

**ST. MARK'S REST. THE HISTORY  
OF VENICE, WRITTEN FOR THE  
HELP OF THE FEW TRAVELLERS  
WHO STILL CARE FOR HER  
MONUMENTS. PART III**

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St. Mark's rest. The history of Venice, written for the help of the few travellers who still care for her monuments. Part III by John Ruskin

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**JOHN RUSKIN**

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# ST. MARK'S REST.

## THE HISTORY OF VENICE

*WRITTEN FOR THE HELP OF THE FEW TRAVELLERS WHO  
STILL CARE FOR HER MONUMENTS.*

BY

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*PART III.*

GEORGE ALLEN,  
SUNNYSIDE, ORPINGTON, KENT.

1879.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE REQUIEM.

1. As I re-read the description I gave, thirty years since, of St. Mark's Church ;—much more as I remember, forty years since, and before, the first happy hour spent in trying to paint a piece of it, with my six-o'clock breakfast on the little café table beside me on the pavement in the morning shadow, I am struck, almost into silence, by wonder at my own pert little Protestant mind, which never thought for a moment of asking what the Church had been built for !

Tacitly and complacently assuming that I had had the entire truth of God preached to me in Beresford Chapel in the Walworth Road,—recognizing no possible Christian use or propriety in any other sort of chapel elsewhere; and perceiving, in this bright phenomenon before me, nothing of more noble function than might be in some new and radiant sea-shell, thrown up for me on the sand ;—nay, never once so much as thinking, of the fair shell itself, “ Who built its domed whorls, then ? ” or “ What manner of creature lives in the inside ? ” Much less ever asking, “ Who is lying dead therein ? ”

2. A marvellous thing—the Protestant mind !

Don't think I speak as a Roman Catholic, good reader : I am a mere wandering Arab, if that will less alarm you, seeking but my cup of cold water in the desert ; and I speak only as an Arab, or an Indian,—with faint hope of ever seeing the ghost of Laughing Water. A marvellous thing, nevertheless, I repeat,—this Protestant mind ! Down in Brixton churchyard, all the fine people lie inside railings, and their relations expect the passers-by to acknowledge reverently who's *there* :—nay, only last year, in my own Cathedral churchyard of Oxford, I saw the new grave of a young girl fenced about duly with carved stone, and overlaid with flowers ; and thought no shame to kneel for a minute or two at the foot of it,—though there were several good Protestant persons standing by.

But the old leaven is yet so strong in me that I am very shy of being caught by any of my country people kneeling near St. Mark's grave.

“Because—you know—it's all nonsense : it isn't St. Mark's—and never was,”—say my intellectual English knot of shocked friends.

I suppose one must allow much to modern English zeal for genuineness in all commercial articles. Be it so. Whether God ever gave the Venetians what they thought He had given, does not matter to us ; He gave them at least joy and peace in their imagined treasure, more than we have in our real ones.

And he gave them the good heart to build this chapel over the cherished grave, and to write on the walls of it, St. Mark's gospel, for all eyes,—and, so far as their power went, for all time.

3. But it was long before I learned to read that; and even when, with Lord Lindsay's first help, I had begun spelling it out,—the old Protestant palsy still froze my heart, though my eyes were unsealed; and the preface to the *Stones of Venice* was spoiled, in the very centre of its otherwise good work, by that blunder, which I've left standing in all its shame, and with its hat off—like Dr. Johnson repentant in Lichfield Market,—only putting the note to it "Fool that I was!" (page 11).\* I fancied actually that the main function of St. Mark's was no more than of our St. George's at Windsor, to be the private chapel of the king and his knights;—a blessed function that also, but how much lower than the other?

4. "Chiesa DUCALE." It never entered my heart once to think that there was a greater Duke than her Doge, for Venice; and that she built, for her two Dukes, each their palace, side by side.

\* Scott himself (God knows I say it sorrowfully, and not to excuse my own error, but to prevent *his* from doing more mischief,) has made just the same mistake, but more grossly and fatally, in the character given to the Venetian Procurator in the 'Talisman.' His error is more shameful, because he has confused the institutions of Venice in the fifteenth century with those of the twelfth.



The palace of the living, and of the,—Dead,—  
was he then—the other Duke?

“VIVA SAN MARCO.”

You wretched little cast-iron gaspipe of a  
cockney that you are, who insist that your soul's  
your own, (see ‘Punch’ for 15th March, 1879, on  
the duties of Lent,) as if anybody else would ever  
care to have it! is there yet life enough in the  
molecules, and plasm, and general mess of the  
making of you, to feel for an instant what that  
cry once meant, upon the lips of men?

Viva, Italia! you may still hear that cry some-  
times, though she lies dead enough. Viva, Vittor—  
Pisani!—perhaps also that cry, yet again.

But the answer,—“Not Pisani, but St. Mark,”  
when will you hear *that* again, nowadays? Yet  
when those bronze horses were won by the Bos-  
phorus, it was St. Mark's standard, not Henry  
Dandolo's, that was first planted on the tower of  
Byzantium,—and men believed—by his own hand.  
While yet his body lay here at rest: and this, its  
requiem on the golden scroll, was then already  
written over it—in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin.

In Hebrew, by the words of the prophets of  
Israel.

In Greek, by every effort of the building  
labourer's hand, and vision to his eyes.

In Latin, with the rhythmic verse which Virgil  
had taught,—calm as the flowing of Mincio.

But if you will read it, you must understand

now, once for all, the method of utterance in Greek art,—here, and in Greece, and in Ionia, and the isles, from its first days to this very hour.

5. I gave you the bas-relief of the twelve sheep and little caprioling lamb for a general type of all Byzantine art, to fix in your mind at once, respecting it, that its intense first character is symbolism. The thing represented means more than itself,—is a sign, or letter, more than an image.

And this is true, not of Byzantine art only, but of all Greek art, *pur sang*. Let us leave, to-day, the narrow and degrading word 'Byzantine.' There is but one Greek school, from Homer's day down to the Doge Selvo's; and these St. Mark's mosaics are as truly wrought in the power of Daedalus, with the Greek constructive instinct, and in the power of Athena, with the Greek religious soul, as ever chest of Cypselus or shaft of Erechtheum. And therefore, whatever is represented here, be it flower or rock, animal or man, means more than it is in itself. Not sheep, these twelve innocent woolly things,—but the twelve voices of the gospel of heaven;—not palm-trees, these shafts of shooting stem and beaded fruit,—but the living grace of God in the heart, springing up in joy at Christ's coming;—not a king, merely, this crowned creature in his sworded state,—but the justice of God in His eternal Law;—not a queen, nor a maid only,

this Madonna in her purple shade,—but the love of God poured forth, in the wonderfulness that passes the love of woman. *She* may forget—yet will I not forget thee.

6. And in this function of his art, remember, it does not matter to the Greek how far his image be *perfect* or not. That it should be *understood* is enough,—if it can be beautiful also, well; but its function is not beauty, but instruction. You cannot have purer examples of Greek art than the drawings on any good vase of the Marathonian time. Black figures on a red ground,—a few white scratches through them, marking the joints of their armour or the folds of their robes,—white circles for eyes,—pointed pyramids for beards,—you don't suppose that in these the Greek workman thought he had given the likeness of gods? Yet here, to his imagination, were Athena, Poseidon, and Herakles,—and all the powers that guarded his land, and cleansed his soul, and led him in the way everlasting.

7. And the wider your knowledge extends over the distant days and homes of sacred art, the more constantly and clearly you will trace the rise of its symbolic function, from the rudest fringe of racing deer, or couchant leopards, scratched on some ill-kneaded piece of clay, when men had yet scarcely left their own cave-couchant life,—up to the throne of Cimabue's Madonna. All forms, and ornaments, and images,