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Volume I

(1819–1860)

CHAPTER I

CHILDHOOD

(1819–1832)

> "So stubborn and chemically inalterable the laws of the prescription were, that now, looking back from 1886 to that brook shore of 1837, whence I could see the whole of my youth, I find myself in nothing whatsoever *changed*. Some of me is dead, more of me stronger. I have learned a few things, forgotten many; in the total of me, I am but the same youth, disappointed and rheumatic."—*Præterita.*

THE first forty years of Ruskin's life, which are the subject of the present volume, have the interest of unity of purpose, showing the approval and the accomplishment in middle age of what youth had planned. His methods and opinions did indeed alter, as any wise man's must, with altering conditions, with enlarged experience, with acquired knowledge. A great man of action was once rallied by a friend for changing his views "so hurriedly." "Yes," he replied, "as hurriedly as I could, for I found I was wrong." The man of letters who is the subject of this biography was often taunted for the different views which he put forward at different times upon the same questions. The problems of life, of ethics, of criticism are mostly polygonal, he replied, and "for myself, I am never satisfied that I have handled a subject properly till I have contradicted myself at least three times."[1] To be truly alive, a man must be capable, he said elsewhere, of nourishment and therefore of change; but in the case of a consistent life and a strong character, the change is "that of a tree, not of a cloud."[2]

[1] *Cambridge Inaugural Address*, § 13.
[2] Preface to *Modern Painters*, vol. v.

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CHAP. I.

Pervicacity of humour, of tastes, of character is one of the most marked features in the life of Ruskin. For nearly fifty years he was a writer of printed books, which became in the end so numerous that he lost count of them; at the age of seven he was already busy with his "Works," and a year later they were numerous enough already for him to begin a classification of them under various heads. He became a great master of English; and though his more juvenile pieces show few gifts of style other than that of fluency, yet by the age of eighteen he was writing sentences nearly as well put together as any he afterwards made. Throughout his active life, he was a moralist in season and, as many of his critics hold, out of season; some have regarded him as a Prophet, all perceive that he was a sermonizer: the performance for which his mother used to call as her baby-boy's great accomplishment was a sermon which began with the words "People, be good." He was to give men eyes to see the beauties of nature: his childish rhymes invited "Papa" to observe "how pretty those icicles are," and "the water-wheel that turns slowly round, Grinding the corn that—requires to be ground" (his "Political Economy of the future," as he afterwards noted), "and quarries with their craggy stones" ("so foretelling *Stones of Venice*").[1] "I was as fond of nature at five years old as I am now," he wrote in 1853,[2] "and had as good an ear for the harmony of words." He became a famous interpreter of art and himself a draughtsman of exquisite, though unfulfilled, skill: already at the age of nine he was poring over engravings from Prout and Turner, and there are drawings of his, done when he was sixteen, which are of real artistic merit. In Ruskin, as in few men of his generation, were united the Hebraistic and the Hellenistic elements; the clash between them, with their reconciliation, is the secret of his work: the earliest of his mental struggles raged around this self-same conflict. The chemical "prescription" in Ruskin's nature must have been unusually stubborn, the accidents of his youth unusually consonant,

[1] *The Queen of the Air*, § 112.
[2] In a letter to his college tutor, the Rev. W. L. Brown.

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to give to his life so much of this consistent unity. To trace the influences of the moulding years of his childhood is the object of the present chapter.

I

The ancestry of John Ruskin, and the origin of his name, have been the subject of much ingenious speculation and some inconclusive research.[1] He himself had little light to throw upon the questions. With the meaning of his name, he was content only to play. He did not care to think that it was merely an abbreviation of "Rough Skin" in the sense of "Pigskin"; but he took "some childish pleasure" in its accidental resemblance to that of Giovanni Rusconi, the Venetian architect who gave an opinion in favour of sparing the old Ducal Palace after the fire of 1574.[2] Ruskin would have been pleased with the etymology, communicated to me by Dr. Furnivall, which traces the name back to an old English word denoting the winter-fur of the squirrel. That "little dark-eyed miracle of the forest, more like a sunbeam than a living creature,"[3] was one of Ruskin's favourite animals. Of the past history of his family he was, he says, "stupidly and heartlessly careless as long as he could have learnt it; not until after his mother's death did he begin to desire to know what he could never more be told." In one place he speaks of his *English* ancestors; and the name has been traced back to the fourteenth century, when a Ruskin was captain of one of Edward III.'s ships. For the most part, however, he thought and talked of himself as of Scottish descent. He was interested in a genealogy which traced his forbears back to the Rusgains (or bark-peeling family) of Muckairn, on the shore of Loch Etive. This is highly conjectural; his paternal great-grandfather—John Ruskin the elder—

[1] Those who are curious in such matters may find the subject fully summarised and discussed in the Library Edition of Ruskin's Works, vol. xxxv. pp. lviii.–lxi., 602–4, 607.

[2] *The Stones of Venice*, vol. ii. ch. viii. § 28.

[3] *Deucalion*, vol. i. ch. xii. § 40.

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whatever may have been his descent, was a Londoner; his grandfather was apprenticed in London, migrating some years later to Edinburgh. This grandfather, John Thomas Ruskin, is described as being of unstable disposition, "seldom knowing his own mind for two hours together"; and during the latter years of his life, his conduct, or misconduct, of his affairs, as well as the condition of his health and mind, gave much anxiety to his family. He had been settled at Bower's Well, Perth, and there he ended his life by his own hand; leaving to his son, John James Ruskin, this painful memory and a load of debt. The character and mental equipment of his son, John James Ruskin (the father of our subject) were, as we shall see, very different from that of John Thomas.

Whatever may have been the remote history of Ruskin's family, its immediate connexion was Scottish. His father was born and bred in Edinburgh; many of his own very earliest memories were connected either with it or with the Grampians and the Tay; the first patriotic delight he could recollect distinctly was that of crossing the border, when his Scottish nurse, Anne Strachan, always sung to him as they approached the Tweed or Esk:—

> "For Scotland, my darling, lies full in my view,
> With her barefooted lassies, and mountains so blue."

He used to speak of himself as "a son of the Manse," too; a son, however, only in the third generation, John Thomas Ruskin, his grandfather, having married Catherine Tweddale, who was a daughter of the Rev. James Tweddale, minister of Glenluce, by his marriage with Catherine Adair. It was through this Catherine Tweddale that he derived, he used to say, such dim gleam of ancestral honour as he could claim, her people being "right earth-born and γηγενεῖς of Galloway." But he was a son of the Manse in another sense. In later years, when he was pronouncing sentence of major commination against a perverse generation at large and pleading, in particular, for a stricter exercise of Church discipline in matters of conduct, he was fond of

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recalling the stern Presbyterian conscience with which a great-great-uncle, James Maitland of Sorbie, fearlessly exercised "the needful excommunicative power of all living churches, Puritan or Papal." A certain Lady ——, living in open quarrel with her son, desired to receive the Sacrament. Mr. Maitland resolutely interdicted her. Thinking to shame him into concession, she came forward and knelt at the altar to receive it; whereupon the undaunted pastor lifted her up bodily and conveyed her back to her seat.

Apart from this Galloway ancestry, Ruskin belonged to the commercial class. His grandfather, John Thomas, was a merchant of some sort in Edinburgh; his father, a wine-merchant in London. His mother was the daughter of a sailor in the herring business; his maternal grandmother was the landlady of the Old King's Head in Market Street, Croydon, and "I wish she were alive again," he wrote from Florence, "that I could paint her Simone Memmi's King's Head for a sign"; his mother's sister married a baker at Croydon; his father's sister, a tanner at Perth; "and I don't know much more about my family," he said, "except that there used to be a greengrocer of the name in a small shop near the Crystal Palace." He was but "a poor gipsy Herald," he wrote, when challenging the Squires of England.[1] He was not a "gentleman," not being born in the caste; but he had some pieces of gentlemen's education, and in looking back upon his early days he "would not change," he proudly wrote, "the dreams and tender realities of them for anything I hear now remembered by lords or dames, of their days of childhood in castle halls, and by sweet lawns and lakes in park-walled forest." He also knew castle halls and pleasaunces, as we shall hear; and attributed to his lot one of the most fortunate influences in his education: an instinct, namely, of uncovetous admiration, through which he perceived that it was "probably much happier to live in a small house, and have Warwick Castle to be astonished at, than to live in Warwick Castle and have nothing to be

[1] *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 45.

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astonished at; and that, at all events, it would not make Brunswick Square in the least more pleasantly habitable, to pull Warwick Castle down."

II

It was in 54 Hunter Street, Brunswick Square, in Bloomsbury, that Ruskin was born. The house, a small brick edifice of the style common in that quarter of boarding-houses, still stands, and has been marked by the Society of Arts with a memorial tablet. Ruskin's father and mother were first cousins, his maternal grandmother having been a sister of the John Thomas Ruskin aforesaid. They had married in 1818, and in the following year, on February 8, their first and only child was born. Ruskin, who sometimes played with the subject of astrology, noted that he was born at "½ past 7 A.M. (under Aquarius)"; John Varley, who believed in everything (except religion) from astrology to the reality of William Blake's ghost of a flea, once met Ruskin in 1842 or '43, to whom he undertook, on being given the place and hour of nativity, to prove the truth of the science in ten minutes; "and in certainly not more than ten minutes, occupied in drawing of its sky, he fastened upon the three years of my past life when I was 14, 18, and 21 as having been especially fatal to me." They were the years in which he had first seen the object of his early attachment, had fallen in love with her, and had lost her by her marriage to another. He used to trace the leaden influences on him of the planet Saturn, to which in the older systems Aquarius was assigned as the "house." Of less nebulous significance were the gifts which Ruskin received from nature, the character of his parents, and the influence of his home surroundings. Biographers are too much in the habit, he says, of attributing to accidents which introduce some new phase of character all the circumstances of character which gave the accidents importance; and for his own part he regarded many elements in his character and powers, and especially the art-gift, as innate. But innate qualities

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may be favoured or checked, and must be directed, by circumstances, and they are thus influenced from the earliest years.

The education of a child begins, said Ruskin, in infancy. "At six months old it can answer smile by smile, and impatience with impatience. It can observe, enjoy, and suffer. Do you suppose it makes no difference to it that the order of the house is perfect and quiet, the faces of its father and mother full of peace, their soft voices familiar to its ear, and even those of strangers, loving; or that it is tossed from arm to arm, among hard, or reckless, or vain-minded persons, in the gloom of a vicious household, or the confusion of a gay one? The moral disposition is, I doubt not, greatly determined in those first speechless years."[1] He wrote thus of the early years of Scott, but he was thinking also of his own. The character of his parents and the tenor of the daily round at home were the formative forces in Ruskin's life. As a child and boy, he was taught by his mother; at school he was a "day boy," and then only intermittently; when he travelled, it was with his parents; and even when he went into residence at Oxford, his mother accompanied him.

"I have seen my mother travel," says Ruskin, "from sunrise to sunset on a summer's day without once leaning back in the carriage."[2] A friend who made her acquaintance in later years, when she had hurt her leg and could only walk with difficulty, noted it as characteristic of her nature that she chose for support, rather than the arm of husband or son, the back of a chair.[3] She maintained this unbending attitude in the education of her son. An evangelical Puritan of the straitest sect, she held strong views on the sinfulness even of toys. A bunch of keys and a box of bricks were the total equipment in this respect of Ruskin's nursery. An aunt once brought him a Punch and a Judy, radiant in scarlet and gold, from the Soho Bazaar. His mother immediately put them away, and he never saw them again. There was a like restriction in dainties.

[1] *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 33.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] G. B.-J. in *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, vol. i. p. 252.

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CHAP. I.

Many a child, even of a generation or two ago, can remember the bliss of accompanying its mother to the store-cupboard and being allowed to dip its tiny hand into the jar of sugar or sultanas; and in the present generation every self-respecting child brings up its parents to the plentiful supply of sweets. Ruskin's recollection in this sort was of three raisins once counted out to him. Nor was the paucity of toys counteracted by any abundance of playfellows. His father and mother kept themselves to themselves, as the saying is, and expected the child to do the like. There were indeed some delicious days when, as soon as he could run, he was taken down to see his Croydon aunt, and left to play by "the springs of Wandel." And there were weeks of yet greater delight, both in his earliest years and in later childhood, spent in his Scottish aunt's garden sloping to the Tay. The idea of distant hills was connected in the child's mind with approach to the extreme felicities of life; so that when at the age of three and a half he was taken to have his portrait painted by Northcote, and the old man asked him what he would like to have put in the distance, he replied, "Blue hills." At Croydon, and at Perth, alike, there were many cousins; of his Perth cousin, Jessie, he was specially fond, but she died early; her elder sister, Mary, was afterwards adopted by Ruskin's parents. The Scottish aunt, like her of Croydon,[1] was of Puritan temper; and the servant-of-all-work in the Perth house "might well have been the prototype of the Mause of *Old Mortality*." "I never can be thankful enough," he added, "for having seen, in her, the Scottish Puritan spirit in its perfect faith and force." The Springs of Wandel and the Banks of Tay were, however, but occasional delights; for the most part his first years were spent without companions, and with no more alluring prospect than could be obtained by watching

[1] Ruskin's family connexions are complicated, and sometimes confused, by the fact that both his father's sister (the Aunt Jessie or Janet of *Fors* and *Prœterita*) and his mother's sister (Aunt Bridget) married a Mr. Richardson—in the former case, Mr. Peter Richardson, tanner, of Perth; in the latter, Mr. Richardson of Market Street, Croydon.

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the turncock at an opposite water-stand or by a sidelong glance at the trees of Brunswick Square. When the child was about four, his father was able to leave Hunter Street and to buy the lease of a house on Herne Hill (No. 28), then embowered in leafy seclusion and commanding from its garret windows a notable view, on one side, of the Norwood hills, and, on the other, of the valley of the Thames. The house, which still stands, was for more than eighty years, though with some intermission, connected with Ruskin or his memory. He lived there with his parents for twenty years. It was then let to strangers for a while; but in 1872 Ruskin made over the lease to his cousin, Mrs. Arthur Severn, and her husband. During their tenancy, which continued till 1907, Ruskin's old nursery was for the remainder of his life kept as a bedroom for him; and it was in that room that he wrote in 1885 the preface to the autobiographical memories of his childhood. The house had front and back garden, and in it the boy passed most of his days for some years:—

> "The differences of primal importance 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. . . . The unalloyed and long continuing pleasure given me by our fruit-tree avenue was in its blossom, not in its bearing. . . . So that very early indeed in my thoughts of trees, I had got at the principle given fifty years afterwards in *Proserpina*, that the seeds and fruits of them were for the sake of the flowers, not the flowers for the fruit; . . . and for many and many a year to come,—until indeed, the whole of life became autumn to me,—my chief prayer for the kindness of heaven, in its flowerful seasons, was that the frost might not touch the almond blossom."

In the matter of discipline, Ruskin's mother was a Spencerian before Spencer. "Let your penalties," says that mildly austere philosopher, "be like the penalties inflicted by inanimate Nature—inevitable. The hot cinder burns a child the first time he seizes it; it burns him the second ime; it burns him every time; and he very soon learns not

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to touch the hot cinder." That was Mrs. Ruskin's method and the boy needed no second lesson. In a lecture given at Woolwich, he recalled an incident of his early childhood which his mother was fond of telling him. "One evening, when I was yet in my nurse's arms, I wanted to touch the tea-urn, which was boiling merrily. It was an early taste for bronzes, I suppose; but I was resolute about it. My mother bade me keep my fingers back; I insisted on putting them forward. My nurse would have taken me away from the urn, but my mother said—'Let him touch it, Nurse.' So I touched it,—and that was my first lesson in the meaning of the word Liberty. It was the first piece of Liberty I got, and the last which for some time I asked for."[1] There are questions, he says, which are determined more easily in days of innocence, than when approached with the prejudices and puzzlements of later years. Is the Will Free, and what is Human Responsibility? *Solvitur ambulando*. He well remembered settling these matters for himself, before he was ten years old, on the nursery stairs: "I jumped up and down an awkward turn of four steps, and considered whether it was likely that God knew whether I should jump only three, or the whole four at a time. Having settled it in my mind that He knew quite well, though I didn't, which I should do; and also whether I should fall or not in the course of the performance,—though I was altogether responsible for taking care not to,—I never troubled my head more on the matter from that day to this." This rough-and-tumble method of approaching some abstract questions was characteristic of Ruskin throughout life. Meanwhile, his sense of responsibility had been strengthened by external sanction; for the child was "always summarily whipped if he cried, did not do as he was bid, or tumbled on the stairs."

Sundays in the Evangelical household at Hunter Street and Herne Hill were a sore trial to Ruskin. A lurid shade was cast, he says, over the whole of Friday and Saturday by the horrible sense that Sunday was coming. Croydon afforded no escape, for his aunt, even more Evangelical than his mother, carried her religion down to the glacial

[1] *The Story of Arachne*, § 3.

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