

THE FABRIC OF LIFE



THE FABRIC OF LIFE

A play for the stage about John Ruskin
1819 - 1900

by David Farn

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The Fabric of Life was first produced by Penrith-based Quondam Theatre Company in 1997, and ran for fifteen performances over the Summer at Brantwood, Coniston, which was Ruskin's home for the last thirty years of his life. It was staged in the drawing-room, overlooking the lake, as part of a dinner-theatre evening.

Synopsis of the play

It is 1883, and at Brantwood, a grand house overlooking Coniston Water, a young woman called Marion Twelves is nervously waiting for an interview with the famous Victorian art critic, John Ruskin. Ruskin, though only fifty-four, is old before his time, disillusioned, and considered half-mad.

Marion is hoping to persuade Ruskin to sponsor the small, lace-making co-operative she has set up but, due to a misunderstanding, Ruskin angrily orders her out of the house. Can the resourceful Marion – inspired by a figure in one of Wordsworth's poems - redeem this unfortunate situation?

In the play, and using many of his own words, Ruskin's fears are revealed to be the same as we have today: the alienating rise of technology and the threat of ecological doom.

The Fabric of Life is a 30 minute stage play for two actors: one male (aged about 60) and one female (aged about 30). It is based on two real characters from history, who did in fact collaborate over what became the Ruskin Linen industry, though I have entirely invented this meeting between the two of them.

The Characters

Marion Twelves

A real character from history. Not much is known about Marion, so I have imagined her as a modest, hard-working woman of the servant class, thoughtful and caring, but with an ambition for her craft which drives her to be determined and inventive.

John Ruskin

Ruskin was, at this time, a well-known public figure. He had made his name as an art critic and sponsor of the Pre-Raphaelites, but was much lampooned in the press for his strident views on Industrialism. A very public divorce from his cousin, Effie, seems to have had a damaging effect on his state of mind and, when we meet him, he is old before his time and not always coherent.

The year is 1883, and the setting is John Ruskin's drawing-room.

The year is 1883. The place is the drawing-room of John Ruskin, the famous Victorian art critic. There is a writing-desk strewn with books and other papers. On the walls, perhaps, there are some architectural sketches, and some geological specimens in cases ranged about.

MARION TWELVES enters. She is a woman in her thirties. Her dress is smart but not ostentatious. She is nervous, feeling intimidated by her grand surroundings. After a moment, she notices the audience.

MARION Heavens! Are you all here to see Mr Ruskin as well? I'm here to put a proposition to him. To be frank, I'm a little nervous. I've heard he can be rather sharp with visitors. (*confidentially*) Not to say a little mad in his advancing years.

I'm Marion Twelves, housekeeper to a Mr Fleming, down at Skelwith Bridge. Mr Fleming is a friend of Mr Ruskin. They're both part of Mr Ruskin's Guild of St George, that do so much to help the poor. I think the notion is, St George is a knight fighting the evil dragon of Capitalism. Something like that. I'm a simple soul myself, I don't pretend altogether to understand. Sush! He's coming!

JOHN RUSKIN enters. Though only in his fifties, he seems careworn and old before his time. He carries a paper and quill and, being preoccupied, does not notice MARION. He strides to the notional window and stares out.

There he is! The great Mr Ruskin: a friend to William Morris the wallpaper man, and Rossetti the painter and – all sorts of people like that. I think he's composing one of his famous lectures.

RUSKIN So! The rich gentlemen manufacturers of Bradford would like me to address them on 'The Ideal of Human Life.' Ha! *Your* ideal is that it should be passed in a beautiful mansion, with two wings, stables, and a large garden with hot-houses, and pleasant carriage drives through the shrubberies out into parkland.

In this mansion live the favoured votaries of the Goddess of Getting-On: the English gentleman, with his gracious wife and his beautiful family. There are jewels for the wife, splendid ball gowns for the daughters, hunters for the sons, and shooting in the Highlands for himself.

Meanwhile, at the bottom of the bank, is the cotton mill. Not less than a quarter of a mile long, it has a steam engine at each end and two in the middle, and a chimney three hundred feet high.

In this mill are a thousand workers, who never drink, never strike, always go to church on Sunday, and always express themselves in respectful language.

RUSKIN pauses to check his notes.

MARION He's gone quiet. Now's my chance! (*hesitating*) He sounded rather fierce. Perhaps I should come back later? (*pause*) How do I look? A woman of some substance, I hope? Wish me luck! (*advancing*) Mr

THE FABRIC OF LIFE

Ruskin, sir!

RUSKIN (*sharply*) Yes, what is it!

MARION Please, sir. I have – an idea.

RUSKIN How nice for you.

MARION (*thrown by this*) Erm – I - you see – it is to do with – linen.

RUSKIN Linen. (*suspicious*) Are you a manufacturer?

MARION Yes, that's it! A manufacturer.

RUSKIN In a large way?

MARION Well, no, sir. Though, one day I hope it will be large – with your help.

RUSKIN (*angrily*) With *my* help! I think you have been misdirected, Mrs -

MARION Twelves – Marion – Miss.

RUSKIN Well, Marion, Miss. You have been *mis*-directed!

MARION (*puzzled*) Sir?

RUSKIN (*staring out of the window*) The storm clouds are gathering.

MARION (*looking – baffled*) Are they?

RUSKIN That darkness on the horizon. It is no natural phenomenon. It is a darkness of our own making: the frightful fog of industry. And do you hear the wind?

MARION Not really, sir.

RUSKIN It is the plague-wind, a phenomenon hitherto unrecorded in the course of nature. Sometimes I see the chimneys, great battalions of them, marching towards me like Birnam Wood.

MARION Erm – trees. I can see trees?

RUSKIN But can you see the Wood? Can you see the Wood for the trees?

RUSKIN seizes MARION by the arm.

MARION Sir, my arm -!

RUSKIN Look at the sun. Go on, look at it! What do you make of it?

MARION Well, it's -

- RUSKIN** It resembles a bad half-crown at the bottom of a basin of soap-suds.
- MARION** (*wrestling free*) Sir, I have not begun well. Let me explain. We make the linen from flax. Many of the farmers hereabout have the maintenance of a flax dam as a condition of tenancy.
- RUSKIN** (*still preoccupied*) What?
- MARION** (*pressing on regardless*) It is harvested, processed, and the fibres are spun on special wheels – cotton spindles do not serve – to make the thread. I have taught some of the local women myself to do this. Sir, you are not attending.
- RUSKIN** The thread?
- MARION** (*seizing on this*) Yes, the thread! And from the thread we make lace. You know my master, Mr -
- RUSKIN** (*interrupting*) Oh yes, I know *your* master. He is Mammon!
- MARION** Erm, no – he’s Mr -
- RUSKIN** Mammon! One of the new breed of false idols we have come to worship. In his service, the great vices are promoted as virtues, and the world is ordered according to them. It is the pride of the rich man in his ill-gotten gains which keeps the poor in squalid and fawning servility!
- MARION** (*confused again*) Yes, sir, but about my lace -
- RUSKIN** Lace, you say! But how many of us would take so much as a *tag* of lace from our footmen’s coats to save the world? Eh? Answer me that!
- MARION** Well, I -
- RUSKIN** No, you see, you cannot! You cannot allow your status as a wealthy manufacturer, with a factory as big as a town hall, and an army of dehumanised hands in the thrall of great dirty engines to be eroded.
- MARION** But, sir, I’m just -
- RUSKIN** Just another cog in the great machine of capitalism. Though I am a little surprised that the disease of capitalism now also seems to be infecting the *female* of our species.
- MARION** Sir, you must allow me to speak!
- RUSKIN** Very well. Out with it.
- MARION** The lace. We have a name for it.

- RUSKIN** And what is this name?
- MARION** With your permission, sir. 'Today: the Ruskin Linen Industry'.
- RUSKIN** (*pause*) You wish to use *my* name to endorse your product.
- MARION** Yes, sir. That's it exactly!
- RUSKIN** I have a name for it also.
- MARION** (*encouraged*) Well, of course, that's just one suggestion. If you -
- RUSKIN** (*interrupting*) I call it impertinence.
- MARION** Sir?
- RUSKIN** You expect me, a vehement critic of the evils of the factory system, to sanction your enterprise, which amounts to nothing but the mass production of misery, not to mention the pall of filth it exhales. Manchester, for example, has become the funnel of a volcano, vomiting pestilence!
- MARION** Yes, but we work from our own -
- RUSKIN** (*interrupting*) Have you heard of the Guild of St George?
- MARION** Why yes. As a matter of fact -
- RUSKIN** (*interrupting*) The Guild's aims are to create a new rural society. There will be free schools, libraries, good housing, a costume – I'm working on the design. It will be beautiful there, peaceful and fruitful. There will be none wretched there but the sick, and none idle but the dead. And we will have no steam-engines! When we want to go anywhere, we will go there quietly and safely, not at forty miles an hour! Good day to you, miss!
- RUSKIN abruptly exits.*
- MARION** But, sir! (*to herself*) Oh! I have knotted up well and truly! He thinks I am some – greedy adventurer, with a thousand downtrodden souls under me. I am nothing but a housekeeper, a servant. And my 'workforce' is nothing but half-a-dozen women like myself: co-workers in a co-operative.
- Trust a man to get the wrong end of the stick and then beat me with it! (*pause*) But I won't be beaten! I shall have his endorsement yet and he'll be glad to give it, or I'll -! Well, I don't know what I'll do. I need to think of something.
- There's a book here. (*inspecting it*) The poems of Mr Wordsworth. There's one here about a poor old man who wanders about the countryside gathering leeches. (*reading*)
'And the whole body of the man did seem

Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
Or like a man from some far region sent
To give me human strength and strong admonishment.’
‘Strong admonishment’. *He* could do with some of that! And *I* could
do with some strength. But it gives me an idea.

Mr Ruskin is impressed by simple rural souls, like this leech
gatherer. (*looking round*) There’s an old shawl here, on the floor.
(*putting it on*) I shall put it on and make myself seem old and bent,
with the aid of this stick here. (*finding a walking stick*) And I’ll dirty
my face a little with this soil (*making use of a pot plant*), alter my
voice, and – hey presto - present myself again to him in a different
guise. Here he comes now! Not a word to him, mind!