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## A rediscovery of Stevenson

BY JOSEPH LEE, '31

### APPARITION

*Thin-legged, thin-chested, slight un-  
speakably,  
Neat-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 crit-  
ical,*

*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-Cate-  
chist.*

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 Louis 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 discountenanced 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, egoistic 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 'idol-otry' was beginning to show signs of an undertow." I thought immediately of my own experience with R. L. S., which I liken 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 re-discovery 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 in the form of rain. No theory competent to explain this hygrometric law has yet been given (as far as I am aware) by Herschel, Dove, Glaisher, Tait, Buchan, or any other writer; nor do I pretend to supply the defect. I venture, however, to throw out the conjecture that it will be ultimately found to belong to the same class of natural laws as that agreeable to which a slice of toast always descends with the buttered surface downwards.

Years later, in fact just a month before he died, R. L. S. added this note: "This paper was written in collaboration with James Walter Ferrier . . . though his principal collaboration was to lie back in an easy chair and laugh."

Tusitala still lives in his tales, yet in a sense, for me, he is no more; never again can I entertain the delicious pleasure that childhood's first reading brought me. But I have found a new Stevenson who is more than Tusitala. No one was concerned in this event in my reading life but myself; no one pointed out the new Stevenson to me. It happened when, a little more than a year ago, I bought for ten cents (how often best loved books come this way) a copy of his *Virginibus Puerisque*. I read it through immediately, for no book is worth spending even ten cents for unless it is worth reading. (You of course have read in Dumas the will of the jovial but unlettered Porthos, in the portion pertaining to his books, ". . . quite new and have never been opened.") *Virginibus Puerisque* is my best loved book. I am certain; it is the book I re-read most.

*Virginibus Puerisque* might have been called, and Stevenson once thought of calling it "Life at Twenty-Five." It is a collection of essays, a kind of genial delineating of his philosophy of life. R. L. S. is one essayist who can be profound without being solemn; his is a gracious touch. The papers in *Virginibus Puerisque* give an airy and sunlit aspect to men and things, reveal kaleidoscopic insights into affairs and events. Take this noble and witty passage from one of them, Aes Triplex:

. . . although we have some experience of living there is not a man on earth who has flown so high into abstraction as to have any practical guess at the meaning of the word life. All literature, from Job and Omar Khayyam to Thomas Carlyle or Walt Whitman, is but an attempt to look upon the human state with such largeness of view as shall enable us to rise from the consideration of

living to the Definition of Life. And our sages give us about the best satisfaction in their power when they say that it is a vapor, or a show, or made out of the same stuff with dreams (or matter) . . . that life is a Permanent Possibility of Sensation. Truly a fine result! A man may very well love beef, or hunting, or a woman; but surely, surely, not a Permanent Possibility of Sensation . . . . . There is a great deal of very vile nonsense talked upon both sides of the matter: tearing divines reducing life to the dimensions of a mere funeral procession, so short as to be hardly decent; and melancholy unbelievers yearning for the tomb as if it were a world too far away. Both sides must feel a little ashamed of their performances now and again when they draw in their chairs to dinner. Indeed, a good meal and a bottle of wine is an answer to most standard works upon the question. When a man's heart warms to his viands, he forgets a great deal of sophistry, and soars into a zone of rosy contemplation. Death may be knocking at the door . . . we have something else in hand, thank God, let him knock.

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, these super-souls who scream about society slowly sinking into sin. They melodramatize themselves, and the deep lines in their countenance 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 griper or giggler 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 unwed and the betrothed. "Crabbed Age and Youth" and the well-known "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 harmonise 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 re-discovery 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 in 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 foot, 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 his cloak 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, the whole previous influence "in a hectic fever following a hemorrhage of the lungs, culminated in the dream of Jekyll and Hyde." His cry 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.

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## A REDISCOVERY OF STEVENSON

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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 and in another three days had written *Jekyll and Hyde* as we have it today. The seventh and eighth days he copied the whole, and sent it to the publisher on the ninth. Ninety-six thousand words, all in laborious longhand, in eight days! And words put together into an ingenious allegory, words as poignant and chock full of meaning as any he ever wrote. This feat, I believe, is unequaled, unapproached, in literature.

Gay, bubbling, enthusiastic, the love of writing literally drove pain from his thoughts, if not from his body. Not that he never complained; what human could live the stoic ideal with trials such as his to bear? Philosophically he was discouraged at times, as all who think candidly about life are bound to be, but his complaints against living and society—when they are voiced—are complaints with a difference; they always leave me with a clean taste in my mouth and hope

in my heart; always a buoyant force is 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 papers, sleeves rolled-up, brandishing a knotted wash-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 re-discovery of him is the remarkable, chameleon-like changeability 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 stupified 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 brave gymnasium, 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 birthday present 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 convulsion 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 Russett 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."

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## A PLAN FOR IMPROVING FRATERNITY SCHOLARSHIP

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of the plan depends predominately upon the individual who undertakes the work. Unless he himself have scholarly attainments; is broad minded enough to understand younger men; is experienced enough in educational matters to be able quickly and surely to point the way; is possessed of capacity for leadership so as to create confidence on the part of those whom he leads, his administration will fall far short of its possibilities.

Assuming however that he is fairly competent, what may reasonably be expected 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 on extra curricular activities.

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