

"SESAME AND LILIES"

EVERY age and every department of human activity have their unique characters. The nineteenth century has produced no more unique literary character than John Ruskin, the great Art critic. His entire life has been devoted to that work for which he is best fitted, Art-criticism. At the age of fifty, he felt that the ten years of his life, spent endeavouring to convince the public of the worth of Turner as a painter, had been wasted. But the verdict of later years confirms Ruskin's early judgment and is a compliment to the worth of his effort. Ruskin is his own publisher and is content that the actual merits of his works be the measure of their popularity. The estimation in which they are to-day held in educated circles, the world over, is an emphatic endorsement of their merits.

Ruskin has created a new branch of English Literature—that having to do with Art. In 1870 he began to publish a series of his works. The first to receive the touch of his revising and life-giving pen was "Sesame and Lilies." Like many other of his works, the title of this one gives not the slightest clue to its real nature. Attached to this work is a double preface. The first of these amply repays the reader for his task of reading it, because of the new fields which it opens up to him. It is throughout characterized by the earnestness of soul of one who would have the youth of his loved land count life aright. Nor does he close this preface without paying to woman a tribute which is her due as a member of society, having for its foundation the teachings of the Christian religion. If one, "skilled in reading the torn manuscripts of the human soul," would be intimately acquainted with Ruskin it must be through his great friends and his greater works. The second preface is descriptive of Alpine scenery and is adorned with choicest gems of descriptive prose.

"Sesame or the King's Treasures," deals with the subject, "What and How to Read." The main idea of this lecture is to determine what is embraced, practically, in the idea of "advancement in life," so often urged as the fittest stimulus to youthful exertion, and what that idea should include. Practically, it includes the gratification of man's natural thirst for applause to which, he says, the greatest

efforts of the race have always been traceable. Thus impelled, man devotes his rarest powers to the pursuit of ephemeral pleasures, while on his book-shelves await Kings and statesmen ready to unveil nature's sweetest secrets. Books are essentially written things and are of two classes—the book for the hour and the book for all time. They are something peculiarly characteristic of the author. Scattered here and there throughout the pages, hidden beneath the outward garb, as gold in the ore, is the true book.

Reading implies work as of the Australian miner, sifting letter by letter and word by word, that the reader may come in contact with the vital power permeating the work. In a true examination of an author the reader is to see what the author sees. As guided by Ruskin, the reader examines a few lines of Milton's "Lycidas," true the advantage of classic lore is felt, but is this *advantage* all *gain*? This method of reading implies the work of the Philologist. Interesting though this may be, life is too short, quiet hours, too few, and good literature, too abundant for the average student to read thus.

Ruskin, like Carlyle, has boldly attacked what he considers the leading vice of our age—a mercenary spirit incapacitating us as a nation of readers, which, however, has not so corrupted the English public that the true ring of the genuine Saxon metal answers not to the stroke of the mystic wand.

He tells us that we have despised Literature, Science, Art, Nature, and Compassion. Does not this reflect some feeling of disappointed ambition? However, it is to be expected that one to whom Art has been a life study will say that the nation has despised Art. But let him who prefers the charge console himself with the fact, that he, more than any other, has so imbued the public mind with the importance of Art, that the elements of industrial and even of classic art have interpenetrated and vitalized all progressive educational systems. That Arbitration is superseding the sword is the highest compliment to his efforts and those of his co-laborers in the worthy cause of showing the universal brotherhood of man. The sense of advocacy everywhere pervading his work lessens the force with which Ruskin speaks of what the nation has despised. But when he says that, "To be mighty in heart, mighty in mind, and to become increasingly so is indeed to advance in life," and again, "He only is advancing