

## RUSKIN AS AN OXFORD LECTURER.

BY JAMES MANNING BRUCE.

(WITH A FRONTISPIECE PORTRAIT.)

IT was my good fortune, some twenty years ago, to spend a winter of study at Oxford. Among the memories of that happy sojourn, the most outstanding are of Ruskin's lectures. He was then closing his second term as Slade professor of art. I had become an "unattached student," availing myself of the system, then of recent date, by which "persons" were "permitted, under certain conditions, to become Students and Members of the University without being attached to any College or Hall." The nominal government of this extra-collegiate group pertained to a body of five "delegates." Such actual supervision as they enjoyed was exercised by two of the delegates, who bore the additional title of "censors." The censorship was, to say the least, not rigorous. I remember but a single interview with the genial administrator of it, who entered my name on the books of the "delegacy," received my two pounds ten, and did whatever else may have been necessary to induct me into the privileges of the university. After some friendly talk regarding the courses I proposed to follow, he said: "And you must not neglect your opportunity to hear the most eloquent man in England—of course I mean Ruskin." I noticed that he did not say *Mr.* Ruskin. The omission, very exceptional in English usage, marked conspicuously the eminence of the name.

It did not need the censor's advice to take me to the small amphitheater of the Taylor Institution on the day set for the art professor's first lecture. A room rather long than square, with narrow banks of uncomfortably cramped seats rising steeply from a railed inclosure; within the rail, a table, a reading-stand, and a chair; on the wall behind, what looked like a haphazard assortment, never twice the same, of prints, photographs, bits of bas-relief, water-color drawings, and once a little Turner landscape,—such were the simple arena and paraphernalia of "the most eloquent man in England."

Although at the time of which I write

Ruskin was but fifty-seven years of age, one inevitably thought of him as an older man. His fame even then far antedated my own earliest recollections. The first volume of "Modern Painters," which established his reputation and decided his career as a writer on art, had been published thirty-three years before. Most of his "beautiful authoritative books," as Thackeray's daughter called them long ago, had already taken their place among modern literary classics, and their pretty, fanciful titles were familiar, if their contents were not. I could at first hardly reconcile with my preconceptions the slight, active figure, the alert, sensitive face, the aspect of not more than mature middle age, which made up my first impressions of Ruskin. There was, indeed, at the same time the suspicion of a stoop, and both face and form had an odd effect of shrivel and shrunkenness. I suppose it must have been on this account that one did not cavil at the references he was fond of making to his advanced age. "Being," he said one day, "to my much sorrow, an old and tired person, and, to my much pride, an old-fashioned person." One admitted his right to characterize himself thus, in spite of chronology.

I can scarcely imagine that Ruskin ever resembled the old sentimental portrait, with its smooth regularity of feature and softly flowing hair, from which my mental picture of him had been derived. Doubtless the first actual sight of a man whom one has dreamed about for years always dissipates something of the glamour with which fancy has surrounded him. But I am glad to record that the real Ruskin, though widely divergent from his poetic presentment, at once approved himself to me a much more congruous and satisfactory apparition. The disappointment, so far as any was felt, pertained to his size. I have called him slight; he was distinctly short as well, wholly lacking the suave majesty of proportions implied, if not depicted, in the early prints. Not that one could by any means have thought him undignified:

but his dignity was no affair of material bulk or imposing manner; it was the worthier dignity of intense earnestness and imperious sincerity. The man's insistent genuineness would have made any conventional grace or elegance seem affectation and artificiality. Rugged and angular, he still was never awkward. The eager swiftness and vitality of his intellect precluded that. It could not happen to him to be, as Emerson biting says, «awkward for want of thought, the inspiration not reaching the extremities.» His face was small, in spite of the largeness of his features; the hair a somewhat tumbled shock of reddish brown, broadly streaked, like the straggling beard and whiskers, with gray. In his costume, simple enough beneath his professor's gown, there was a suggestion of originality and picturesqueness, chiefly due, I think, to the broad necktie of bright blue satin which he habitually wore. Matthew Arnold, in one of his pleasant letters, speaks of meeting Ruskin at a London dinner-party, «looking very slight and spiritual»; and adds: «He gains much by evening dress, plain black and white, and by his fancy's being forbidden to range through the world of coloured cravats.» But it seems to me that I should have found him less engaging without the clumsy blue satin tie.

It was with something like dismay that we heard Mr. Ruskin's introductory announcement concerning the winter's lectures. They would be nothing, he told us, but a few readings from the «Discourses» of Sir Joshua Reynolds. This was not what we had anticipated. We might have had this from anybody else. But we soon found that it was Ruskin, after all, and not Reynolds, whom we were to hear. The large, thin quarto volume of the «Discourses» was regularly produced and laid open on the broad top of the platform-rail. The lecture often began with a few of Reynolds's stately sentences. I am far from sure that this was always the case; but I am positive that the «reading» never exceeded a paragraph or two. The extract thus dutifully presented became immediately a text, but even a text only in the sense in which the Scottish preacher used his Bible verse—as a «loupin'-an stane.» From the point of departure thus obtained, he ranged with brilliant and fascinating discursiveness over the topics which happened to be uppermost in his mind.

When he spoke of art, it was with a scope far beyond that of any mere academic discussion. No technical detail was too minute to escape his masterful and incisive touch,

but the whole was always present in the smallest part. The trees never hid the forest. He taught principles rather than rules; but he taught principles in such a way that the rules they involved became clear and stringent. «The power of great men,» he said, with deep seriousness, «lies in *subjection*»; and, in illustration: «Sir Joshua Reynolds attributes his power to seeing the will of God, and not opposing to it any will of his own.» Echoing the same thought: «Only in the sure knowledge of our Lord and of his law is the sureness of any human action, in conduct or in art.» Still again: «Religion is a submission, not an aspiration; an obedience, not an ambition, of the soul.» «We have the habit of thinking our own opinions law, instead of recognizing a law in the will of our Creator. We judge the truth of God by our opinions instead of *vice versa*.» «According to the new theology, it is unnecessary to obey God, but entirely proper to repose upon him.» «Modern scientific men suppose that their prayers take God by surprise.» «I remember» (speaking of prayer) «that every one is listened to, of course, and appointed to his ignorance and the life he has led.» «The object of all great artists is to make you forget their art and themselves, and believe in and love their subject.» «All my theories,» he declared, «are summed up in the line of Wordsworth, (We live by admiration, hope, and love.) Not admiration of ourselves, nor hope for ourselves. Love can be only of others; self-love is a contradiction of terms.»

There were often incidental aphorisms and sharp individual characterizations, epitomes of criticism, in a sentence. «The power of distinguishing right and wrong, called, when applied to art, taste.» «The art-students of Rome now make ditches of themselves for the defunct rubbish of the past.» «Vile artists, like Gustave Doré, love shade and death.» «Ghiberti worked without love; his art is cold.» The young man about town of London or Paris, the consummate product of modern civilization, was branded as «a fanged but handless spider, that sucks, indeed, and stings, but cannot spin»—this with an intensified sibilation which made the whole sentence a hiss.

There has never, doubtless, been a more audacious dogmatist than Ruskin. «I am, I believe, the only person here in Oxford who says he has got something entirely definite to teach.» This was the opening sentence of his lecture one morning. I could well understand the very literal young English-

woman, though I did not really agree with her, who told me she never thought of going to hear him. «I can't bear him,» she flared. «I think he is the most conceited man that ever lived.» Obviously there was nothing more to be said to her. And yet I might have urged that he was far from exaggerating the importance of his message, albeit he insisted upon it so strenuously. I remember his bringing to the lecture-room a meager octavo pamphlet of sixty-odd pages, containing selections from his writings which had been printed for the University of Madras. «Here,» he explained, as he held it up before us, «you will find everything of any consequence in all the books I have written.»

On the principle I once heard enunciated, that men like best to listen to the preachers who «make them squirm,» it is probably true that Ruskin's frank and furious quarrel with many things in the England he loved so well had much to do with his popularity among his own countrymen. Certainly he «rowed» them in a fashion for which it would be hard to find a parallel. «The British Constitution, of which you are so proud,» he broke out one day, apropos of some abuse he had been denouncing—«why, it is the vilest mixture of humbug, iniquity, and lies that Satan ever spewed out of hell.» Another day it was this: «Instead of, (England expects every man to do his duty,) we are receiving and acting on the watchword, (England expects every man to do the best he can for himself.)» Another day he descanted upon certain present tendencies which he could not vehemently enough reprobate, and climaxed: «The reverent olden time called Him the Wonderful, the Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Our modern philosophers have found other names—Just - what - might - have - been - expected, Evolution, the Conservation of Forces, the Prince of Competition.» He lashed himself into a magnificent frenzy over some rationalistic comments on the «horror of great darkness» that fell upon Abram waiting for a sign from the Lord. «Indigestion, most likely, thinks modern philosophy. Accelerated cerebration, with automatic conservation of psychic force, lucidly suggests Dr. Carpenter. Derangement of sensorimotor processes, having certain relations of nextness, and behaviour uniformly depending on that nextness, condescendingly explains Professor Clifford. Well, my scientific friends, if ever God does you the grace to give you experience of the sensations either of horror or darkness, even to the extent your books

inflict them on my own tired soul, you will come out on the other side of that shadow with newer views on many subjects than have yet occurred to you, novelty-hunters though you be.»

He was never done girding at the English Church, for what he regarded as its pretentious ineffectiveness. Once, after describing the army and the law as affording careers, the one for the high-spirited, the other for the intellectually gifted sons of the nobility, he added: «And public theology furnishes means of maintenance for the sons of less clearly distinguished ability.» Something led him to quote from the fifteenth chapter of Genesis the clause, «the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision.» He at once interpolated a paragraph for the sake of which, I suspect, he had introduced the reference: «In the (Explanatory and Critical Commentary and Revision of the Holy Bible,) by bishops and clergy of the Established Church, published in 1871 by Mr. John Murray, you will find the interesting statement respecting this verse that (this is the first time that the expression (so frequent afterward) «the word of the Lord» occurs in the Bible.) The expression is certainly rather frequent afterward, and one might have expected from the episcopal and clerical commentators, on this its first occurrence, some slight notice of the probable meaning of it. They proceed, however, without farther observation, to discuss certain problems, suggested to them by the account of Abram's vision, respecting somnambulism, on which, though one would have thought few persons more qualified than themselves to give an account of that condition, they arrive at no particular conclusion.»

I discover the above passage, almost word for word, in one of the «Fors Clavigera» letters, issued during the winter we were «in residence» at Oxford; and I dare say that if my notes of Ruskin's lectures at that time were less fragmentary, they would embrace pretty much the entire «Fors Clavigera» of the period. It was one of the ingenuous ways Mr. Ruskin had of taking his audience into his confidence to bring us the manuscript of each letter as it was written, and to give us at least «the heart of it» in advance of its publication. Nowhere, perhaps, did his genius for vituperation have freer or more sparkling play than in these deliverances to the workingmen of England. Sometimes the scintillation grew lurid and baleful, but there was generally a half-humorous extravagance of language in his

diatribes which supplied, whether intentionally or not, an antidote to their venom. «Here,» he flashed, «is the first economical fact I have been trying to teach these fifteen years, and can't get it yet into the desperate, leathern-skinned, death-helmeted skull of this wretched England—till Jael-Atropos drive it down, through skull and all, into the ground: that you can't have bread without corn, nor milk without kine; and that being dragged about the country behind kettles won't grow corn on it; and speculating in stocks won't feed mutton on it; and manufacturing steel pens and scrawling lies with them won't clothe your backs or fill your bellies, though you scrawl England as black with ink as you have strewed her black with cinders.» His immitigable hate of the railways vented itself with the drollest exaggeration. Think of a man in the midst of Oxford's sumptuous trees and lustrous turf sneering fiercely: «There is no green grass, there are no green trees, in England any more. Everything is black since we were overtaken by the blight and curse of railways»!

Among all of what the irreverent were accustomed to call Ruskin's fads, none was more persistent, as none was superficially more incongruous, than his exaltation of manual labor. «No one can teach you anything worth learning but through manual labor; the very bread of life can only be got out of the chaff by rubbing it in your hands.» A year or two before my time at Oxford, he had attempted a practical demonstration of this doctrine. He persuaded a group of his most enthusiastic pupils to spend their afternoons with him working upon ditches which were being dug in the neighboring village of Hinksey. I do not know whether the experiment justified itself by any physical or spiritual benefit accruing to the amateur «navvies»; but while it lasted, the spectacle it offered was «distinctly precious» to the Philistines, both of town and gown. I can still hear the joyous chuckle with which a dear old Oxford lady, whose racy talk was as innocent of malice and uncharitableness as of final *g*'s, dilated upon the fun she had in going out to see «the Hinksey diggin's.»

The union of sweet reasonableness with fanaticism, which was one of Ruskin's many paradoxes, explains his delightful candor in animadverting upon his own weak points. He had no tolerance for shallow self-sufficiency. «There is no temptation to folly,» was one of his pungent *obiter dicta*; «a man has no business to be an ass.» Accordingly,

he put us on our guard against his faults and fallacies. I treasure in memory one exquisitely diverting instance. He had been speaking with approval of unsectarian education, —«Teach no church catechism; teach only the Mosaic law and the love of God,»—and had commended a recent speech in that vein by Professor Max Müller. Then, after a pause, he began very slowly: «It is a vice of mine, in the fear of not saying strong things strongly enough, to use a violence of language that takes from their strength; but this is my calm and cool conviction: I tell you, without a note of excitement in my voice or manner, in language of absolute and tamest moderation, as I stand quietly here with my arms hanging at my sides,»—letting his arms fall, and holding them stiffly down, —«unless you teach your children to honor their fathers and their mothers, and to love God, and to reverence their king, and to treat with tenderness and take care of kindly all inferior creatures, to regard all things duly, even if they only have the semblance of life, and especially such as God has endowed with the power of giving us pleasure, as flowers—unless you teach your children these things,»—by this time the pinioned arms, which had been gradually freeing themselves, were revolving in frantic curves, and the carefully modulated voice had risen till it became a hoarse shriek in the climax, —«you will be educating Frankensteins and demons!»

Another instance of Ruskin's letting himself go remains somewhat painfully in my recollection. He had made reference to the fifty-fifth psalm, quoting, «Oh, that I had wings like a dove!» and stopping to comment on the lovely words. They reminded him of Mendelssohn's song, which he chose to consider a vulgar jingle, wholly unworthy to be linked with that beautiful scripture. To show his sense of its poverty and pettiness, he made a burlesque pretense of singing it, and accompanied the performance with a jump and a bat-like flapping of his black gown sleeves that verged unpleasantly upon buffoonery.

The phraseology of Ruskin's lectures, like that of his books, was strongly tinged with biblical references. He could not sufficiently extol the Bible as a treasury, not only of spiritual verities and inspirations, but also of pure and lofty English style. He made glowing acknowledgment of the lifelong gratitude he owed his mother for obliging him to read the Bible through many times. He was glad she did not pass over «the hard and

cruel chapters, or the dry, tough genealogies,» and especially that he could not beg off from the serious task of memorizing large portions. In fact, he attributed to this early and close familiarity with the Bible all that was best in his intellectual equipment, and all the power he possessed of good literary expression.

One of his most memorable passages of biblical panegyric was whimsically prefaced. To illustrate the honesty of medieval art in contrast with modern sham, he pointed out an arabesque from a manuscript of the Psalms, copied with coarse inaccuracy for a tail-piece in a current magazine. He made us see how the graceful lines were distorted, and the whole perfect design cheapened and

falsified. «And that 's what you like, you blessed English!» he railed, as he flung the offending (Fortnightly) on the floor. Then, taking up his manuscript Psalter, he opened to the first psalm, and began to read it, giving both the majestic Vulgate Latin that was before him, and the English he knew so well. In a moment his spirit was rapt into an ecstasy. Striding back and forth behind his platform rail, he poured out a rhapsody of exalted thought in rhythmic phrase which no one could have attempted to transcribe, but which must have overwhelmed all who heard it with the thrilling consciousness of being in the immediate presence and listening to the spontaneous exercise of creative genius.

## BR'ER COON IN OLD KENTUCKY.

BY JOHN FOX, JR.

Author of «A Cumberland Vendetta,» «The Kentuckians,» etc.

WITH A PICTURE BY MAX F. KLEPPER.

De ole man coon am a sly ole cuss;

Git erlong, coon-dog, now!

An' de lady coon am a leetle bit wuss;

Git erlong, coon-dog, now!

We hunts 'em when de nights gits dark;

Git erlong, coon-dog, now!

Dey runs when dey hears de big dogs bark;

Git erlong, coon-dog, now!

But 'deed, Mister Coon, hit 's no use to try;

Git erlong, coon-dog, now!

Fer when we comes you 's boun' to die;

Git erlong; coon-dog, now!



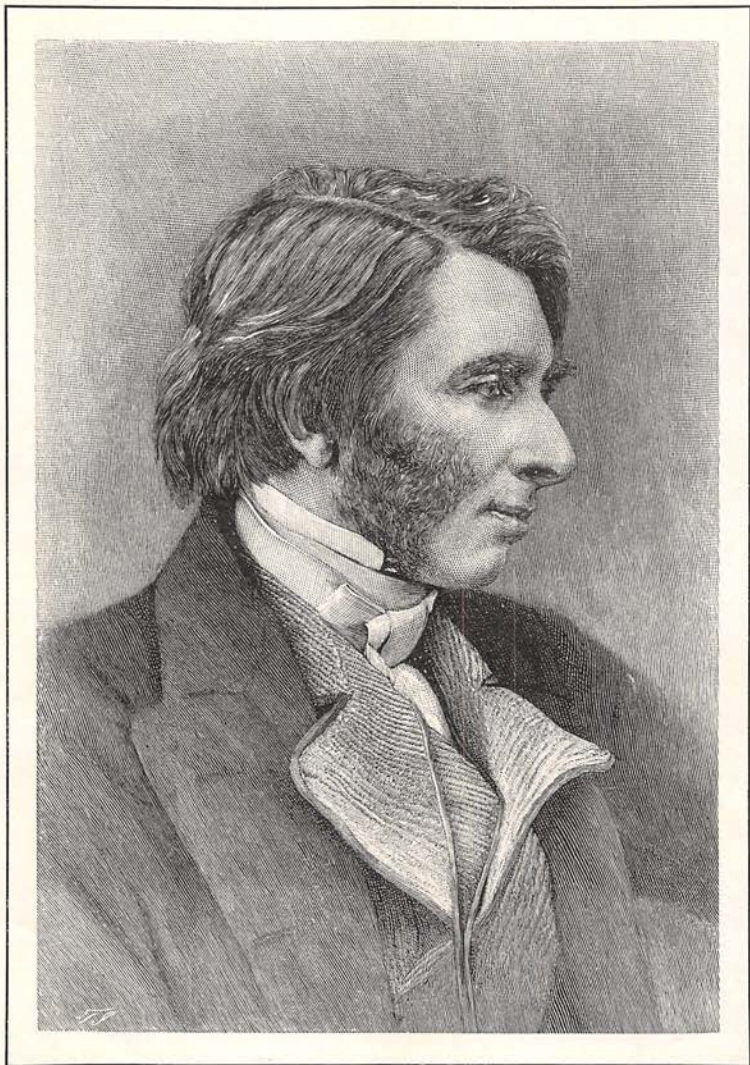
HE day was late in autumn. The sun was low, and the haze of Indian summer hung like mist on the horizon. Crows were rising from fat pickings in the bluegrass fields, and stretching away in long lines through a yellow band of western light, and toward the cliffs of the Kentucky River, where they roost in safety the winter long. An hour later darkness fell, and we rode forth the same way, some fifty strong.

There were «young cap'n,» as «young master» is now called, and his sister Miriam; Northcott, who was from the North, and was my friend; young farmers from the neigh-

borhood, with their sisters and sweethearts; a party from the county town not far away; a contingent from the Iroquois Hunt Club of Lexington; old Tray, a tobacco tenant from the Cumberland foot-hills; and old Ash, a darky coon-hunter who is known throughout the State.

There were White Child and Black Babe, two young coon-dogs which Ash claimed as his own; Bulger, a cur that belonged to Tray; young captain's favorites, June Bug and Star; several dogs from the neighborhood; and two little fox-terriers, trotting to heel, which the major, a veteran, had brought along to teach the country folks a new wrinkle in an old sport.

Ash was a ragged, old-time darky with a scraggly beard and a caressing voice. He rode a mule with a blind bridle and no saddle. In his belt, and hanging behind, was an ax-head fixed to a handle of hatchet length; the purpose of this was to cut a limb from under Br'er Coon when he could not be shaken off, or to cut a low entrance into his hole, so that he could be prodded out at the top with a sharp stick. In his pockets were matches to build a fire, that the fight could be seen; at his side hung a lantern with which «to shine his eye»



Ruskin

ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON.

AFTER A PHOTOGRAPH BY ELLIOTT & FRY.

RUSKIN IN MIDDLE LIFE.