

Robert Louis Stevenson, The Man of an Understanding Heart

Earl Clement Davis

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Stevenson once wrote in a notebook the three great desires of his heart. They were, first, good health; secondly, a small competence; and thirdly, "O Du Leiber Gott, Friends." Of the first of these we may hardly say that his wish was ever satisfied. From his childhood days to the very end, he was constantly waging a fierce fight against ill health. In the second he never found satisfaction for he was always struggling with lack of money. Had it not been for the fact that he received constant aid from his father, he must of necessity been crushed in the struggle for existence. In truth we do not always see, and properly reward those who render the greatest service. Many would say that Stevenson was not thrifty, and that he deserved to suffer and go down to ruin in the struggle. Perhaps that is true, but the world would have lost one of its choicest spirits. Of friends he always had many, and some of the choicest ones that a man could ask for. Perhaps it was the abundance of friends that kept his head above water when he was fighting the hardest for health, and a living. While this bitter fight was going on, he was working, working for a great purpose, and making the world a cheerier place in which to live, and providing inspiration, uplift, and solid mental and moral stimulus for hundreds of thousands of people. One gets a glimpse of his point of view in a letter written about one year before he died to George Meredith. He says,

For fourteen years I have not had a day's real health; I have wakened sick and gone to bed weary; and I have done my work unflinchingly. I have written in bed, and written out of it. Written in hemorrhages, written in sickness, written torn by coughing, written when my head swam for weakness; and for so long, it seems to me I have won my wage and recovered my glove. I am better now, have been, rightly speaking since first I came to the Pacific; and still few are the days when I am not in some physical distress. And the battle goes on—ill or well is a trifle;

so as it goes. I was made for a contest, and the Powers have so willed that my battlefield should be this dingy, inglorious one of the bed and the physic bottle.

Such were the obstacles against which Stevenson was persistently fighting. Yet he conceived it as his mission in life to preach the gospel of happiness. To him his duty towards his fellow men was not to make them good, but to make the happy.

Stevenson was born in Edinburgh, Nov. 13, 1850. He was the son of a pioneer in expansive engineering, and in no limited degree we may see in Stevenson the elder a picture of the best of the genius that went into the great industrial development of the last century. The same spirit is in the son, but it is directed to other pursuits. The childish precocity of the lad won for him recognition in his family in much the same way that his genius of mature manhood won for him a wide recognition as a man of letters. Perhaps his infancy and childhood had more of tender care than most children receive, because of his extremely delicate health. His childhood was largely shaped by this physical limitation, and he was thus compelled to rely upon his reading and his imagination to keep his alert and active mind satisfied. A particularly devoted mother, and an adoring nurse were always at his service, and if ever [a] child could have been spoiled by overmuch attention and care, Stevenson should have been the child.

During the boyhood period from 1859 to 1867, in the face of continual suffering he prepared himself for the University, partly at public schools, and partly with private tutors. The general character of the lad is indicated in a remark by one of his teachers. "He was without exception the most delightful boy that I ever knew; full of fun; full of tender feeling; ready for lessons, ready for a story, ready for fun." These characteristics of the boy are also the characteristics of the man.

He entered the University of Edinburgh, and studied for a science degree in Engineering. For three and one half years he studied with the idea of taking up the work of an engineer in which his father had already made himself famous. During all these years his real interests were not scientific but literary. In 1871 the inevitable change came to the front. He definitely gave [up] the idea of a scientific career, and chose the uncertain difficult work

of a man of letters. In order that he might not be left entirely at the mercies of a living earned by his pen, he equipped himself for law, spending two years at this.

From 1873 to 1880 he was developing in the work that most appealed to him, winning recognition and appreciation as a writer. In 1879 he made his journey to California, still in search of health. This well nearly proved a fatal step for him, as the exposure of the trip just missed resulting in quick consumption. While here he married, and began one of the most beautiful family relationships that history gives an insight to. He and his wife returned to Europe to spend the next few years in vain search for health. In the winter of 1887-8 another trip to the United States, followed by the south sea cruise, and settlement in the Samoan Islands in 1891. This ended his journeyings, and here he died in 1894, and here he was buried, a chance spirit from the unknown, alighting for a moment or two upon the earth, is the suggestion of Abbott Thayer's painting.

Upon the tomb built after the Samoan fashion is this inscription, taken from the Samoan Bible, and written in the Samoan language, placed there as a tribute of the people among whom as a foreigner he had lived four short years, and died. "Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; and thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; and where thou diest, I will die, and there will I be buried."

On the other side of the tomb is a panel, on which is inscribed his own requiem:

Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live, and gladly died,
And I lay me down with a will.

This be the verse you gave for me;
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

Such the outline of his life. These two inscriptions tell the tale. He lived joyously, and with laughter, overflowing with a big generous fellow feeling, enriched by a deep appreciation of human nature and human life.

If all men were like Stevenson this would be a queer world in which to live. I am sure that most of us would go to bed at night hardly knowing where to look for the morning meal, and blandly oblivious to the need of knowing. This condition would not be the result of selfishness and greed as it is today, but simply the result of the fact that life would be so full of other things that we would not have time for ought else. Perhaps we like Stevenson the more because we may enjoy in him vicariously what we should like to have the opportunity and courage to do, namely to take little thought of the morrow, but to live for the real things that may not be stolen or corrupted. Most of us work to provide for the necessities of life, and if by chance there is a margin of unused energy, we devote it to the real things, but for the most part the real things, the high thinking, the great human fellowships, the disinterested joyous outpouring of human personality, are crushed out of us in the struggle for bread and butter. I think that one reason why Stevenson has taken so firm a hold on this generation is that in him we see a person that defies, and rises above the brutal gluttonous struggle for the negative values of life. He does not preach about living for those great values, but he simply does live for them, because they are to him the real values. He knows men, not for what he can get out of them in the way of money or wealth, or advantage or usage, but for what he together with them may know and enjoy of real human life. Most of us can measure men only by the conventional standards of social influence, and wealth, and popular recognition. In other words we do not measure them at all, we simply accept the surface judgement of the world. Stevenson went down below, into the inner nature of the man, saw what was at work there, and judged it at its value. There is a refreshing simplicity and candor in his description of his student days, bringing out this idea.

I was always kept poor in my youth, to my great indignation at the time, but since then with my complete approval. Twelve pounds a year was my allowance up to 23 (which was indeed far too little) and though I amplified it by a very consistent embezzlement from my mother, I never had enough to be lavish. My monthly pound was usually spent before the evening of the day on which I received it; but often as not it was forestalled; and for the rest of the time I was in rare fortune if I had five shillings at once in my possession. Hence my acquaintance was of

what would be called a very low order. Looking back upon it, I am surprised at the courage with which I first ventured alone into the societies in which I moved; I was the companion of seamen, chimney sweeps, and thieves; my circle was being continually changed by the action of police magistrates. I see now the little sanded kitchen where Velvet Coat, for such was the name I went by, has spent days together, generally in silent, and making sonnets in a penny-version book; and rough as the material may appear, I do not believe these days were among the least happy I have spent. I was distinctly petted and respected; the women were most gentle and kind to me; I might have left all my money for a month, and they would have returned every farthing of it. Such indeed was my celebrity that when the proprietor and his mistress came to inspect the establishment, I was invited to tea with them, and it is still a grisly thought to me, that I have since seen that mistress, then gorgeous in velvet and gold chains, an old, toothless ragged woman, with hardly voice enough to welcome me by my old name of Velvet Coat.

You see that this is just a plain human statement, that goes beneath the surface, and is free from conventional self-consciousness.

The truth is that Stevenson was born into the world, a true child of his time, pulsating with all the noble democratic impulses that are destined to make this age one of tremendous significance. He had a tremendous capacity for what Jesus used to call righteous judgement, for a sympathetic insight into the best that struggles for expression in human life. His very insight, his very sympathy brought from those among whom he lived the best that they had to give. In his *Lay Morals*, in speaking of his own life this comes clearly into the foreground. He himself is the person from whom he takes "a few pages out of a young man's life."

This young man

"was a friend of mine; a young man like others; generous, flighty, variable as youth itself, but always with some high motions, and on the search for higher thoughts of life... But he got hold of some unsettling works, the New Testament among

others, and this loosened his views of life and led him into many perplexities. As he was the son of a man in a certain position, and well off, my friend, had enjoyed from the first the advantages of education, nay, he had been kept alive through a sickly childhood by constant watchfulness, comforts and change of air, for all of which he was indebted to his father's wealth.

At college he met other lads more diligent than he, who followed the plough in summer-time to pay their fees in winter; and this inequality struck him with some force. He was at that age of a conversable temper, and insatiably curious in the aspects of life; he spent much of his time scraping acquaintance with all classes of man- and womankind. In this way he came upon many depressed ambitions and intelligences stunted for want of opportunity; and this also struck him. He began to perceive that life was a handicap upon strange, wrong-sided principles, and not as he had been told, a fair and equal race. He began to tremble that he himself had been unjustly favored, when he saw all the avenues of wealth, and power and comfort closed against so many of his competitors and equals, and held unwearingly open before so ideal, desultory, and so dissolute a being as himself.

This is the growing spirit of modern life. The three books that he speaks of as the ones that most helped him in these perplexities of early manhood, when he was hunting for his God, were the New Testament, Walt Whitman, especially *Leaves of Grass*, and Herbert Spencer. He speaks of the startling effect produced on him by reading the Gospel of Matthew. True to the spirit of his time, he is appealed to by the ethical and social teaching of Christ, and the discrepancy between Christ's teaching, and the practice of Christian societies he was neither ready to explain away nor able to ignore. The total effect of the New Testament upon him was to make of him, as he puts it, "a red-hot socialist." Speaking of Whitman, he says, "I come next to *Leaves of Grass*, a book or singular service, a book which tumbled the world upside down for me, blew into space a thousand cobwebs of genteel and ethical illusion, and having thus shaken my tabernacle of lies, set me back again upon a strong foundation of all the original and manly virtues." As for the influence of Herbert Spencer, he says,

"I should be much of a hound if I lost my gratitude to Herbert Spencer."

The truth is you see he was getting back to first principles, and going below the surface of conventional standards and pious phrases down to the very root and marrow of ethical principles. He was developing that capacity that all of us have if we but exercise it, of putting himself in the other man's place, and judging men according to the inner motives and purposes that dominate their lives, giving them always the best advantage of the doubt. Nor were his judgements based or influenced by general opinion. For example his essay on Robert Burns shows a searching insight in the deplorable weaknesses that must always remain a blot upon the history of one of the best of modern singers. He does not gloss over the essential defects of Burns' character. It's not so much the things that Burns did, that appalls Stevenson, [it is his] essential weakness of his character that made the things possible, and yet Stevenson is just and righteous in his judgement as appears in the closing lines of the essay.

And lastly has he not put in for himself the unanswerable plea?

Then Gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister woman;
Though they may gang a kennin' wrang,
To step aside is human:

One point must still be greatly dark...¹

One? Alas I fear every man and woman of us is "greatly dark" to all their neighbors, from the day of birth until death removes them, in their greatest virtues as well as in their saddest faults; and we who have been trying to read the character of Burns may take home the lesson, and be gentle in our thoughts.²

One of the most searching tests of Stevenson's capacity to understand the inner workings of human nature, to distinguish between the transient and the permanent, or rather to see the transient in the permanent is noted in the life that he lived among the South Sea Islanders. More

¹ From Robert Burns, "Address To The Unco Guid, Or The Rigidly Righteous" (1786).

² From Robert Louis Stevenson, "Some Aspects of Robert Burns," Cornhill Magazine, October 1879.

impressive still appears his capacity for bringing out in others the best that is in them. He did not attempt to teach these people, to put onto them a coat of outward respectability, and conventional culture as he might have done. He simply lived among them, remaining the simple natural Robert Louis Stevenson that he was and letting the others among whom he lived retain their identity. But in four-year's time these Samoans were so touched by his humanity, that his death drew from them one of the most spontaneous manifestations of real human respect and love, that I know of. First consider the people among whom he lived. "They are," he says,

Christians, churchgoers, singers of hymns at family worship, hardy cricketers; their books are printed in London by Spottiswoode, Trubner, or the Tract Society; but in most other points they are the contemporaries of our tattooed ancestors who drove their chariots on the wrong side of the Roman wall. We have passed the feudal system; they are not yet clear of the patriarchal. We are in the thick of the age of finance; they are in a period of communism. And this makes them hard to understand.

Among these people he lived four years nearly. Among them he died. Yet note their tribute to him. Two years before the Mataafa had built for him as an expression of his visits to them while in prison, a road through his estate which they christened the "Road of the Loving Heart." Now, Tusitala, the Writer of Tales, as they called him, was dead. All day and all night they came to pay him tribute, to kiss his hand, to watch the whole night through. The next morning they came in bands to cut a pathway up the steep face of the mountain upon whose top Stevenson had expressed a wish to be buried. At one o'clock a body of powerful Samoans bore away the coffin, hid beneath a tattered red ensign that had flown above his vessel in many a remote corner of the South Seas. A path so steep and rugged taxed their strength to the utmost, for not only was the journey difficult in itself, but extreme care was requisite to carry the coffin shoulder high. "Nineteen Europeans and some sixty Samoans reached the summit." There they paid their last tribute to the loved Tusitala. Using the customary burial service, and reading that last prayer written by Stevenson the night before he died. The whole thing was the spontaneous expression of human respect and human love. If ever there was a burial that was free from the conventional and the commercial it was his. "No

stranger's hand touched him. It was his body servant that interlocked his fingers, and arranged his hands in the attitude of prayer. Those who loved him carried him to his last home. Even the coffin was the work of an old friend. The grave was dug by his won men."

Did not those Samoan people know that he was a man of a big human understanding heart, when they put upon the tomb of Tusitala these words. "Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; and thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; and where thou diest, I will die, and there will I be buried."

Is it not true that Stevenson appeals to our time because he has sounded the deep note of human hope and human life, that measures people and things, not in terms of commercial wealth, and conventional standards, but in terms of human personality, and its infinite possibility for deep understanding, and profoundly sincere regard for the nobler purposes that struggle for expression in the life of each one? Is it not true that the heaviest burden that rests upon mankind today, is the consciousness that we cruelly choking, and crushing out the best of human life in our merciless greed and grind of human life in the mad race for wealth and climbing the social ladder. The price that we are paying for this damnable ideal of a commercial prosperity, can only be faintly guessed at by comparing the degrading mad struggle for food, with its turmoil, its cruelty, its bitter warfare, by comparing this with outpourings of true human nature as it is seen when some Christ, like Stevenson, touches it with the magic wand of an understanding heart. How much today we need the spirit of a broad generous human fellowship, the sordid misery of the world bears witness.