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John Ruskin

Excerpt

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# SESAME AND LILIES

## LECTURE I.—SESAME

### OF KINGS' TREASURIES

“You shall each have a cake of sesame,—and ten pound.”

LUCIAN: *The Fisherman*.<sup>1</sup>

1. My first duty this evening is to ask your pardon for the ambiguity of title under which the subject of lecture has been announced:<sup>2</sup> for indeed I am not going to talk of kings, known as regnant, nor of treasuries, understood to contain wealth; but of quite another order of royalty, and another material of riches, than those usually acknowledged. I had even intended to ask your attention for a little while on trust, and (as sometimes one contrives, in taking a friend

<sup>1</sup> [In eds. 1–4, instead of this motto from Lucian, was the following from the Septuagint: “ἐξ αὐτῆς ἐξελεύσεται ἄpros . . . καὶ χῶμα χυπότων,” with a footnote giving the reference to “Job xxviii. 5, 6”: “As for the earth, *out of it cometh bread*; and under it is turned up as it were fire. The stones of it are the place of sapphires: *and it hath dust of gold.*” For a note on this motto and the substituted passage from Lucian, see above, Introduction, p. lvi. In Mr. Allen's copy Ruskin added the preceding words in Lucian: “Every one who thinks himself a philosopher, come to the Acropolis. You shall each . . .”]

<sup>2</sup> [Editions 1–4 add: “. . . announced; and for having endeavoured, as you may ultimately think, to obtain your audience under false pretences. For indeed . . .” And so in line 12, they add:—

“But since my good plain-spoken friend, Canon Anson, has already partly anticipated my reserved ‘trot for the avenue’ in his first advertised title of subject, ‘How and What to Read’—and as also . . .”

The report in the *Manchester Examiner* gives the following exordium:—

“Mr. Ruskin, at the outset of his discourse, which extended for about an hour and a half, said he always came to Manchester in a somewhat nervous state of mind, feeling that he addressed an audience out of a most powerful city—powerful in its probable influence on the destinies of mankind, and representative of the commerce of England, which would certainly be, for evil or for good, the great influence that would conduct our destinies for the next 100 years. He also felt the fear of the recluse, who had got into the habit of looking rather upon the dark side, and if he seemed to speak with sourness or complaint, he must ask to be forgiven.

to see a favourite piece of scenery) to hide what I wanted most to show, with such imperfect cunning as I might, until we unexpectedly reached the best point of view by winding paths. But—and as also I have heard it said, by men practised in public address, that hearers are never so much fatigued as by the endeavour to follow a speaker who gives them no clue to his purpose,—I will take the slight mask off at once, and tell you plainly that I want to speak to you about the treasures hidden in books; and about the way we find them, and the way we lose them. A grave subject, you will say; and a wide one! Yes; so wide that I shall make no effort to touch the compass of it. I will try only to bring before you a few simple thoughts about reading, which press themselves upon me every day more deeply, as I watch the course of the public mind with respect to our daily enlarging means of education; and the answeringly wider spreading on the levels, of the irrigation of literature.

2. It happens that I have practically some connection with schools for different classes of youth;<sup>1</sup> and I receive many letters from parents respecting the education of their children. In the mass of these letters I am always struck by the precedence which the idea of a “position in life” takes above all other thoughts in the parents’—more especially in the mothers’—minds. “The education befitting such and such a *station in life*”<sup>2</sup>—this is the phrase, this the

It was always his desire to make up for the dullness of a discourse by trying to excite curiosity in his hearers, whom he sought to lead on without knowing what it was about till near the end, making it a sort of conundrum. But to-night he found that the cat had been let out of the bag by his friend Canon Anson in his . . .”

Ruskin, it will be seen, had meant not to disclose in his prefatory remarks that the “Kings’ Treasuries,” which he chose as the title of his lecture, were books, but to make this suddenly clear when he came into close contact with the subject. Canon Anson, however, had frankly announced the subject of the lecture as “How and What to Read”; thus making it impossible for Ruskin suddenly to disclose the meaning of his own title (or, as he puts it, to reserve his trot for the avenue).]

<sup>1</sup> [As a Governor of Christ’s Hospital, for instance, and as a patron of Miss Bell’s school for girls at Winnington (see above, Introduction, p. lxvi.); perhaps also as an Examiner in the Oxford Examinations of Middle Class Schools (see Vol. XVI. p. xxxi.).]

<sup>2</sup> [On the subject of “station in life,” see below, § 135 (p. 181) and compare Vol. XVII. p. 320 n.]

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object, always. They never seek, as far as I can make out, an education good in itself; even the conception of abstract rightness in training rarely seems reached by the writers. But, an education "which shall keep a good coat on my son's back;—which shall enable him to ring with confidence the visitors' bell at double-belled doors; which shall result ultimately in establishment of a double-belled door to his own house;—in a word, which shall lead to advancement in life;—*this* we pray for on bent knees—and this is *all* we pray for." It never seems to occur to the parents that there may be an education which, in itself, *is* advancement in Life;—that any other than that may perhaps be advancement in Death; and that this essential education might be more easily got, or given, than they fancy, if they set about it in the right way; while it is for no price, and by no favour, to be got, if they set about it in the wrong.

3. Indeed, among the ideas most prevalent and effective in the mind of this busiest of countries, I suppose the first—at least that which is confessed with the greatest frankness, and put forward as the fittest stimulus to youthful exertion—is this of "Advancement in life." May I ask you to consider with me, what this idea practically includes, and what it should include?

Practically, then, at present, "advancement in life" means, becoming conspicuous in life; obtaining a position which shall be acknowledged by others to be respectable or honourable. We do not understand by this advancement, in general, the mere making of money, but the being known to have made it; not the accomplishment of any great aim, but the being seen to have accomplished it. In a word, we mean the gratification of our thirst for applause. That thirst, if the last infirmity of noble minds,<sup>1</sup> is also the first infirmity of weak ones; and, on the whole, the strongest impulsive influence of average humanity: the greatest efforts of the race have always been traceable to

<sup>1</sup> [*Lycidas*, 71.]

the love of praise, as its greatest catastrophes to the love of pleasure.

4. I am not about to attack or defend this impulse. I want you only to feel how it lies at the root of effort; especially of all modern effort. It is the gratification of vanity which is, with us, the stimulus of toil and balm of repose; so closely does it touch the very springs of life that the wounding of our vanity is always spoken of (and truly) as in its measure *mortal*; we call it “mortification,” using the same expression which we should apply to a gangrenous and incurable bodily hurt. And although a few of us may be physicians enough to recognise the various effect of this passion upon health and energy, I believe most honest men know, and would at once acknowledge, its leading power with them as a motive. The seaman does not commonly desire to be made captain only because he knows he can manage the ship better than any other sailor on board. He wants to be made captain that he may be *called* captain. The clergyman does not usually want to be made a bishop only because he believes that no other hand can, as firmly as his, direct the diocese through its difficulties. He wants to be made bishop primarily that he may be called “My Lord.” And a prince does not usually desire to enlarge, or a subject to gain, a kingdom, because he believes no one else can as well serve the State, upon its throne; but, briefly, because he wishes to be addressed as “Your Majesty,” by as many lips as may be brought to such utterance.

5. This, then, being the main idea of “advancement in life,” the force of it applies, for all of us, according to our station, particularly to that secondary result of such advancement which we call “getting into good society.” We want to get into good society, not that we may have it, but that we may be seen in it; and our notion of its goodness depends primarily on its conspicuousness.

Will you pardon me if I pause for a moment to put what I fear you may think an impertinent question? I

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never can go on with an address unless I feel, or know, that my audience are either with me or against me: I do not much care which, in beginning; but I must know where they are; and I would fain find out, at this instant, whether you think I am putting the motives of popular action too low. I am resolved, to-night, to state them low enough to be admitted as probable; for whenever, in my writings on Political Economy, I assume that a little honesty,<sup>1</sup> or generosity,—or what used to be called “virtue,”—may be calculated upon as a human motive of action, people always answer me, saying, “You must not calculate on that: that is not in human nature: you must not assume anything to be common to men but acquisitiveness and jealousy; no other feeling ever has influence on them, except accidentally, and in matters out of the way of business.” I begin, accordingly, to-night low in the scale of motives; but I must know if you think me right in doing so. Therefore, let me ask those who admit the love of praise to be usually the strongest motive in men’s minds in seeking advancement, and the honest desire of doing any kind of duty to be an entirely secondary one, to hold up their hands. (*About a dozen hands held up—the audience, partly, not being sure the lecturer is serious, and, partly, shy of expressing opinion.*)<sup>2</sup> I am quite serious—I really do want to know what you think; however, I can judge by putting the reverse question. Will those who think that duty is generally the first, and love of praise the second, motive, hold up their hands? (*One hand reported to have been held up behind the lecturer.*) Very good: I see you are with me, and that you think I have not begun too near the ground. Now, without teasing you by putting farther question, I venture to assume that you will admit duty as at least a secondary or tertiary motive. You think

<sup>1</sup> [See, for instance, the Preface to *Unto this Last* (Vol. XVII. p. 19).]

<sup>2</sup> [The report in the *Manchester Examiner* says: “Probably not a single hand out of all the hundreds was lifted up, though a very few, here and there, were for a moment raised, amid much laughter, and as quickly lowered, whether from diffidence or in hasty retreat from some mistake.”]

that the desire of doing something useful, or obtaining some real good, is indeed an existent collateral idea, though a secondary one, in most men's desire of advancement. You will grant that moderately honest men desire place and office, at least in some measure for the sake of beneficent power; and would wish to associate rather with sensible and well-informed persons than with fools and ignorant persons, whether they are seen in the company of the sensible ones or not. And finally, without being troubled by repetition of any common truisms about the preciousness of friends, and the influence of companions, you will admit, doubtless, that according to the sincerity of our desire that our friends may be true, and our companions wise,—and in proportion to the earnestness and discretion with which we choose both,—will be the general chances of our happiness and usefulness.

6. But, granting that we had both the will and the sense to choose our friends well, how few of us have the power! or, at least, how limited, for most, is the sphere of choice! Nearly all our associations are determined by chance or necessity; and restricted within a narrow circle. We cannot know whom we would; and those whom we know, we cannot have at our side when we most need them. All the higher circles of human intelligence are, to those beneath, only momentarily and partially open. We may, by good fortune, obtain a glimpse of a great poet, and hear the sound of his voice; or put a question to a man of science, and be answered good-humouredly. We may intrude ten minutes' talk on a cabinet minister, answered probably with words worse than silence, being deceptive; or snatch, once or twice in our lives, the privilege of throwing a bouquet in the path of a princess, or arresting the kind glance of a queen. And yet these momentary chances we covet; and spend our years, and passions, and powers, in pursuit of little more than these; while, meantime, there is a society continually open to us, of people who will talk to us as long as we like, whatever our rank or occupation;—talk to us in the

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best words they can choose, and of the things nearest their hearts.<sup>1</sup> And this society, because it is so numerous and so gentle, and can be kept waiting round us all day long,—kings and statesmen lingering patiently, not to grant audience, but to gain it!—in those plainly furnished and narrow ante-rooms, our bookcase shelves,—we make no account of that company,—perhaps never listen to a word they would say, all day long!

7. You may tell me, perhaps, or think within yourselves, that the apathy with which we regard this company of the noble, who are praying us to listen to them; and the passion with which we pursue the company, probably of the ignoble, who despise us, or who have nothing to teach us, are grounded in this,—that we can see the faces of the living men, and it is themselves, and not their sayings, with which we desire to become familiar. But it is not so. Suppose you never were to see their faces;—suppose you could be put behind a screen in the statesman's cabinet, or the prince's chamber, would you not be glad to listen to their words, though you were forbidden to advance beyond the screen? And when the screen is only a little less, folded in two instead of four, and you can be hidden behind the cover of the two boards that bind a book, and listen all day long, not to the casual talk, but to the studied, determined, chosen addresses of the wisest of men;—this station of audience, and honourable privy council, you despise!

8. But perhaps you will say that it is because the living people talk of things that are passing, and are of immediate interest to you, that you desire to hear them. Nay; that cannot be so, for the living people will themselves tell you about passing matters much better in their writings than in their careless talk. Yet I admit that this motive does influence you, so far as you prefer those rapid and ephemeral writings to slow and enduring writings—books, properly so

<sup>1</sup> [Editions 1-4 read: “. . . choose, and with thanks if we listen to them. And this society . . .”]

called. For all books are divisible into two classes, the books of the hour, and the books of all time. Mark this distinction—it is not one of quality only. It is not merely the bad book that does not last, and the good one that does. It is a distinction of species. There are good books for the hour, and good ones for all time; bad books for the hour, and bad ones for all time. I must define the two kinds before I go farther.

9. The good book of the hour, then,—I do not speak of the bad ones,—is simply the useful or pleasant talk of some person whom you cannot otherwise converse with, printed for you. Very useful often, telling you what you need to know; very pleasant often, as a sensible friend's present talk would be. These bright accounts of travels; good-humoured and witty discussions of question; lively or pathetic story-telling in the form of novel; firm fact-telling, by the real agents concerned in the events of passing history;—all these books of the hour, multiplying among us as education becomes more general, are a peculiar possession of the present age: we ought to be entirely thankful for them, and entirely ashamed of ourselves if we make no good use of them. But we make the worst possible use if we allow them to usurp the place of true books: for, strictly speaking, they are not books at all, but merely letters or newspapers in good print. Our friend's letter may be delightful, or necessary, to-day: whether worth keeping or not, is to be considered. The newspaper may be entirely proper at breakfast time, but assuredly it is not reading for all day. So, though bound up in a volume, the long letter which gives you so pleasant an account of the inns, and roads, and weather, last year at such a place, or which tells you that amusing story, or gives you the real circumstances of such and such events, however valuable for occasional reference, may not be, in the real sense of the word, a "book" at all, nor, in the real sense, to be "read." A book is essentially not a talking thing, but a written thing; and written, not with a view of mere communication, but of



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permanence. The book of talk is printed only because its author cannot speak to thousands of people at once; if he could, he would—the volume is mere *multiplication* of his voice. You cannot talk to your friend in India; if you could, you would; you write instead: that is mere *conveyance* of voice. But a book is written, not to multiply the voice merely, not to carry it merely, but to perpetuate it. The author has something to say which he perceives to be true and useful, or helpfully beautiful. So far as he knows, no one has yet said it; so far as he knows, no one else can say it. He is bound to say it, clearly and melodiously if he may; clearly at all events. In the sum of his life he finds this to be the thing, or group of things, manifest to him;—this, the piece of true knowledge, or sight, which his share of sunshine and earth has permitted him to seize. He would fain set it down for ever; engrave it on rock, if he could; saying, “This is the best of me; for the rest, I ate, and drank, and slept, loved, and hated, like another; my life was as the vapour,<sup>1</sup> and is not; but this I saw and knew: this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory.” That is his “writing”; it is, in his small human way, and with whatever degree of true inspiration is in him, his inscription, or scripture. That is a “Book.”

10. Perhaps you think no books were ever so written?

But, again, I ask you, do you at all believe in honesty, or at all in kindness, or do you think there is never any honesty or benevolence in wise people? None of us, I hope, are so unhappy as to think that. Well, whatever bit of a wise man's work is honestly and benevolently done, that bit is his book or his piece of art.\* It is mixed always with evil fragments—ill-done, redundant, affected work. But if you read rightly, you will easily discover the true bits, and those *are* the book.

11. Now books of this kind have been written in all

\* Note this sentence carefully, and compare the *Queen of the Air*, § 106.

<sup>1</sup> [James iv. 14: see also § 97 (below, p. 146); Vol. VIII. p. 220; and Vol. XIII. p. 316.]

ages by their greatest men:—by great leaders,<sup>1</sup> great statesmen, and great thinkers. These are all at your choice; and Life is short. You have heard as much before;—yet have you measured and mapped out this short life and its possibilities? Do you know, if you read this, that you cannot read that—that what you lose to-day you cannot gain to-morrow? Will you go and gossip with your housemaid, or your stable-boy, when you may talk with queens and kings; or flatter yourself that it is with any worthy consciousness of your own claims to respect, that you jostle with the hungry and common crowd for *entrée* here, and audience there, when all the while this eternal court is open to you, with its society, wide as the world, multitudinous as its days, the chosen, and the mighty, of every place and time? Into that you may enter always; in that you may take fellowship and rank according to your wish; from that, once entered into it, you can never be outcast but by your own fault; by your aristocracy of companionship there, your own inherent aristocracy will be assuredly tested, and the motives with which you strive to take high place in the society of the living, measured, as to all the truth and sincerity that are in them, by the place you desire to take in this company of the Dead.

12. “The place you desire,” and the place you *fit yourself for*, I must also say; because, observe, this court of the past differs from all living aristocracy in this:—it is open to labour and to merit, but to nothing else. No wealth will bribe, no name overawe, no artifice deceive, the guardian of those Elysian gates. In the deep sense, no vile or vulgar person ever enters there. At the portières of that silent Faubourg St. Germain, there is but brief question:—“Do you deserve to enter? Pass. Do you ask to be the companion of nobles? Make yourself noble, and you shall be. Do you long for the conversation of the wise? Learn to understand it, and you shall hear it. But on other terms?—no. If you will not rise to

<sup>1</sup> [In eds. 1–4 “leaders”; misprinted “readers” in later editions.]