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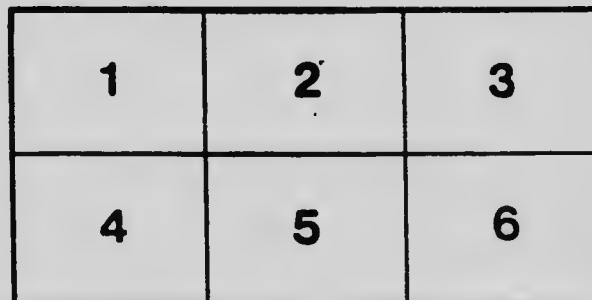
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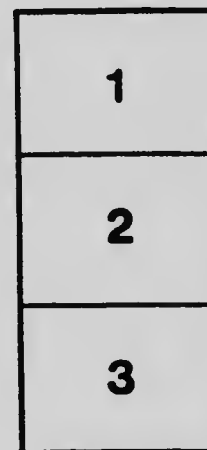
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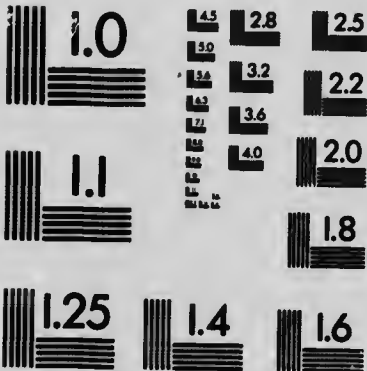
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MY  
ACQUAINTANCE  
WITH  
RUSKIN



Edw. Brydson

AK  
700.42  
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Feb. 13, 1967

## MY ACQUAINTANCE WITH RUSKIN

TO meet a leader amongst men, in thought or action, on anything like familiar terms, is generally considered worthy of some note. The modern interviewer, with his keen business instinct for copy, has effectually dampened the enthusiastic glow that might arise from such an encounter, and it is fortunate when the accidental association with a famous man is under such circumstances, as to obviate the English tendency to complacency over such a situation, as if some reflected credit accrued from the great man's acquaintance.

I was a very young man when I first met Ruskin. I came under his notice in an Institution entirely unique in its own time, and which, I believe, has no exact parallel in ours. It was at the Workingmen's College in London in 1865. This Institution was formed by a group of eminent men, who had very little in common, except a high ideal of moral responsibility to use their endowments in some

## MY ACQUAINTANCE WITH RUSKIN

practical way for the benefit of the working classes. The epoch-marking Maurice was the Principal; Hughes (the world-known "Tom Brown") taught Latin and Boxing; Dickenson, the Portrait Painter, and Ruskin supervised the Art classes; Literature, Mathematics and History were all taught by men of note in the literary world. One peculiarity of this Institution was, that all the Instructors gave their time and labor without financial return of any kind, actual or prospective; and another was, that working men only were admitted.

We met in an old London lodging-house with sordid little rooms dingily papered, with the wear and tear of age untended. The furniture was of the simplest and cheapest—old-school-deal kind. The murky little windows with panes of bluish and yellow glass, were of the sixteenth century type. The place was strikingly bare of all ordinary attractions. But there was one characteristic common to both professors and pupils, which generated an atmosphere of singular fascination to men of a certain stamp—we were all desperately in earnest. No



MY ACQUAINTANCE WITH RUSKIN

Edinburgh Scotch student, living on porridge and sharing a bed in a tenth-story attic, could have had more desperate devotion in scaling the clouded summits of learning, than most of us were possessed with.

I, a little art workman, beginning life on two dollars and fifty cents per week, and living in the next street in a little dark back room, with as much cupboard as bed room, in a big house, fit to Dickens' mystery, came on the College as a poor find. The fees were the smallest possible. The great Ruskin taught for nothing, and gave paper and pencils and paints into the bargain! Was ever such a thing in all time gone? Plato and Socrates apparently taught without fees, but Phidias and Apelles, we can hardly question exacted helping hand labor. Our Modern Idealist in Art, exacted only subjection to his methods, peculiar methods undoubtedly, and looking back on forty years of hard art handiwork I judge his methods of little value to the training of the art workman. It certainly did not train to the mastery of drawing. It would take

## MY ACQUAINTANCE WITH RUSKIN

too long, and be of little general interest to explain Ruskin's regulations for his art students. Its main results were the perception of minute details, and the mastery of the finest gradations of shading. To my special pursuit, that of an Engraver, rendering the drawing and coloring of others, it proved at the time of great value; but the lack of drawing facility became a serious and irksome drawback under wider requirements.

Before seeing Ruskin I had passed a session in the elementary room taught by advanced students, plodding with as much toil as any colored brother in the cotton fields, over a gleaming white ball suspended against a sheet of white paper with an infinite number of shadows cast by ranges of gas jets. Our college hours began with sunset and the closing of workshops and factories. More poor souls, I fancy, stumbled over that white ball than those that fell through the "Asses' Bridge" in geometry. Faith in a mystic treasure to be found at last in Ruskin idealism, a sort of artistic Holy Grail, pulled me through.

MY ACQUAINTANCE WITH RUSKIN

In the opening of the second session, with high expectations I crossed the threshold of the Master's Sanctum. It was early in the evening. Workingmen's College students did not spruce much, and I was prepared to see a group of half a dozen British workmen. I do not think our collars would have passed socially, and our ties made no show. The horny-handed style was very apparent. With the respectful attitude of the independent but intelligent artisan, they were all engrossed, standing around, and listening to a man, in dress in no way distinguished from themselves—a tall lank figure, shoulders and head above his fellows, in a snuff-brown colored old wrap coat, with a dull red tie. He certainly was not striking, his head was remarkably small and his straight longish hair worn Puritan style, had a washed-out look. The light eyebrows projected in somewhat gorilla fashion. The nose stood out in a Roman arch, and the lips kindly, but sentimental, were not helped by a small and rather retreating chin. When I entered, the nose was pointing straight up to the ceiling, and the eyes, the finest point in the face, were gazing

MY ACQUAINTANCE WITH RUSKIN

up mystically. The vision to me was distinctly disappointing. This peculiar figure must be Ruskin. I must confess, the first impression I got was of a most unpleasant sentimental egotism, and, to the conceit of youth, with great ideas of classic moral grandeur, I saw a modern self-conscious type of flimsy worth.

Ruskin was descanting on two studies, one, of a large shell done wholly in cobalt blue with exquisite delicacy of detail, and the other, of a small dead bird in rose madder. Remarkable work certainly, and no doubt I lost much by not hearing his enunciations. That he was laying down Art Law was evident.

Later on I came to know Ruskin with feelings of more appreciation, of honor, and of some affection. In all his ways he showed the manners and temper of a cultured gentleman. To poor little me, too self-absorbed, and too engrossed in a life struggle for a foothold, to see much beyond my own nose, Ruskin gave ample time. He wrote careful criticisms on my laborious studies of leaves, with generous praise

MY ACQUAINTANCE WITH RUSKIN

and evident pleasure, in a small and beautiful hand. These marginal notes I carefully cut out, and to my lasting regret lost in a treasured purse some time in the year I came to Canada.

There was never a shade of condescension in Ruskin's manner. He had the strength of definite purpose and assured conviction, but in personal intercourse, the impression was not that of any assumption of domination, or of self assertion, but of that of a man possessed of an over-mastering sense of the calling of a Missionary of Truth.

His enthusiasm was obviously sincere. His pleasure in being amongst us, was simple and direct, and his interest in our poor little exercises lively. None of us did anything beyond studies from natural objects, and my impression is, that drawing from the figure received minor attention.

Ruskin, I believe, impressed most of the small group of workmen who adhered to his system, as more of a sort of Art Missionary, introducing a

MY ACQUAINTANCE WITH RUSKIN

religious sentiment into art culture, than as a teacher of practical work. We were all serious men enough, and we came and went, much as we may imagine the old art workmen came and went in their labors on the ancient cathedrals, of which we shall never see the like again.

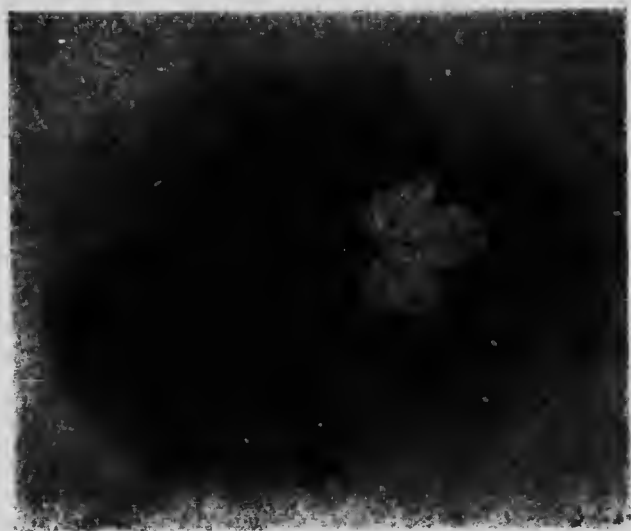
"Where builders wrought with anxious care  
Each minute and unseen part  
For the Gods see everywhere."

□ □

*The foregoing being a paper delivered to the Saturday Club by Frederick Brigden, Sr., at one of the regular fortnightly meetings of the Club held at 103 Rose Avenue, Toronto.*



PENCIL SKETCHES  
UNDER DIRECTION  
OF RUSKIN AT THE  
WORKING MEN'S  
COLLEGE, LONDON,  
JANUARY, 1861.



*Unfinished Study—Currant Leaves*

F. Bridgen.





