industrial conditions of America, and I soon found myself "occupying the time," while an occasional word of interrogation from Mr. Ruskin gave me no chance to stop. I came to hear him, not to defend our "republican experiment," as he was pleased to call the United States of America. Yet Mr. Ruskin was so gentle and respectful in his manner, and so complimentary in his attitude of listener, that my impatience at his want of sympathy for our "experiment" only caused me to feel a little heated ❧ ❧

"The fact of women being elected to mayoralties in Kansas makes me think of certain African tribes that exalt their women into warriors—you want your women to fight your political battles!"

"You evidently hold the same opinion on the subject of



## JOHN RUSKIN

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equal rights that you expressed some years ago," interposed my companion.

"What did I say—really I have forgotten?"

"You replied to a correspondent, saying: 'You are certainly right as to my views respecting the female franchise. So far from wishing to give votes to women, I would fain take them away from most men.'"

"Surely that was a sensible answer. My respect for woman is too great to force on her increased responsibilities. Then as for restricting the franchise with men, I am of the firm conviction that no man should be allowed to vote who does not own property, or who can not do considerably more than read and write. The voter makes the laws, and why should the laws regulating the holding of property be made by a man who has no interest in property beyond a covetous desire; or why should he legislate on education when he possesses none! Then again, women do not bear arms to protect the State."

"But what do you say to Mrs. Carlock, who answers that inasmuch as men do not bear children, they have no right to vote: going to war possibly being necessary and possibly not, but the perpetuity of the State demanding that some one bear children?"

"The lady's argument is ingenious, but lacks force when we consider that the bearing of arms is a matter relating to statecraft, while the baby question is Dame Nature's own, and is not to be regulated even by the



## JOHN RUSKIN

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sovereign." ¶ Then Mr. Ruskin talked for nearly fifteen minutes on the duty of the State to the individual—talked very deliberately, but with the clearness and force of a man who believes what he says and says what he believes.

Thus, my friend, by a gentle thrust under the fifth rib of Mr. Ruskin's logic, caused him to come to the rescue of his previously expressed opinions, and we had the satisfaction of hearing him discourse earnestly and eloquently ❧ ❧

Maiden ladies usually have an opinion ready on the subject of masculine methods, and, conversely, much of the world's logic on the "woman question" has come from the bachelor brain.

Mr. Ruskin went quite out of his way on several occasions in times past to attack John Stuart Mill for heresy "in opening up careers for women other than that of wife and mother." ❧ When Mill did not answer Mr. Ruskin's newspaper letters, the author of "Sesame and Lilies" called him a "cretinous wretch" and referred to him as "the man of no imagination." Mr. Mill may have been a cretinous wretch (I do not exactly understand the phrase), but the preface to "On Liberty" is at once the tenderest, highest and most sincere compliment paid to a woman, of which I know.

The life of Mr. and Mrs. John Stuart Mill shows that perfect mating is possible; yet Mr. Ruskin has only scorn for the opinions of Mr. Mill on a subject which



## JOHN RUSKIN

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Mill came as near personally solving in a matrimonial "experiment" as any other public man of modern times, not excepting even Robert Browning. Therefore we might suppose Mr. Mill entitled to speak on the woman question, and I intimated as much to Mr. Ruskin.

"He might know all about one woman, and if he should regard her as a sample of all womankind, would he not make a great mistake?"

I was silenced.

In "Fors Clavigera," Letter LIX, the author says: "I never wrote a letter in my life which all the world is not welcome to read." From this one might imagine that Mr. Ruskin never loved—no pressed flowers in books; no passages of poetry double-marked and scored; no bundles of letters faded and yellow, sacred for his own eye, tied with white or dainty blue ribbon; no little nothings hidden away in the bottom of a trunk. And yet Mr. Ruskin has his ideas on the woman question, and very positive ideas they are too—often sweetly sympathetic and wisely helpful.

I see that one of the encyclopedias mentions Ruskin as a bachelor, which is giving rather an extended meaning to the word, for although Mr. Ruskin married, he was not mated. According to Collingwood's account, this marriage was a quiet arrangement between parents. Anyway, the genius is like the profligate in this: when he marries he generally makes a woman miserable. And misery is reactionary as well as infectious. Ruskin is a



## JOHN RUSKIN

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genius. ¶ Genius is unique. No satisfactory analysis of it has yet been given. We know a few of its indications—that 's all. First among these is ability to concentrate. No seed can sow genius; no soil can grow it: its quality is inborn and defies both cultivation and extermination. To be surpassed is never pleasant; to feel your inferiority is to feel a pang. Seldom is there a person great enough to find satisfaction in the success of a friend. The pleasure that excellence gives is oft tainted by resentment; and so the woman who marries a genius is usually unhappy. ❧ ❧

Genius is excess: it is obstructive to little plans. It is difficult to warm yourself at a conflagration; the tempest may blow you away; the sun dazzles; lightning seldom strikes gently; the Nile overflows. Genius has its times of straying off into the infinite—and then what is the good wife to do for companionship? Does she protest, and find fault? It could not be otherwise, for genius is dictatorial without knowing it, obstructive without wishing to be, intolerant unawares, and unsocial because it can not help it.

The wife of a genius sometimes takes his fits of abstraction for stupidity, and having the man's interests at heart she endeavors to arouse him from his lethargy by chiding him. Occasionally he arouses enough to chide back; and so it has become an axiom that genius is not domestic. ❧ ❧

A short period of mismated life told the wife of Ruskin



## JOHN RUSKIN

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their mistake, and she told him. But Mrs. Grundy was at the keyhole, ready to tell the world, and so Mr. and Mrs. Ruskin sought to deceive society by pretending to live together. They kept up this appearance for six sorrowful years, and then the lady simplified the situation by packing her trunks and deliberately leaving her genius to his chimeras; her soul doubtless softened by the knowledge that she was bestowing a benefit on him by going away. The lady afterwards became the happy wife and helpmeet of a great artist.

Ruskin's father was a prosperous importer of wines. He left his son a fortune equal to a little more than one million dollars. But that vast fortune has gone—principal and interest—gone in bequests, gifts and experiments; and today Mr. Ruskin has no income save that derived from the sale of his books. Talk about "Distribution of Wealth"! Here we have it.

The bread-and-butter question has never troubled John Ruskin except in his ever-ardent desire that others should be fed. His days have been given to study and writing from his very boyhood; he has made money, but he has had no time to save it.

He has expressed himself on every theme that interests mankind, except perhaps "housemaid's knee." He has written more letters to the newspapers than "Old Subscriber," "Fiat Justitia," "Indignant Reader" and "Veritas" combined. His opinions have carried much weight and directed attention into necessary



## JOHN RUSKIN

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lines; but perhaps his success as an inspirer of thought lies in the fact that his sense of humor exists only as a trace, as the chemist might say. Men who perceive the ridiculous would never have voiced many of the things which he has said.

Surely those Sioux Indians who stretched a hay lariat across the Union Pacific Railroad in order to stop the running of trains had small sense of the ridiculous. But it looks as if they were apostles of Ruskin, every one. Some one has said that no man can appreciate the beautiful who has not a keen sense of humor. For the beautiful is the harmonious, and the laughable is the absence of fit adjustment.

Mr. Ruskin disproves the maxim.

But let no hasty soul imagine that John Ruskin's opinions on practical themes are not useful. He brings to bear an energy on every subject he touches (and what subject has he not touched?) that is sure to make the sparks of thought fly. His independent and fearless attitude awakens from slumber a deal of dozing intellect, and out of this strife of opinion comes truth.

On account of Mr. Ruskin's refusing at times to see visitors, reports have gone abroad that his mind was giving way. Not so, for although he is seventy-four he is as serenely stubborn as he ever was. His opposition to new inventions in machinery has not relaxed a single pulley's turn. You grant his premises and in his conclusions you will find that his belt never slips, and that

## JOHN RUSKIN

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his logic never jumps a cog. His life is as regular and exact as the trains on the Great Western, and his days are more peaceful than ever before. He has regular hours for writing, study, walking, reading, eating, and working out of doors, superintending the cultivation of his hundred acres. He told me that he had not varied a half-hour in two years from a certain time of going to bed or getting up in the morning. Although his form is bowed, this regularity of life has borne fruit in the rich russet of his complexion, the mild, clear eye, and the pleasure in living in spite of occasional pain, which you know the man feels. His hair is thick and nearly white; the beard is now worn quite long and gives a patriarchal appearance to the fine face.

When we arose to take our leave, Mr. Ruskin took a white felt hat from the elk-antlers in the hallway and a stout stick from the corner, and offered to show us a nearer way back to the village. We walked down a footpath through the tall grass to the lake, where he called our attention to various varieties of ferns that he had transplanted there.

We shook hands with the old gentleman and thanked him for the pleasure he had given us. He was still examining the ferns when we lifted our hats and bade him good-day. He evidently did not hear us, for I heard him mutter: "I verily believe those miserable Cook's tourists that were down here yesterday picked some of my ferns."