

**THE CROWN OF WILD
OLIVE, AND THE
CESTUS OF AGLAIA**

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The crown of wild olive, and The cestus of Aglaia by John Ruskin

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JOHN RUSKIN

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INTRODUCTION

ALREADY to idealists of the younger generation the sombre years in which Ruskin wrote have begun to be touched with beauty, and even with romance. The imagination delights to inhabit, as far as it may, that era when the great poets were building up the Elizabethan drama, and now we begin to recall, almost in the same way, the period when Rossetti, Morris, and Burne-Jones were creating in the least romantic of ages the most romantic of all poems or paintings in the story of English art.

Much of their earliest impulse was due to the influence of Ruskin, and all through the time when they were painting and writing he was labouring to evoke, in the English people, a reverence for beauty and a more intelligent religious interest in art. He was never wearied of demonstrating the high position which ought to be given to the arts in the life of a civilised people, for he knew that when a nation adds nothing to the beauty of the world, it is remembered neither clearly nor with affection by the men of after-times. And as we read the lectures in this book it is not easy to realise that their author is no more living, so real and so passionately felt are the words that were spoken half a century ago. Nor in truth for any but those who "make their dullard's distinction between life and books" is Ruskin an influence of the past. His words are the living reflection of a spirit beautiful and fearless. Every page still burns with an unrelenting sincerity, and we cannot put aside the truth if it disturbs us by the assurance that the writer really cares but little for what he declares. Ruskin did not fear to strike boldly at the rotten roots of a nation, and he took up his position without any

thought of escape. To do this great courage was needed, since such work immediately provokes conservative criticism and the resistance of those who only live by tradition.

The root-quality of Ruskin's nature was a profound admiration for order; it was this that led him to seek out and enunciate broad principles or theories whether in ethics or in art. In the statement of these principles he often displays a striking dramatic sense. His lectures open with some astonishing statement which holds fast the attention by rousing that feeling of suspense which is the secret of dramatic effect. When he addresses an audience of young soldiers, he wins their attention at the outset by declaring that in a warless nation the arts inevitably wane! Under the imminence of war men live intensely, he tells them, and this quickening of energy, being magnetic, imparts a new virility to craftsmen and thinkers, and kindles a fresh fire. It is only when thus he has won their sympathy that he qualifies the statement and shows his audience that the soldiers' duty is not merely to obey, but to obey the right, and that war which is wrongly undertaken can never have any beneficial result. Perhaps no better illustration of this dramatic treatment may be found than in the famous lecture in *The Two Paths* where he compares the elaborate art of India with the artlessness of Scotland, for the comparison threatens to destroy utterly the principle which opens the discourse. He delights in this way to confront himself with difficulties, and to go forth to battle with Goliath.

But apart from the method of his argument, and the rightness or wrongness of his thought, there is here, as in every one of Ruskin's books, the particular element of his style to be considered. Lecturing or writing, he spoke or wrote when he was most inspired, with a faultless ear for music, and with a strength, a suppleness and a variety that are lacking in the pages of the greatest of his contemporaries. Two among them have especially