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A rediscovery of Stevenson

BY JOSEPH LEE, '31

APPARITION

Thin-legged, thin-chested, slight unspottedly,
Near-footed and weak-fingered: in his face—
Lean, large-boned, curved of beak, and touched with race,
Bold-lipped, rich-tinted, mutable as the sea,
The brown eyes radiant with vivacity—
There shines a brilliant and romantic grace,
A spirit intense and rare, with trace on trace
Of passion and impudence and energy.

Valiant in velvet, light in ragged luck,
Most vain, most generous, sternly critical,
Buffoon and poet, lover and sensualist: A deal of Ariel, just a streak of Puck,
Much Anthony, of Hamlet most of all,
And something of the Shorter-Catechist.

W. E. Henley, Rhymes and Rhythms.

I have been hoping that A. Edward Newton's definition of a gentleman will be able to withstand the ravages of time and exposure: "A gentleman might be described as one who has no steady occupation." I not only had none, but have none. I was glad for that broad bolster when, at the height of my rediscovery of Robert Lewis Stevenson, I read in R. L. S.'s otherwise soothing essay on gentlemen this alarming tenet: He is a gentleman in one house who does not eat peas with his knife; in another who is not to be discomfited by any created form of butler."

Now, perhaps, I should thank heaven for the relativity of all definitions, for my state of leisure is not of my choosing, I do not eat peas, and I have seen only one butler in my whole lifetime. But casting levity to the winds, as the poets say, I want to direct a gossip to that charming, sensitive, romantic, egotistic temperament that called and spelled itself, up to the age of eighteen, Robert Lewis Balfour Stevenson.

In a recent Atlantic Monthly reminiscence, Christopher Morley mentioned "a time when the old Stevenson 'idolotry' was beginning to show signs of an undertow." I thought immediately of my own experience with R. L. S., which I like to two peaks limiting a lengthened valley between. The distant peak, back across the valley, I reached not reading but devouring Treasure Island when I was hardly out of rompers. I remember when I read the covers off a copy of the book; only my first reading of Swiss Family Robinson excited me to joy as great. Surely the first "Stevenson" I knew would have been to me Tusitala, "teller of tales," had I known then the affectionate title given him by the South Sea islanders, among whom he lived as a kindly neighbor the last five years of his life. Incidentally, this tale for boys from eight to eighty was written because Stevenson needed a blustering yarn to illustrate a map that he and Lloyd Osbourne, his small stepson, had drawn for fun. Most maps merely illustrate books, but this is an extraordinary map; it merited a whole book for its legend.

There is another verdant place upon the distant peak. I mean that lovely Child's Garden of Verses, scraps of which I can remember being read to me. And certainly, who has been pulled, sleepy-eyed, out of a trundle-bed who does not remember

A birdie with a yellow bill
Hopped upon the window-sill,
Cocked his shining eye and said: Ain't you 'shamed, you sleepy-head!

And who, with nose against the window pane on a rainy day has not chanted to himself

The rain is raining all around
It falls on field and tree,
It rains on the umbrellas here,
And on the ships at sea.

I think that is one of the most image-packed bits in the language. Nothing more delightful exists unless it be "The Walrus and the Carpenter" in Through the Looking Glass. Which reminds me: The finest touch in the English play, Journey's End, is that of the lieutenant, a former Oxford don, who calmly read Alice in Wonderland under heavy bombardment in the front-line trenches. Stevenson would have liked that man. He never lost a capacity for what Chesterton calls "lucid lunacy" or what we might term quite sensible nonsense which, though accredited to children, is quite as proper a sphere for adult mentality. It remains, however, that children are more sincere in their serious sallies than we are; they ask our great unanswerable questions and thus achieve the only true profundity becoming to man.
When I crossed the valley, taking too many years to traverse the distance, to the peak on which I stand as I write—and this peak, I mean, is my rediscovery of Stevenson—one of the first bits to charm me was the Philosophy of Umbrellas, among his college papers. In it he has a fictitious scientific friend say:

There is no fact in meteorology better established—indeed; it is almost the only one on which meteorologists are agreed—than that the carriage of an umbrella produces desiccation of the air; while if it be left at home, aqueous vapour is largely produced, and is soon deposited on the rain. No theory, or even a theory, can be put forward to explain this hygrometric law which has yet been given (as far as I am aware) by Herschel, Dove, Glaisher, Tait, Buchan, or any other competent to explain this hygrometric law has yet been given; it is almost the only one on which meteorologists are agreed—than that the vapour is largely produced, and is soon deposited. Indeed; it is almost the only one on which meteorologists are agreed.

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There is no better antidote than that for the poison labeled "Philosophic Pessimism" that such men as Joseph Wood Krutch and Aldous Huxley are pouring down our throats today. Even Schopenhauer venting his opinion about women wasn't as deprecatory and depressing as some of our more emancipated and enlightened youths are when they pule about life. Their funereal mien fails to impress anyone capable of laughing at himself or capable of laughing in general as being any more than a quite puerile and sophomoric distortion of the mental physiognomy. They are silly, they are super-souls who scream about society slowly sinking into sin. They melodramatize themselves, and the deep lines in their countenances have stark tragedy in them worthy of Little Nell in the Clutches of the Vile Viper. And I am now quite convinced that there is no better cap for their candle than the writings of Robert Louis Stevenson. One of the watermarks of good literature and good philosophy is the applicability of its substance to all ages; no transient grip or giggle can long hold the attention of men; only those who see fairly and plainly life's miseries and ecstasies, and who can laugh.

The essays on love and marriage in Virginibus Puerisque are provocative to all alike, the unloved and the loving; the unused and the betrothed. "Crabbed Age and the Young for Us"—an essay on "Apology for Idlers" justify the remaining humanity in the educated. "Ordered South," another Virginibus essay, is a brave paean to emotional stability scored for those who, like himself, have been assigned to invalidism. "Bound tenderly to life," Stevenson found that "The happiness of such a one comes to depend greatly upon those fine shades of sensation that heighten and harmonize the coarser elements of beauty." R. L. S. was ill almost all of the forty-four years of his life, but did ever any man have a sweeter view of living? Virginibus is a great book; it was "Luly's" earliest volume of collected papers, but for me it remains unsurpassed by any of his later works.

There are five more books of essays and miscellaneous papers, full of freshened spontaneity of spirit; virile, red-blooded, piquant, tasting of mountain air, they contributed heavily to my rediscovery of this man who loved better than his own existence the "art of words and the appearance of life." They range in style from the ultra-familiar to the semi-formal. Stevenson never dons full dress in literature, never more at most than a tuxedo, and usually, I should say, no more than flannels and a sweater, which become him most.

Speaking of dress reminds me that Stevenson's friend and sometimes collaborator, W. E. Henley, whose poem Apparition is the best portrait of Stevenson I know, wrote this anecdote of his friend's youth:

He came to an informal evening in these garments, (pork-pie hat, velvet jacket, and Spanish cloak) and, in their removal, appeared dress-coat, a blue flannel shirt, a knitted tie, pepper-and-salt trousers, silk socks, and patent leather shoes (he was exceedingly vain of his feet, which was neat and elegant). His hair fell to his collar, he waltzed, he talked, he exploded, he was altogether wonderful. And the women (this would have touched him, had he known it) were in fits of laughter till—a whole Romantic Movement in clothes and turban—he departed. To dream (it may be) over a sentence of Sir Thomas Browne's and a gin-and-ginger at Rutherford's.

I admit that I have not read all of his numerous novels, for it was essentially as the essayist and commentator of life that I rediscovered him. Those I have read tasted like more. From the power of one, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, I have gone fearfully to bed many a night. Stevenson wrote Jekyll and Hyde under peculiar and almost incredible circumstances. He had been fascinated by papers in French scientific journals on the subconscious and dual and multiple personality. He had used the idea of a double life twice before in play and story, and finally, as Mrs Stevenson tells, he who had written "the previous curious book" following a hemorrhage of the lungs, culminated in the dream of Jekyll and Hyde. His cries of horror caused Mrs Stevenson to awaken him, much to his indignation. "I was dreaming a fine bogey tale," he said reproachfully, following a rapid sketch of the dream up to the transformation scene, where he had been awakened. In three days he had written, propped up in bed and too ill even to talk, the thirty-two thousand words of the story. When he read it to Mrs Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne on the evening of its completion, his

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different to the necessity for granting the Negro a new freedom be made to see their moral duty to assist in the solution of the race problem? Why cannot ignorant, prejudiced persons be made, by education, to see the light of truth?

I think there is no reason why these things cannot be done, and I believe that if those who have succeeded in their quest for understanding should attempt in their own little sphere of influence, to exert themselves, even only a little, they could gradually change the thought of the whole nation, just as a pebble dropped in a still pool of water sends out ripples that reach the farthest edges of the pool. It seems to me that the students in our colleges and universities should be the leaders in this movement for the adjustment of race difficulties. If not by college students, then by whom? The race problem in America has rocked along for many years, chiefly because of lack of well-directed effort by those who should be interested in setting right what is wrong. The solution of the difficulty lies in intelligence. How long must it be said that Americans do not use intelligence in the solution of one of the most vital problems? I consider this an urgent challenge to the young men and women of our colleges.

A RECOVERY OF STEVENSON

wife complained, so Osbourne says, that he "had missed the point; had missed the allegory; had made it merely a story—a magnificent bit of sensationalism—when it should have been a masterpiece." Stevenson, chagrined and hurt, nursed his pride for a few moments, then saw clearly his error, and with characteristic drama threw the story into the fire the same night. The next morning he started again, with a clean taste in my mouth and hope for a score of years, and take rank not as a prophet, but as an unteachable brat, well birched and none the wiser." In his dedications (to which Thomas Stevenson, his father, turned when all other books failed him) he is conscious and thankful that his thinking has been capable of mutations; in one he says: "It is good to have been young in youth and, as years go on, to grow older . . . to travel deliberately through one's ages is to get the heart out of a liberal education. Times change, opinions vary to their heart's content; and so do the expectations of the adviser? First, that he do his own work so well as to become an encouraging example; second, that he become well acquainted with the inner personality of the chapter members; third, that he help all freshmen to choose wisely their courses; fourth that he learn through frequent contacts with their concerned instructors on the faculty what members are weak in classroom work and the reason therefor and then that he make a special effort at correction; fifth that he see that proper silent hours are observed and hold study hall when necessary for all who need it; sixth, that he give intelligent counsel where needed and encourage those who need it. If a student's fault is lack of application to study or class attendance, then with the help of the chapter further requirements and restrictions must be enforced until that lack is removed; if the fault is due to preoccupation with other and extraneous matters, efforts must be made to meet that condition, usually heart to heart talks with the adviser and appeals to pride are effective; if not, then the chapter must take a hand; if poor preparation for the course is evident either a change of course or a special coach over the preparation ground work is indicated and one or the other

in my heart; always a buoyant force is always in my mind after conversation with this armchair friend of mine. I sit back and laugh and applaud as I watch Stevenson, stalking through his page, sleeves rolled-up, brandishing a knotted washing rag wherewith he scours with soap the mouths of all morbid beraters of every positive human value, past and present. When R. L. S. is aroused the cannonading of his irony is terrific; he has a way, when most depressed about men or events, of being a capital humorist. After all—the sophisticated and the pretending-to-be-sophisticated won't admit it—the joys of life are in our transitions to romantic, sentimental, and humorous worlds.

A characteristic of Stevenson that has been the special delight of my rediscovery of him is the remarkable, chameleon-like changability of his opinions and moods. And surely, as he says: "To hold the same views at forty as we held at twenty is to have been stupefied for a score of years, and take rank not as a prophet, but as an unteachable brat, well birched and none the wiser." In his dedications (to which Thomas Stevenson, his father, turned when all other books failed him) he is conscious and thankful that his thinking has been capable of mutations; in one he says: "It is good to have been young in youth and, as years go on, to grow older . . . to travel deliberately through one's ages is to get the heart out of a liberal education. Times change, opinions vary to their opposite, and still this world appears a grave gymnasia, full of sea-bathing, and horse-exercise, and bracing, manly virtues . . . " And full, I might add, in one of Stevenson's most choice descriptions, "of generals who go galloping up and down among the bomb-shells in absurd cocked hats."

A word for his letters. Christopher Morley—that most excellent American essayist—says he presented four volumes of Stevenson's letters to himself on his twenty-first birthday. I did the same on my twenty-third. They are the best present birthday I ever gave myself. The "Open Letter to the Reverend Dr. Hyde of Honolulu" (to be found in the "Vailima Papers") is one of the most devastating invectives—a thorough castigation it is—ever written. Even Doctor Johnson's immortal letter to Lord Chesterfield does not hold a candle to it.

So was his spirit strong until death burst a blood vessel in his brain while in the midst of dictating "Weir of Hermiston," called by many his best work. This fine unfinished novel is broken off in the middle of a sentence: "It seemed unprovoked, a wilful convolution of brute nature . . ." Little did he realize how fully those last words describe the tragedy of his untimely end. He was buried the next day on the summit of Mt. Vaea, on that "ultimate island" of Upolu, in the South seas, the one place in all his wanderings where he had found peace.

His last letter had been to Edmund Gosse. It closes: "Well, my dear Gosse, here's wishing you all health and prosperity, as well as to the mistress and the bairns. May you live long, since it seems as if you would continue to enjoy life. May you write many more books as good as this one (In Russet and Silver, poems)—only there's one thing impossible, you can never write another dedication that can give the same pleasure to the vanished Tusitala."