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978-1-108-00858-7 - The Works of John Ruskin, Volume 10: The Stones of Venice II

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Excerpt

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# THE STONES OF VENICE

VOLUME II

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## FIRST, OR BYZANTINE, PERIOD

## CHAPTER I

THE THRONE<sup>1</sup>

§ 1. IN the olden days of travelling, now to return no more,\* in which distance could not be vanquished without toil, but in which that toil was rewarded, partly by the power of deliberate survey of the countries through which the journey lay, and partly by the happiness of the evening hours, when from the top of the last hill he had surmounted, the traveller beheld the quiet village where he was to rest, scattered among the meadows beside its valley stream; or, from the long hoped for turn in the dusty perspective of the causeway, saw, for the first time, the towers of some famed city, faint in the rays of sunset—hours of peaceful and thoughtful pleasure, for which the rush of the arrival in the railway station is perhaps not always, or to all men, an equivalent,<sup>2</sup>—in those days, I say, when there was something more to be anticipated and remembered in the first aspect of each successive halting-place, than a new arrangement of glass roofing and iron girder, there were few moments of which the recollection was more fondly cherished by the traveller, than that

\* I have as little doubt of their return now, as I had then hope of it, though before that day, I shall have travelled whence there is no return. [1879.]

<sup>1</sup> [This chapter is ch. ii. of vol. i. of the "Travellers' Edition."]

<sup>2</sup> [For other descriptions of Ruskin's mode of travel in these olden days, see *Præterita*, i. ch. ix., ii. ch. iii. § 55, and *Proserpina*, "Giulietta." For the contrary—viz., those of railway travelling—see *Modern Painters*, vol. iii. ch. xvii. § 24, vol. v. pt. ix. ch. xi. § 15; *Seven Lamps*, Vol. VIII. p. 159; *Bible of Amiens*, ch. i. § 4; and *Præterita* i. ch. ix. § 177.]

## THE STONES OF VENICE

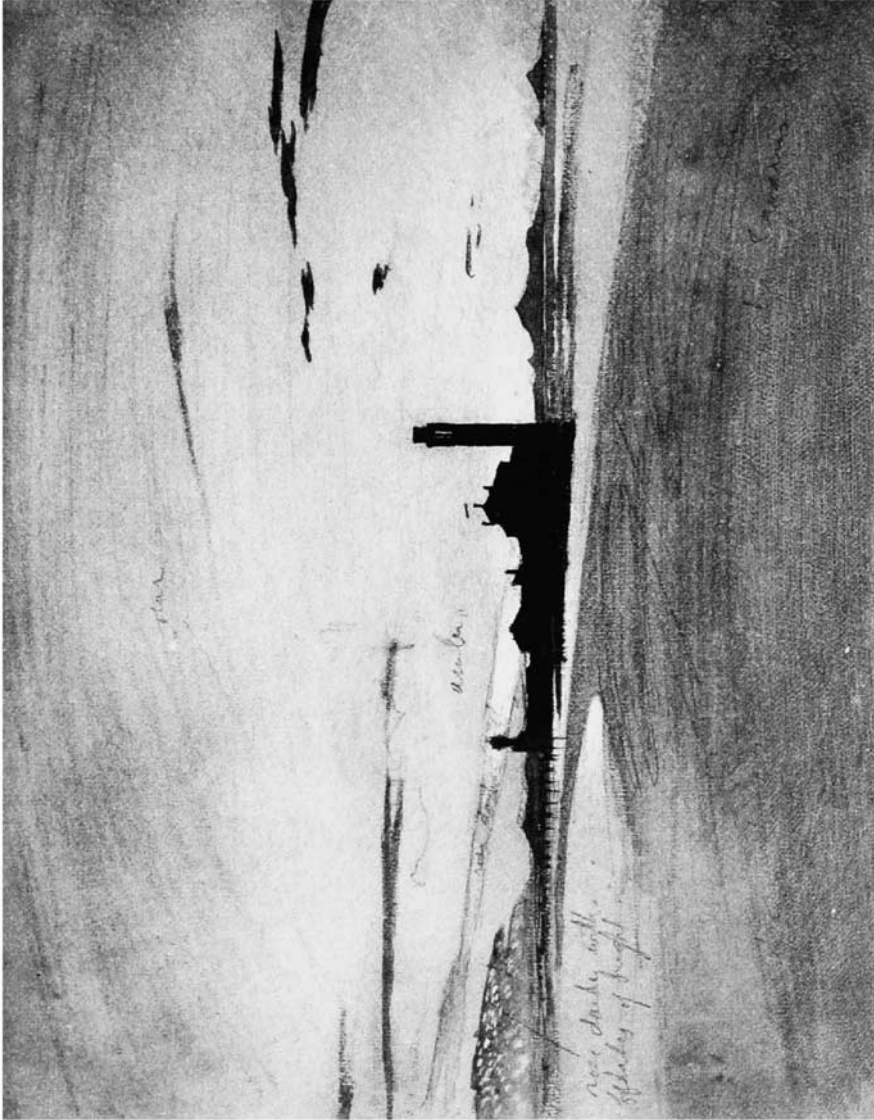
which, as I endeavoured to describe in the close of the last chapter, brought him within sight of Venice, as his gondola shot into the open lagoon from the canal of Mestre.<sup>1</sup> Not but that the aspect of the city itself was generally the source of some slight disappointment, for, seen in this direction, its buildings are far less characteristic than those of the other great towns of Italy; but this inferiority was partly disguised by distance, and more than atoned for by the strange rising of its walls and towers out of the midst, as it seemed, of the deep sea, for it was impossible that the mind or the eye could at once comprehend the shallowness of the vast sheet of water which stretched away in leagues of rippling lustre to the north and south, or trace the narrow line of islets bounding it to the east. The salt breeze, the white moaning sea-birds, the masses of black weed separating and disappearing gradually, in knots of heaving shoal, under the advance of the steady tide, all proclaimed it to be indeed the ocean on whose bosom the great city rested so calmly; not such blue, soft, lake-like ocean as bathes the Neapolitan promontories, or sleeps beneath the marble rocks of Genoa, but a sea with the bleak power of our own northern waves, yet subdued into a strange spacious rest, and changed from its angry pallor into a field of burnished gold, as the sun declined behind the belfry tower of the lonely island church, fitly named “St. George of the Seaweed.”<sup>2</sup> As the boat drew nearer to the city, the

<sup>1</sup> [See Plate E, “The Vestibule,” in Vol. IX.; and for Ruskin’s earliest impressions of the approach to Venice, see *Velasquez, the Novice*, Vol. I. pp. 537–545.]

<sup>2</sup> [For another notice of this view see in the next volume, Venetian Index, s. “Giorgio in Alga,” where a note added in 1877 describes how “all is spoiled from what it was.” See also the letter to C. E. Norton, in Vol. IX. p. xxviii. The sketch here given (Plate A) was made in 1849; another sketch made in the same year was engraved for *Modern Painters*, vol. iii. (Plate 15). In Ruskin’s diary (1851) we get a word-picture of a similar effect:—

“November 19.—There was a lovely scene this evening out by San Giorgio in Aliga. It had been raining nearly all night and was very foul weather to-day and wretchedly cold, and the snow was down on the hills, nearly to the plains. And there was the strange snow mist upon them—not cloud, but a kind of dense light breaking into flakes and wreaths, and the upper precipices came gleaming out here and there fitfully in the haze, their jagged edges burning like lightning, then losing themselves again in blue bars of clouds, to the north disappearing altogether in one mass of leaden grey, against which the whole line of Venice came out in broad red light. As the sun set, there were fiery flakes and streams of long cloud brought out from this grey veil, and the

A



Allen & Co. Sc.

St. George of the Seaweed,  
(1849)

J. Ruskin.

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coast which the traveller had just left sank behind him into one long, low, sad-coloured line,\* tufted irregularly with brushwood and willows: but, at what seemed its northern extremity, the hills of Arqua rose in a dark cluster of purple pyramids, balanced on the bright mirage of the lagoon; two or three smooth surges of inferior hill extended themselves about their roots, and beyond these, beginning with the craggy peaks above Vicenza, the chain of the Alps girded the whole horizon to the north—a wall of jagged blue, here and there showing through its clefts a wilderness of misty precipices, fading far back into the recesses of Cadore, and itself rising and breaking away eastward, where the sun struck opposite upon its snow, into mighty fragments of peaked light, standing up behind the barred clouds of evening, one after another, countless, the crown of the Adrian Sea, until the eye turned back from pursuing them, to rest upon the nearer burning of the campaniles of Murano, and on the great city, where it magnified itself along the waves, as the quick silent pacing of the gondola drew nearer and nearer.† And at last, when its walls

\* Nonsense. I might as truly have said “merry-coloured.” It is simply the colour of any other distant country. [1879].

† All this is quite right. The group of precipices above the centre of the Alpine line is the finest I know in any view of the chain from the south, and the extent of white peaks to the north-east always takes me by renewed surprise, in clear evenings.<sup>1</sup> [1879.]

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lagoon flowed and rippled under them in great sheets of rose colour with ripples of green. The seagulls were sinking and flitting by toward the south—not the common shrieking gull, but one that gives a low, clear, plaintive whistle of two short notes dying upon the salt wind like a far away human voice. And at last as the sun went down, he sank behind a bank of broken clouds which threw up their shadows as on the opposite page [reference to a sketch] on dark grey horizontal soft bands of vapour, the clear sky seen through, shadowless. When the sun had sunk, the shadows disappeared, but the grey bands became blood colour, and so remained glowing behind the tower of the St. Eufemia, as I rowed back up the Giudecca, growing purple and darker gradually, till their deep crimson became a dark colour on the clear sky behind. Note that at this time of evening one may have—down on the horizon—grey cold clouds, and across them bars of dead crimson of a depth which is *light* upon the grey cloud but dark against the soft amber of the sky.”]

<sup>1</sup> [Ruskin had noted the same thing in letters to his father (1851):—

“VENICE, November 15.—I do not know if it is the same in Switzerland, but certainly the best views of the Alps, and on the whole the most striking scenery here, of distant effects of every kind, are in the winter.

were reached, and the outmost of its untrodden streets was entered, not through towered gate or guarded rampart, but as a deep inlet between two rocks of coral in the Indian Sea; when first upon the traveller's sight opened the long ranges of columned palaces,—each with its black boat moored at the portal,—each with its image cast down, beneath its feet, upon that green pavement which every breeze broke into new fantasies of rich tessellation; when first, at the extremity of the bright vista, the shadowy Rialto threw its colossal curve slowly forth from behind the palace of the Camerlenghi;<sup>1</sup> that strange curve, so delicate, so adamantine, strong as a mountain cavern, graceful as a bow just bent; when first, before its moonlike circumference was all risen, the gondolier's cry, "Ah! Stali,"\* struck sharp upon the ear, and the prow turned aside under the mighty cornices that half met over the narrow canal, where the plash of the water followed close and loud, ringing along the marble by the boat's side; and when at last that boat darted forth upon the breadth of silver sea, across which the front of the Ducal Palace, flushed with its sanguine veins, looks to the snowy dome of Our Lady of Salvation,† it was no marvel that the mind should be so deeply entranced by the visionary charm of a scene so beautiful and so strange, as to forget the darker truths of its history and its being. Well might it seem that such a city had owed her existence rather to the rod of the enchanter, than the fear of the fugitive; that the waters which encircled her had been

\* Appendix 1: "The Gondolier's Cry" [p. 441].

† Appendix 2: "Our Lady of Salvation" [p. 443].

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Yesterday was a wonderful day: the breaking-up of our week of fine weather, and the whole chain of the Alps were bare and bright in the strange sharp clearness which one only has before rain, seen along the horizon in a belt of open sky. . . .

"November 27.—Yesterday there was one blue-grey mass of dark cloud upon the plains running along the whole horizon—not a bit of the bases visible, but their tops out, so—[sketch] in glowing rose light. You never saw anything so fine (even the Bernese Alps are hardly so grand), and they rise from the dead level of the sea; contrasting so suddenly with the waste of lagoon and sand island. . . ."

<sup>1</sup> [See in the next volume, Venetian Index, s. "Salute."]



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chosen for the mirror of her state, rather than the shelter of her nakedness; and that all which in nature was wild or merciless,—Time and Decay, as well as the waves and tempests,—had been won to adorn her instead of to destroy, and might still spare, for ages to come, that beauty which seemed to have fixed for its throne the sands of the hour-glass as well as of the sea.

§ 2. And although the last few eventful years,<sup>1</sup> fraught with change to the face of the whole earth, have been more fatal in their influence on Venice than the five hundred that preceded them; though the noble landscape of approach to her can now be seen no more, or seen only by a glance, as the engine slackens its rushing on the iron line; and though many of her palaces are for ever defaced, and many in desecrated ruins, there is still so much of magic in her aspect, that the hurried traveller, who must leave her before the wonder of that first aspect has been worn away, may still be led to forget the humility of her origin, and to shut his eyes to the depth of her desolation. They, at least, are little to be envied,\* in whose hearts the great charities of the imagination lie dead, and for whom the fancy has no power to repress the importunity of painful impressions, or to raise what is ignoble, and disguise what is discordant, in a scene so rich in its remembrances, so surpassing in its beauty. But for this work of the imagination there must be no permission during the task which is before us. The impotent feelings of romance, so singularly characteristic of this century, may indeed gild, but never save, the remains of those mightier ages to which they are attached like climbing flowers; and

\* This is a true, and, as far as I can judge of my own writing, one of my best finished passages, to the close of the paragraph; except that the charity of imagination, in the beginning of the clause, should have been more directly connected with the indolence of the imagination at its end. [1879.]

<sup>1</sup> [Written, it will be remembered, in 1851–1852, in a time of political revolution, railway and telegraph extension, and “Progresso” generally (see in the next volume, ch. i. § 32 n.)—which seemed to all to open a new earth, and to many (though not to Ruskin) a new heaven. For the railway and other “improvements” at Venice, see Vol. IV. pp. 40–41.]

they must be torn away from the magnificent fragments, if we would see them as they stood in their own strength. Those feelings, always as fruitless as they are fond, are in Venice not only incapable of protecting, but even of discerning, the objects to which they ought to have been attached. The Venice of modern fiction and drama is a thing of yesterday, a mere efflorescence of decay, a stage dream which the first ray of daylight must dissipate into dust. No prisoner, whose name is worth remembering, or whose sorrow deserved sympathy, ever crossed that "Bridge of Sighs," which is the centre of the Byronic ideal of Venice;<sup>1</sup> no great merchant of Venice ever saw that Rialto under which the traveller now passes with breathless interest: the statue which Byron makes Faliero address as of one of his great ancestors was erected to a soldier of fortune a hundred and fifty years after Faliero's death;<sup>2</sup> and the most conspicuous parts of the city have been so entirely altered in the course of the last three centuries, that if Henry Dandolo or Francis Foscari<sup>3</sup> could be summoned from their tombs, and stood each on the deck of his galley at the entrance of the Grand Canal, that renowned entrance, the painter's favourite subject, the novelist's favourite scene, where the water first narrows by

<sup>1</sup> [See *Childe Harold*, canto iv. st. 1. The Bridge of Sighs was built by Antonio da Ponte in 1589: see below, ch. viii. § 29, p. 355, and in the next volume, ch. iii. §§ 16, 22. The Rialto, by the same architect, was built in 1588.]

<sup>2</sup> [See *Marino Faliero*, Act iii. sc. i. The doge was put to death in 1355. The statue (in the square of SS. Giovanni e Paolo) which Byron makes Faliero address as "the sire of my sire's fathers," is Verrocchio's splendid equestrian one of Bartolommeo Colleoni, erected in 1496, for which see in the next volume, ch. i. § 22. Ruskin's father, on reading this passage, seems to have put in a plea for Byron. Ruskin replied (September 12, 1853):—

"I don't think Byron's ignorance of a kind to be compared with Shakespeare's or any other great man's: *their* ignorance is always of things out of their way,—inevitable, natural, and excusable. Byron's is of the things which he *took in hand* to write notes about, and was interested in, and in the midst of, but too idle to be accurate, or even to *approach* accuracy."

It should, however, be stated that in the Preface to *Marino Faliero*, Byron explains that he took poetic licence in Faliero's address; "The equestrian statue," he says, "is not of a Faliero, but of some other now obsolete warrior, although of a later date." Ruskin returns to the charge against "the ignorant sentimentality of Byron" in the next volume (*Venetian Index*, s. "Ponte de' Sospiri,") but in his epilogue of 1881 ("Castel-Franco," §§ 2, 3) makes amends to the poet who had "taught him so much."

<sup>3</sup> [For Enrico Dandolo and Francesco Foscari, see Vol. IX. pp. 20, 21.]



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the steps of the Church of La Salute,\*—the mighty Doges would not know in what part of the world they stood, would literally not recognise one stone of the great city, for whose sake, and by whose ingratitude, their grey hairs had been brought down with bitterness to the grave. The remains of *their* Venice lie hidden behind the cumbrous masses which were the delight of the nation in its dotage; hidden in many a grass-grown court, and silent pathway, and lightless canal, where the slow waves have sapped their foundations for five hundred years, and must soon prevail over them for ever. It must be our task to glean and gather them forth, and restore out of them some faint image of the lost city; more gorgeous a thousandfold than that which now exists, yet not created in the day-dream of the prince, nor by the ostentation of the noble, but built by iron hands and patient hearts, contending against the adversity of nature and the fury of man, so that its wonderfulness cannot be grasped by the indolence of imagination, but only after frank inquiry into the true nature of that wild and solitary scene, whose restless tides and trembling sands did indeed shelter the birth of the city, but long denied her dominion.

§ 3. When the eye falls casually on a map of Europe, there is no feature by which it is more likely to be arrested than the strange sweeping loop formed by the junction of the Alps and Apennines, and enclosing the great basin of Lombardy. This return of the mountain chain upon itself causes a vast difference in the character of the distribution of its débris on its opposite sides. The rock fragments and sediments which the torrents on the north side of the Alps bear into the plains are distributed over a vast extent of country, and, though here and there lodged in beds of enormous thickness, soon permit the firm substrata to appear from underneath them; but all the torrents which descend

\* Little thought I that, five-and-twenty years after writing this sentence, I should revise it again for press with this piece of the canal lapping under my window (Casa Ferro,<sup>1</sup> 21st December, 1876.) [1879.]

<sup>1</sup> [The Grand Hotel.]

from the southern side of the High Alps, and from the northern slope of the Apennines, meet concentrically in the recess or mountain bay which the two ridges enclose; every fragment which thunder breaks out of their battlements, and every grain of dust which the summer rain washes from their pastures, is at last laid at rest in the blue sweep of the Lombardic plain; and that plain must have risen within its rocky barriers as a cup fills with wine, but for two contrary influences which continually depress, or disperse from its surface, the accumulation of the ruins of ages.

§ 4. I will not tax the reader's faith in modern science\* by insisting on the singular depression of the surface of Lombardy, which appears for many centuries to have taken place steadily and continually; the main fact with which we have to do is the gradual transport, by the Po and its great collateral rivers, of vast masses of the finer sediment to the sea. The character of the Lombardic plains is most strikingly expressed by the ancient walls of its cities, composed for the most part of large rounded Alpine pebbles alternating with narrow courses of brick; and was curiously illustrated in 1848, by the ramparts of these same pebbles thrown up four or five feet high round every field, to check the Austrian cavalry in the battle under the walls of Verona.<sup>1</sup> The finer dust among which these pebbles are dispersed is taken up by the rivers, fed into continual strength by the Alpine snow, so that, however pure their waters may be when they issue from the lakes at the foot of the great chain, they become of the colour and opacity of clay before they reach the Adriatic; the sediment which they bear is at once thrown down as they enter the sea, forming a vast belt of low land along the

\* I wish I could now appeal to his faith in anything else. [1879.]

<sup>1</sup> [The reference is to the Battle of Custoza (1848), near Verona, in which the Austrians defeated the Piedmontese, driving them back upon Milan and Novara: see *A Joy for Ever*, § 77, "heaped pebbles of the Mincio divide her fields to this hour with lines of broken rampart, whence the tide of war rolled back to Novara." Ruskin would have heard many particulars of the campaign during his sojourns at Venice, 1849-1850 and 1851-1852, for he saw something of Field-Marshal Radetsky and his staff (see above, Introduction, p. xxxi.), and was on friendly terms with other Austrian officers (see letter of June 6, 1859, in *Arrows of the Chace*, 1880, ii. 6).]