

Robert Louis Stevenson, the Writer and the Man

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Th appeal which Stevenson has made to a large public is one of the interesting things of the literary annals of the generation. There has been a sort of spontaneous response to his writings that indicates that he has touched a lost cord in life. It would be too much to say that he could be called a great river that furnishes the power, and the refreshing moisture, and makes beautiful the plains and hills of our modern life. But he is one of the mountain streams that trickles and tumbles, leaps and glides down the hillside and pours itself generously and joyously into that great river of that modern life. That mountain stream of Stevenson's personality. and life has a freshness, and a thirst-slaking coolness of its own. It comes from the unquenchable springs of life abounding in the pure spontaneous joy of living. It pours itself out pure and sparkling with the steady pressure of the best dynamic of human nature.

As I read Stevenson I like to think of it as an hour or two of quiet loitering, fishing along a beautiful stream. I do not do it for what I may catch. I do not make a business of the fishing. I do not do it as an expert fisherman, intent on probing every inch of the stream, but just for the joy of the fishing, or if I may feel like it, of just sitting by and watching the stream glide without ever an attempt at casting a line. When, as often happens, I hook a lively sparkling thought from the stream, I like to sit down in some quiet nook and make ready for proper assimilation. I have not fished the entire stream. There are lots of places that I have passed by. I cannot give a map of the stream. I do not know all of its glittering ripples, its tumbling falls, or its deep pools. Here and there I

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<sup>1</sup> This manuscript is undated. Two pieces of evidence suggest that it was written in 1909. First, Earl Davis preached a sermon, "Robert Louis Stevenson, The Man of an Understanding Heart" on December 12, 1909. Second, most of the manuscripts that this manuscript has been bound with can be dated to 1909.

have dropped in my line, but there are long stretches undisturbed. Someday, when I am in the mood r I shall go to those spots which I have thus far passed bye If you ask me about the beauty of some particular spot that you have visited, I shall not feel ashamed to say that I have not been there. I shall treasure your description of your special pool. Someday I shall come upon it.

I said a moment ago that it seems as if Stevenson had touched some lost cord in our life, and recalled us to some of the dreams of childhood. While his writings are finished products, polished, and delicate in their form, yet it is not for their beauty that we go to them. Somewhere down in the heart of them, hidden and protected by the petals of richly colored literary beauty is the sack of honey. We are charmed and attracted by the forms, but when we come close to them, we instinctively get the aroma and the foretaste of the honey that is beneath and within. Sometimes I think that I have tasted that honey, and it has seemed very toothsome to me. I want, if I can, to bring some bit of it to you this afternoon. I know that it is cruel and merciless to attempt any analysis of these bits that we see and feel, yet I cannot refrain from saying something [of] the reasons why Stevenson has appealed to me and why I think that he appeals to others. I just want to suggest something of the spirit of his life as it looks to me through the lens that I am wearing .

Before I do that, however, I wish to outline the main periods of his life.

Stevenson, whose full name is Robert Louis Balfour, was born in Edinburgh on Nov. 13, 1850. Stevenson was a precocious child in some ways, and this precocity earned for him early recognition in his family. Perhaps his infancy and childhood had more of that tenderness and care than he would naturally have had, had it not been for his general physical weakness. At a very early age he began to suffer from the frailty which at last caused his early death. So his childhood is largely shaped by that limitation. Clear, imaginative, a dreamer of child's dreams, he was forced the more to turn to himself for the amusements of childhood. Cared for by a particularly motherly mother, and a most devoted nurse, for whom he always retained

the deepest affection, his childhood environment was particularly that of the more protected and more subjective and kind. Stories, tales, both such as were repeated to him and such as he formulated from his own little head, were the great delights of these younger days.

From 1859 to 1867 is the boyhood period. During this time, in the face of severe physical limitations, he prepared himself for the university. Part of this preparation was accomplished in the schools, and part under the direction of private tutors. The general character of the lad is indicated by one of his instructors at school in these words, "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."<sup>2</sup> These are characteristics which may be said to show that the boy was father to the man.

Following the bent the family, he entered the University of Edinburgh, and studied for a science degree in Engineering. For three and one half years he followed his studies with the idea of taking up the work in which his father had already made himself famous. In spite of the fact that he was working for the engineering degree, his tastes and inclinations were leading him towards the literary work through which he has made his contribution to our life. In 1871 the change which had long been developing came to a head. He gave up the work of engineering and determined to follow a literary life. In order that he might not be left entirely to the mercies of the fruit of the pen for his support he spent a couple of years reading law.

The following seven years from 1873-1880 marks the period when he was developing along the lines dearest to his heart. In spite of the allowance which he received from his father, and the great delight that he took in his work, and the growing recognition that he was winning, he had to fight constantly against his ill health, and his poverty. In 1879 he made his journey to California, traveling steerage. This proved eventful, for while here he married. But while in California, partly as a

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<sup>2</sup> This quotation is from the Reverend Peter Rutherford, one of his teachers, and can be found in Graham Balfour's *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905, P. 65.

result of exposure on the trip and after reaching that place, he had serious trouble with his lungs. He had a narrow escape from developing quick consumption.

He and his wife returned to Europe, and spent the next few years in a vain search for his health. In the face of these difficulties he continued his work writing and publishing. In 1887-8 he returned to the United States. Then followed his cruise to the South Seas, and the settlement at Vailima, on the South Sea Island of Samoa in 1891. This ended his journeyings. Here, on the far sea island, Stevenson died in 1894. Here he was buried.

Upon the tomb built after the fashion of the Samoan, is this inscription taken from the Samoan Bible and written in the Samoan language, "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 are the rough outline events of his life. These two inscriptions tell the tale of a glorious life, lived joyously, and with laughter, overflowing with a big generous fellow-feeling, enriched by a deep appreciation of the human heart and human life.

I want to suggest something of the nature of the man, and to leave the implication as to why he has struck so deeply and yet so delicately into the inner corners of our life.

There was a certain spring-like spontaneity about him that appeals to our age of conformity. You cannot say that he is strikingly original. At least he never tried to be original, and perhaps that is why we like him. He was himself. He never was completely a child. Even in his youngest days there was the suggestion of maturity about him, that bespoke his depth. On the other hand, he never outgrew his childhood. There was always something of that naive simplicity about him that must have been in the mind of Jesus when he said that unless we become like these children we shall in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven.<sup>3</sup>

This childlike attitude appears not only in a direct way in some of the incidents and writings to which I shall refer, but also indirectly in some of those writings in which he recalls some of his childhood memories.

See, Vol. I, Pages 68–9, where he gives a thoroughly sympathetic picture of the child life.<sup>4</sup>

Also see the incident of student days, Vol. I page 108–110 where his full appreciation of the practical joke comes to the surface.<sup>5</sup>

Also another little incident related in Vol II, p. 136.<sup>6</sup> Also in *Virginibus Puerisque*, page 117, *Idlers*.<sup>7</sup>

All this is characteristic. His work, his pleasure, his writings and his conversation seemed to bubble up out of the depths of some fountain of eternal youth, hidden deep within the recesses of his being. He had learned what the Spanish explorer

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:3, "And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

<sup>4</sup> Earl Davis does not identify the book here, but these page references and the brief descriptions that Earl Davis gives are consistent with Graham Balfour's *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *"Virginibus Puerisque" and Other Papers*, New York: Current Literature Publishing Co., 1910, first published in 1881, chapter III, "An Apology for *Idlers*."

had not learned, that if one would find the fountain of eternal youth, one must look within and not in some far away land.

All his experiences, all his readings, all his travelings he appropriated for himself, filtered, clarified, and sent forth pure, living and thirst-quenching. He seemed to delight to have the rain of experience all upon him. It mattered not whether it came from books, or travels, so long as it came. But he was not a cistern into which the water of sense-suggestion was poured, only to be pumped out again as required. Rather he treated this as the earth does the rain. It fell upon him, soaked itself in, slowly percolating down through until it came to some hidden chamber. From this chamber it bubbled forth under the natural pressure of his buoyant spirit. If he read and absorbed a thought or a situation, it went through this process of becoming Stevensonized. When it came to the light again it bore the unmistakable evidences of his personality. His travel stories are not catalogs of sights and scenes such as anyone might see, or concerning which one might read in Baedekers. They are accounts of the things that one Robert Louis Stevenson had seen, and reflected upon and appropriated for himself in certain various journeyings. So far as the interest and the charm of his stories of travel are concerned, he would not make much difference where he was traveling. He always sees the universal in the particular, and he makes you see it. That is his art, as a writer and a man. This is one of the things that we must understand about Stevenson. There is a certain spontaneous life about him that appeals to us who are so dependent upon the externals of life for our enjoyment and pleasure in living.

In the first characteristic of spontaneity is the dynamic of the second. Just because life seemed to flow out of him in a continuous stream of joy, just because he abounded in natural human life, every human being appealed to him and he in turn appealed to all with whom he came in contact. This appears early in his student days as he describes them himself. See Vol. I, Page 99 showing his circle of friends in those days.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> All these references appear to come from Graham Balfour's *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.

See also *ibid* page 97-8 as showing his sympathy. Also his steerage trip, as narrated in *Across the Plains*. Page 38... 62-3. This same characteristic appears in the relations with the South Sea Islanders, Vol. II, p. 178-9, also 183-4, also 188.<sup>9</sup>

Of course it is needless to add that in the life of a man whose sympathy was so broad and so deep and natural, there must appear a great diversity of interests. He was a kind of universal man. We have spoken much in our words of the time when we shall meet men as men without regard to limitations. It may be that the reason why we like Stevenson is because he, out of the very naturalness and sympathy of his heart, has given a living incarnation of that haunting vision of human relationships broader than caste or race. Perhaps in his free, natural and self-respecting and man-respecting cosmopolitan he has been the prophet of the future to which our ideal points.

Perhaps also he is prophetic in that sagacious remark concerning the relations of men to men, and the duty that we bear to each other. At least it is certainly refreshing to read these words after we have been surfeited with the cant of inculcating moral principles in the lives of others.

There is an idea abroad among moral people that they should make their neighbors good. One person I have to make good: myself. But my duty to my neighbor is much more nearly expressed by saying that I have to make him happy-if I may.<sup>10</sup>

So much for Stevenson within himself, and in his social relations. No treatment of him would be adequate that did not take into consideration his attitude toward wider considerations. I have said that in everything that he did Stevenson was very much Stevenson. He was very much Stevenson in his selection of the combination of the three books that interested and did the most for him. This combination is none other than Herbert Spencer, Walt Whitman, and the New Testament.

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<sup>9</sup> Graham Balfour, *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.

<sup>10</sup> From "A Christmas Sermon" in *Across the Plains, with Other Memories and Essays*, in *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Boston, Charles E. Lauriat Co., 1895, p. 607.

As I think it over, I can understand the meaning of this all. Stevenson was born into the religious atmosphere of rigid orthodoxy. He himself was essentially natural and spontaneous. As he came to years of maturing youth he found himself confronted with the perplexing problems of religion and theology such as many have had to meet in the last fifty years. As he did in everything else, so he did here. He followed the natural tendencies of his personality. Spencer would certainly nourish that hunger to get back to real things. Also would Walt Whitman. In a way, Walt Whitman and Stevenson are very close, in spirit at least. Whitman never was disciplined, either by himself, or by circumstances, as was Stevenson. But barring the form and the refinement and purifying and clarifying that comes from such experiences as Stevenson had, we can see the common touch between the two.

In the same way also there is a line of connection between Stevenson's natural life and the idealism of the New Testament. The New Testament breaths the atmosphere of freedom and naturalism in human life. But it appears that Stevenson was drawn to the New Testament much more by the social teaching than by anything else. They appealed to him on account of their bearing on what seemed to him, as they seem to many today, conditions of social injustice. Here too we find that Stevenson has touched deep into the inner life of our times, and sounded a cord of human sympathy that has been lost amid some of the discordant sounds of our time.

But he goes still more deeply into our life. In this he touches upon things that he can only mar and confuse by comment or observation. In closing I will read two or three of his prayers. They show him at once in his deepest, most apparent and most natural light.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately the manuscript does not identify the prayers to which Earl Davis refers here.