

**SELECTIONS FROM
RUSKIN (ON READING
AND OTHER SUBJECTS)**

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Selections from Ruskin (on Reading and Other Subjects) by Edwin Ginn & D. H. M. & John Ruskin

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(ON READING AND OTHER SUBJECTS)

By EDWIN GINN

With Notes and a Sketch of Ruskin's Life

By D. H. M.



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PREFATORY NOTE.

THIS volume contains Ruskin's four lectures on Books and Reading, War, and Work, selected from "Sesame and Lilies," and the "Crown of Wild Olive," and slightly abridged for school use.

Such notes have been added as seemed necessary for the complete understanding of the text.

JOHN RUSKIN.

JOHN RUSKIN, "the greatest living master of English prose," was born nearly seventy years ago (1819), in a dreary London street not far from the British Museum. He was an only and a lonely child, having no other prospect during his early years "than that of the brick walls over the way," and such amusements as he could find for himself in counting the bricks in those walls, watching the filling of the water-cart at the hydrant, and the like. With such slender resources the boy unconsciously began that method of self-instruction which was ultimately to make him one of the leading minds and educators of the age.

Of his parents he says: "My father began business as a wine-merchant, with no capital, and a considerable amount of debts bequeathed him by my grandfather. He accepted the bequest, and paid them all before he began to lay by anything for himself, for which his best friends called him a fool, and I, without expressing any opinion as to his wisdom, which I knew in such matters to be at least equal to mine, have written on the granite slab over his grave that he was 'an entirely honest merchant.'" ¹

¹ These and the following quoted passages are taken chiefly from Ruskin's "Præterita," a series of autobiographic sketches now in course of publication, and from his "Fors Clavigera."

Ruskin's mother had made up her mind to "devote him to God," or, in other words, to educate him for the ministry, and to that end her discipline was somewhat strict; but, as he says, "entirely right, for a child of my temperament." He was early taught the inestimable lesson of taking care of himself and of not being troublesome; "and," as he says, "being always summarily whipped if I cried, did not do as I was bid, or tumbled on the stairs, I soon attained serene and secure methods of life and motion."

With a view to the lad's future eminence as a clergyman, he was taken regularly to church, where he tells us, "I found the bottom of the pew so extremely dull a place to keep quiet in (my best story-books being also taken away from me in the morning), that the horror of Sunday used even to cast its prescient gloom as far back in the week as Friday; and all the glory of Monday, with church seven days removed again, was no equivalent for it."

In the course of a few years the dismal house in town was given up, and a cheerful one with a garden taken on Herne Hill, just outside the city's roar and smoke. "The differences of primal importance," says Ruskin, "which I observed between the nature of this garden, and that of Eden, as I had imagined it, were, that, in this one, *all* the fruit was forbidden; and there were no companionable beasts; in other respects, the little domain answered every purpose of Paradise to me; and the climate, in that cycle of our years, allowed me to pass most of my life in it. My mother never gave me more to learn than she knew I could easily get learnt, if I set myself honestly to work, by twelve o'clock. She never allowed anything to disturb me when my task was set; if it was not said rightly by twelve o'clock, I was kept in till I knew it, and in general, even when Latin

grammar came to supplement the Psalms, I was my own master for at least an hour before half-past one dinner, and for the rest of the afternoon."

Ruskin's father always returned punctually from his business at half-past four and spent the evening reading aloud; the boy sitting in a little recess like an "idol in a niche," and listening if he chose. Speaking of these readings, he says, "The series of the Waverley novels, then drawing towards its close, was still the chief source of delight in all households caring for literature; and I can no more recollect the time when I did not know them than when I did not know the Bible." Later, "I heard all the Shakespeare comedies and historical plays again and again . . . and all Don Quixote." "Such being the salutary pleasures of Herne Hill, I have next with deeper gratitude to chronicle what I owed to my mother for the resolutely consistent lessons which so exercised me in the Scripture as to make every word of them familiar to my ear in habitual music, — yet in that familiarity revered, as transcending all thought, and ordaining all conduct."

"This she effected, not by her own sayings or personal authority, but simply by compelling me to read the book through for myself. As soon as I was able to read with fluency, she began a course of Bible work with me, which never ceased till I went to Oxford. She read alternate verses with me, watching, at first, every intonation of my voice, and correcting the false ones, till she made me understand the verse, if within my reach, rightly and energetically. It might be beyond me altogether; that she did not care about; but she made sure that as soon as I got hold of it all, I should get hold of it by the right end."

"In this way she began with the first verse of Genesis, and went straight through to the last verse of the Apocalypse¹; hard names, numbers, Levitical law, and all; and began again at Genesis the next day. If a name was hard, the better the exercise in pronunciation, — if a chapter was tiresome, the better lesson in patience, — if loathsome, the better lesson in faith that there was some use in its being so outspoken." "It is strange that of all the pieces of the Bible which my mother thus taught me, that which cost me most to learn, and that which was to my child's mind chiefly repulsive, — the 119th Psalm,² — has now become of all the most precious to me, in its overflowing and glorious passion of love for the Law of God, in opposition to the abuse of it by modern preachers of what they imagine to be His gospel."

"And truly, though I have picked up the elements of a little further knowledge, — in mathematics, meteorology, and the like, in after life, — and owe not a little to the teaching of many people, this maternal installation of my mind in this property of chapters, I count very confidently the most precious, and, on the whole, the one *essential* part of all my education."

"And for best and truest beginning of all blessings, I had been taught the perfect meaning of Peace, in thought, act, and word."

"I never had heard my father's or mother's voice once raised in any question with each other; nor seen an angry, or even slightly hurt or offended, glance, in the eye of either. I had never heard a servant scolded; nor even

¹ Apocalypse: Revelation.

² Beginning "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord."